

HOW DOES PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH AFFECT FRENCH NATIVE SPEAKERS AT WORK?



A qualitative research conducted in the French-speaking part of Switzerland

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Master of Advanced Studies in HR, Career Management and Coaching
HEC - University of Geneva, 2012

Context

"It is well recognized that English now reigns as the global language of business and as a consequence more and more multinational companies are now mandating English as their corporate language, wherever they are based in the world." (Neeley, 2012).

Considering the number of multinational HQ's in Switzerland, the main purpose of our research was to explore and investigate how non-native professionals manage English in their every day work. In addition, we wanted to gain a deeper insight into how proficiency in English affects non-natives at work.

Findings

Using data from 37 interviews with Swiss and French professionals from 25 companies across the French-speaking part of Switzerland, our research disclosed the following findings:

1. Non-natives felt particularly vulnerable when they had to operate in English outside the parameters of their job.
2. Non-natives' well-being was affected when operating in English, which was a standard part of working life for certain industries.
3. Different linguistic communication styles between natives and non-natives, coupled with cultural aspects, had a detrimental impact on non-natives' communication and confidence.



Testimonials

« L'anglais professionnel et l'anglais privé c'est complètement différent, vraiment. Au niveau professionnel c'est toujours les mêmes termes qu'on utilise [...] enfin, c'est assez simple. Là où je doute le plus c'est effectivement au niveau privé. »

- Director, FMCG Company

« Le problème c'est lorsqu'ils [les natifs anglophones] commencent à faire des blagues, des jeux de mots. Tant que ça reste dans le cadre du travail, on parle avec un vocabulaire que je connais, mais dès qu'on sort du cadre du travail j'ai plus de peine. »

- HR Business Partner,
International Org.

« Je n'ai pas la même rapidité intellectuelle, je n'ai pas la même façon de suivre mes idées... je ne vais pas aussi vite en anglais qu'en français, donc inévitablement je perds deux choses : je perds l'assurance et la vivacité à laquelle je pense habituellement. »

- Assistant Manager, Finance

« Quand on maîtrise mal l'anglais ou si on a des difficultés avec cette langue, ça amène plus de fatigue parce qu'on a une crainte d'être mal compris, [...] de mal comprendre et c'est vrai qu'on est plus fatigué. »

- Client Advisor, Banking



Small talk is often stressful for non-natives

Small talk

The "Achilles' heel"

"The ability to build relationships through small talk is a vital ingredient for successful global communication." (Andrew L. Molinsky, 2013)

Our study showed that there was a clear difference in proficiency between professional and social English i.e. small talk. This lack of proficiency caused stress and anxiety among non-native professionals, especially in meetings, lunch or coffee breaks and informal discussions.

Furthermore, non-natives felt they were linguistically disadvantaged during small talk and at times they reported to be "left out" in conversations. Conversely, non-natives specified that English-natives shared collective cultural customs that they did not identify with. Consequently, small talk is not just a language issue but a cultural one too.

Well-being outcomes

"[Companies] very much underestimate the psychological stress that a language change can cause." (Piekkari 2001)

The use of English was perceived as disruptive by some individuals and thus, having a negative impact on their well-being. Well over 80% of respondents agreed that working in a foreign language did not allow them to fully exploit their professional skills, because they did not dare to intervene as much as they would have in their own language.

We saw from our findings that non-natives often felt the emotional repercussions of lingua franca dominance at work. However, there was a form of resignation on the part of non-natives and a kind of "submission" to the power of the natives.

The "power" of the natives

Communicating in English in an English speaking professional environment put native speakers in a position of superiority over their non-native colleagues. It was reported that Anglophones had a kind of "power" over non-natives at work and natives' language competence was at times perceived more valuable than professional knowledge or skills.

There were various cultural components which played a major role: e.g. accents, idioms, metaphors, as well as differences in cultural communication styles between natives and non-natives.

Besides this, it also was noted that non-natives communicated better with each other because English was not their mother tongue. Therefore they had to ensure that when they communicated the message they gave was clear. They also tended to speak slower, and used less complex vocabulary.



Meetings in English can generate fatigue for non-natives

Conclusions

Our study attempted to highlight the trials and tribulations of being a non-native professional working in an English-speaking organisation based in French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Firstly in this study, we discovered that social English was perceived as an important feature of working life and non-natives felt particularly vulnerable when they had to operate in English outside the parameters of their job.

Secondly, English is a must for non-natives and a clear relationship was found to be true between their performance, well-being and language proficiency. At all levels it was perceived that a low level of English proficiency prevents the career development.

Thirdly, there were various linguistic components which played a major role, e.g. accents, idioms, metaphors, as well as different cultural communication styles between natives and non-natives which can have a detrimental impact on communication and confidence.

The importance of intercultural skills in order to make appropriate modifications to their own attitude and communication style in to bridge cultural differences, was noted by all participants in our study.

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Who we are

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Born in London, Sunita is of Indian origin and has lived in Switzerland for over 20 years. She speaks English, French and Hindi.

Sunita has extensive experience in Training and Development both in the UK and Switzerland. She founded Walk The Talk in 2010.

She obtained the Master of Advanced Studies in HR, specialty Career Management.

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Born in Romania, Rodica worked in several East-European countries and has lived in Switzerland for over 8 years. She speaks French, English and Romanian.

Rodica has over 15 years experience in Training and Development, Sales and Marketing Communications.

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Our services

1. Cross Cultural and Intercultural Training

We design and deliver tailor-made programmes specific to your company's needs, focussing on:

Business English for non-native speakers

How to organise ideas and communicate clearly, develop linguistic skills and increase English proficiency in order to communicate ideas more effectively.

Successful Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication

Practical workshops to develop skills to operate in an intercultural context, enabling your employees to work productively across cultures.

Managing Multicultural Teams

Developing skills and strategies to manage cross-cultural concerns within multicultural teams and organisations.

2. Swiss Market Briefings

Our programmes will assist you to gain a better understanding of Swiss Business Culture.

Working in a New Culture

A programme for executives focussed on building successful business relationships with Swiss partners and colleagues. This programme helps you understand:

- Market expectations
- Communication styles
- Business etiquette

Living in a New Culture

We offer executives and their families training to enable them to settle into Switzerland more smoothly. Our courses are always personalised to the needs of your employees and their families. This covers:

- The contextual culture
- Things to watch out for
- Culture shock: what it is and how to deal with it

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We work with companies to ensure they are communicatively and culturally equipped to meet the challenges of working in the global world. This includes:

- Business English and Intercultural Competence audit and assessment
- Business English skills testing for recruitment or career development purposes
- Designing and Implementing Organisational Intercultural Training Programmes

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