



*English-in-the-workplace for Garment Workers:
a feminist project?*

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ABSTRACT *This article draws on a recent study of an English-in-the-workplace (EWP) programme currently in operation at three Canadian garment factories. The EWP programme offers formal instruction in English during the workday to a labour force comprised mainly of immigrant women employed as sewing machine operators. Among other things, results from the study suggest that newly acquired English skills may be reinforcing linguistic behaviour that reconstitutes traditional relations between workers and management, men and women. The article highlights a possible connection between workers' linguistic behaviour and the pedagogical practices evident in the EWP classes. We suggest that an exclusive and/or particular emphasis on the 'personal' in the form and content of lessons, taken up as it is in the EWP classes is problematic and may not ultimately work in the best interests of women workers. We look to the development of more critical EWP programmes.*

Introduction

At the end of a chapter describing the experience of literacy as threat and desire in the lives of immigrant women, Kathleen Rockhill comments: 'The possibilities for learning English have to be better structured into the material and oppositional realities of women's lives ... An obvious solution is to offer programs that teach 'English-in-the-workplace' (EWP) as well as other opportunities for schooling and education' (1987a, p. 329). In recent years, the 'obvious solution', EWP, has received increased attention by both the private and public sector, and numerous programmes have been established in Ontario and in Canada generally {1}. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the opportunities afforded women by EWP through an examination of one programme offered to a predominately female immigrant workforce employed as garment workers at three Canadian factories. The paper is written in response to two questions raised during

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the study: one posed by a plant manager, 'Is EWP "empowering" our workers?' and the other, our own question, 'What does EWP mean in terms of a feminist pedagogical project?'

Feminism, Empowerment and the Promise of EWP

Our question and the question raised by the manager presuppose definitions of 'empowerment' and of 'a feminist project', both of which are highly contested concepts within and among various discourses operating in academic and corporate/industrial settings. It would, therefore, seem necessary to clarify our use of these terms. With regard to empowerment, one of the major goals of management, expressed frequently in company documents and in discussion with researchers, was a commitment to creating greater teamwork in the organisation and operation of the factories. This was to be accomplished by increasing the participation of individual workers in decision-making processes and structures and by changing the organisation of factory work. At the time of the study the company was contemplating a shift from 'piecework' to teamwork in its organisation. The piecework system is highly individualised and designed to maximise productivity—the more 'bundles' of a particular operation that have been completed (for example, risers or zippers or inseams), the more compensation an individual receives. In a teamwork approach a group of workers would be paid by the number of garments produced and the work organised among the team members. As well, greater opportunities would be provided for teams and individual team members to participate in the decision-making processes of the company. One of the many expectations of the EWP programme was that it would 'empower' workers to participate in the decision-making processes and in teamwork by increasing their ability to function in English, the language of management. While one could be sceptical about the company's motives and the commitment to EWP, what is interesting is that the liberal ideology of bringing marginalised people into the mainstream used to frame the sense of EWP means that the company in this study has also supported the rationale of EWP in Canada generally. The promise of EWP programmes in Canada articulated in government documents and policy statements has been to make the workplace more equitable by providing accessible language training on the job site. What underlies this promise is a belief that a lack of proficiency in English or in French is, in part, responsible for the ethnic and racial stratification that continues to occur in Canadian society. The hope is that by providing language training in one of the two official languages immigrants will be able to participate more fully in Canadian society, accessing Canadian institutions and resources, and competing on an equal basis with other Canadians, gaining the same degree of upward mobility as is possible for other individuals (Ministry of Citizenship, 1987, 1989; Goldstein, 1991).

There have not been many studies in the area of EWP or in the more general field of ESL (English as a Second Language) investigating these claims and assumptions. Some researchers have suggested that the entire field of second language learning has been slow to adopt any kind of a critical stance (Pennycook, 1989; Giltrow & Colhoun, 1992). Indeed Giltrow & Colhoun raise the troubling suggestion that, 'ESL pedagogy has been less open to critical reasoning than other pedagogies and that this delay in screening the discipline through critical heuristics may be an expression of neo-colonialism' (pp. 50–51). A notable exception to this is a study of the language choices of Portuguese immigrant workers employed in a toy factory in Toronto (Goldstein, 1991). Goldstein's research challenged the assumption that English proficiency is a panacea for the

difficulties immigrants experience in Canada. The data revealed that speaking English in the factory had social and economic costs that actually threatened workers' ability to adjust to Canada by limiting access to the resources of the Portuguese-Canadian community. That is, speaking Portuguese ensured membership of the community of Portuguese workers at the factory and access to their help in adjusting to Canadian life.

Other more general challenges to the promise of EWP can also be found in sociological research on the immigrant experience in Canada. A number of these studies focused on how gender and 'race' relations determine the access and social mobility of immigrants and how these relations effect the nature, structure and outcomes of programmes set up for those new to the country (Ng & Ramirez, 1981; Boyd, 1992; Giltrow & Colhoun, 1992). In this vein, and considering that the workforce under investigation in our study was primarily composed of immigrant women from racially and ethnically marginalised groups, our question concerns the promise, the opportunities and the outcomes of EWP for these women. It should be noted that one administrator labelled the EWP programme as 'Women's Education' and 'Settlement Education', and concerns were raised about the effects of EWP on 'women's' lives by personnel managers, trainers and teachers, so that our question was not far removed from the concerns of the company or, for that matter, the workers themselves. However, because of our personal and professional commitment to feminism and to the development of feminist pedagogy, our question highlighted gender as a primary category of analysis, giving it more emphasis than it might otherwise have been accorded in the study.

More specifically, our question, 'What does EWP mean in terms of a feminist pedagogical project?' speaks to the opportunities made available in the EWP programme for engaging in literacies or 'discourses' that would permit rereading of the category of 'women', recognising that the category of women is criss-crossed by 'race', class, ethnicity and sexual orientation, in efforts to transform the power relations under which women live and work. In this paper, we focus on the connection between the EWP class and the linguistic behaviour of the women workers in the context of the factory, but we begin first by describing the study, the programmes and the factories that were investigated.

The Study, the Factories and EWP Programmes

The study on which this paper is based was commissioned by the Levi Strauss Company to investigate factors related to the participation of workers in its EWP programme and the impact of the programme on workers, supervisors and management personnel (Burnaby *et al.*, 1990). The study was not a quantitative evaluation of measurable learning outcomes *per se* but instead, through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, an investigation into the organisation and nature of the EWP programme, the assessment of the programme by various groups of employees, and the impact of the programme on the linguistic practices occurring in the factories and, to a lesser extent, in the domestic lives of workers. The data, collected over a period of 3 months by three researchers, provided a detailed snapshot of the EWP programme contextualised within the culture(s) of three factory sites.

Although each factory differed in its history and operation, and in the history and operation of its EWP programme, the demographics were strikingly similar. As evident in Table I, between 80 and 90% of the workforce as female and between 50 and 90% of the workers were identified by the company as immigrants or refugees whose first language was not English {2}. The vast majority of these women were employed as sewing machine operators and line supervisors, whereas technicians, warehouse

TABLE I. The demographics of the three factories

The workforce		
Factory X	Factory Y	Factory Z
300 hourly or piecework employees	400 hourly or piecework employees	467 hourly or piecework employees
70 salaried	70 salaried	45 salaried
60% foreign born	50% foreign born	90% foreign born‡
95% women	80% women	90% women
Recent immigrants†	Recent immigrants	Established immigrants

*This number includes sewing machine operators, quality control clerks, pressers, packers, etc.

†The majority of workers of foreign birth were of Asian descent; specifically, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Fijian. The workforce was more diverse at the other two factories. In Factory X 26 first languages were represented in the workforce. Exact percentages for each group were not available.

‡‘Recent immigrants’ refers to those who had been in Canada for less than a year. Exact percentages were not available; however, in two factories recent immigrants were in the majority according to the human resource managers. Established immigrants were those who had been in the country for more than 1 year. Many of those in Factory Y had been with the company for many years.

personnel, middle and senior managers were more often male. Ethnicity and ‘race’ were also factors. The majority of women working on the factory floor were of Asian, South Asian, Latin American, Eastern or Southern European origins {3} With few exceptions, white women of Anglo-Saxon descent were employed as secretaries, trainers, EWP teachers, occasionally as middle and senior managers and, in this study, researchers {4}.

The organisation and curriculum of the EWP programme differed somewhat among the three plants. At the time of the study, classes at two of the factories were offered for 1 hour, three times a week during the lunch break. The company released workers (with pay) for one half hour of each class and the workers used their lunch break to make up the other half hour. In contrast, classes at a third factory were conducted after work or on Saturdays and workers were paid a stipend for their attendance. Various levels or streams were offered at two of the plants; while only a beginners’ class was offered at a third. The curriculum at all three plants focused generally on oral language, and social conversation was emphasised. The students seemed comfortable with their teachers and generally spoke very highly of them. A student-centred approach dominated the pedagogy offered. Although work-related materials were incorporated into some of the lessons, much of the content concerned domestic or personal language contexts. The family and family relationships, for example, formed a teaching unit at one plant. The lesson observed focused on naming and describing various family members and the names for various kinship relationships—mother, father, etc. Family photographs were passed around the class. At another plant the programme curriculum included units on (students’) autobiography, shopping, banking, health care. There were units on work-related topics—one entitled ‘Your Specific Job’; however, in general, work issues and topics did not dominate the programme at any of the plants. Indeed, after one class, the teacher commented to one researcher that it was unusual to have the students speak so much about their work and the company, and went on further to explain that this occurred only because they were new employees and new students, and that the content of the discussion would change in a few weeks. It seemed that the referent ‘workplace’ in the EWP programme offered at Levi Strauss referred primarily to the location of classes rather than to specific or critical work-based skills and knowledges.

Depending on the plant, access to the EWP class was regulated by the worker's supervisor, by administrators of the programme, or by teachers. Teachers were contracted by the Levi Strauss company for programmes at two of the plants, and at a third, a private firm, employing its own teachers, ran the entire programme. Almost all of the teachers were highly educated, well-qualified, white women, who seemed genuinely concerned about their students and their programme. Women in EWP interviewed at all three plants expressed satisfaction both with these teachers and with the programme for the opportunities it provided. There were, however, indications from these workers and from other employees in the plants of issues and outcomes that suggested limitations to the programme. In looking over the interview data and our classroom observations, it became evident that there was a possible connection between the female workers' linguistic behaviour and the pedagogical practices in the EWP classes that might be limiting the potential of the students. It is to these opportunities, outcomes, and limitations we now turn.

Opportunities and Outcomes of the Programme

In speaking with women enrolled in the programme during this study, it became obvious that EWP, structured as it is within the workday and site, created an opportunity for language learning not easily accessed in more traditionally organised programmes. The energy and time to attend the more commonly organised 'night classes', for example, was simply not available for many women due to the demands of domestic responsibilities during their 'off' hours. One worker commented, 'I have to {go} here because no time for me when I go home. No time for me to go evening to school. And when I get home I tired, work, you know'. As well, the difficulty of securing public transportation and in some cases the expense of child care made attendance in alternative programmes impractical for many of those we interviewed (5). Several women also mentioned a concern with personal safety. Personal safety is an important factor to consider, particularly for women who are visible minorities who do not speak English proficiently, and who may have to travel alone at night on public transit in a community and in a culture largely unfamiliar to them. This factor, together with the others, rendered access to traditionally organised programmes highly problematic for many of the women we spoke to. The EWP, organised as it was at Levi Strauss, opened up the possibility of learning English.

Of course, it may be argued that formal classes are not absolutely necessary in order to learn a language. And it is true that immersion in the culture can eventually result in language acquisition. However, for the women at Levi Strauss immersion was difficult. Many of those interviewed had very limited exposure to English on a day-to-day basis due in part to the nature of their work both at home and in the factory. As Kathleen Rockhill (1987a) found in her work, women tended to be confined to the private sphere: the home, and the local neighbourhood, where English may not often be heard, let alone spoken. While their husbands are more likely to have employment that involves contact with English speakers and their children learn English in school, women do not necessarily have such contact with the language. And the situation did not necessarily improve when they entered the job market.

As sewing machine operators, one of a limited number of work options open for the women in the Levi Strauss study, they could easily cope with the few linguistic demands required by using gestures and broken English—what employees referred to as 'Levi English'. Some women relied on co-workers to translate for them or speak in a non-English language common to the supervisor or co-worker. With regard to this last

point, although English was the language of management, it was not generally the language of the factory floor. A host of other languages was used; that is, when language was needed at all, as one operator sardonically noted: 'I speak to my machine'.

With little exposure to English either at home or in the factory, it is not surprising that the women often lagged far behind their husbands and their children in learning the language. It is a pattern described in many studies and serves to highlight the importance of EWP for female employees (Spink, 1975; Rockhill, 1987b; Marshall, 1990). Even with an EWP programme, the 3–5 hours of instruction per week, did not translate into immediate or enormous progress with the language, but the women tended to blame themselves (e.g. 'my age') rather than their teacher, the programme, or the linguistic circumstances of their lives for their limited progress. Considering these difficulties, it is not surprising that some workers who deeply wished to improve their English did not participate or sustain their participation in the programme (6). However, the women, both in and out of the programme, remained highly appreciative of the opportunity afforded by EWP. For many of these women it was quite simply their only viable option, their only hope, to learn the language.

Clearly, the EWP programme opens a space in the working lives of many of these workers to learn English. It is curious, then, that workers who did stay in the programme, some for several years, who developed a degree of proficiency in the language, did not seem to avail themselves of the resources the language would seem to provide. The promise of EWP in terms of participation, equity and access seemed unrealised. For example, from a liberal perspective, the ability to speak, read and write in the dominant language should bring marginal individuals into the mainstream. In terms of a liberal feminist project, women receive the language skills and knowledges that men generally have been provided with in order to participate in 'their world'. Such skills become a prerequisite to equality and individual success. It follows from this perspective that, with English, individual immigrant women should be able to move into more economically and politically powerful positions. Critical or radical conceptions of literacy suggest that linguistic resources empower through 'collective action and the enhancement of individual capacity' (Rockhill, 1987b, p. 158). From a more radical feminist perspective women learn a literacy that allows them, ideally, collectively to rewrite their experience from their own perspective, reforming how gender and other social relations are understood and practised in women's personal and public lives. From this perspective, immigrant women might use their English to articulate and promote their identity and 'difference'. In doing so the women would be reforming rather than accommodating to the *status quo* of factory life and culture. However, neither of these outcomes, even in a small way, seemed to be occurring at Levi Strauss.

While there certainly were benefits of the EWP programme noted by various groups of employees, what seemed evident was that workers at Levi Strauss were not using their English to agitate for change in the factories, nor were they seeking new job opportunities outside the plant, nor were they becoming significantly more involved in the company, collectively or individually. With regard to agitating for change, head office personnel admitted that they had expected workers to be more contentious as they became more proficient in the language, but this had not yet materialised. The 'difficult workers', about whom one supervisor whispered, 'It would be better if they didn't learn English', were not using their English to become 'more trouble'. In addition, management's concern that they were educating their workers for jobs out of the factory also had not been realised. But while workers were not finding alternative work 'outside' the factory, neither were they becoming significantly more active 'in' the company. Managers and super-

visors noted that workers were generally not taking up opportunities to participate in company task forces, committees, or for that matter, union work. One human resources officer, in exasperation, commented that even when one committee was advertised as a place to practise one's English, workers did not show interest. Workers themselves spoke of their lack of energy and time or interest.

In a company attempting to include its workers in more of the decision-making processes and in the 'life of the factory', workers' lack of participation was a serious problem. Since the EWP programme was in place, evidently providing the linguistic resources to participate, it became easy to blame the character and capabilities, in particular the initiative, of the workers themselves for their failure to make use of their English. And a number of managers and supervisors certainly did so. One line supervisor complained that the workers failed to make sufficient use of English on the factory floor: 'They still talk to each other in their own language. Shouldn't they be practising?' Another supervisor noted that workers did not attempt to speak English even on their way to class, and from what he overheard they frequently used their first language in class. His observations were supported by one former student who mentioned that one of the reasons she had dropped out of EWP was that there was too much social talk in a non-English language occurring in class: 'Some people ... they was sitting there. They start talking the same language, their language, and bother me. Like, when I come in, but they start talk, talk. We just want to speak English. Sometimes bother me'. Another supervisor, reiterating the doubts of some workers, said that several of those attending were just too old to learn; others suggested that workers were going to class simply to collect the stipend offered at one factory site—a claim not substantiated by the data from our study. One plant manager commented that, unlike automobile manufacturing plants, Levi Strauss was not hiring 'problem-solvers'. However, the personal histories of the women and their struggles to leave their countries and adjust to life in Canada indicated that they were quite capable 'problem-solvers'. Instead it seemed that these abilities seem unrecognised or unrealised within the context of the plant, and the EWP programme was evidently not effecting much change in that regard.

This is not to suggest that EWP was having no impact on the language practices of workers in the plant. Workers indicated that they could understand more of what was said and written to them in English and one area where 'progress' was noted by managers and supervisors was in workers' social conversation with management. In the plant with the longest history of EWP (7 years) and the highest participation by workers, the manager noted in particular the increase in 'small talk' or 'social talk' he was able to have with his workers because of their improved English skills. He also commented on a general increase in the amount of English he overheard during company social events.

It is our contention that the increase in 'social talk' conducted in English and the failure of workers as a group to take a more active role in the company are important and not unconnected outcomes and these outcomes suggest something of what EWP may be offering women. More generally, the outcomes provide some indication of how gender, bound together with class, 'race' and ethnicity, is affecting how English is taught and learned and used. Although it is a somewhat dated form of analysis within feminist scholarship, we draw on a distinction between the public and private spheres in order to explore the connection between the EWP class and the women workers.

Private and Public Spheres

One factor that influences the opportunities and outcomes created for and by EWP is women's silence or exclusion from the language, a theme that permeates much of the

feminist research on linguistic practice. Although much of the scholarship has been confined to Anglo-American or European cultures or contexts, where such cultures have dominated, research indicates that women's voices, perspectives and concerns have been largely absent in the public domain. In particular, women's voices have been conspicuously absent from the prestigious registers—legal, religious, judicial, literary etc. But more than simply *silent*, women historically have been *silenced* 'by social taboos, restrictions or by the most genteel tyrannies of custom and practice' (Cameron, 1991, p. 4). Furthermore, if not overtly forbidden from speaking publicly, women have been and in certain contexts continue to be ignored or ridiculed for their efforts to speak, and this can lead to self-censorship (Bodine, 1975). For all women employees speaking in a 'public voice' can be difficult; for women further marginalised by 'race', class, ethnicity and English language proficiency, the difficulties compound. One obvious implication in terms of EWP and Levi Strauss in particular is that supervisors and managers may not necessarily or immediately see the results of the programme in their communication with a predominately female workforce or in the involvement of women workers in meetings and committees.

Women are not silent in the same sense in the personal/private sphere, but in personal conversations in which they do engage, English is not often the language of choice. For example, workers who shared a common non-English language, even if they were attending EWP classes together, did not often speak English to each other. However, considering that relationships are forged in/within linguistic practices, and that changing practices may mean altering the dynamics of the relationship, this hardly seems unusual. Furthermore, in discussions with workers, we were told explicitly that speaking English was considered highly inappropriate in social groups where another language was normally used. According to several, such behaviour offended their friends and co-workers who believed they were boasting. One worker commented, 'Friends think you showing off. Think you make a joke'. This is not surprising, considering that in Canada, English is the language of power and, in some countries from which these workers come, the language of the educated élite. Moreover, speaking English, the language of management at Levi Strauss, could to some degree threaten solidarity and affiliation among workers, so that in light of the possible social costs of using English, it is understandable, at least to us, if not the managers and supervisors, that some workers would choose not to use it even if they were proficient speakers.

In terms of the EWP class, although teachers attempted to regulate the amount of non-English spoken in class, there was often a great deal of what might be termed 'social talk' both in English and in other languages. While the solitary nature of the work done by sewing machine operators may explain the need for talk of any kind in the middle or at the end of a long day, it may also be an effect of the gendered construction of talk and of a particular type of pedagogical practice in the EWP programme.

Research suggests that women's linguistic activity can differ in some respects to men's (Lakoff, 1975; Maltz & Broker, 1982; Coates & Cameron, 1989; Fishman, 1991). Women's speech to each other seems to be marked more by self-disclosure, intimacy and less need for self-assertion, whereas male speech is more assertive, more competitive. Some maintain this is a result of differing peer group organisation (Cameron, 1991). Historically there have been female dominated linguistic forms or genres, identified as gossip, chat, diaries, personal letters, etc. These forms suggest that women's linguistic activity has been located traditionally within the private sphere, within 'the personal' in terms of location, nature and form. This also may explain the reluctance of women workers to take up the public sphere generally. However, it would seem important to

examine how this public–private dichotomy structures not only the linguistic practices in the plant but the EWP class itself.

In the best-attended, longest-running programme, the EWP classes seemed to replicate the ‘private’ sphere. The classes were taught almost exclusively by teachers who appeared to be sensitive, personable women who worked conscientiously to ensure their classrooms were places where students felt comfortable. These teachers often used a form of student-centred pedagogy where students’ personal experiences and interests become the basis of lessons. It was a place where family photographs were passed around, where a first-time visitor to the class is asked about her husband, her children, or failing the first two questions, her boyfriend. It was a place of the personal. There was in our estimation a pleasant air of informality. Everyone operated on a first name basis and there was a remarkable amount of sharing. Students ate their lunch during class or at one plant drank beverages provided by the company. It is not surprising then that in some classes there was a great deal of social talk both in English and non-English languages, nor was it unusual that students developed a strong bond with their teacher and with their classmates. Students in a particularly large class at one site, would not allow their group to be split into two smaller classes. They simply did not wish to be separated from their classmates. One woman commented that they felt ‘like a big family’ and went on to say, ‘I feel safety here’.

There is ‘safety’ in the best of these classes on several levels. It is safe because the attempt to create personal and private space in the atmosphere and content of the classes means that women do not usually or obviously confront or cross the gendered constructions of linguistic practice. They can remain within ‘the private sphere’ albeit in a language in which they are not proficient. Of course EWP is still inescapably a part of the public sphere; it is, after all, located in the public domain of work, and women must take on some sort of a public voice in speaking out in class. But in these classes, where the majority, if not all of the participants are female, they are safe from male ridicule of their ‘public voice’. They are freer to make mistakes. Most importantly, because of the private-like nature of the pedagogy they are, to a degree, freed from the ‘mistake’ of being a woman speaking publicly—moreover a woman othered by ‘race’, class, and ethnicity speaking publicly and speaking English.

Documented in the Rockhill study (1987a), this ‘mistake’ often meant physical abuse for some women at the hands and fists of their husbands. At Levi Strauss a personnel officer indicated that some female employees (immigrant and non-immigrant) were battered, and that some women chose not to tell their husbands they were taking English classes, out of fear. There was no explicit evidence in the interviews we conducted that linked EWP to physical violence. What workers chose to say to us was that their families were either very supportive or quite indifferent to the fact they were learning English. For those workers not enrolled in the programme, it was difficult to determine if there were underlying reasons connected to psychological or physical abuse that may have explained their non-participation. The study was not sufficiently intensive to address this issue in depth, and although suspicions were raised, all that can be said is that there were varying degrees of support from family members for women in the EWP programme.

Making classrooms ‘safe’ places where, to some extent, the private sphere is replicated, may be important in ensuring that women feel relatively comfortable. However, such well-intentioned actions may also promote private and personal forms of language practices over public practices and this may affect the kinds of outcomes noted by managers and workers. Our interview data did not provide measurable evidence with regard to the specific outcomes of particular lessons or teaching units. Instead, in

accordance with the mandate of the study, what we have are general trends noted by workers, supervisors, trainers, managers, teachers, etc. who indicate an increase in the social talk of workers, a failure to participate more actively in the company, and in our own observations, an emphasis on the 'personal' in the EWP class. To assess the precise connection between these three trends will require further study; however, it would seem reasonable to suggest that an emphasis on personal and social talk in an EWP class may result in workers who use English largely for such purposes.

But of course, workers are not simply products of their EWP class; they come into the class with expectations and goals, which, in a student-centred pedagogy, shape the programme. And of course, the nature and organisation of work affects the students and the use they can make of their EWP lessons. In the first instance, language use for the private sphere may indeed be what these adult students desire. In the course of the study we asked workers why they were learning English. In the interviews, workers often seemed initially baffled by our question. The answer seemed all too obvious. When pressed, they spoke both of their social and work-related communication needs. In terms of social conversation or what might be referred to as affiliation, women spoke of their desire to speak to their neighbours and family and also for social talk with co-workers and supervisors. In terms of family, some of the women mentioned having difficulty communicating with grown children and grandchildren who were losing or had lost the language of the parents or grandparents. For women whose identity was primarily organised around being a wife and mother rather than a garment worker, this was very difficult. Learning English for these women became tantamount to maintaining their role and identity as mother and grandmother.

In many instances, the goal of speaking to co-workers and neighbours reflects the women's desire to affiliate with those outside their own linguistic, ethnic group—what some workers described as speaking to 'Canadians'. Some spoke of learning English because 'I live in Canada now' and of a desire to be Canadian which meant in terms of citizenship, having to impress immigration officials with one's proficiency in English. It is difficult to know how the desire to be Canadian was shaped by or shaping the EWP class and the degree to which it represents a desire to distance oneself from the terms 'refugee' or 'immigrant' which are often used pejoratively in this country. We do know that something of this sort is suggested in the comment of one worker who stated candidly, 'Some people don't like people who don't speak English'. We raise it as an issue for further research and consideration. It is also worth thinking about how invested English language teachers, as well as workers, are in thinking that one's level of English proficiency rather than discrimination and prejudice explains why 'affiliation' might be difficult, and what racial and gender discrimination might mean in terms of 'language' lessons an EWP programme offers.

Workers also spoke of how they wished to improve their communication with their supervisors. Their relationship with their supervisor, particularly for new workers, was deemed very important as they find themselves often highly dependent on their supervisor, unfamiliar with the plant and uncomfortable with English. One personnel officer exclaimed that, 'They (the supervisors) are like gods' to some of the workers. Researchers were also told of how one worker would not speak to a senior plant manager until it had been cleared by her supervisor. As well, it should be noted that some cultures place a high value on honouring one's employers and supervisors. At Levi Strauss, plant managers, teachers and supervisors spoke of how they were invited to the family gatherings and celebrations of many of the workers.

On a more practical level, since it is the immediate supervisor who has a major influence on the day-to-day working conditions and experiences of the operators, it is not surprising that workers wish to learn English so as to ensure a smooth relationship between themselves and their English-speaking supervisors. Although senior management established the EWP programme, and more recently, daycare facilities, it is usually the supervisor who, for example, allocates bundles of materials to be sewn—bundles that differ in terms of the fabric, size and cut. Since workers are paid by the bundle and since the fabric, size and cut of the bundles affect the speed at which the garments can be sewn, the supervisor's decisions directly affect the amount of money a worker can earn. One worker remarked that her supervisor always gave 'good' bundles to the Canadians and 'bad' bundles to the immigrants. Although this was not a common complaint, it highlights the power supervisors can exercise over the lives of their workers and the importance of ingratiating oneself with the supervisor. As well, this indicates how the organisation of work and the importance of the worker-supervisor relationship affects how the personal and private emphasis in the EWP class may be articulated in the day-to-day experiences of workers.

The Tea Party

During the study researchers were told about a major event that had been undertaken by teachers and students in an EWP programme at one plant. The event was a tea party organised by students for plant supervisors. Organising the tea party, under the auspices of the EWP programme, required students to write personal invitations to their supervisors, make up posters, order refreshments, etc. In the context of this paper we see the tea party as a metaphor or symbol for what proficiency in English means in the EWP programme and ultimately in the lives of these women. The tea party offered the women and their teachers an opportunity to bring the private sphere of class to the public sphere of work. It offered a chance to speak outside the normal bounds of the supervisor-worker relationship, a chance to speak as individuals, an opportunity to speak 'as women' rather than 'as workers'. It provided students with an opportunity to affiliate with people generally and to use their lessons. For example, workers had handwritten personal invitations to their supervisors for this event. It was a chance as well to 'humanise', or better yet, 'feminise', the dehumanising environment of the factory. Men do not put on 'teas' for each other and certainly not at work. Whether intended or not, the tea does in some sense disrupt the public sphere of work but does so in a way that reconstitutes traditional gender relations. As such it was a safe thing to do. The Levi Strauss tea, then, is more disruptive of social relations than it may first appear. From a liberal perspective, women who would not normally have been able to participate in the mainstream are given an opportunity, albeit only to organise and attend a tea party. But we raise the issue of whether EWP teachers should offer something more than 'traditional tea' to women workers. It would seem important to examine more specifically what the women themselves want with regard to their EWP classes.

The women workers at Levi Strauss indicated during conversations and interviews with us that the personal forms and contexts of language use should dominate the experience and outcomes of EWP as mentioned earlier. That was what they wanted from their lessons, but that is not all they said. In addition to the need or desire to affiliate, workers spoke of the autonomy they believed English would give them. They talked

explicitly of feeling 'like an invalid' or 'like a baby', of having to depend on family and friends too much. One young woman spoke of having to wait for days before going to the doctor because she had to arrange for a bilingual family member to go with her. They told us, as well, of their desire to speak English to bankers, immigration officers, store clerks, teachers, as well as to the company nurse, the mechanic, the supervisor in work-related communication. At one plant, a number of the workers spoke of their need to communicate English as a means of defence, that is, a means to ensure they were being treated fairly by supervisors and other employees with power over them. Although the women did not express a desire for work outside the company, and indeed many spoke highly of Levi Strauss, some of them did speak of promotion within the company. Proficiency in English would permit them to be promoted although the number of positions that were available was numerically very small. In general, there seemed to be a desire on the part of the women we interviewed for the kind of language practices that might be more useful in the public sphere and in this way, a redefining of their sense of themselves in the public world of paid labour.

The question we raise is whether this can be accomplished within a curriculum and practice focused on the personal, that often marks progressive or student-centred education and in this instance the EWP programme. The more general question for teachers, employers, and workers is to what degree and to what end does the curriculum and pedagogy channel or create the linguistic resources made available. During our research, the moment for such a question occurred after one class observation period. As cited earlier, one teacher indicated to the researcher that the class was unusual in that students spoke a great deal about their work, but she explained that was because they were new to the factory, and soon the conversation would change and they would begin to speak of other things. What was left unspoken, what was unacknowledged, was whether this was an effect of workers' familiarity with the plant or a predictable outcome of the kind of curriculum and pedagogy promoted in the programme or a combination of both.

Conclusion: empowering workers?

Let us conclude by returning to the two questions posed at the beginning of this paper. The first question focused on whether EWP was empowering workers, in particular, empowering workers to participate in the decision-making processes and structures in the company by increasing workers' proficiency with English. It was apparent from the interview data in the study that workers were not becoming substantially more active in the committee meetings, task forces or other related activities in the plant, nor were they organising collectively or becoming more active politically through union work or the like, nor were they seeking alternative employment outside of the factory. Workers were becoming more active in the 'culture of the company', in the social talk with managers and supervisors. According to one personnel officer and a number of supervisors and those participating in the study, workers were certainly happy, more confident, and more sociable as a result of EWP. But as the workers themselves indicate in the reasons and motivations they have for learning English, these outcomes may not ultimately be enough.

This becomes important for the second question: what does EWP mean in relation to a feminist project? It was apparent that EWP, structured as it is during the workday, fits into the material realities of women's lives and certainly, the EWP classroom seemed to

be a safe place for women to learn. It was apparent that at least in some of the classes, efforts in the EWP class were directed towards incorporating women's experiences into classes as well as into the curriculum organisation and structure of the programme. All of this should be applauded. However, the question that haunts this EWP programme and other such programmes is whether the attempts to accommodate women within educational programmes, both in structure and content of the programme, ultimately serve to maintain or alter the present status and conditions that women are faced with at work and in society at large. In other words, does the EWP programme at Levi Strauss offer women a 'tea party' English that allows them only to accommodate or cope more successfully with the conditions under which they live rather than to alter these conditions when/as they see fit. The futility of accommodation is captured powerfully in the statement of one worker: 'We can't be like you but we can try'.

Creating a 'safe' or relatively safe place for women to learn, for example, by itself does not address the question of why the world is such a dangerous place for women that 'safe' places are required, and what can be done individually and collectively about this in the public sphere. This is not to suggest that teachers discount or ignore the desire of workers to have the kind of private and personal literacy in English that will allow a grandmother to speak to her English-speaking grandchildren or to her English-speaking neighbour for this, too, was important for many workers. However, if the promise of EWP for a more equitable workplace is to be realised, it would be important to provide an English that would allow women workers to promote their interests in the public domain, perhaps in terms of company meetings and task forces or perhaps in new and other ways.

While we do not presume to know what the exact content and pedagogy would look like for such a programme, we do suspect that there are moments already occurring where an opening is created for something that moves beyond what might be called a feminising pedagogy to a feminist pedagogy—moments where issues of identity and power are problematised and not simply accommodated—perhaps moments when the private and the public mesh in powerful and engaging ways. It will be important to identify and intensify these moments and this is where our future investigation will be directed. In general this means a move to a more critical EWP. Ultimately what this may mean is that EWP students and teachers continue to organise tea parties, but tea parties reconceptualised to offer women collectively and individually a more powerful EWP programme. Clearly EWP programmes have to be a place where collectively we brew our tea stronger.

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NOTES

- [1] In Canada over 100 different EWP programmes and development projects have been identified. In Ontario the largest project, operating in over 100 sites, is provided by the Ontario Federation of Labour and Labour Councils of Ontario and Hamilton. The programmes are most common in manufacturing industries and in the food and accommodation sector (Darville, 1992).

- (2) This is not to suggest that 50 to 90% of the workers required EWP. Some were proficient in English. It was difficult to determine precisely how many workers required or desired EWP.
- (3) The numbers differ according to the plant and reflect the immigration history of the city and area. In one plant, women of Asian extraction represented the vast majority of workers. In the other two plants the immigrant workforce was more mixed. There were Asian, East Indian (or South-east Asian) women as well as large numbers of Eastern and Southern Europeans including Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavians, Hungarians and Poles. A total of 26 languages was represented and spoken at one plant.
- (4) The data collected must be read with the knowledge that the power dynamics of 'race', class, gender and the English proficiency between researchers and workers factor into the findings. The interview data consist of the kind of information that workers chose to tell to white, middle-class female researchers who spoke English as a first language and who were working obviously on a management-initiated project taken from the kinds of questions that we as young, white, middle-class female researchers asked. It should be noted, however, that the company frequently interviewed its workers and that we were surprised at how comfortable the workers seemed to be with us. Indeed it was supervisors and middle managers who seemed more careful in their discussions with us.
- (5) This was not the case for all workers. In one plant, for example, workers were generally older and so child care provision was less of an issue. In addition more workers in this plant had access to private transportation. In part this may be a reflection of the fact that workers had been in Canada longer on average than the workers at the other plants. It also points to the fact that social class cannot necessarily or automatically be assumed by the occupational status of wives. It was evident that even with recent immigrants social class origins varied greatly. There were a number of workers who had completed advanced degrees and/or who had held high status positions in their own countries prior to emigrating to Canada. It is important that the diversity of women working in these plants be recognised.
- (6) There are other reasons workers dropped out or failed to enrol in the EWP programmes. These include a lack of knowledge about the programme, the anxiety over loss of production, the resistance of supervisors, resentment of peers, anxiety over compensation, limitations of the programme, domestic pressures and a lack of support from family and friends. These are described in detail in 'Workplace ESL at Levi Strauss: dropouts speak out' (Peirce *et al.*, 1993).

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