

Hosting virtual group interactions: Language needs

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Abstract

Emerging communication practices in digitally mediated professional settings have changed the paradigm of current workforce requirements. This paper presents the results of a survey on the way people communicate virtually in the workplace and the specific needs that have been detected concerning virtual communication practices. The survey itself was carried out within the context of CoMoViWo, a European Erasmus Project which involves the participation of five European countries. Specifically, the current study carries out a contrastive analysis of the results of the needs analysis of Spanish and Finnish users of digital communication tools. The data obtained from the study highlights the differences found with regard to the communicative strategies preferred by the virtual workers of both countries. Although they all need to communicate formally on most online tools, Spanish workers prefer more informal registers in emails and social networking than Finnish virtual workers. Also, Spanish speakers manifest a greater need than the Finnish interviewees for improving strategies involving greetings, virtual presentations and negotiating. On the other hand, Finnish speakers perceive they only need to develop strategies in managing and/or hosting virtual group interactions. The results reflect the particular identity of both cultures and highlight the importance of understanding multiculturalism in international communication. The study, which has relevant implications, will contribute to the development of learning modules to train future employees to communicate successfully in an increasingly globalized world that is engaged daily in virtual communication.

Keywords: Workplace language; virtual communication; English; cross-cultural study;

1. Introduction

In current working environments English is increasingly being used to communicate in online contexts. With this point in mind, learners need to develop communication skills in English as well as e-literacy skills and intercultural understanding to work in virtual and multicultural environments. In this context, new projects such as CoMoViWo (Communication in Mobile and Virtual Work) are being developed. CoMoViWo, financed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Union within the Erasmus + Programme, attempts an exploration of language needs in workplace communities. The present study focuses on the emerging communication practices in digitally mediated professional environments and the needs of the users. A contrastive analysis of what Spanish and Finnish users need in digital communication is the base of our research.

Communication technologies have improved at lightning speed and today's new contexts of work have led to virtual exchanges of information on a daily basis in which English is the Lingua Franca used (Poppi, 2012). Virtual communicative environments in workplace interactions have led to a change of paradigm in interpersonal communication in business contexts both in small companies and large organisations (Darics, 2015). Specifically, document sharing platforms, email, forum, instant messaging, social networking and teleconferencing have become the norm when reference is made to the online communication tools used at work every day.

The generalized use of these tools make us strongly believe that virtual communication in the workplace is the norm and private companies, as well as public enterprises, need to train their employees to communicate successfully in an increasingly globalized world. This world is daily engaged in virtual communication through instantaneous and spontaneous interactions. In educational settings, the development of students' professional competences in virtual communication in multicultural workplaces should be a must. Learning the language of routine workplace interactions may enhance employability competences, interpersonal communication, intercultural awareness as well as critical language awareness.

2. Rationale of the study

CoMoViWo aims at modernizing education at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), vocational institutions and enterprises in order to meet the needs of virtual and mobile work interactions. The innovative character of this project is embedded in the combination of communication, mobile and virtual work and technology. CoMoViWo will generate methods and learning modules for achieving effective communication and the language skills needed in virtual working environments. The present study stems from the new practices that characterize the current virtual workplace and the features of its language, and is framed within the use of English as a Lingua Franca.

2.1. Workplace language

The incorporation of the Internet into our lives has substantially modified the way we have communicated in the last 30 years. One area that has undergone more changes has been that of workplace communication since the Internet has allowed novel communicative situations, continuously shaping interactions, meanings, discourse, and language (Darics, 2015). Consequently, corporate discourse has had to adapt quickly to be successful in the new working paradigm (Darics, 2015).

As O'Dowd and Fitzpatrick (2012) indicate, today's workers need to be able to communicate clearly and efficiently both through asynchronous tools such as email, and through synchronous tools such as online telephony (e.g., Skype) or video-conferencing (Trilling and Fadel, 2009), among others. However, while traditional business English courses have focused on developing future workers' skills in usual business tasks (e.g., formal presentations, letter and email writing, formal negotiations), researchers like Fitzpatrick and O'Dowd (2012), Crosling and Ward (2002), and Roberts (2010), now highlight the greater importance of English for informal interaction and socialization in 21st century workforce contexts. Improving proficiency will make workers able to participate in informal work-related discussions, casual and informal conversations and also handle more efficiently requests and negotiations. Acquiring these

competences will enhance workers' pragmatic competence in English. As the Special Barometer 386 (European Commission, 2012b) reports, most Europeans, around 60%, think that the key advantage of learning a second language is related to the workplace. Respondents to this barometer highlight that a second language will allow them to work abroad, travel for work or get a better job.

2.2. *Lingua Franca*

Most Europeans think that English is the most useful language for their personal development (European Commission, 2012b). At the moment, there is no doubt that English is the predominant language of communication on the Internet and this dominance is not likely to change substantially in the next years (Paolillo, 2005). Corporate discourse is also dominated by English as an international strategy of communication (Breeze, 2013). Consequently, English (as a *Lingua Franca*) is the communicative medium of choice for speakers of many different languages (Seidlhofer, 2011), and it is currently being used on the Internet as a contact language. In this sense, Poppi (2012) posits that the classical distinction between native speakers of English and non-natives should be overcome; instead, we should refer to internationally competent and efficient interactants.

3. Methodology

The ongoing project CoMoViWo aims, in the long term, to produce learning modules for improving virtual communication skills in the workplace. The initial stage has involved carrying out a needs analysis with 273 employees in both multinational and local businesses with a view to establishing the use of different virtual communication tools for inter and intra-company matters, formal and informal registers online, political correctness within companies and finally, for identifying current practices related to intercultural awareness. Moreover, the study has focused on the strategies needed by virtual employers. These indicators are partly based on Cowling's (2007) needs analysis of an intensive workplace course in Japan, especially those concerning negotiations and small talk. Other dimensions are based on the needs analysis carried out by Lam et al. (2013) involving handling complaints and the preference of genres for working online, among others.

The current research will answer the following questions posed:

3.1. *Research question 1.* Do Finnish and Spanish users show the same degree of formality in virtual communication in work settings?

As an example, Table 1 shows what participants are asked to answer in the questionnaire delivered: "I communicate in English formally in virtual settings". Interviewees are informed that 'formal' means, for instance, the use of formal greetings, farewells, formal address forms, the use of formal pronouns, clear organization of ideas, longer, more complex sentences, linking words, etc.

Table 1. Question about formality in language use

	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
Document sharing platforms					
Email					
Forum					
Instant Messaging					
Social Networking					
Teleconferencing					

3.2. *Research question 2.* Do Finnish and Spanish users feel they need to develop the same strategies to communicate successfully in virtual work?

Interviewees are asked about their needs in order to work on the following strategies: developing conversations (small talk, greetings, starting and closing conversations), giving virtual presentations, handling complaints, handling negotiations (agreeing and disagreeing, persuasion techniques, being assertive), managing and/or hosting virtual group interactions or handling requests and refusals.

In general, the descriptive analysis of the responses may yield information that could facilitate the profiling of the language needs of employees whose work environments involve the use of virtual communication as an everyday occurrence. SPSS (2012) software has been used to process the results of the questionnaire delivered in several countries. Comparison of means has been used to analyze differences between Finland and Spain as regards formal and informal uses of the language. We have also performed contingency tables to examine differences in strategies needed by workers across countries.

4. Results and Discussion

Regarding our first research question concerning the degree of formality used in virtual work communication settings by Finnish and Spanish employees, this needs analysis shows that participants in these working environments have a preference for the use of formal registers in both countries in most online tools. However, Finnish workers prefer to communicate more formally on social networking and email than Spanish workers as shown in Figure 1.(a).

As for informality, the study reveals that there are greater differences in register in document sharing platforms and instant messaging. Spanish speakers use these technologies much more informally than in Finland, as illustrated in Figure 1.(b).

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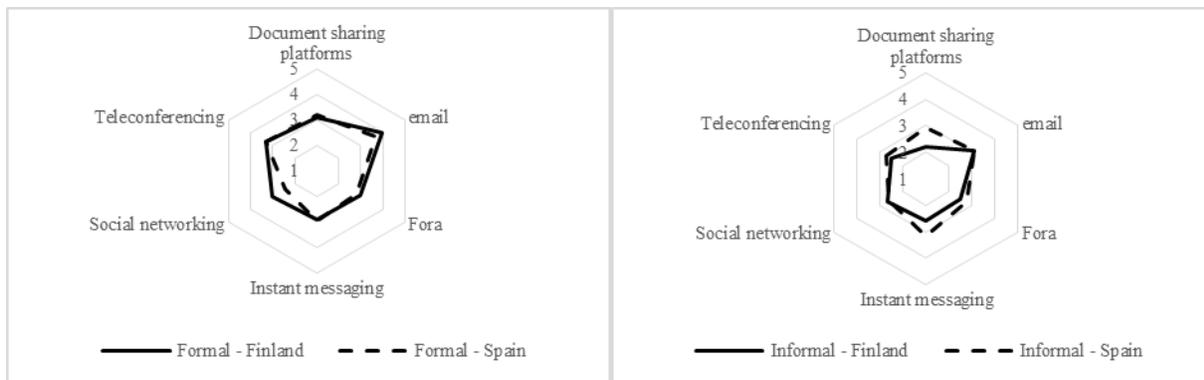


Figure 1.(a). Formal use of English in online tools by Finnish and Spanish workers

Figure 1.(b). Informal use of English in online tools by Finnish and Spanish workers

In general, Spanish culture is more prescriptivist than other languages such as English (Montero et al., 2009) but it seems that in this context, Spanish workers prefer a more informal style than Finnish employees. This preference for informal styles in Spanish online contexts is in stark contrast with previous studies carried out by the authors. These studies concluded, with respect to Spanish-English rhetorical contrasts in the written language, that there is “a more

elaborate style preference for Spanish writers” which reinforces the idea that there are “well-patrolled boundaries” in discourse practices in Spanish (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007: 142).

Regarding the second research question on the strategies that Finnish and Spanish users need to develop when communicating virtually, the results obtained in this needs analysis indicate clear differences. In general, Spanish speakers display a greater need for developing different communication strategies than the Finnish interviewees. This is especially the case of greetings, virtual presentations and negotiations.

Figure 2 displays the strategies needed to be developed according to Finnish and Spanish employees:

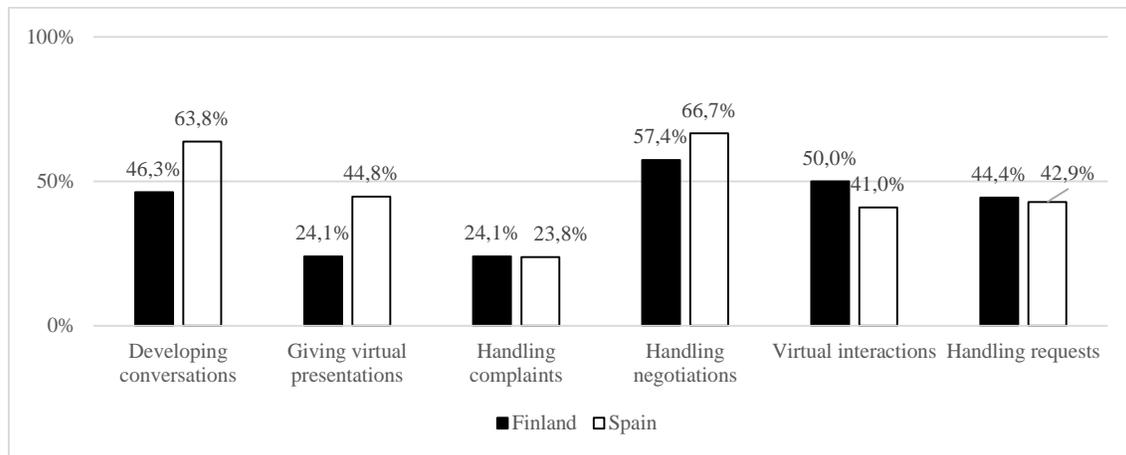


Figure 2. Strategies needed by Finnish and Spanish workers

The study shows that, while most participants agree on the necessity to develop their negotiation skills, there is an outstanding difference between both countries concerning the topics of developing conversations and giving virtual presentations. This dissimilarity may respond to the general level of command of the English language in both countries.

On the one hand, Finns are generally seen as having good language skills (Pöyhönen, 2009) and many surveys confirm that English has gradually become the most widely studied language and most common language used in Finland (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2014; Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2006; Kangasvieri et al., 2011). The presence of English in this country is widespread and attitudes towards it are positive. In a National Survey of English use in Finland the following results were obtained: “The majority of all the respondents agreed with the following statements: (a) English is displacing other languages in the world, (b) English skills should become more common in the world, (c) English skills add to mutual understanding on a global level, (d) to be up-to-date, people must be able to function in English” (Leppänen et al., 2011: 85). Finnish people study English at all levels of education and 40.5% of workers use English also at work. Languages are studied both in formal and informal education (Leppänen et al., 2011).

According to the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2006) Finns are more willing to learn languages than, for example, people in Spain (European Commission, 2006). The national report on English use in Finland shows that Finns declare that they are better at understanding spoken English and reading and worse with regard to speaking and writing skills (Leppänen et al., 2011).

Younger and also more educated Finns self-evaluated their language and communication skills at a higher rate: “In all the skills, substantially more than 50% and up to almost 70% of the respondents rated themselves as having mastered

English at least moderately” (Leppänen et al., 2011:103.) (The scale used for self-evaluation was: fluently, fairly fluently, moderately, with difficulty, only a few words, not at all).

Furthermore, Finland is seen as an individualist culture and in these cultures people try to avoid losing face (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2002); most important is to save one’s own face, not another persons’ face. And that’s why people may be quite direct in communication and they also avoid conflict (to ensure face-saving). This may be the reason why many Finns are afraid of making mistakes when using a foreign language and prefer to fall silent (Lehtonen, 1994) or rely on neutral communication (Wilkins, 2006). In working life, Finns are task-oriented and they think that small talk is a waste of time and reduces effectiveness at work. Finns prefer direct communication (Isotalus, 1995) and they are quite good in communication that has an informative character (Salo-Lee, 1993) and only factual and essential information will be shared (Carbaugh, 2005). This is the main reason why developing conversations is not seen as an interesting strategy to be developed in Finland.

On the other hand, as for Spain, the results obtained confirm the need for Spanish workers to improve English proficiency. As Figure 2 shows, Spanish interviewees express their need to develop virtual presentations, handling negotiations and developing conversations. Historically, Spain has been one of the countries with a lower level of English proficiency despite the efforts of governments and families to change this (Pantaleoni, 2008). The European Commission (2012a) in a survey on the levels of language achievement of students of 15 European countries, revealed that Spain obtained almost the lowest rate, as only 13% of the students accredited a B2 level in English; only France was behind (5%). Although The European Commission did not include Finland in its survey, Spanish figures contrast with other Northern European countries, e.g., in Sweden, 57% of students have a B2 level, whilst in Estonia this percentage stands at 41%. When analyzing the performance of students in each skill, the worst results were those of oral comprehension. Thus, further concern is needed to implement actions which favour the acquisition of this skill.

Generally speaking, the results of our survey demonstrate that Spanish people need to improve their English proficiency. In this concern, while 70% of Finns are able to hold a conversation in English, only 11% of Spanish people affirm that they are able to speak the language fluently, 65% are unable to read, speak or write in English (Pantaleoni, 2008). Only 12% of Spanish people, for example, are able to follow the news on TV or radio in English, the lowest rate in Europe together with Hungary, according to the Special Eurobarometer 386 (European Commission, 2012b). Interestingly, this Barometer indicates that only 17% of the Spanish population interviewed says that they understand English well enough to use it for communicating online, in contrast to 51% of the Finnish respondents who are able to communicate successfully online. This lack of linguistic skills in English is due to cultural, political, educational and linguistic reasons (Lendoiro, 2014). In Spain, people make fun of how (badly) politicians and public people speak English (Lendoiro, 2014).

In relation to this, it is worth mentioning that in the business world, people are often unable to manage a workplace conversation in English (Lendoiro, 2014). To illustrate this point, according to a recent study published by the Spanish Ministry of Education, workers have problems in these interactions because of a lack of foreign language proficiency (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2012). In this regard, in 2006 The European Commission published the “Effects on the European economy of shortages of foreign language skills in enterprises” where Spain is revealed to be one of the European countries that misses out on having more export opportunities owing to the country’s deficiency in foreign language skills. Williams (2011) estimates that Spanish employees who are fluent in English obtain a salary rise ranging from 6% to 9%.

Today’s need to face the challenge of preparing teams to deal with the difficulties of carrying out peaceful cross-cultural negotiations where a great deal of sensitivity, understanding, and reciprocity is involved is stressed by Okoro (2012). In the context of our study, Spanish and Finnish employees preparing for multinational virtual assignments should acquire the essential skills for strategic negotiations and virtual presentations in order to achieve the expected objectives.

5. Implications for further research

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Globally, the aspects that the employees themselves thought most needed improvement for virtual communication in the workplace centred on negotiating skills, conversation, giving presentations, handling requests and refusals which, to a greater or lesser extent, are related to the development of pragmalinguistic competence. Perhaps one day, as McKeown and Zhang (2015) claim, Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) usage at the workplace will crystallise on a global scale so as to provide generalisations. Until that moment occurs, we must accept and celebrate current diversity and investigate these diverse work communities as entities of interest in their own right.

On the whole, we would like to say that online technologies now play such an integral role in the international workplace that language trainers need to ensure that online activities and resources are fully integrated into language courses, rather than simply representing an occasional *ad hoc* activity.

The contrastive needs analysis of Finnish and Spanish native speakers at the workplace here addressed has been a key starting point within CoMoViWo framework in order to develop the language modules which should ensure the enhancement of the strategies highlighted for improvement by each of the two study groups. Consequently, areas such as formality and informality in the workplace, different modes for workplace communication, online meetings, small talk or developing conversations as well as giving virtual presentations, handling negotiations and multicultural understanding need to be dealt with in the learning modules.

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