The Flexibility of Human Resources in an Exercise of Job Interview

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Abstract

Job interviews are resourceful to address discourse of flexibility and thus it helps learners of English aware of it critically. However, this relationship between questions for a job interview and the discourse of flexibility needs further exploration due to its limited number of studies on it (Chun, J.2016; Campbell-Avenell, Z.2017; Dunford, R. et. al 2013). This paper contributes to this area of inquiry by employing critical discourse analysis in investigating construction and negotiation of flexibility through an exercise of a job interview. Data are drawn from three sets of job interview exercise conducted in 2016 with 24 students of English Study Program of Madiun State Polytechnic. Two stages of analysis are carried out. Firstly, the patterns of questions in the job interview is presented and distributed. Secondly, the process of questioning and answering and their relation to the discourse of flexibility is analyzed. Findings and discussion reveal that the patterns of questions not only function for asking new and contextual information but also for evaluating interlocutor's knowledge, for showing expectation, and as social control. The questions are closely related to flexibility discourse that involves the behavior of being highly responsive to any possible shift of regular format, target, and process to help make minor short-term steps in new budgeting and outsourcing. Negotiation of flexibility in the side of applicants is evident from the emerging patterns of the length of the declarative form of the reply, the adaptability of reply to the questions, and the degree of uncertainty of the reply.

Key Words: Applicant, Job Interview, Critical Discourse Analysis, Flexibility, Negotiation.

Introduction

When one needs to know the readiness of vocational students in applying for a job, what sort of questions should be raised in an exercise of the job interview? How do these questions address the discourse of flexibility? How do the students answer these questions to reflect their flexibility? Questions such as these encouraged the process of this article to explore the issue to address discourse of flexibility through an exercise of the job interview. Additionally, this article demonstrates the value of adopting critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand flexibility.

Flexibility had been adopted to sustain commercial enterprises following Great Depression almost a century ago. In the post-1970s period, thanks to Japan's model of running a business, a new form of management based on the flexibility of labor processes came into being among Western companies. Greater flexibility in turbulent environments is the key element to address the issue. The relationship between the intention to improve flexibility and the initiative to change seems to encourage scholars to focus on.

Flexibility matters because one of the features of social life in a contemporary society which demands a critical awareness of discourse is the change from 'Fordism' to 'flexible accumulation'. Fordism is a form of capitalism which focuses on 'mass production' whereas flexibility is a new version of capitalism which emphasizes flexibility more on the process of production, labor system and capital management. In terms of the amount of production, it matches the demand of the market. In terms of workforce, permanent working is not a must and extensive retraining is acceptable.

In a job interview, it is suggested that a job applicant should demonstrate his flexibility and adaptability in his style and approach to deal with different personalities and unforeseen circumstances. The company is looking for candidates who match their requirements and the closer he fits the job description the more competitive he will be.

A struggle for rights to negotiate, however, has emerged. While some organizations have banned workers from discussing salaries, for example, there is a movement underway to make information more transparent.

Questions of Job Interview

In order to determine if a job applicant is worth being hired, a job interview can be carried out. An applicant can be asked a series of structural questions prior to the job interview. However, the questions in the job interview can also be 'free-wheeling' and not structured.

Typically, interviewers will ask (1) questions about the candidate to gain insight into his personality; (2) questions about leaving his job as employers almost always ask about why the candidate left his job; (3) questions about salary or compensation; (4) questions about qualification which is regarded the most important thing for interviewers; (5) questions about job performance which is exploring how the candidate performed in previous roles.; (6) questions about the candidate work history; (7) questions about management and teamwork; (8) questions about why the candidate should be hired; (9) questions about the new job and the company which is figuring out what he knows about the company; (10) questions about the future which is asking if he is going to stick around if he is hired. All these questions will anchor his interest in making a commitment. (Doyle, 2017).

In applying for a new job one can make a negotiation to resolve an issue by employing strategic discussion. The applicant can persuade the employer's representative to agree with his point of view because what might have been offered is basically flexible. Since the offer is negotiable it is open for the applicant to propose better pay, benefits, vacation time and retirement. For this offer will be the reference of the increase of compensation in the future the art and the science of negotiating a job offer is significant.

Such opportunity is relevant to a statement which points out that the omission of hierarchy, layer, and aggregation of business are the features of work environment flexibility (Palmer's et. al 2007 in Dunford, R. et. al, 2013)

In this context, the way in which language is not just descriptive but also constitutive brings implication that attention should be paid on identification of discourse in organization, what is produced and maintained, what affects individual's thought and the process of his doing something in order to make something happen, and how they develop gradually (Marshak and Gant, 2008 in Dunford, R. et. al, 2013).

Flexibility as a course of action has survived for almost a century today. The relationship between the power to act before other people do to change and the strong wish to improve flexibility keeps on attracting scholars' attention (Bernardes and Hanna, 2009 in Dunford, R. et. al, 2013).

In management literature, flexibility a has positive connotation. It can be a good thing for a condition of companies survival (Verdu and Gomez-Gras's, 2009 in Dunford, R. et. al, 2013).

Discourse of Flexibility

In the broadest sense, flexibility is treated as the capacity to respond to changing environmental conditions. Such flexibility is a necessary condition for enhancing or even just maintaining a company performance. It is believed that flexibility is important as it is relevant to the mantra of 'innovation', 'competitive advantage', and a solution to face unfriendly circumstances such as 'hypercompetitive' and 'turbulent' market.

However, there is also a growing awareness that flexibility is 'ideologically motivated'. It is assumed to be an effort to make the workers believe that everyone cannot avoid flexibility to survive. It should be realized that their job is not permanent, that they should be available to be retrained, and that their pay as well as their work condition subject to change any time (Dunford, R. et. al, 2013)

In developing their capitalist companies in the post-1970s period, Western nations have been influenced by the techniques of running business developed in Japan in the late 1940's. A new form of management based on the flexibility of labor processes came into being characterized by workers and management cooperation, 'just-in-time" model, productivity and quality combination, and the most efficient "inventories". The emphasis is on "flexible form of accumulation'.

Since then the sector of service and smaller scale of chains of production got more attention to pay. Advanced technology in the sector of production has made conventional specialists lose their jobs. The production process has been reorganized to sustain the capitalist's dominance socially by applying the new system of work including "outsourcing", "autonomous" and "temporary work", and subcontracting. In order to refresh their social dominance, a new project is established in a different environment.

The transformation of the aspects of ideology from modernity to post-modernity with the emergence of the flexibility discourse and its influence on individual's lifestyle demands critical awareness from the side of employees. The ability to assess corporate culture implies a message to our education system.

The purpose and the target audience of education have been a hot issue lately. The dominant view on this issue suggests that education should address the transformation of knowledge and skills which are oriented towards vocational ones. It is wise to say that in order to comply with this point of view vocational education should be empowered. One among the endeavors to make it happen is by preparing the students of the vocational college to be capable of negotiating flexibility in a job interview.

This study is aimed at revealing how questions of a job interview for vocational college students are addressing the discourse of flexibility and how the students negotiate flexibility in the interview.

Method

This is a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on an exercise of job interview carried out in 2015. There are 24 students of English Program Study of a vocational college – "Politeknik Negeri Madiun" involved in three separate exercise of the job interview. They are offered to take an option out of three fields of the job interview: hotel staff, translator, and administrative staff. The interview is conducted in English. The interviews are recorded and transcribed for analysis and interpretation. CDA is selected for a number of reasons. Fairclough (2001) remarks that CDA is as much theory as method or rather, a theoretical perspective on language which gives rise to ways of analyzing language or semiosis within broader analyses of the social process.

Fairclough (1992) argues that language can be used for both describing and constituting something. It can be useful in framing what is regarded to "be" and acceptable to carry out.

In addition, CDA is chosen for a number of premises: (1) behavior of either in favor of 'status quo' or 'supporting change' can be shaped by discourse; (2) in construing something individual can be unconsciously influenced by discourse at the level of individual up to the level of society; (3) interaction forms and spreads the 'narrative' of change; (4) the dynamics of power constructs discourse and their effect on their interest based on the sort and the reason of change; (5) dominant discourse would be open to alternative ones to survive; (6) gradual change and construction of discourse is no ending 'interactive' and 'discursive' process; (7) being aware of the nature of discursive of their practice can make the capacity of the agents of change improve (Grant & Marshak, 2011 in Dunford 2013).

In order to answer the two questions underpinning this study, the pattern of questions and answers in the exercise of the job interview is described and its relation to the discourse of flexibility is analyzed and interpreted. The former is a descriptive analysis of the questions and answers by utilizing syntactical and functional perspective as a starting point for critical analysis; whereas the latter is the critical interpretation of the distribution of the questions and answers.

Findings and Discussion

This section is devoted to answering the two questions underpinning this study, i.e. the pattern of questions and answers in the exercise of the job interview and its relation to the discourse of flexibility. The former is a descriptive analysis of the questions and answers by utilizing syntactical and functional perspective as a starting point for critical analysis; whereas the latter is the critical interpretation of the distribution of questions and answers by emphasizing the information, could either be referential or evaluative. Referential questions ask for contextual information, whereas evaluative questions attempt to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge.

For the analytical purpose the answer and question in the exercise of job interview are mapped in three levels: syntactical, functional and process (Kearsley, 1976). Syntactically, the questions in the exercise of job interview can be categorized into WH-interrogative and polar interrogative. WH-interrogative are questions initiated by who, what, when, why and how. Polar interrogative are questions replied by either "yes" or "no".

In functional perspective, questions which are generally posed to 'elicit verbal responses' could be echoic, epistemic, expressive, and social control. Echoic questions require repetitions and are often the paraphrase of original questions. Epistemic questions which seek for new information could either be referential or evaluative. Referential questions ask for contextual information, whereas evaluative questions attempt to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge.

Expressive questions show attitudinal information, such as surprise, disbelief, and expectation. Questions could be employed as social control, particularly when used to exert authority and maintain the discourse. Questions might have multiple intents. A question like 'why did you do that?', for example, might be referential as it requires a contextual reason for an action, but at the same time also as a social control because it shows the authority to judge a particular action.

Looking at the process of question would hint a critical reflection. There are three processes: selection, formation, and asking. Question selection relates to the consideration of why and how a particular question raises; question formation deals with the linguistic formulation and generative rules, and asking process is the emphasis that questioning is a strategy to maintain a conversation.

In this section, the data from syntactical perspective is described, and the similarity and difference from the functional perspective are investigated, and relate them to the discourse of flexibility from questioning processes.

Question Patterns

Table 1 outlines the distribution of questions generated in job interview.

Table 1. The distribution of questions generated in job interview

Perspective	Category	Hotel staff position	Translator position	Administrative staff
	Yes/no question	2	5	6
	WH-Question	7	12	9
Syntactical	Imperative	2	1	0
	Echoic	0	0	0
	Epistemic	10	10	15
Functional	Expressive	0	0	0
	Social control	10	10	15
	Selection	Interest on serving guests	Interest on translating	Interest on serving management
Process				
	Formation	Short and long clauses	Short clauses	Long clauses
	Strategy	More WH-interrogative and polar interrogative	Use of social control and Use of imperative	Use of social control and use of polar interrogative

Syntactically, the questions raised in the exercise of job interview consist of WH-interrogative more than polar interrogative questions. Respectively, WH-interrogative question emerges seven times for hotel staff position, 12 times for translator position, and nine times for administrative staff position. Whereas for polar interrogative, it appears two times for hotel staff position, five times for translator position, and six times for administrative staff position Polar interrogative are found in question [1a] and [2a]:

May I see your CV? [1a]
Can you say something about your experience? [2a]

Question [1a] and [2a] requires either 'yes' or 'no' answers. Functionally, these questions are referential that is demanding new information. Unlike polar interrogative, WH-interrogative question syntactically initiated by Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How:

What sort of job are you dreaming of? [3a]
Could you tell me how long have you been searching for a job? [4a]
What preparation did you make for this interview? [5a]

Syntactically Question [3a] is WH-question whereas question [4a] is yes/no question. Meanwhile question [5a] is WH-question. Although they are different syntactically they are functionally in common that is referential since they demand new information. The process of the questions relates to the consideration why and how those particular questions arise. Syntactically, these two following questions are WH-questions as well:

What is your salary you expect for this job? [6a]
How do you keep up to date and current about your job that you have worked in? [7a]

However, whereas question [6a] demands information, the question [7a] attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. Therefore, the question [6a] belongs to referential question whereas question [7a] is categorized into evaluative question. The process of the questions is also considering why and how these particular questions arise. Although not an interrogative in form, the following question is WH-question:

Tell me about the way you manage your time when you planned and organized a project from start to its accomplishment. [8a]

Question [8a} is preceded by affirmative sentence but followed by a question asking for a time when a something is planned and coordinated. This question includes evaluative question because it attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process of this question belongs to question selection considers why and how it arises. A similar case happens to the following question:

We hope to have managers who can work more than 8 hours a day. You don't mind, do you? [9a]

Although question [9a] begins with a declarative sentence, obviously the question that follows is yes/no question. Functionally, this question belongs to expressive question since it involves expectation. The process of this question can be categorized into asking process since this questioning is a strategy to maintain conversation. These following questions are syntactically also WH-questions:

What sort of colleague do you find it difficult to work with? [10a]
When did you feel most satisfied in your career? [11a]
Why are you interested in this job? [12a]

Functionally, question [10a] and [11a] are referential since it asks for contextual information. Question [12a] might be a referential for it demands a contextual reason of an action, but the same time also as social control since it shows the authority to judge a particular action. is evaluative for it attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. Thus, functionally question [12a] has multiple intents. The process of these questions is question selection since it relates to the consideration of why and how they arise. Prior to the following question is a declarative sentence:

It's time now to make an offer. Are you prepared to decide today? [13a]

Not to mention, question [13a] is syntactically yes/no question although it is initiated with declarative sentence. Functionally the question is referential for it is asking for contextual information. The process of question is question selection since it relates to consideration of why and how the particular question arises .The questions that follow are for administrative assistant/office position:

What program of computer are you skillful and which one is comfortable for you to use? [1b]

Question [1b] is syntactically WH-question. This function is evaluative since it attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process is question selection for it relates to the consideration of why and how the particular question arises. The following question is similar:

We have a phone with multiple lines. Do you have problem to handle a high volume of telephone calls? [2b]

Syntactically the question [2b] is yes/no question. Functionally, this question is epistemic, which seek for new information. As it relates to the consideration of why and how the question arises it belongs to question selection. The following questions are similar:

We work in a team to each the same target at this company. How do you like working in a team environment? [3b]

Prior to question [3b] is a declarative sentence. Syntactically, question [3b] is WH-question. The function is echoic for it paraphrases of the original question. Question [4b] is WH-questions the function of which is asking for contextual information. The process of both questions is question selection since they relate to why and how the particular questions arise. The questions that follow are similar:

How do you feel supervising two or three other staffs? [4b]
What is your superiority and how will it accelerate your performance [5b]

Question [4b] and [5b] are syntactically WH-questions. The function of these questions is evaluative for it attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process is question selection since they relate to the consideration why these two particular questions arise. The questions that follow are different syntactically.

How would you keep yourself stress-free and overcome pressure? [6b]
Do you like working independently or in a team? [7b]

Question [6b] is syntactically WH-question whereas question [7b] is yes/no question. However, these questions are in common in terms of their function that is referential for both ask contextual information. Their process is question selection since both relate to the consideration of why and how these particular questions arise. The next questions are similar:

What is your philosophy of work if we hire you? [1c]
What make you motivated that will help you progress in the hotel industry? [2c]

Question [1c] and [2c] are both WH-questions syntactically. The function of both these question is evaluative since they attempt to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process of these questions is question selection for both relate to consideration of why and how they arise. The following two questions are syntactically different:

Tell how would you be responsible at this hotel? [3c]
Tell me your most challenging day at work [4c]

Questions [3c] and [4c] are basically WH-questions because both are seeking for information on what sort of things the interlocutor is concerned with. Functionally they are epistemic questions that attempt to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process of the questions is question selection as it relates to the consideration of why and how those particular questions arise. The questions that follow are similar:

In a case of medical emergency, what would you decide to do? [5c]
How would you overcome the shortage of supplies in this hotel? [6c]

Syntactically questions [5c] and [6c] are WH-questions. The function of both questions is evaluative since they attempt to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process of these questions is question selection for the consideration of why and how these particular questions arise is related. The next questions are similar:

How would you solve the problem of service that make your guest not satisfied and unhappy with? [7c]
How would you make your foreign guests happy? [8c]

Questions [7c] and [8c] are syntactically WH-questions the function of which is evaluative for both attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. They relate to why and how these particular questions arise. Therefore the process is question selection. The following questions are different from another:

Will you be able to tackle the problem of stressful late hours? [9c]
How do you show your hospitality? [10c]

Question [9c] is syntactically a yes/no question whereas question [10c] is WH-question. These two questions are not only different syntactically but they are also different functionally. The former is referential since it is asking contextual information but the latter is evaluative for it is attempting to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The process of both is question selection as they relate to the consideration of why and how these questions arise.

Addressing Discourse of Flexibility

The result of analysis on the patterns of questioning in the exercise of job interview indicates that the questions are referential as it requires a contextual reason of an action but at the same time it is also evaluative since it attempts to evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge.

A job interview typically precedes the hiring decision. Question [1a], [2a] and [3a] can be perceived as parts of the screening section. It is possibly assumed that employees are also flexible in terms of selecting employers. It is, therefore, reasonable why question [4a] is concerned with finding out if the interviewee has a dispute to settle with previous employers.

Question [5a] which is concerned with whether the interviewee is interested enough to do some research or he is going to "wing" it could be viewed as addressing operational flexibility that includes instant response to the most recent issues covering foreseen changes, structures and objectives.

The relation to operational flexibility is also reflected in Question [6a] which is asking what is the interviewee's salary expectation for the job is relevant to today's management that the worker's skill and performance are the reference to determine his salary and remuneration. It is expected that the company could afford the applicant with a lower expenditure.

Question [7a] which is asking how the interviewee keeps current and informed about his job and the industries can be perceived as reflecting strategic flexibility which suggests that in order to survive an organization should be responsive to important and unpredictable changes that is taking place around by complying with the demand to adopt different acceptable paradigm.

Question [8a] which is asking the interviewee to tell about a time when he had to plan and coordinate a project from start to finish is relevant to structural flexibility which is believed to make management capable in making use of communication to exchange the goals.

Question [9a] which is asking whether the interviewee has a problem with the employer's expectation for managers to work more than eight hours a day is closely related to characteristics of flexibility discourse which requires high adaptability to every change and considerable work flexibility, mobility and ability to adjust in team-work. Question [10a] which is asking what kinds of people the interviewee has difficulties working with is relevant to the discourse of flexibility as flexibility is treated as the capacity to respond to changing environmental conditions in the context of work-life balance, career change and personal identity, employment contracts and employment numbers and conditions.

Question [11a] which is asking when the interviewee has been most satisfied in his career is closely associated with managerial tools of the flexibility discourse which requires the workers' not only to keep updating their education but also maintain their commitment to the process of work. It includes their capacity to keep being competitive and to use effective strategies in addition to their 'emotion' and 'subjectivity'.

Question [12a] which is asking why the interviewee wants that job is relevant to the consolidation of ideology of flexibility which suggests that the workers should 'assume' and 'reproduce' the company's values and also apply them in their personal life.

Question [13a] which is declaring that the company is ready to make an offer and asking if the interviewee is ready to accept that day could be perceived as the sign that the company does not want him to go away and thinks about it and change his mind -- the company wants him. This question is relevant to the management of individuals' affections in the discourse of flexibility. In this context 'affective ties' is the keyword to make workers willing to do anything for the sake of the company. In return, they could make a dream come true apart from success and recognition.

Question [1b] and [2b] are asking the interviewee's skill and his comfort to use the programs available. This question is closely related to the strategy in flexibility discourse that instead of embracing formal market it is adopting social networks to enhance flexibility.

The question [3b] is asking how the applicant feels about working in a team environment as at the company, they like to think of themselves as a team that works together towards the same goals. The question [4b] is asking how the applicant would feel supervising two or three other employees. The interviewer asks the applicant to imagine he is a supervisor and she wonders what he feels.

The question [5b] asks the applicant what his greatest strength is and how it will help his performance in that position. These last three questions are relevant to flexibility discourse which emphasizes efforts to build 'trust' and 'mutual benefit' in order to improve the 'capacity' of flexibility.

The question [6b] asks how the applicant will handle stress and pressure and question [7b] asks how the whether the applicant prefers to work independently or in a team. These questions can be related to the belief in flexibility discourse that in 'turbulent' environment loose structure of interdisciplinary team-works and individual 'autonomy' are more effective in achieving satisfactory performance.

In answering the questions most applicants make an effort to be flexible by adapting to the demand of the work offered by the employer. For example:

Q: We expect managers to work more than 8 hours a day. Do you have a problem with that?
A: I think there is no problem with that if the request from the management in 8 hours or more I will do that.

The applicant's answer to the question above shows that he is flexible and he can comply with the employer's expectation. The power relation between the employer and the applicant is apparent to be unequal with the former that is hegemonic whereas the latter is surrendered and obedient. However, there is no hegemony without resistance. The applicants do not always comply with the flexibility offered by the employer. They try to make negotiation by considering some alternatives and possibilities. For example:

Q: What is your salary expectation for this job?[6a]
A: About salary there is some I think expectation that is depend on my responsibility in my job that I do in my job.

The amount of salary the applicant expects is silenced. Instead, the applicant is trying to match and link the responsibility of the job and the salary expected. A similar case happens to the other questions as follows:

Q: We are ready to make an offer. Are you ready to accept today?
A: I think I must think it first and maybe I can inform about that tomorrow.

It is possible that the applicant is not unaware that he is running a risk of being replaced by other applicants when he does not accept the offer promptly. Nevertheless, he needs a space of time to make a decision. The emerging pattern and the length of declarative sentence, the adaptability of replies to the questions, and the degree of uncertainty of the reply to the question above are evidence of the interviewees' ability to negotiate flexibility. Additionally, it is indicated that the skills of interviewees to communicate are equally significant to employable skills and work experience of the candidates

Conclusion

The pattern of questions in the exercise of job interview which is syntactically dominated by WH-questions functionally attempts to gain contextual information and evaluate the interlocutor's knowledge. The content of the questions is highly adaptive to the discourse of flexibility. The reply to the questions which is considerable in terms of length, adaptability, and degree of uncertainty are evidence of the interviewees' capacity to negotiate flexibility.

Conscious or unconsciously, critical awareness of flexibility discourse has emerged from the side of the applicant and transformed into negotiation to agree with the applicant's point of view on work flexibility, mobility and ability to adjust in team-work as well as for the applicant to propose better pay, benefits, vacation time and retirement.

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