

LINGUISTIC GOOD PRACTICE IN COMPANIES

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Abstract: *The international context in which many companies have become more and more deeply involved in the latest twenty years has highlighted the issue of foreign languages in companies. Indeed, many companies are now facing the process of organizing work at an international level, which involves the relations between headquarters and subsidiaries and also between subsidiaries, the use of work tools common to several units (software and management systems, multi-site work teams, etc.), the flow of information between these locations as well as the movement of people, especially the distribution of managers who do not know a foreign language of international circulation, etc. Thus, language problems arise both in the internal functioning of companies and in the sale of their products and services. This process of internationalization, combined with the considerable influence of foreign capital, can be found essentially in three types of companies: large companies, foreign companies, SMEs, exporters and importers. The need to communicate within the same group in different parts of the world, but also the communication in an international context and the desire to save money often lead companies to favor the use of a single language. In the absence of clear guidelines from senior management, companies tend to deal with language issues empirically. This has led some companies to impose, consciously or not, English as a working language for a growing number of employees and an increasing number of activities: first for communication between local management and international headquarters, then for tasks performed at work. The problems posed by this use of a single language lead to the subsequent search for other language solutions that would have been preferable and less expensive to consider as soon as the process was implemented. While most of the companies have managed to develop interesting and often original ways of addressing language issues, fewer have developed a comprehensive strategy for managing language issues in a coherent, equitable and sustainable manner, addressing the challenges posed by globalization and market liberalization.*

Key words: management, knowledge, business, language problems

JEL classification: M1, M14, M54

1. Introduction

In a world characterized by growing social multilingualism, organizations such as businesses and the people who work in them must find answers to the challenge imposed by diversity and solutions to manage their linguistic resources.

The increasing use of English may have a high impact on some employees during the merger of companies of different linguistic backgrounds or, to a lesser extent, when companies enter into alliances with each other. The decisions made by the management of a company on the use of languages can also have a significant impact, for example during the restructuring, centralization of certain services or the appointment of non-English-speaking management staff. However, many

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examples show that the use of the national language is deeply rooted in society and that organizations are more interested in integrating it than trying to change it. Considering this observation, a pragmatic approach is to try to reconcile the goal of competitiveness with the need to maintain social cohesion, by recognizing languages as a real resource for the company and not as a problem. There needs to be a link between a coherent language strategy and increased export sales. Adopting a language strategy that meets the company's international communication needs, while guaranteeing employees the right to work in English: this seems to be the approach to be recommended to companies.

Companies are a very fertile environment for linguistic production. In general, this production is a faithful reflection of the knowledge - sources of competitive advantage - and the company's actions, which has a particular impact on human resources and communication. These two sectors are key sectors, given that people exchange language productions to make sense. As a result, this production becomes a problem and an economic factor that must be integrated and then understood in order to be able to communicate internally, then externally. The working language in business is not limited to a single language, but to a set of means of communication that the diversity of spoken languages must be able to express. At this stage, what is projected by the company, through its actors, must be able to be expressed. If we take into account the fact that terminology studies terms as a linguistic expression of concepts, its approach can very well address the situation of companies. But the analysis of the topic takes into account mainly a part of the linguistic material, that of language, and does not address the other forms of expression that ensure the competitive advantages of the company.

2. Literature review

Languages spoken in business have been the subject of numerous studies. However, hidden behind the spoken languages, the business languages or languages specialized in the business sectors of the companies, there is a special reality. The company uses expressions that, although often opaque, are specific to it and distinguish it from its competitors: it is about corporations (de Vecchi, 2007) or organizations. Business discussions, a real field of language to explore, are not very visible, which is undoubtedly a reason that would explain the labor shortage.

Our analysis was based on a grid with four areas: (fig. no.1)

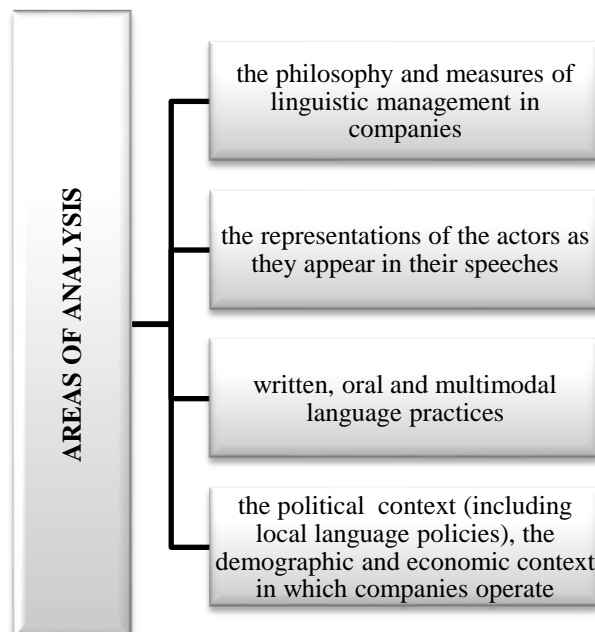


Figure no. 1 Representation of areas of analysis

- the philosophy and measures of linguistic management in companies,
- the representations of the actors involved as they appear in their speeches,
- written, oral and multimodal language practices,
- the political context (including local language policies), the demographic and economic context in which companies operate.

We were mainly interested in the relationships between these dimensions. Part of the novelty of our research is that we did not focus on corporate culture, but on linguistic philosophy and language management measures or on linguistic representations or on the use of language itself. Influenced by the idea that all languages are mutually transparent, business organization research often neglects multilingualism when dealing with, or even planning for, internal and external business communication (Bruhn, 2003). Moreover, the predominance of English in the business world is not in question. It is therefore not surprising that much of the research has focused on the progressive choice of English as the language of business, as well as on the forms and ways of using it in the workplace (Crystal, 2007).

Many companies take on the challenge of linguistic diversity through a range of measures, implicit or explicit, that may be aimed at the management of diversity and / or at defining a company culture (corporate culture), or even a corporate language (corporate vocabulary); but these measures are by no means limited to the problem of the English language. Consequently, we will focus on managing the diversity of languages present in the workplace and on their alternative or mixed use. The fundamental questions are, therefore: (fig. no.2)

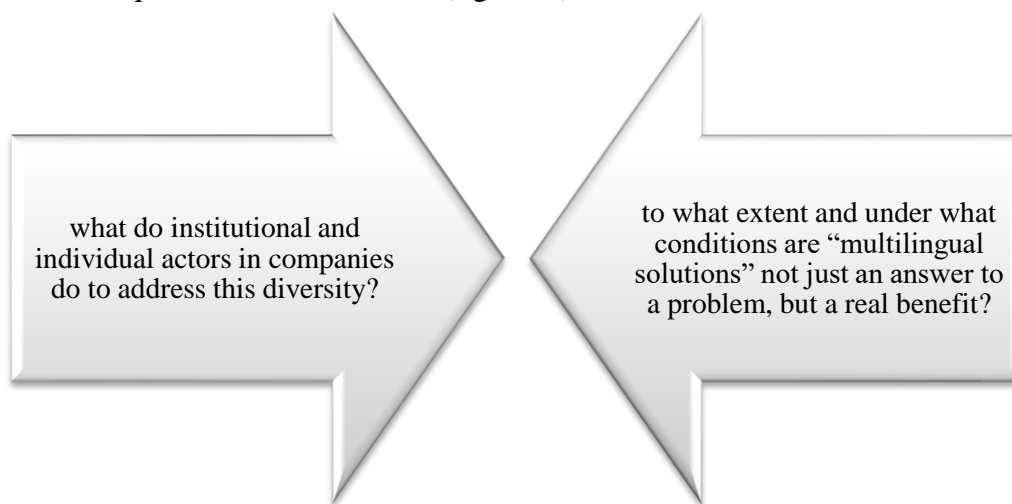


Figure no. 2 Linguistic diversity questions

- what do institutional and individual actors in companies do to address this diversity?
- to what extent and under what conditions are “multilingual solutions” not just an answer to a problem, but a real benefit?

Indeed, the ideologies and communication practices in multilingual contexts vary enormously. "Solutions" to overcoming potential problems include using a language (often English), choosing the language of one of the interlocutors known to others (especially immigrants), exploiting receptive skills and using different forms of multilingual speech, and using translation and interpreting services. Two arguments prevail in the analysis of these solutions from the point of view of companies: the first concerns the effectiveness of communication; the second takes into account the inclusion or exclusion of people, namely equity. From a European perspective, the present research will analyze under what conditions the predominant linguistic diversity in Europe is an asset for companies rather than an obstacle.

Therefore, we will describe and evaluate a set of communication situations involving language management measures and their impact on companies operating in a context of linguistic diversity of speakers of different languages in a variety of contexts to show how and in what conditions different ways of thinking and acting related to different languages can favor the creation, transfer and application of knowledge. The research underlying this article sought to answer some of these questions by investigating language policies in companies, describing the representations of different actors in a business context, and analyzing examples of real language use in the workplace, and namely by making recordings of multilingual interactions in companies.

The emphasis is on the one hand on the way in which employees mobilize their language resources, and, on the other hand, on the congruence / incongruity of these strategies with the prescriptive discourse of the company. The confrontation between management measures, actors' representations and recurring behavioral patterns resulting from the analysis of language practice led us to emphasize the discourse between the languages used in the workplace and the real behavior of the actors. This emphasis also implies "everyday theories" about multilingualism and language in general. The aim of this paper is to reflect on these tensions, as well as on the question of the extent to which forms of communication in a multilingual situation are predictable and even likely to be influenced.

The main research questions are:

- How is communication managed across language and on-site?
- What role does English play as an international language for internal and external communication?
- Can we see tensions between the company's "doing", employee representations, and current practices?

A multilingual philosophy and appropriate language management measures

Unlike other companies operating in contexts of linguistic diversity, which try to impose a single corporate language, linguistic philosophy does not hardly aspire to homogeneity, but opts for the plurality of languages. This is a facet of diversity management for the company. The vocabulary used in official documents refers to ethical values (equal opportunities, acceptance, tolerance, integration), economic success (profit, competitive advantage, advantages, profitability, efficiency, etc.), social benefit (for employees, customers and society in general) and management measures (promotion, motivation, formation of mixed groups, language teaching / acquisition, etc.).

English is a universal contact language; therefore, it is required as the second language of communication in business.

The control of the risks caused by the use of foreign languages

While some risks associated with the use of foreign languages can be eliminated, others can only be controlled. Language risks are significant when companies from different language backgrounds merge or, to a lesser but real extent, when companies form alliances. The decisions of a company management can also have a significant linguistic impact, for example during the restructuring, centralization of certain services or the appointment of non-English speaking managers. Setting up a subsidiary or a network in one country also raises many language issues. In addition, the risks of a poor understanding of documents in a language other than the mother tongue or language of training are often underestimated. Many language choices, which seem obvious to some managers, actually have a negative impact and involve risks for companies that should not be overlooked: (fig. no.3)

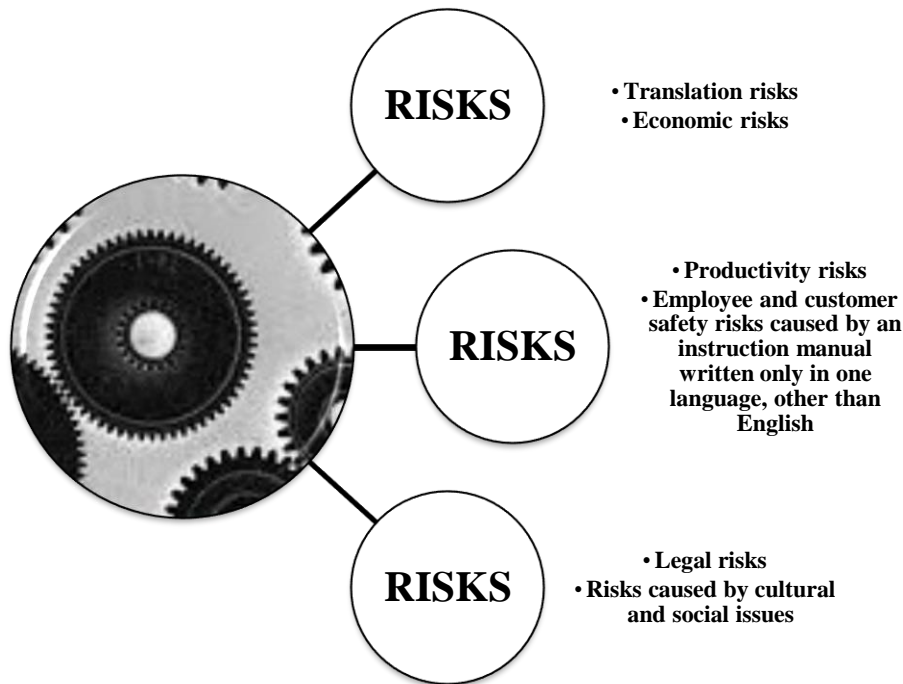


Figure no. 3 Risks caused by the use of foreign languages

- **Translation risks:** some studies show that estimates of translation costs are largely offset by productivity gains associated with working in the language in which the employee was trained, especially when it comes to the mother tongue. Translation obviously involves risks and some cases of mistranslation are unfortunately difficult to avoid, but these risks can be controlled and considerably reduced by the use of qualified people or reliable and proven translation tools;
- **Economic risks:** are present especially during oral and written exchanges in another language during a negotiation. Misunderstanding or partial misunderstanding can lead to mistakes and serious consequences. Negotiating in a language known by all the actors involved has advantages that far outweigh the costs and disadvantages associated with using qualified translators;
- **Productivity risks:** people understand better and faster what is expected of them and work faster, achieving greater efficiency when working in the language of training or in their mother tongue; they make full use of the resources made available, in particular computer tools; they are more creative, more attentive, more alert and less stressed. They also have more initiative. All of these are factors that contribute to increased productivity.
- **Employee and customer safety risks caused by an instruction manual written only in one language, other than English:** when safety issues are involved, the consequences can be disastrous in all respects, including financially.
- **Legal risks:** the economic consequences of a partial or incorrect agreement may be considerable, for example in auctions and legal documents. A better understanding of the rules, requirements and constraints, obligations, laws and regulations will relieve companies of many inconveniences.
- **Risks caused by cultural and social issues:** the coexistence of several languages without a minimum of rules sometimes harbors risks of misunderstandings, misinterpretations and sometimes even conflicts between individuals. Staff must make arbitrations that are not always unanimous. On the other hand, requesting the exclusive use of English may deprive the company of certain talents or cause it to lose some. Numerous examples show that cultural

practices have a deep social anchorage and that organizations are more interested in integrating them than in trying to change them. Emphasis should be placed on knowledge of English with proficiency in a particular field. There may be a risk of discrimination when a competent person is unable to do his or her job because he or she does not have sufficient knowledge of the required language and, even worse, when a position he or she aspires to is given to a competent person who knows that language. Some people who are able to perform professional tasks in a foreign language, however, feel uncomfortable when used in an environment that involves them personally, for example when the evaluation interview takes place in the evaluator's language, rather than in that of the evaluated person.

3. Research methodology

The approach is qualitative and multi-methodological (ethnography of communication, conversational analysis, participant observation, etc.); it includes the analysis of texts mentioning language philosophy and explicit management measures, interviews with company managers (on explicit and implicit language management measures) and with the employees on their perception of management measures and practices, the interpretation of written documents circulating in the company (e.g. for example, the internal magazine, annual reports and job postings) and their presentation to the large public (website, brochures, advertising), the analysis of the company's landscape, as well as audio and video recordings of workplace interactions.

In order for this paper to be recognized as a management tool, the choice was made for it to rely on testimonials that describe the practices actually implemented.

The method chosen was to set up a body of interviews either face-to-face or over the phone or recorded. We first contacted people from the business world who expressed their opinions on language issues or who took initiatives: management staff, trade unionists, representatives of the chambers of commerce. At the same time, companies were contacted to obtain information on language practices and, as a result, they showed a certain a priori openness to language issues.

4. Results and discussions

Stating the choice of explicit management of language issues

The best practices could never have been implemented if they had not first obtained the support of the company's management and been made norms. The management of language problems must be based on principles, objectives or practices, which the company refers to every time it faces them. Sound risk management, whatever its nature, also requires companies to take a minimum of precautionary measures and make the best decision from the outset. Ideally, these principles and objectives should be included in an official document that is part of an overall business strategy.

Entrusting one or more people with the management of language problems

The management of language problems must be a responsibility recognized and assumed by management. Whichever form is chosen, it is essential that, on the one hand, one or more people be entrusted with the task of managing these issues within the company and, on the other hand, that these people receive support, moral authority, and legitimacy. It is necessary for solutions to be proposed to language problems. The management of the company must provide the necessary means (time, resources and money) to perform these tasks.

The establishment of a body for the management of language problems

A common body within the company that brings together representatives of management and staff has the advantage of involving these different players. It is an environment in which all the linguistic questions that arise can be presented and discussed. These questions and answers can reconcile economic benefits and social cohesion. The activity of a Committee on Health, Safety and Working Conditions in the field of international assistance refers to language issues that concern all sectors of the company.

Entrusting a manager with language management

There must be an intercultural management and language skills manager in each company assisted by an educational advisor. It is essential that these people have the necessary support and legitimacy to propose solutions to language problems. It is advisable to perpetuate the position by formalizing it in the company agreements as much as possible.

Raising the language issue in social dialogue

It is much better to deal with language issues in social dialogue than in court.

The agreement signed with General Electric Medical Systems (GEMS) made it possible to set up a joint monitoring committee and specify its competencies and operational resources. The language issues that have been the subject of social conflicts in the company for many years are thus treated by social dialogue.

A number of companies, for example, adopt employment policies, purchasing policies or policies for the use of information technology in English to ensure that the use of this language will remain widespread within the company.

Adopting a global language policy

Some companies also adopt a comprehensive language policy that specifies the place that English should occupy in the day-to-day operations of the company. With the support of senior management, these policies address most language issues, such as the language of internal communication, the language of external communications and the use of English in information technology. These policies are widely disseminated within these organizations, especially through the intranet. Their main provisions are made public and local partners (customers, suppliers, subcontractors, various partners) are informed about them. In addition, management representatives must adhere to the principles set out in the company's language policy and are expected to manage by the force of their own example.

Entrusting one or more people with language management

In all companies, at least one person must be responsible for monitoring the language situation of the business. Due to their knowledge of the work environment and production processes, the company's employees are often able to detect problems, participate in the development of solutions and implement them. Their participation promotes a more accurate assessment of the language situation and better consultation. For example, Rolls-Royce committees are particularly active. Their success is mainly based on dialogue and mutual respect. The members of these committees meet several times a year and propose to the management and employees several measures aimed at making English the working language.

Thus, when it is observed that certain decisions may have an impact on working language or that certain situations need to be corrected to allow English to take its proper place, these questions are generally the subject of discussions within the company.

The assessment of the situation regarding the use of English at regular intervals

Once the action plan has been established, the company must ensure, at regular intervals, that the situation progresses. Many companies take precautionary measures, such as purchasing or employment policies, to ensure that they remain in compliance with the law at all times and to avoid the need to make costly corrections. At Bombardier Aerospace, language criteria are an integral part of the relevant and applicable procurement procedures implemented by supply chain personnel. Linguistic criteria are also taken into account when making any business decision that has an impact on working language, including investment in information technology.

Support actions for the use of English at work

When good practice in language management is based on individual initiatives and risks being abandoned, especially if changes occur in the composition of management staff, it is advisable to integrate them into the company's administrative processes and current practices. To ensure sustainability, it is recommended that a language policy be adopted that addresses most of these issues and that has the support of all senior management. In short, the management of language problems

must find its place in the very culture of the company. Some companies choose to add a language criterion to the processes leading to purchasing or investment decisions, while others integrate language issues into their management practices.

Adapting the language training offer to the needs of collaborators (employees)

First of all, the prior analysis of communication needs involves consulting the employee, an exercise that is most often done during the annual evaluation. It is important to choose the training that best suits their needs: multimedia centers, telephone courses, in offices. At GDF Suez, an employee who is about to leave for Brazil will first receive a three-week immersion course to become familiar with Portuguese. L'Oréal develops online self-learning. Any employee who wishes can dedicate themselves to online learning, including during working hours. At the headquarters of the national federation Crédit Mutuel, employees have a "resource space" for self-training. It often happens that an inadequate training offer compromises the achievement of the intended objectives. It is therefore a matter of defining, before the training, the communication needs in order to be clear on the training objectives. The choice of language of instruction is crucial. Two assessments, one at the beginning and one at the end of the training, allow the company to measure the progress of its employees. Finally, the company has to gain by offering various formulas compatible with the availability of its employees: face-to-face, distance or online courses, tutoring, self-training, etc.

Promoting the integration of immigrants

Measures that promote the learning of English by immigrant workers are often accompanied by measures to integrate these workers into their adoptive society. There are many businesses that apply such measures, whether it is peer-to-peer or mentoring, informal conversations during breaks or meals, or even posters or a mini-glossary of terms and phrases to correct.

These are some examples of good practices observed in several companies, which: (fig. no. 4)

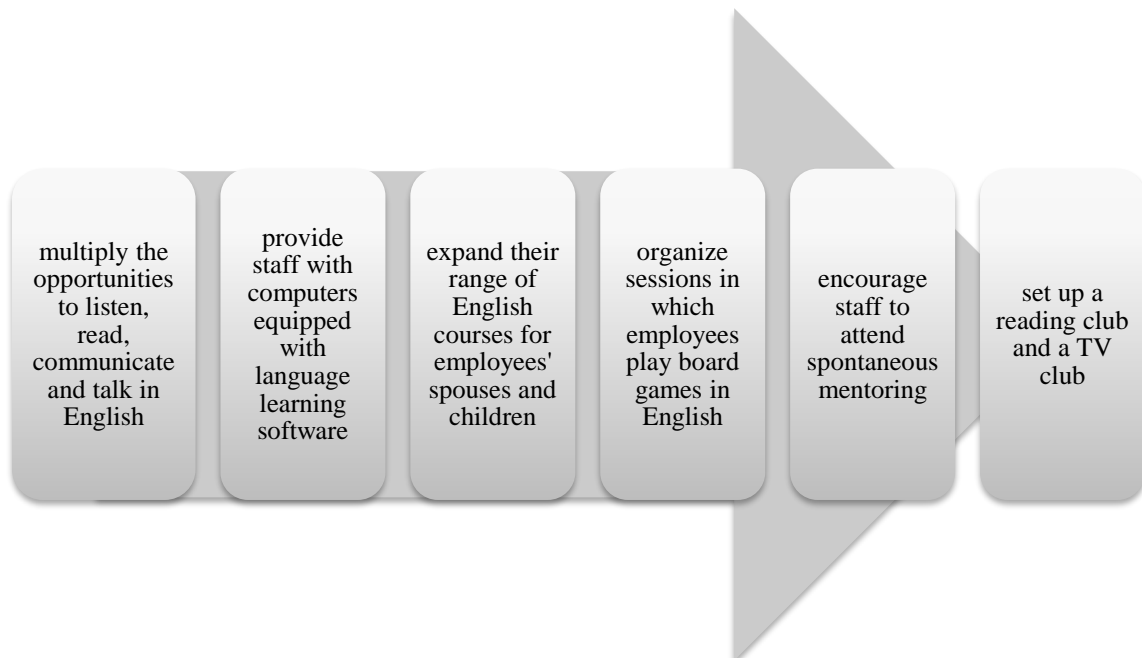


Figure no. 4 Representation of good practice examples observed in companies

Encouraging people with no functional knowledge of English to learn the language

The desire to learn English or to make people learn it gives rise to interesting language practices in companies. Until employees gain knowledge of English, the managers of many large companies often have a "language bridge", that is, a person who acts as an interpreter between them and workers in their internal communications.

Language bridges are also made available to various employees of smaller companies. Similarly, in order to complete the language training of their immigrant workers and to further promote their integration into the community, several companies hold an informal meeting each week, for example during lunch, during which workers discuss a hot topic in English.

As in any other field, it is essential that managers encourage the use of English and set an example, especially by organizing meetings in English, providing opportunities for learners to put into practice the skills they have acquired.

Assessment of learners' language skills and progress during annual assessment interviews

The annual employee evaluation interview is a good opportunity to assess the employee's progress in learning English.

Defining the preconditions for language skills adapted to the job

Where English is intended to be used in the workplace, it is necessary to define precisely the tasks in which it will be required.

Many companies invest in the language skills of their employees. Philips, for example, has a competency management system for executives and technicians. It includes not only recruitment tools (job profiles, job vacancies) in the target language, but also relational databases that make it possible to update the list of language and intercultural skills of employees (during the annual evaluation interview) and use of these tools to ensure staff mobility.

Employee training in the languages of clients and partners

For many companies, training employees in the languages of clients and partners is a key step in an international strategy. An employee who agrees to learn the local language integrates much faster. The goal is to be as close as possible to clients.

Considering language training as key investment

In many cases, the training policy is defined at group level. A large company in the energy sector has set up a management center that coordinates all national applications, including languages other than French and English. Solutions are developed there: resources, documentation, educational counseling, support role at the request of employees.

Basing training actions on a language skills assessment

Establishing a diagnosis upstream of training, measuring progress during and after it and, finally, certifying the competencies required by the job, these aspects allow the assessment of knowledge.

5. Conclusions

The measures taken to manage linguistic and cultural diversity within companies are numerous and include means of assessing and improving the linguistic and intercultural skills of employees in order to make the institution more competitive. In this context, an important tool is the creation and preferential treatment with mixed teams. Previous research has revealed the cognitive and social benefits that multilingual individuals enjoy. In general, individual multilingualism seems to foster creativity, be it:

- linguistic (the ability to choose within a multiple mental lexicon and to create hybrid linguistic forms),
- cognitive (wider access to information, alternative ways of thinking and perceiving the world),
- interrelational (higher),
and flexibility to adapt to new communicative or even strategic contexts (negotiation, decision-making, problem-solving or control).

According to the experience of managers, these observations are transferable to mixed teams. Moreover, the multilingual asset is always an intercultural asset. One might even be tempted to argue that these benefits stem from cultural rather than linguistic diversity, that is, from the fact that

members of mixed teams do not share the same values and experiences, or even the same worldview, because of their roots and early socialization in different cultures. The companies' experiences would thus confirm the observation that creativity results from the clash between divergent perspectives, ways of interpretation or prediction and the different forms of language use in conceptual spaces, more precisely between spaces between cultures.

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