THE CHALLENGE OF LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE WORKPLACES AND HOW WE CAN HELP STUDENTS COPE

STRUČNI RAD / PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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Abstract

In this article, we will discuss the challenges facing future business professionals in linguistically diverse workplaces and propose courses of action that LSP professionals can take to overcome these challenges. Contemporary international business and management literature increasingly discusses the negative impact of language barriers on trust formation, power inequalities, and knowledge transfer and processing. In addition, language barriers can lead to a misjudgement of professional competence derived from language proficiency, the development of shadow management structures and undue self-censorship or lack of participation of people with less proficient language skills. These problems are becoming a reality in the Croatian labour market and LSP teaching needs to prepare students for linguistically diverse workplaces. The authors will present pedagogical approaches that can be used to promote effective communication and inclusion. Firstly, activities aimed at raising awareness of influential language ideologies and the impact of language as a factor in management and international business (IB). Secondly, activities that help students develop appropriate communication strategies for inclusion and transparency. Next, the authors propose introducing activities that mitigate the negative effects of accents (both L1 and non-L1). Finally, it is important to draw attention to students' existing metalinguistic and plurilingual competences and boost their confidence through transformative learning.

Keywords: language barriers, linguistically diverse workplace, pedagogical approach, plurilingual competence, transformative learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's business context is characterised by the unprecedented mobility of the workforce, advanced communication technology, global teams and multinational

companies - all leading to linguistically diverse work environments and making language a crucial factor in international organisations. In this article, we argue for the need to prepare students for linguistic diversity in the workplace.

The changes outlined above have also transformed the Croatian labour market. Around 300,000 Croatian citizens have emigrated to the EU since 2013, contributing to the already growing labour shortage in Croatia. Croatia's population is currently 3,880,000 and the number of foreign workers is expected to increase from around 50,000 in 2021 to almost 500,000 in 2030, with a growing number of workers from countries such as Nepal, India and the Philippines (Grgas, 2023). Whichever way we look at it, our business students will build their careers in a multilingual environment, either as foreigners in the countries they have migrated to or as members of multilingual and multicultural teams in Croatia. The language factor will influence them from the moment they start their first jobs. In the later stages of their careers as managers, their language-sensitive approach to management – or lack thereof – will influence the lives and careers of their subordinates and the success of their organisations.

International Business (IB) and management researchers now recognise the performative nature of language and the importance of language in the construction of reality (Vaara et al., 2005) and call for management education to take a 'multilingual turn' and prepare future professionals for language diversity in business. We as LSP teachers should contribute to this endeavour. Informed and encouraged by the research outlined above, we have developed and implemented interventions to improve students' metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok et al., 2014), make them more effective communicators, activate their plurilingual repertoire (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168; Kalliokoski, 2011) and prepare them for the multilingual workplace.

In this article, we will present findings from language-sensitive management and IB research and introduce four areas of engagement as the focus of our interventions. We will describe practical tasks that were implemented in these interventions and report and reflect on their success.

1.1. Motivation and literature review

In the early 2000s, researchers in IB and management recognised language as the forgotten and neglected "orphan of international business research" (Feely & Harzing, 2002). It was recognised that both overt (level of lexical and syntactic knowledge) and covert language barriers (pragmatic and prosodic elements) hinder participation in communication across language boundaries and that participation in communication is crucial for knowledge transfer (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007) and knowledge processing (Tenzer et al., 2021) - key factors for the competitiveness of multinational companies (Welch & Welch, 2008). This has led to an increase in language-sensitive

management and IB research, including a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches drawing on sociolinguistics and multilingualism research.

This language-sensitive research has produced numerous useful insights for LSP professionals: the business environment is becoming increasingly multilingual and linguistic diversity is becoming the norm (Ciuk et al., 2022; Kassis Henderson, 2005; Neeley et al., 2012), which means that multinational corporations (MNCs) are increasingly focusing on language competences, policies and practices (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013) to develop and maintain cultural, economic, political and social relationships across national borders. Regardless of the efforts to achieve good communication and integration, inequalities resulting from one's language skills and the language ideologies prevalent in a particular context are often detrimental to both the individual and the organisation. For example, language barriers have been shown to negatively impact trust formation as they lead to emotional and cognitive reactions that reinforce negative perceptions (Tenzer et al., 2013). Furthermore, an organisation's language policy can empower or disempower individuals based on their language proficiency, regardless of their professional competence (Vaara et al., 2005), while native speakers are automatically given more power or higher status (Feely & Harzing, 2003). A misperception of professional competence based on language proficiency has been reported by numerous authors (e.g. Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007; Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020). Individuals may be perceived as less professional, less competent and less trustworthy simply because of their weaker language skills (Piekkari, 2006) or the social status of their accent (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Furthermore, impressions based on language proficiency are formed early and tend to remain stable over time. Asymmetries in language proficiency can also trigger the formation of subgroups, cliques and shadow management structures (Hinds et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2021) that undermine the company's organisational and management efforts. Finally, there is evidence of self-restraint or lack of participation when individuals forego opportunities and withdraw from activities due to a negative self-perception of their linguistic and communicative competence (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014) or due to anticipated stigmatization at the workplace (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a, 2010b; Hideg et al., 2022).

Although English initially seemed to be the obvious solution to language-related problems in MNCs (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011), the insistence on English as the common language has led to a distinction between native and non-native speakers and to undesirable consequences for HR practices (Li et al., 2007; Neeley et al., 2012). Proficiency in English, preferably at a native level, has become one of the implicit rules of the game in IB and a power factor (Hinds et al., 2014) that influences IB dynamics (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004) and trust building (Tenzer et al., 2013; Welch & Welch, 2008). The fixation on English as the language of business has only recently been questioned (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Karhunen et al., 2018; Steyaert

& Janssens, 2013) and language-sensitive IB research has confirmed that insisting on monolingual systems, even with English as the lingua franca, is not the solution to participation problems, either for organisations or for individuals (e.g., Ciuk et al., 2022; Jeong & Lindemann, 2024; Karhunen et al., 2018).

The realisation that language is at the heart of management and IB has not yet received sufficient attention in business education. While English language skills rightfully remain mandatory in both business and educational institutions, the impact of linguistic diversity on participation is largely neglected and communication in multilingual environments remains a struggle. IB and management researchers have repeatedly emphasised the need to prepare students for linguistically diverse contexts (Cohen et al., 2015; Gaibrois & Piekkari, 2020; Swallow, 2020) so that they can benefit from their own linguistic resources and those of their peers without prejudice. In other words, language skills suitable for monolingual contexts need to be complemented by skills that facilitate multilingual communication.

2. METHOD

2. 1. Participants and needs analysis

Our action research project was conducted at the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Zagreb (FEB), a large institution with over 8500 students in six different study programmes (from BA to PhD). The vast majority of our students are native Croatian speakers. The general English proficiency of most students is at B2 level or higher on the CEFR scale (Sladoljev-Agejev & Kabalin Borenić, 2017). While Business English or Business German is compulsory for first-year students, language as a component of culture is only briefly covered in management courses for upper-year students.

The results of an unrelated survey of senior IB and management students conducted by one of the authors showed that students would welcome content that prepares them for language diversity in the modern multilingual workplace (Kabalin Borenić et al., 2023). We decided to organise workshops and activities to meet this need.

We also conducted two short surveys to assess how well prepared our students are for the challenges of linguistic diversity. The first survey was designed to gain insight into students' knowledge of foreign languages. First-year students were asked to list the languages that they could communicate in at any level. We received 371 responses to this survey. While all students reported knowing English, other languages were represented in much lower proportions. 57.1% said that they have some knowledge of German, 21% Italian, 11.1% Spanish, 10.8% Latin and 9.2% French. Other languages (such as Portuguese, Hungarian, Korean or South Slavic languages) were represented by four or fewer speakers (1% or less).

In the second, qualitative survey, workshop participants were asked to name problem areas when communicating in a foreign language in a professional environment. The questionnaire was completed by a small sample of 17 students. Their responses reflected a fear of not understanding and not being understood, as well as shame about their inability to communicate. Students also reported a lack of confidence in situations where they were expected to speak in a language that they were not proficient in. These feelings were compounded by the realisation that they would be at a disadvantage in social or professional situations if they could not make themselves understood. All of this suggests that action should be taken to equip our students for the multilingual workplace.

2.2. Action research

We chose action research (Somekh, 2006) as a research method because we wanted to simultaneously investigate how students react to multilingual challenges, address the problem of poor communication to raise students' level of communicative competence and initiate change. Interventions (full workshops and shorter classroom activities) were designed and implemented to facilitate effective communication and inclusion through transformative learning.

3. RESULTS

Based on our observations and needs analysis we planned activities in four main areas of engagement: 1) Raising awareness of influential language ideologies. 2) Communication strategies for inclusion and transparency. 3) Strengthening metalinguistic and plurilingual competences. 4) Activities to mitigate the negative effects of non-native accents.

3.1. Area 1: Raising awareness of influential language ideologies

Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2024) define language ideologies as:

> "shared sets of beliefs about language(s) amongst social groups, which are societal-level phenomena that employees bring with them to work. As such, they are part of the external social, political and historical context of IB activities."

Language ideologies differ in their tolerance towards less competent speakers. Of the four main types of language ideologies, monolingual approaches block participation and create friction. Such ideologies are *the standard language ideology* (Lippi-Green, 1997, as cited in Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024) and *the one-nation/region-one-language ideologies* (Woolard, 1998, as cited in Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024). All of these ideologies advocate the correct use of one language in a particular nation/

region. Less competent speakers are not encouraged to participate and are viewed negatively. On the surface, the ideology of *English as the language of globalisation* offers a solution to the problems created by the other monolingual approaches: It places English in the position of a lingua franca - a neutral language available to all as a means of knowledge transmission. While the use of English undoubtedly promotes global communication, it is also criticised for producing language-based inequalities (Boussebaa & Tienari, 2019). In general, in Western countries, the monolingual approaches are the standard.

The *ideology of societal multilingualism as an opportunity* takes a less purist view of communication and encourages participation from different linguistic backgrounds. It embraces the creative use of all languages available to the speaker. This can include "translanguaging" (e.g. the creation of hybrid language forms) as well as passive and receptive multilingualism, i.e. the more or less competent use of several languages in a single conversation (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024).

Recognising the dominant language ideology in society and the extent to which this ideology forms the basis of one's own reflexes and opinions about language use is a crucial first step in changing one's language attitudes. In our first workshop, we identified language ideologies in the business setting and led a discussion on the effects of language use in international business. We asked students to recall situations in which they felt themselves to be inadequate communicators and to describe what actions would have improved the situation. This exercise aimed to increase inclusivity in communication and error tolerance.

In the second half of the same workshop, communication strategies were introduced. As part of the discussion on language ideologies, we reflected on the fact that not all communication strategies are considered acceptable in all societies. Societies where the dominant language ideology is monolingual tend to reject language switching, foreignizing/translanguaging, literal translation, miming and the use of all-purpose words, while most of these strategies are considered acceptable in multilingual societies. Multilingual workplaces may also benefit from adopting multilingual ideologies, as such ideologies encourage participation.

3.2. Area 2: Communication strategies for inclusion and transparency

Dörnyei (1995) uses the definition of communication strategies (CS) as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his [or her] meaning when faced with some difficulty" (Corder, 1981, as cited in Dörnyei, 1995, p. 56), as well as "enhance the effectiveness of communication" (Canale, 1983 as cited in Dörnyei, 1995, p. 56). While some strategies limit communication due to a lack of communication skills (avoidance or reductive strategies), others, such as compensatory strategies, help the

speaker offset their linguistic deficits in order to get their message across with the language at their disposal (Dörnyei, 1995, p. 57).

In the workshop we introduced the following CSs: confirmation check, comprehension check, approximation, word coinage, use of fillers/ hesitation, paraphrasing devices, clarification request, foreignizing/translanguaging, language switching, literal translation, miming, all-purpose words. The activities designed and implemented around the CSs above had a three-fold purpose: Through discussing the CSs, students became aware of their pre-existing repertoire of CSs in Croatian (their L1) or in English (the focus of the first workshop). The conviction that these CSs work in the L1 served to encourage students to use CSs intentionally and freely, without fear of making mistakes. Finally, we provided a role-play situation in which students could use and practise the newly learnt CS devices.

Some of the CSs listed above (confirmation check, comprehension check, approximation, word coinage, use of fillers/hesitation, paraphrasing devices, clarification request) are more acceptable in monolingual language ideologies than others (foreignizing/translanguaging, language switching, literal translation, miming, all-purpose words). Building on the theoretical discussion on language ideologies, the difference between the two groups was highlighted and discussed with the workshop participants. Such an approach allowed the participants to understand the dominant language ideology in Croatia and Europe on a practical level. During the role-play task students had the opportunity to see in practice which CSs were more useful in solving communication problems and/or breakdowns.

3.3. Area 3: Strengthening metalinguistic awareness and plurilingual competence

Bialystok et al. (2014) define metalinguistic awareness as a skill set related to the formal aspects of language (phonology, morphology, syntax and lexis). It is based on the user's ability to focus on language structure and form rather than the content. Metalinguistic ability, on the other hand, refers to the ability to use knowledge about language (Roehr-Brackin, 2018). In our experience, business students are slow to utilise their knowledge about language and tend to hold back in situations which call for the activation of metalinguistic knowledge.

A similar hesitant behaviour is observed when students are confronted with an unfamiliar language. They seem to reject the idea that applying their plurilingual competence might produce a positive result. Plurilingual competence refers to "the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). Our students' plurilingual competence includes varying degrees

of proficiency in foreign languages as well as proficiency in Croatian dialects and local speeches, which are heavily influenced by the languages of neighbouring countries.

We have designed a workshop to help students activate their linguistic resources (metalinguistic ability and plurilingual competence). In order to spark students' metalinguistic awareness and show them that meaning can be derived from the underlying structure of language, we introduced Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense poem, "Jabberwocky" as an example of a text where meaning does not come from the words themselves. In subsequent activities, students used both their knowledge *about* language and their knowledge *of* languages.

First, they grouped several phrases in six unfamiliar languages according to their meaning. Then they did a matching activity (questions and answers) involving six local Croatian speeches. Some students were able to recognise foreign lexical influences and thus infer the meaning of the sentences in dialectal Croatian, while others worked in the opposite direction, starting from the familiar local expression and expanding their foreign language vocabulary. Finally, the students were asked to read and translate a text in Dutch, a language none of them spoke. After the initial dismay and hesitation, they managed to find and interpret the words that helped them recognise the context: the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel. Reading on was an exciting adventure full of linguistic discoveries.

While living languages are a good base for strengthening students' metalinguistic awareness and plurilingual competence, ancient Greek and Latin (which are taught in some Croatian high schools) also seem to be an untapped resource. Another workshop in the series dealt with this topic. It focused on two areas: 1) Building metalinguistic awareness through recognising the morphology of English terms with Greek or Latin roots, prefixes or suffixes. 2) Learning the meaning of commonly used Greek or Latin prefixes and suffixes to discern the meaning of unfamiliar English words and also to use them creatively for word coinage, a CS introduced in the previous workshop.

The students' comments on the two workshops revealed that they felt empowered and more confident. This proves that even a very small amount of linguistic capital can be a valuable resource in the meaning-making process.

3.4. Area 4: Activities to mitigate the negative effects of non-native accents

Research on the social perception of people who speak with a non-native accent reveals that accent forms a unique category of its own, similar to sex and age (Pietraszewski & Schwartz, 2014) as well as race (Kinzler et al., 2009). This conspicuous demographic marker is often viewed negatively and leads to negative consequences in the workplace through stigmatisation (Hideg et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2022). This external

stigmatisation is then internalised by the speaker and leads to a reduced sense of belonging (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b) and (self-) exclusion (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). In addition, the speaker's awareness of accent-related stigmatisation can also result in enhanced cognitive resource depletion and self-censorship (Hideg et al., 2022), further aggravating the negative effects of non-native accents. Social psychology literature has found two moderators for the effects described above, namely prejudice and familiarity with the accent in question (Hideg et al., 2022). People with more prejudices view speakers with an accent more negatively (de Souza et al., 2016), while familiarity with non-native accents leads to a positive attitude (e.g., Baese-Berk et al., 2013).

While the scope of LSP classes may not be large enough to counter social and cultural prejudice, they can help familiarise students with non-native accents. There are many ways to do this, including the use of high-quality audiovisual materials featuring experts with non-native accents (both contemporary teaching materials and freely available online resources are available), as well as creating opportunities for interaction with other non-native speakers.

We organised one such interaction as part of a small international project with Charles University in Prague. Croatian and Czech students were divided into groups and given the task of negotiating the details of an international takeover. The first-hand experience of talking to other students whose accent was sometimes difficult for our Croatian students to understand, and also the experience of their own accent not always being understood by the Czech students, led to self-reflection during the post-task analysis with the Croatian students. Such familiarisation exercises can lead to breaking down prejudices and rejecting the idea that accent and professional competence are inherently linked.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We evaluated the results and success of our interventions in two ways: through student reactions in an exit-poll survey we sent to workshop participants after the workshop on plurilingual competence and through our observations of students' ability to master the skills taught to them in the interventions. When it comes to reactions to the workshops, participants gave very positive feedback on their experiences. Most comments remarked on the realisation that by using multilingual competence, one can understand even languages that they do not speak. This skill shifts the focus to the importance of participation and raises the speaker's general linguistic competence as well as their confidence when communicating in a foreign language.

Our observations of the success of the interventions are also quite positive. We had two goals: to help students overcome the challenges of a multilingual workplace early in their careers and to prepare them to become successful managers who can maximise the

talents of their team members. Being aware of dominant language ideologies and how accents contribute to stereotype formation can be useful for both positions: it helps future employees better understand the environment in which they must perform well, and future managers to distinguish between instinctive stereotypes reinforced by dominant ideologies and a subordinate's true performance. The interventions also provided devices for students to increase communication and participation: learning about CSs led students to become more confident in using these tools, so important for solving communication problems. Strengthening metalinguistic awareness has several positive effects: It expands the speaker's multilingual repertoire, which can contribute to a larger vocabulary in an L2; an increased ability to extract meaning in an L2 they speak with low proficiency and an overall increase in communicative confidence and openness to using one's linguistic resources creatively.

In conclusion, helping students understand the effects of the multilingual work environment–shaped by language ideologies and global labour mobility–is a valuable goal. Being aware of the effects of language and accent biases can help overcome the stereotypes associated with language use and shift the focus to professional competence. Equipping students with tools to increase communication and participation (e.g., communication strategies, metalinguistic awareness, accessing multi-lingual repertoire) can make them more effective communicators who can use their linguistic repertoire creatively. In this environment, LSP instructors can make a big impact with small interventions.

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IZAZOV VIŠEJEZIČNOG RADNOG OKRUŽENJA I KAKO MOŽEMO POMOĆI NAŠIM STUDENTIMA DA SE SNAĐU

U ovom radu bavit ćemo se izazovima višejezičnosti koji očekuju buduće poslovne ljude u suvremenom radnom okruženju i predložiti oblike rada koje nastavnici stranog jezika struke mogu implementirati kako bi odgovorili na te izazove. Suvremena istraživanja u područjima međunarodnog poslovanja i menadžmenta poklanjaju sve više pažnje negativnim učincima jezičnih barijera na izgradnju povjerenja, jednakost i prijenos i obradu znanja. Osim toga, jezične barijere mogu dovesti do pogrešnih procjena suradnika u situacijama kada znanje određenog stranog jezika poistovjećujemo sa stručnim kompetencijama. Jezične barijere mogu dovesti i do formiranja upravljačkih struktura u sjeni i neutemeljene autocenzure ili povlačenja iz komunikacije zbog nižih jezičnih kompetencija. Ovakve situacije sve su prisutnije na hrvatskom tržištu rada pa nastavnici stranog jezika struke trebaju pripremati studente za višejezično radno okruženje. Autorice će predstaviti četiri područja djelovanja i aktivnosti koje pridonose učinkovitoj komunikaciji i uključenosti: 1) Aktivnosti usmjerene na podizanje svijesti o utjecajnim jezičnim ideologijama te o jeziku kao važnom čimbeniku u menadžmentu i međunarodnom poslovanju; 2) Aktivnosti koje pomažu studentima da razviju komunikacijske strategije koje omogućuju uključenost i jasnoću; 3) Aktivnosti koje umanjuju negativne učinke naglasaka (kako neizvornih tako i izvornih); 4) Aktivnosti kojima se razvijaju postojeće metalingvističke i plurilingvističke kompetencije te jača samopouzdanje studenata kroz transformativno učenje.

Ključne riječi: jezične barijere, pedagoški pristup, plurilingvistička kompetencija, transformativno učenje, višejezično radno okruženje