English at work in Berlin

ELIZABETH J. ERLING and ALAN WALTON

A report on a survey of seven multinational companies in Germany

SINCE THE 1990s, there has been a dramatic change in the structure of many large European companies. While previously many were 'particularly solidly established in their countries of origin' (Truchot 2002:14), they have now become multinational and are less identifiable with a particular country. A case in point is DaimlerChrysler, formed in 1998 through the merger of Daimler-Benz (a German manufacturer of motor vehicles) and the Chrysler Corporation (a US automobile manufacturer). A side effect of the rise of such corporations has been that English has become a key language of international business. This has certainly been true for DaimlerChysler, which has given English official status in the company.

Introduction

The rise of English as a corporate lingua franca in Europe coincides with the expansion of the European Union, in which it serves as a link language while, in effect, national languages have been demoted to regional languages (cf. Graddol: 2000). As Wright (2000:77) has noted, in an assessment of language use in Europe:

> In a continent where transnational corporations increase in number and power, where the technologies for information exchange are developing rapidly, where a supra-state appears to be evolving, there is also growing pressure to communicate across national boundaries, to be part of a larger community of communication than the national.

In accordance with such trends, English now fulfils several functions as a business language in Germany. In the past, companies conducted most of their business in German, and employed only a handful of specialists to deal with English-speaking business partners where they were most needed, most notably in London and New York. Nowadays, however, with business transactions crossing ever more boundaries, knowledge of English is necessary for communication with people from all over the world. It has been noted that, in formerly national companies, managers, engineers, and even leading blue-collar workers have to write, email, and call colleagues and customers in Europe, the US, and Japan in English (Baker *et al*, 2001).

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Indeed, it has been claimed that in Germany 'you cannot pursue an international career without English' (Hutton 1999:1). Vollstedt (2002:90) further demonstrates that English has even become an important language for internal communications in many companies whose headquarters are based in Germany. Several such large multinational corporations are located in Berlin, the country's capital, which since reunification has been emerging as a site of major business development, with companies like DaimlerChrysler, Deutsche Bank and Siemens represented there.

This paper describes a project undertaken by the students and lecturers in a Business English course at a Berlin university. They intended to investigate the dynamic nature of multinational companies in Berlin and the ways in which English is used as the language of change and development among such companies. The data confirm that English no longer functions as a foreign language, but more like a second or additional language (see also Erling 2004).

While the results of this exploratory project cannot be generalized to reflect the situation in either a particular company or in European companies in general, they can be taken as indicative of current trends in the use of English in multinational corporations in Germany, and perhaps even in Europe. In addition to contributing to the growing body of work in this field, undertaking such a collaborative project has given us a first-hand impression of the role of English in European and multinational business. Moreover, it has provided students with insight into issues of language choice and planning in the business world. Finally, it has offered the lecturers of this course ideas about how to meet the language needs of Business English students with regard to their future careers.

The project

We report here on projects undertaken in two English courses for students of economics and business administration at a major university in Berlin. During 2001 and 2002, students in these courses undertook projects whose aim was to analyse the use of English at a company of their choice.[1] Their course work entailed designing a questionnaire with items intended to probe language use in a particular company. In most cases, the students were either working or interning at the company in question. They collected data by consulting the company website, examining company documents, and conducting informal interviews with at least one company employee. There were no set rules as to the choice of interviewee: students were free to choose their respondents even from their acquaintances. Thus, the data presented here are taken from an arbitrary sample of convenience.

The research questions which students devised were to investigate the extent to which foreign languages, and especially English, have taken root in German companies and whether English in particular is used as a supplement to, or a substitute for, the German language. Students aimed to discover how widely the use of English affects daily business life in Germany and in particular how employers and employees deal with the current challenges of international communication and with multilanguage situations. Further, they focused on possible problems associated with the use of English as a means of communication. Finally, they tried to assess the predicted future language needs in the respective companies.

Companies surveyed

While students collected data from all types of companies, in order to show the shift away from national to transnational orientation, only the data collected from multinational corporations will be presented in this paper. The companies surveyed were seven large corporations with offices in Berlin. As Table 1 shows, six of the seven companies are German companies that have merged with, acquired, or been acquired by other large corporations with different national connections. The seventh, Company A, is a Japanese multinational corporation, one of whose subsidiaries has an office in Berlin.

In most of these companies, German is the major language of internal communication, but English is often used. In one case, at Company A, employees were estimated to use English from 35 to 50 percent of the time. Students' data show that the amount of English used depends on an employee's position, the department in question, and the amount of international interaction generally engaged in.

In most instances, English is used increasingly as an employee moves up the company ladder and as contacts become more interna-

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TABLE 1: Seven multinationals with offices in Berlin[2]

Company	Line of business	HQ location	Locations	Employees	National connections
A	Music industry	US	in 43 countries	150,000 worldwide; 45 in Berlin	subsidiary of larger company whose HQ is in Japan
B	Rail system manufacturer	Canada	in 23 countries	37,000 worldwide; 2,400 in Berlin	former German company that merged and was acquired
C	Electrical engineering and electronics	Germany	in 190 countries	460,000 worldwide; 160,000 in Germany	German company that has acquired other German and British companies
D	Consulting	Germany	in 5 countries	500 worldwide; 300 in Germany	subsidiary of a German bank that has acquired German, British. and American companies
E	Automobile manufacturer	Germany and US	in 17 countries	90,000 worldwide; 45,000 in Germany	result of a German-American merger
F	Pharmaceutical company	France	in 70 countries	100,000 worldwide; 7,400 in Germany	result of a French-German merger
G	Consulting	UK	in 144 countries	100,000 worldwide; 7,000 in Germany	result of a British-German merger

tional. It used to be that the frequency of such occasions decreased with the hierarchy level, so that the need for English was not as important at lower levels of employment, but it is no longer the case that the employees with the highest positions have the greatest need for English. The regularity of contact with the language is also related to the department an employee works in. For example, sales, supply management, project management, and marketing departments have frequent contact with firms abroad. Moreover, in departments of research and development, English is an essential language. Almost all employees in these areas have to use English daily, regardless of their level in the company hierarchy.

What is more, the likelihood of needing to use English depends on what type of interaction is taking place. For example, English is typically used in negotiations, meetings, telephone conversations, email, travelling, at trade fairs, and for small talk with international contacts. Furthermore, the less local the business interaction is, the more likely it is that English will be used. When colleagues from different nations come together, English is used for communication. At Company D, for example, business on an international level is always done strictly in English. Although English is not as important locally, because nearly all employees speak German, its importance increases when conducting business nationally. Even within Germany, and especially at the head office, there are many employees who, like company clients, do not speak German. English is therefore often needed for meetings which take place in Germany because non-speakers of German are present.

Company language policy

The present section deals with company language policies at the seven multinational companies. The students investigated how these companies deal with multilingual situations. They tried to find out whether there are strict

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policies for when and where certain languages must or cannot be used or whether employees have found their own pragmatic ways to deal with language and communication problems.

There were only two cases in which companies had an official policy. The first was Company B, in which English and French are used officially because both languages are official in the country where this company's headquarters are located. However, this policy did not cover the other seven languages that are used within the company. Because of the mergers this company has been through, it has had to face serious communication, cultural, and linguistic challenges. Since the company functions across many borders, it is not always easy for employees to find a suitable means of communication with their colleagues elsewhere. The management includes employees from Canada, Germany, Sweden, France, Denmark, and Britain. In order to ensure that all employees stay informed about current company developments and policies, the local management translates all important official letters into local languages. An additional problem for this company is that many of their employees were educated in the former German Democratic Republic (the GDR, 'East Germany'), where English education was not a priority.

At Company E, there is a rather strict language policy**.** The prescribed language is English, which every employee is expected to be able to speak and understand. Additionally, there is a policy that employees are allowed to use any language for communication as long as the addressee is competent in the same language. However, if there is someone around who does not understand the language in use, there is a switch to English. Moreover, at meetings, the use of English is mandatory for every employee when there is a participant who is not able to speak German.

In all other cases, no written policies for language use were found, although in every instance certain procedures are always followed. For example, the respondent at Company D explained that employees switch between languages as appropriate, without thinking. If meetings are held in English, minutes are also in English, and a German translation may or may not be attached. The same applies to in-company emails. At Company A, the majority of the official documents – contracts, sales letters, proposals and memos – are written in German because the addressee is German. Such documents are written in English when directed to an English-speaking audience.

At Company F, English is also the international language of communication. The respondent there explained that, for example, meetings with Dutch colleagues are held in English, even though these colleagues may well speak German and may even communicate in German in a more informal atmosphere. At Company G, English is used whenever people from other countries visit the firm.

The fact that most companies do not have explicit language policies is in accordance with the findings of Vollstedt (2002:99); she notes in her assessment of European transnationals that language planning is rarely carried out in companies:

> In most organisations, there appeared to be neither a written fixed company language nor a systematic concept for the introduction of a new company language. […] Most of the companies reacted unfavourably to the question of an official language or of the planning of the language shift in internal communications: according to those questioned, the selection of the language was pragmatically managed. The employees chose either their native language or English according to the individual situation. Imposing bureaucratic rules on the employees was to be avoided in all cases.

Vollstedt (2002:100) estimates that lack of language policies is due to extra costs that could result from 'spending for personnel and materials, translations, foreign language and intercultural training or equipment for computer supported translation'. This seems to be the case at Company E, where the respondent rejected the idea of language policies because of their impracticality: he felt they are a waste of time and resources. The interviewee at Company C also commented that a language policy would be time-consuming and would increase employees' workload. It is also interesting to note that the presence of a language policy does not necessarily rule out communication problems.

English language ability in companies

The students investigated the general English proficiencies of company employees. It is obvious from the results that English language abilities are very important for employees in all of

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these companies. English proficiency was a job requirement for all of the respondents interviewed and questions about language proficiency are always a part of job interviews. At Company G, for example, new employees are required to have a minimum score of 200 points on the TOEFL test for English. In addition, many of the employees at all levels at each of these companies have some English ability.

The results of this study suggest that proficiency in English is related to the status, age, or background of an employee. In most instances, English language ability is also related to the employee's place in the company hierarchy: it is weaker lower down the company ladder. In all the multinationals surveyed, employees in the top and middle management are generally fluent in English; for their work at an international level, they need to be able to negotiate in English. Employees at this level deal with customers, dealers, and suppliers via phone or in meetings, so knowledge of social conventions and politeness is also necessary. At Company C, the upper and middle management almost exclusively use English at work.

In some cases, for example Companies A and C, middle managers were perceived as being more proficient in English than top managers, especially in writing. This may have to do with the type of work they do: top managers meet with clients more regularly and have to be fluent in spoken English, whereas middle managers do more written work and need good writing skills. English ability seems to lessen as one moves down the company hierarchy: the clerical staff have adequate skills, and most blue collar workers speak English poorly, if at all. At Company D, all employees speak at least some English, and it was reported that only a few members of the clerical/secretarial staff do not speak English well.

An employee's English language ability was also related to age: at Company C, top managers are often older and were educated when English was not an important part of the curriculum, whereas middle managers may have more experience with learning and using English. At Company E, knowledge of English was not a requirement at all when the respondent, a top manager, was hired twenty years ago.

Proficiency in English also has to do with an employee's background. At Company B, for example, some middle managers are from the former GDR, had little English language education, and have had little or no experience in English-speaking countries. As a result, their English skills are often minimal. Some of these employees reported that they avoid situations where English is used because of their poor language skills. This company now expects new employees to know English, and questions about language proficiency are always a part of job interviews, no matter the level of position.

Language learning opportunities

Considering the great need for English in the multinationals investigated, it seemed appropriate to try to discover the circumstances in which in-company language training was provided. Companies C, D and F have extensive language learning programmes for employees. Company C has a training institute for all kinds of further education. The training offered for English is custom-made for specific business situations in this company. The form this training – whether one-to-one, departmental, group-specific, or in-service – is decided together with the department or employee according to needs. Another important part of language training is developing a sensitive understanding of the business partner's world. For that reason the institute teaches intercultural skills, identifying the business specific patterns which are typical of a culture, how partners, suppliers, and customers can be persuaded, and how to negotiate confidently with them. All the companies considered such skills important, although they are only taught in this one particular environment.

Company D gives all new employees language tests. Employees who require further skills in English are then offered training in the form of one-to-one language tutoring or intensive courses that usually last one or two weeks. For employees in top and middle management positions, language training is a continuous part of their jobs, and they are sometimes sent to England for one or two week intensive courses. Other employees are offered training when needed.

At Company F, it was reported that the demand for English education has changed drastically since 2000: there has been a more than 50% increase in courses offered. Training includes developing skills in English that meet the various needs and purposes of the company. Course opportunities include intensive courses and a four-week language stay in New York. However, employees are only offered

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training in English if it is considered to benefit the company.

While the language instruction offered by these three companies is impressive, such provision is also rare. In most cases, language courses offered by companies were not as extensive. Some, as with Company A, may be prepared to hire language tutors for top management. This company also has a contract with a private language teaching institute which offers courses on company premises for small groups once or twice a week. At Company E, employees are required to take English lessons if their ability is below the expected level. This may happen when an employee is promoted and suddenly needs to use English frequently. It may also occur when an employee's department is planning to cooperate with foreign partners more intensively. Company G offers voluntary courses before or after work for its employees. Staff members who wish to be promoted have to increase their knowledge of English and raise their scores on the TOEFL test. Only Company B offers basic courses in English, primarily intended for blue-collar workers and clerical/secretarial staff. All others either expect their employees to have a high level of English proficiency at the outset or do not consider it important for employees at this level to be proficient in English.

Success in communication: Misunderstandings?

A further goal of the projects was to discover whether companies experience communication problems because of the increased use of English. Thus, the students hoped, for example, to find out whether customers were dissatisfied or deals were lost because of language problems. In general, most respondents reported that there do not seem to be many situations in which a total breakdown in communication occurs. The absence of such situations implies that the desire to cooperate in achieving mutual understanding is at the core of successful interaction rather than grammatical correctness and appropriate lexis. In general, respondents felt that their customers or suppliers appreciate their efforts to use a foreign language. Such effort is felt to show that the company cares about its customers, which counts more than linguistic perfection.

At Company D, the respondent felt that his company's employment requirements guarantee high linguistic standards. Since all employees hired have a high level of proficiency, misunderstandings because of insufficient language skills almost never occur. There may be occasional misunderstandings in conversations, but the respondent claims that these are often the result of a lack of knowledge about cultural differences rather than of poor language skills. In cases where successful communication is truly at risk, translators are hired. But as this is cost-intensive, the company tries to avoid these situations.

In spite of the generally perceived success of communication using English, there was some mention of misunderstanding. The respondent at Company B reported that a possible source of communication problems is the project team meeting. When a problem arises, it is discussed among the team members in search of a solution. But the discussion becomes complicated when there is a non-German speaker present and, as a result, the meeting has to be held in English. Levels of English ability vary among the team members, and people with expert knowledge do not always speak the language well. This means that, for linguistic reasons, experts may be restricted in their ability to present arguments clearly. However, those who speak English well may use the opportunity to argue without expert knowledge, as a result of which the discussions at such meetings may lead to unsatisfactory solutions. What is more, the director of this company is British and some employees admitted to avoiding communicating with him because they are intimidated by having to speak or write in English.

At Company E, where English is the company language, meetings can sometimes be a problem. The respondent reported that time may be lost when German employees struggle to find the right words in English. In order to make meetings more efficient, simultaneous translators have been engaged. However, the respondent reported that sometimes translators do not know the required technical terminology.

At Company G employees have a weekly meeting with their English-speaking project manager. At this time, all employees give their presentations in English and no translators are present. The respondent from this company noted that he feels at a disadvantage discussing company matters in English and some-

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times lacks vocabulary. He reported that when the meeting is over, the manager smiles and says, 'Now you can go back to speaking German.' The respondent also noted that staff members are not pleased about being forced to speak English at meetings, but they accept this fact and do their best.

Company expectations of employees' English

As this project was designed in part to give insight into the types of skills that university instructors of English should be teaching students of economics and business administration, we were interested in finding out what English language skills employers seek. Respondents at the group of multinational companies made several comments about what they consider to be 'good English' and what they expect from future employees.

The ability to read and understand the essential meaning of English texts was considered to be crucial for employees. There is also a need for employees who can write English clearly and concisely, using language appropriate to contracts and memos. Employees are expected to be able to translate their thoughts into English without losing too much meaning or making too many mistakes. Good grammar and correctness, although necessary, are not always considered as important as knowledge of social conventions, sensitivity towards cultural differences, or the ability to communicate efficiently. One respondent at Company E commented that '[i]t is not necessarily imperative that employees write entirely grammatically faultless English. It is more important that they are able to choose the right words, especially where the English and German words are very similar.'

Another essential skill is the ability to follow and take part in discussions. It was mentioned that employees should be able to understand all speakers of English who do not have too unfamiliar an accent and discuss business matters in a clear manner, using relevant terminology. For international companies, it is important that employees can communicate, make small talk, and be aware of different cultural conventions. The ability to be sensitive to other cultures, aware of differences, and respectful of other social conventions is considered imperative. There is also a great need for skills in informal speech because conducting business is based on good relationships, which are developed through small talk. The use of informal English in conversation and meetings is felt to improve both the longevity and intensity of the business connection.

Future language needs

As far as the future language needs of German companies go, most respondents predicted an increasing need for English skills. At Company C, for example, English will increasingly become the company language. This suggests that future employees may find themselves having to use English more, even in local German contexts. German may well be losing ground in certain companies, such as B and D, but it remains important as a language used for local business as well as for informal discussion among colleagues. Thus, most respondents felt that a combination of English and German will be used locally, with international communication being carried out in English. Moreover, English may soon be an employment requirement for every position. One respondent at Company D mentioned that the most recent employees hired had spent at least one year studying in the UK or the US.

While a need for English seems to be on the rise, the findings of this study support the suggestion that 'for all the importance, the growing dominance and great usefulness of English in the world today, there are also a number of reasons why English is not enough' (Salverda 2002:7). Having only English as a foreign language restricts the scope of international communication, and Salverda further argues that customer-friendly multilingualism is especially important when one wants to get one's message across in sensitive cases, where matters of value and culture are concerned. Therefore, future employees may not only be expected to have good German and English language abilities. Several respondents mentioned that an additional language gives applicants a further advantage. Since English language proficiency is increasing for all Europeans, knowledge of a third or fourth language gives job applicants a competitive edge (cf. Erling 2004:177).

The increasing need for trilingual job applicants provides additional support for the language policies introduced in the EU in 2001, which encourage Europeans to gain proficiency in at least three languages: the mother tongue

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and at least two additional languages (cf. Foreign language teaching in schools in Europe 2001). Although all European languages are deemed useful by the companies surveyed, Spanish appears to be the second most sought-after language. The popularity of Spanish may stem from the growth of Spanish as an international language (cf. Graddol 1997) and the desire to capitalize on the open market in South American countries. Likewise, at Company G, Russian is helpful, as this company is expanding into Russia. And at Companies B and F, French is important because of the companies' ties with French-speaking countries.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

In summary, these student projects show that English is an important language in all the companies assessed. In each of them English is no longer merely a useful additional skill: it has become a necessary basic qualification. Whereas in the past only top management had a need for English, now young middle management uses the language regularly and is likely to have even stronger skills in the language. For some firms, it is of importance that secretarial staff have proficiency in English, as they answer international phone calls, type letters in English, and greet clients from around the world.

While the results of these studies indicate that English is becoming increasingly important as an international lingua franca, the need for other foreign languages is obviously still present. In a world where increasingly more people are competent in English, knowledge of a third or fourth language will set job applicants apart from the rest. Moreover, the national language(s) of the country that the company is attached to will remain the language used for local business as well as for informal discussion among colleagues.

These findings show that the process of weeding out people without English skills is done in the hiring process, as applicants with little or no English skills are not even considered for positions. But the findings also suggest that, while privileges are not given to those employees who speak English well, *inability* to speak English (adequately or at all) may hinder an employee's career. At Company C, improvement in English is one way to work one's way up the company ladder, and at Company E, inability to speak English may prevent an employee from being considered for projects or better-paid positions.

The data outlined above seem to suggest that English is functioning fairly well as the world's lingua franca. Many companies have fuzzy language policies that are based on employees behaving linguistically as they see appropriate; in other words, people have found their own pragmatic ways to deal with language and communication problems without official guidelines. Out of politeness and the desire to market a product, business is conducted in English if a non-German speaker is present. While there does not seem to be a need for language policies in such companies, those companies that provide continuing training in English seem to profit from providing such a service. Certainly, the language education that companies like C and D offer seems advantageous. However, in many cases it is left entirely up to the employee to sink or swim in this new language environment. The result is that in companies like B, some employees may be disadvantaged due to deficient English skills. Ideally, such companies should offer advanced-level English courses for staff members who are struggling with the language.

As many companies do not offer English language training, these studies indicate a need for language instruction for students who plan to work in domains where English is used as a lingua franca. Such language instruction needs to move away from a limited focus on grammar and lexis. While there is a need for specialist terminology, the greatest need of international employers is to have employees who can communicate successfully in English. Thus, communication and accommodation should be emphasized in language instruction; the mastering of perfect grammatical forms is an added bonus that can be reserved for later refinement. Flexibility is just as important as the mastering of prescribed forms, if not more so. In order to communicate across international boundaries, students must learn to adjust to their interlocutor in order to facilitate understanding.

Moreover, because of the growing use of English as a global lingua franca, students of the language need to be exposed to a wide range of English accents in order to increase their abilities to understand the people they are likely to encounter in an international career. Furthermore, it is not only formal but

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also informal language skills that should be practised at university: students should be made more aware of the different genres and registers in English, so that they can determine the appropriate use of the language in the various situations in which they are likely to find themselves. In addition, students should practise writing tasks that will be needed in their upcoming careers, such as summarising, composing emails, and taking notes and minutes. They must also be alerted to differing stylistic and organizational techniques between their first language and English.

Finally, students should be taught skills that allow them to mediate between languages and cultures. Thus, an intercultural approach is needed in language teaching, so that future employees are 'able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding' (Corbett 2003:2). An approach that has the goal of successful intercultural communication at its core will prepare students for the relatively unpredictable needs of language use in corporate Europe. ■

Notes

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2 These data are from 2002 and do not take into account any changes that may have occurred since then.

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