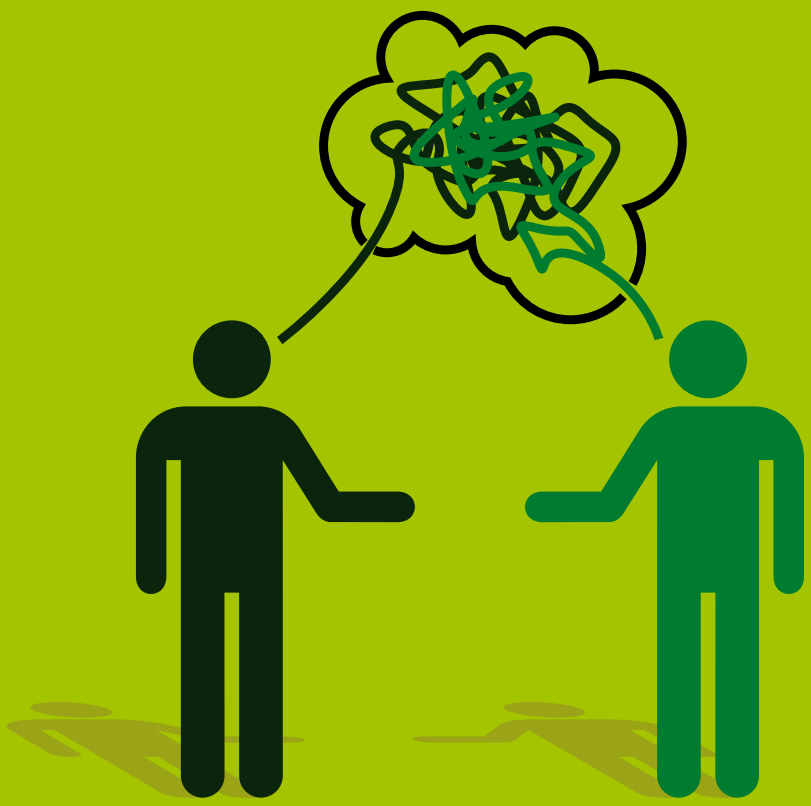
Jane Kassis-Henderson and **Philippe Lecomte**
argue that globalisation means that communication is about more than learning a foreign language



LANGUAGES & COMMUNICATION: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Since the mid-1990s business schools have undergone major changes due to the globalisation of the higher-education market. These changes are characterised by the development of academic research, the process of internationalisation of campuses and faculty, and the greater proximity of faculty to the business world.

These changes have in turn led to the increasing importance of international accreditation bodies, whose quality labels are a key factor in the drive to attract the best students and faculty members on an open international market. Globalisation has also changed the requirements of companies regarding the training of managers, who must now operate worldwide within growing networks of international business connections.

This means that business school graduates, in order to prove their employability, are required to understand and analyse complex situations in multicultural and multilingual environments. They must also be adaptable and reactive as the world around them is changing rapidly.

These major consequences of globalisation should have made the question of communication competencies a central issue of company policies and of management education. It is therefore worth investigating how this has been translated into the strategies of today's corporate world and business school curricula.

Some decades ago questions of foreign language use in the corporate world were of a marginal nature. They tended to be associated with the exportation of products or the expatriation of company personnel and concerned a relatively small proportion of the workforce. However, with the internationalisation of companies an increasing number of employees at all levels of the corporate hierarchy are confronted with a variety of languages in the course of their daily business, be it in the head office or in foreign subsidiaries. They will often be faced with the need to speak, understand, read or write in a foreign language. The language question should therefore have shifted from being a marginal to a central concern for management.

However, in spite of this increasing need for organisations to understand the repercussions of working in a multilingual environment, language has, until recent years, been a much-neglected factor in international management research.

This can be partly explained by the fact that research has tended to focus on cross-cultural issues and that language-related phenomena have been hidden by the all-encompassing category of culture. An additional element accounting for the lack of sensitivity to questions linked to the presence of different languages in the workplace is the fact that the majority of management scholars have been educated in the mainstream English-speaking academic tradition.

English is indeed the *lingua franca* of international business. But the mistaken and widely held notion that English alone is the solution to be adopted in business education and in companies has led to the failure to recognise the complexity of working across languages and cultures and consequently the failure to address the language question.

This state of affairs is aggravated by the fact that top executives are often cut off from the reality of everyday communication practices in their organisations as information flows up to them in standardised boardroom language.

To summarise, there tends to be an oversimplification or lack of understanding of the ramifications of the language question. In fact, we can speak of a double challenge: companies confronted with the need to understand the challenge of multilingual/multicultural communication; and business schools confronted with the challenge of identifying the place of language and communication studies in the curriculum.

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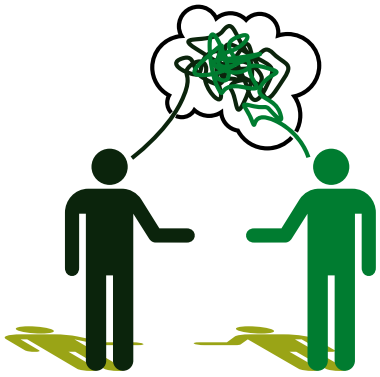
During the last two decades many language-related issues have been investigated by scholars in the fields of international business and organisational science, such as, for example, cross-border co-ordination or multicultural team cohesion.

These issues include, for example: how do cross-language exchanges take place in the multilingual workplace and what language policies and strategies exist in organisations? Articles have been published in management journals under the following headings: "Beyond English: transnational corporations and the strategic management of language in a complex multilingual business environment" and "Speaking in tongues: the importance of language in international management processes".

In the field of linguistics and communication studies, the multilingual workplace is also coming under increasing scrutiny with concepts from disciplines such as sociolinguistics and discourse analysis being introduced to throw light on language-related phenomena in international business. Moreover, recent research has emphasised the importance for international teams and management education of understanding language use in establishing rapport and building interpersonal relations.

The stated aim of most business schools today is to provide the programmes and framework to enable students to develop the competencies required in the international business arena, which go beyond the acquisition of the so-called "hard" management tools and techniques. Within this context, the objective of communication studies in particular is to enable students to communicate effectively in multinational/multicultural/multilingual settings. In short, business schools are committed to preparing business students to become effective international managers and instilling communication competencies is an integral part of this.



There is a need to reconsider the place of communication in international business studies and to re-think the role of language and communication departments in business schools. This could make them one of the drivers for change within business education, playing an active part in teaching and course design and in academic and company-oriented research in the developing field of language-related issues and management.

More specifically, this means taking a broader view of the role of language and communication faculty. One of the main goals for language and communication departments is to train students to develop communicative competencies within multiple language environments. This entails achieving mutual accommodation between parties in order to become adaptable and co-operative. For this purpose it would be more appropriate to shift emphasis from teaching "language skills" to teaching the rhetorical or discourse strategies required in specific contexts.

Language and communication departments must change their image, develop shared learning goals with other departments and collaborate with them in order to acquire a cross-disciplinary understanding of international management issues. For this purpose schools need to adopt a holistic approach in order to break down disciplinary boundaries.

The internationalisation of business school campuses does not automatically lead to the emergence of intercultural learning; schools must put adequate structures in place to draw tangible results from the presence of mixed student populations.

Experience has shown that it is principally the members of language and communication departments who provide this structure and learning forum. The courses they provide offer students the opportunity to exchange observations, experiment with communication strategies and learn about concepts and theories that will throw light on their experiences.

In this way, examples of misunderstandings or of failed communication experienced in the multicultural classroom or reported by students are analysed by experts in a structured and formal context. One of the objectives of the courses delivered by language and communication academics is to teach students to develop a critical capacity to analyse communication behaviour and to relativise communication norms between cultures. Indeed, managing language diversity in the workforce should be an integral part of all business school modules on leadership and change management.

There is a need to develop research in the field of international management with a special focus on managing people in a multilingual world. One aim of this research agenda would be to identify and analyse the multiple issues related to the question of communication and interactions within multinational teams. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly necessary to introduce more diversity in order to accommodate the changing needs of globalised companies.

If business schools are to meet the needs of international firms and adapt their teaching methods and goals to their requirements, they should not only teach languages but communication competence in multilingual settings to train students to adopt a flexible approach to language use, according to the composition of multilingual teams.

Addressing the above questions is the aim of the recently created Groupe d'Etudes en Management et Langage (GEM&L). This international association emphasises the importance of research focusing on language use and language management in globalised companies.

It aims to promote an interdisciplinary approach to management education and break down the barriers between academic disciplines and to place communication competence at the heart of the issues encountered in management rather than arbitrarily and artificially include foreign language courses within the business school curriculum.

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Business schools throughout Europe have different traditions concerning the place of languages in the curriculum. French business schools, for their part, have always had departments of "language and communication studies" although these are often considered as non-academic areas because of the general and mistaken assumption that they simply teach language courses in the narrow sense of language as a simple tool for communication.

We propose that international business and language and communication studies are two areas that could be mutually reinforced through the development of joint programmes based on joint research within a broad-based Department of International Business combining economics and strategy, cross-cultural studies, and language and communication studies. We therefore recommend a cross-disciplinary perspective, allowing business schools to strengthen the links between management sciences and other human sciences such as linguistics, anthropology and social psychology.

Business schools need the competencies of researchers and teachers devoted to the question of language use in globalised firms. Our hope is to see these recommendations implemented through institutional change, the open-mindedness of stakeholders and a determination to move forward. **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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