

Multilingualism at work in France

Case studies

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The fieldwork in France

- Fieldwork preparation : interviews with experts (6) ; workshops organised by ministry of culture (1) and Association des managers de la diversité (1)
- Case studies : Interviews conducted in construction (1 top manager), cleaning (2 cleaners), health (3 nurses).
- Interviews conducted with actors operating in the above mentioned sectors (2)

Experts views

- Issues raised by multilingualism at work revolve mainly around the 2 following points :
 - 1) English is becoming dominant in a growing number of situations and French legislation is not respected ;
 - 2) While most immigrants are Francophone and all are supposed to speak French, analphabetism creates the disadvantage.
- Company segmentation: different issues at different levels.
- Social partners not very active in this field.

Cleaning sector

- Large aerospace plant (4000 employees, mainly engineers), cleaning subcontracted.
- About 100 cleaners, different ethnic backgrounds with a majority of Portuguese .
- French is the dominant language.
- If and when languages issues, this is managed within the working team.
- No specific language training provisions, no translations.

Construction sector

- A large French multinational company, leader on its market (About 6000 employees in France) ;
- Three 'worlds' : 'ordinary' jobs (locals) ; highly-sought-after skilled professions (international) ; managers (international).
- Working language : French and language of the country ; English due to recent merger.
- Company provisions for language training for employees and partner.
- No provisions for translation

Health sector

- Different activities : hospital and occupational health.
- Intermediate staff (nurses, secretary): French citizens, supposed to speak French.
- Patients : all ethnic backgrounds.
- Work exclusively in French. If and when languages issues, they are managed within the collective.
- A few tools : a list of staff speaking foreign languages ; help line with interpreters ; book « English in hospital ».
- Access to language training and to 'multiculturalism' training at the workplace.
- Issues of language never raised by trade unions.

Actors operating in the sectors

- Top manager from a company of temporary work ; trade union organisers (undocumented workers).
- 'Not much language issues':confirm that most workers are speaking French.
- Partial acknowledgement of communities on TU side – use of interpreters in case of chinese workers.
- Refusal of communities on the Company side. Language is considered as a specific 'qualification'. But no formal method to assess this qualification.

Provisional conclusions

- Case studies tend to confirm experts statements (company segmentation, domination of English, issues of multilingualism largely ignored).
- Difficulties raised by multilingualism appeared to be taboo, especially when this can lead to consider discrimination process.
- Immigrant plurilingualism never acknowledged as a specific qualification.
- Hypothesis : Invisible process of racial and social discrimination operating on the basis of the different level of language command.