

Language for work matters

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As migration increases worldwide and European economies are increasingly dependent on migrant workers, the issue of language skills development in the language(s) of the host country (L2) is of growing importance. Migrants need work-related L2 skills to find suitable employment, participate in work and society, and progress. Employers need L2-competent employees to offer quality products and services for the benefit of the whole society. Work-related L2 development is a democratic, social and economic imperative: it is an issue of social justice and peace as well as economic development for individuals, economies and whole societies. This paper seeks to give evidence why L2 for work matters: it highlights the interdependency of work, technology and communication and the central role of communication and language, understood as social practice, in today's workplaces. It illustrates the language requirements and needs for migrant workers. It offers examples of how to support work-related L2 learning in formal, non-formal and informal learning environments. The paper draws on research and practices across Europe collected and further developed by the Language for Work (LfW) project. LfW refers to two European projects and an international network sponsored by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), an agency of the Council of Europe. It concludes with an invitation for researchers to investigate how digitisation will impact communication at work and for work and how people react to it, in order to develop a proper offer for formal, non-formal and informal L2 learning.

KEYWORDS: migration, ECML, L2 development, merging technology, vocational education and training, VET



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1. INTRODUCTION

This article discusses research into ways to support adult migrants developing the majority language of the country of residence for work, at work, and through work in the context of their linguistic integration in Europe. It draws on work sponsored by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), an agency of the Council of Europe, in connection with two Language for Work (LfW) projects (LfW, 2019a; LfW, 2019b).

The first part of the article examines the rationale for supporting work-related second language (L2) development by adult migrants. It considers the role of language in and at work (including

today's demand that employees at all levels be effective communicators); the role of migration in relation to recent structural changes in work and society, and why support for labour market integration of adult migrants is seen as a democratic, social and economic imperative for most European countries. It concludes by analysing the understanding of language and language learning that underpins the LfW work and its implications for those who support work-related L2 development inside and outside educational settings. The second part of the article reviews learning from the two LfW projects and looks forward to future developments.

2. WORK, COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY

2.1 Why support work-related language development for adult migrants?

Work – productive activity – and communication are two fundamental and deeply interconnected aspects of the human experience, at the level of both the individual and society. As an essentially collaborative activity, work is hardly possible without communication among people, between people and machines and artefacts. Likewise, ‘work’, in the sense of purposeful, collaborative activity, provides both the context and object of much of our communication. In turn, both work and communication are deeply informed by a third human fundamental, the use of technology.

Throughout the various industrial eras, as historians of work point out, technological innovations have transformed not only work activity and its organisation but also workplace communication (Boutet, 2001). These technological transformations have been so radical that scholars speak of ‘industrial revolutions’, three or four of them, according to different perspectives. The centrality of work has meant that the changes ushered in by these various so-called ‘industrial’ revolutions have extended far beyond the immediate production of good and services to the whole society, including education, welfare, and the basic organisation of social life.

The long phase of the first industrial revolution – covering the 18th and the 19th centuries – was based on mechanisation and steam power. Workplace communication was centred on oral exchanges to communicate duties and regulations. From the late 19th century on, we have witnessed a sharp acceleration in technological development, accompanied by the rise of new economic and industrial models based on large factories like the Ford car plants, ushering in the second industrial revolution. Mass production, assembly lines, electrical energy, and vertical forms of work organisation transformed industry including production and services. A dichotomy in the organisation of work and in the use of language at work transformed the long-standing distribution of written

and oral communication. *‘Speaking and working were antagonistic activities. Talking wastes time, distracts, hinders focus on the actions to be done. In a certain sense, at managerial level where work was conceived and organised the written form prevailed, on the shop floor, where it was carried out, silence’* (Boutet, 2001, p. 17).

From the second half of the 20th century, electronics and information technology have brought about the third industrial revolution, characterised by globalised economic systems, underpinned by automation, standardisation and service industries, and engendering a raft of radical changes to in work activity, work organisation and workplace communication. Communication and language – as a subset of communication – are now central to work. Oral and written language skills are now requested by all employees, in all sectors and positions as part of vocational competence.

Today, the fourth revolution is underway, developing at an exponential pace. It has been characterised as a ‘merging technology’ – Cyber Physical Systems (CPS) – that blurs the lines between the physical, digital and human spheres: the internet of things and networks (including communication between machines and human beings). *‘With information and communication technology informing modern work through the use of microelectronics, new technologies and digital media, a new epochal industrial development stage has been reached. Its main feature is the online networking of machines, equipment and logistics systems via Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS), in principle worldwide. People, machines, means of production, services and products communicate directly with each other. Ultimately, Cyber Physical Systems network the virtual computer world with the physical world of things’* (Dehnbostel, 2018).

In their extent and depth, these changes are a sign of transformations in the entire production, management and governance systems, including communication. Work sociologists, VET researchers and others follow with extreme attention the transformations in this rapidly changing world, in order to identify the future of work and the technical and communicative skills that tomorrow will

most probably demand.

2.2 Language and communication at work today

In today's workplaces, with their prescribed and audited regimes of quality control and compliance with safety legislation, their focus on teamwork and customer service, communication and language are clearly central to work, constituting the linguistic part of the work. Literacy skills for so-called mother-tongue and second language

speakers have thus become vocational skills. In France they are recognised as such by law.

The following examples illustrate how work organisation, legislation and new technologies have created new communicative practices in the so-called 'post-Fordist' workplace (Grünhage-Monetti & Kimmelman, 2012). They are taken from interviews carried out by the study group of the *Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz* (German in the Workplace) research project, sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Table 1

Feedback on work organisation and communication

WORK ORGANISATION	COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES	THOSE CONCERNED SAY ...
Decentralised forms of work organisation	Communicating and explaining decisions and solutions to colleagues and management	<i>'The employee has to make independent decisions at night. He also needs to justify his decisions'</i> (Operations manager)
Quality assurance	Communicating changes in work processes	<i>'We have so-called 'five-minute talks' every morning to discuss quality assurance'</i> (Operation manager)
	Reading and writing documentation	<i>'Every handshake [detail] has to be documented'</i> (Worker)
Certification / auditing	Describing and explaining own error management	<i>'The auditor addresses the worker, points to the defect-catalogue and asks what they would do in case of such an error'</i> (Head of personnel)
Automation, robotisation, new technologies	Reading displays Communicating changes/errors	<i>'You cannot rely on work routines. Sometimes there a minor change – you have to read it thoroughly every time'</i> (Skilled worker)
	Reporting and recording	<i>'We upload reports on all our clients contacts to an online system'</i> (Social worker)
Health and safety	Reading and writing short records Understanding training (compulsory and legally binding)	<i>'The cleaning and disinfection of the kitchen are also written down by the workers and signed'</i> (Kitchen worker)

Such practices require literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening: a challenge and a hurdle for many low-skilled workers, in particular for speakers of other languages. It is here that the dimension of today's migration interplays with the communicative requirements of the workplace and gives momentum to the issue of language for and at work.

2.3 Migration, employment and language

Although migration has been a key feature throughout Europe's history, in the last few decades immigration flows have considerably changed the socio-demographic structure of many European countries, posing challenges in the light of the changed work structures and requirements.

According to Eurostat, on 1st January 2018 the

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‘number of people residing in an EU member state with citizenship of a non-member country was 22.3 million, representing 4.4 % of the EU-28 population. In addition, there were 17.6 million persons living in one of the European Union member states with the citizenship of another EU member state’ (Eurostat, 2019a). Within a population of 508 mln (Eurostat, 2019b), the distribution of non-nationals varies considerably. Germany has the largest number of non-nationals with 9.7m; Luxembourg – the highest rate of 48%, while Poland and Romania (0.6%) and Lithuania (0.9%) have the lowest (Eurostat, 2019c).

If we consider Europe, as constituted in the Council of Europe, in 2017 its population included just under 78 million international migrants – that is, people who were living in a country other than their country of birth. In the world ranking, Germany takes the third place with 12 mln, the UK fifth with 9 mln; France seventh with 8 mln, and followed not far behind by Spain and Italy, each with 6 mln (United Nations, 2017, p. 6). The large majority of these migrants, particularly upon arrival, are of working age (United Nations, 2017, p. 17), and work is typically the first context that migrants mention when asked about their use of L2 (ISTAT, 2014; Braddell & Miller, 2017).

At the same time, and very much linked to these developments as well as to demographic change, migrants have come to play a crucial role in many economies. Taking into consideration the language requirements of today’s workplaces, this reliance on migrant labour, particularly in lower-paid sectors, poses communicative challenges for all concerned. Labour market shortages in the less attractive sectors often lead to the recruitment of migrants with quite limited communicative skills in the language of the host country. Yet, in most cases, formal support for language learning ends

when migrants gain employment. For many, particularly those with limited, interrupted or no formal education, long hours and low pay discourage further participation in formal language learning – leaving many in a ‘low-pay, limited-language trap’, with negative consequences for the individuals and the economy of the country of residence (Sterling, 2015). Improved goods and services through better language skills are an asset for the whole society, not only for employees and employers.

2.4 Reconceptualising language: the social turn

Not only have language requirements changed, but so too has the understanding of language and language acquisition, taking a social turn (Ortega, 2009; Ellis, 2008). Language is not only a formal system of grammar and lexis to be learnt in the classroom, or a vehicle to exchange information. Today it is conceived as an instrument to construct social realities, including the vocational.

Communication is an interactive process, involving all who are party to the process. Negotiation of meaning, likewise, is bi- or multilateral and depends on more than just linguistic form. In any act of communication, therefore, all those involved share responsibility for mutual understanding. In relation to the linguistic integration of adult migrants, this understanding that responsibility is shared points helpfully towards the support that L1 speakers can give to migrants. In the context of work, this includes employees, employers and colleagues as well as labour market administrative entities and trade unions. All actors and their language artefacts are responsible for effective and efficient communication at work (LfW, 2019c).

3. LANGUAGE FOR WORK

3.1 Background

Between 2012 and 2018, the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML, an agency of the Council of Europe) sponsored work to create a European professional development network for professionals supporting work-related L2 learning by adult migrants and ethnic communities: *Language*

for Work 1: *Developing migrants' language competences at work* and *Language for Work 2: Tools for professional development* (LfW, 2019b). Over the course of seven years, the Language for Work (LfW) projects brought together some 120 professionals from over 30 European countries, as well as the Russian Federation and Canada, to explore issues related to work-related L2 language learning by adult migrants and ethnic communities, at a series of seminars and workshops held at the headquarters of the ECML in Graz in Austria. Actors in these events included researchers, language learning providers, policy makers, trade unionists and others, including many with personal experience of work-related language learning as adult migrants themselves.

Together, these actors established a professional development network with a website available in English and French to hold resources (in many languages) related to support for work-related language learning by adult migrants and ethnic communities (LfW, 2019a). Collectively, LfW professionals also developed a number of evidence-based resources themselves, over the course of the two LfW projects, including:

- quick guide on how to help adult migrants develop work-related language skills (available in 14 languages);
- collection of practice examples, illustrating diversity of ways developed across Europe and beyond to support work-related L2 learning;
- checklist of competences useful for different actors to support work-related L2 development;
- communicating with migrants: a guide for staff in job centres and public services.

All are available through the LfW Network website (LfW, 2019a). The remainder of this paper considers the outcomes of the LfW work between 2012 and 2018.

3.2 Collecting examples of practice

Over the course of its two projects, LfW sought out and recorded numerous examples of diverse practice, through its network of practitioners (i.e. researchers, teachers, policy makers, etc.).

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promote work-related L2 development, LfW pursued three goals: documenting different practices; identifying how these support learning in different contexts and the key actors involved; and gathering data to deduce competences helpful to the key actors to put in place specific forms of support.

Ultimately some 35 examples were chosen to give an overview of the wide spectrum of educational offers in the various European countries and Canada, from innovative provision in more 'traditional' educational contexts like vocational schools to completely new arrangements in companies, integrating formal, non-formal and informal learning (LfW, 2019d).

A set of categories were developed to describe the practices, aiming to capture their main features, including the type of support offered, for whom, how, and where. When analysed in this way, key actors emerge, brought together in different constellations to support work-related L2 learning, in various different settings, including language and VET classrooms, community learning centres, workplace training rooms, on the job (i.e. at work stations), and online – or in several of these settings simultaneously.

As with all models, the LfW categorisations offer generalised constructs. Nor are these descriptions and models of practice intended to be exhaustive. There must be many other practices LfW is not aware of – not least because new forms of work organisation and freelance employment models are taking hold, such as the so-called 'gig' economy, in which migrants are over-represented. Similarly, they are over-represented in the fields of domestic help and care of elderly, often working alone in the homes of their employers, with or without contracts.

3.3 Identifying competences for different supporters in different settings

Drawing on the compilation of practice examples and on the expertise of the network members as teachers, teacher-trainers and researchers, LfW constructed a checklist of skills helpful to the various supporters of work-related L2 learning (LfW, 2019e).

The competences are organised by supporter, in the range of settings where opportunities exist for different combinations of actors to support work-related L2 learning. The following example for a language teacher shows the specific type of skills indicated, when working outside of the standard educational domain. The teacher will be (1) familiar with ethnographic methods and instruments to identify the language and communication needs of learners and employers; (2) able to develop a realistic curriculum on the basis of the needs analysis, language level of the learners and structural conditions (e.g. time); (3) willing to raise awareness of workplace actors for the role of language as part of vocational competence (LfW, 2019e).

3.4 Developing guidance

LfW developed two practice-oriented guides. A 'Quick guide' is a guide to help adult migrants develop work-related language skills and offers practical information and tips to practitioners supporting L2 development for work, at work and through work. *Communicating with Migrants* is a guide for staff in job centres and public services which addresses both managers and front-desk staff interacting with clients with limited language skills in order to ensure a more effective delivery of services. It describes practical strategies and advice for managers on how to support their own staff in meeting communication challenges in today's increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse working context, and it gives tips to all staff on how to communicate more efficiently. Both guides are practice-oriented and illustrated by thumb-nail case studies, with some explanation of the research-based theoretical understandings that underpin the guide.

LfW network members have translated these guides into a range of different languages (LfW, 2018; LfW, 2019f).

4. CASE STUDIES

4.1 Revisiting teaching and learning practices

The structural and technological changes in globalised work (and society), as described above, are blurring the traditional distinction between first, second and foreign language(s). New language skills are demanded by all employees across different sectors and positions. If understood as social practice, language use, language learning and teaching in and for the new work order raise ethical issues as well. Both language teaching and learning should be 'revisited' in order to cater for language learning provision and support meeting the changed and changing needs and requirements. The following case studies give an idea of the wide spectrum of challenges facing employees, language practitioners (i.e. teachers and providers) as well as researchers. They draw on personal experience and the contribution of the LfW network members.

4.2 Social care in Sweden

In care of the elderly, digitisation and quality management systems have been changing documentation requirements. In Sweden, for example, documentation is mandatory, and must follow specific rules. The single entries make up digital journals, which can be read by managers or relatives. They must contain facts, and not subjective opinions. Instead of writing *Lisbeth was sad*, which is a judgment, the carer must write what s/he has observed, as in *Lisbeth said that she was sad*. Instead of *Sven was angry and aggressive towards the nurse – Sven reacted actively and struck the nurse*. These new demands require cognitive and linguistic skills: the worker must evaluate their own perceptions, to distinguish facts from judgments, and then choose suitable language.

4.3 Logistics in Germany

In Germany the great majority of couriers are young migrant men with limited L2 skills. They are

taught the relevant basics in a German crash-course, alongside a technical induction (Werthenbach, 2018). This proves sufficient to cope with the communicative requirements of a properly functioning system of parcel registration and delivery. But as soon as technical problems occur, they must deviate from the routine, read and understand the error message on the scanner and follow the instruction provided. The language chunks learnt in the crash course are often not sufficient to master the stressful situation of error management, as a customer reports in a telephone interview with Cathrin Thomas at AWO Bielefeld:

'I helped the courier with the error messages of the system. He was panicking because he didn't understand the instructions on the scanner and couldn't explain the problem. It wasn't until I looked at the device myself and showed him where to type on the touchpad that he was able to solve the problem and deliver my package. A huge difference to the job of the good old postman of ten years ago!'

4.4 Call centres: An issue of ethics and language

To reduce salary costs in western countries, huge back-office centres are rising dynamically in less privileged or still developing regions. This development provides enormous demand for employees with specific and high language skills.

According to King (2009, p. 1), *'call centres involve connecting service-seeking customers from wealthy countries with service-providing workers from more multilingual, less economically powerful states or regions'*. Globalisation and digital communication are deeply changing the way languages are conceptualised. Languages lose their meaning as a mean of communication. They are rather treated as a commodity that can be sold to a richer business partner. Language practices are conceptualised as separated from the 'speaker'. They are reduced to means of production, and to a product (Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013).

In a pilot study, Bobowska (2018), master student at the university of Luxemburg, investigates one of the biggest Swiss global bank back office

located in Wrocław, Poland, to illustrate the complex and the contradictory use of languages for professional purposes in nowadays labour markets.

In order to deliver services for the headquarter in Zurich, investment banking offices in London and New York as well as IT services for Singapore and Hong-Kong, the Polish call centre employees need high oral and written competences in German and English. They all have a Master and often a Doctor title, while none of the employees in the previous call-centre in Switzerland had a university degree, not even a Bachelor. To comply with the wishes (and avoid the complaints) of many private Swiss customers they are supposed to speak 'Switzer Dötsch' with them.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Work-related language skills can be defined as the skills people need to find suitable employment, to participate in work and learning, to progress professionally and to learn and develop. Typically, these skills are context-specific and constantly evolving. They reflect not only the various communicative requirements of particular fields of work and different roles within them, but also social norms related to work, both generally and in specific settings.

Language learning is the process through which a learner acquires communicative ability in the target language. This process occurs over a period of time, and in a variety of ways, of which the most important is interaction in the language. The process takes place within the learner and in constant interaction with his/her environment. Moreover, it is embedded in social contexts, which, in turn have an impact on success in learning.

This learning can be supported in a variety of ways – as the LfW collection of practices show – including formal, non-formal and informal learning arrangements. Support for work-related L2 learning by migrants seeking employment or in employment is most likely to be effective when it is based on a realistic understanding on how adults learn, what their needs and the needs of the working environment are. As to work-related L2

development, there are many opportunities for different actors (including employers and colleagues at work) to support learners in different ways, as the LfW collection of practices shows (LfW, 2018; LfW, 2019d).

Looking ahead, it is clear that communication at work will continue to evolve, as technology develops and social changes occur. Mass migration is one of the most widely foreseen consequences of climate change, while artificial intelligence is predicted to revolutionise the landscape of employment.

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Meanwhile, communication in mixed virtual and real workplaces continues to develop. Literacy and cognitive skills such as reflective practice are of growing importance for all employees, including those in low-skilled positions (see also case study 1). There is evidence that non-formal and informal learning is more effective when built into work, if professionally supported.

Digitisation offers new chances for blended and hybrid forms of learning in virtual spaces. Less optimistic prognoses envisage a loss of jobs and/or dramatic changes with risks of de-skilling and re-

mote working, such as the couriers who support internet retail (see case study 2), and the domestic workers and or live-in carers employed informally (*interna* in Spain, *badanti* in Italy).

A further issue which needs more research has been voiced by a courier delivering food to the clients' homes in an interview for the television report *Kuriere am Limit – Heisse Ware per Fahrrad*: algorithms are their supervisors, not human beings. What consequences does this have for the attitude to work and the opportunities of (language) learning? The suggestions of LfW which assumed structural opportunities like teamwork must be revisited under this new emerging reality.

The issue of communication is just emerging in research on the future of work and leaning for and at work.

So far there seem to be no research on how digitisation will impact on language and communication and which requirements and learning needs will emerge. Such research is urgently needed in order to develop evidence-based L2 teaching and learning for work and at work.

Whatever developments lie in store, the LfW network is committed to continue its work to support language learning for some of the most vulnerable members of our societies. We invite colleagues wherever they may be to join the LfW network. Cooperation and the sharing of experience can trigger innovation and lead to more effective local solutions.

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