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**Research Notes**

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## **Language Challenges in Working Across Borders**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the growing influence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), language issues persist among NGO staff. This small-scale study explored the language issues that employees on international missions face in a globally operating NGO specializing in medical humanitarian aid. The international NGO is a multicultural and multilingual organization with staff from all over the world, and English is the common language on global missions. The present study aimed to assess self-perceived competence in English among international NGO staff and to determine the language most commonly used among staff engaging in global missions. The study employed a paper-based survey questionnaire that used a 5-point Likert scale and was distributed to staff ( $n = 30$ ). The results showed the respondents generally perceived themselves as competent in English, but had difficulties comprehending English spoken in unfamiliar accents. Among the other findings, some staff contravened organizational policy by rarely using English, and Spanish was primarily used on international missions. The limitations of the study are also discussed, including the small sample size and lack of data triangulation.

### **Key words**

Self-perceived English competence, Common language,  
International non-governmental organization

#### **1. Introduction**

In a globalized society, people are more mobile across national boundaries and frequently encounter others with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, people are more likely to work in multicultural and multilingual environments

and face a range of issues therein. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in addressing various transnational challenges caused by the climate of globalization and governments' inability to work beyond borders (Chang, 2005), including poverty and suffering

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(Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012), conflict, epidemics, disasters, and exclusion from healthcare (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2019). Expatriate staff in international NGOs are faced with physically and psychologically challenging tasks in host countries, and they also encounter various language issues when working with staff who are from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds.

Language has a large impact on cross-cultural communication among people from different linguistic backgrounds. However, language issues have rarely been investigated in international professional contexts (García & Cañado, 2005; Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). Welch, Welch, and Piekkari (2005) pointed out in a study of a multinational corporation that language was treated as one of the cultural issues in business management. They suggested that language issues should be taken separately for multinational corporations to perform effectively, arguing that language plays a vital role in international operations. Attention has recently been focused on language issues associated with globalization. Among several business studies that revealed problems associated with language differences in multinational organizations, Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) noted that language was a barrier to communication in a case study of a Finnish multinational corporation. Since 92% of the workers were non-Finnish, the majority of employees had difficulty in exchanging technical and non-technical information due to language differences and limited language skills. The authors also noted that those with relevant language skills tend to control the nature of communication, exerting more influence than they might otherwise have based on their position.

Welch and Welch (2008) discussed the danger of language standardization in multinational organizations. The authors reported that low levels

of proficiency in a common language affect team operations, which prevent information exchange and reduce trust in international management. In some cases, expatriate employees have high proficiency in a common language, but do not have a high level of confidence or the ability to articulate complicated ideas. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) also explored language issues in corporate settings and examined language strategies in corporate organizations. An international NGO adopted a *multilingual strategy* that encompassed four official languages (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese). However, other languages were also used at work, and in practice English had a higher status than the other three official languages because it was regarded as the language of the headquarters. The multilingual strategy created problems due to the lack of clear guidelines for the use of the official languages, such as confusion among employees and perceived inequality regarding the dominance of English. On the other hand, five other global companies adopted an *emergent strategy*, in which English was chosen as the working language for international communication. Since 70% of the English communication was between non-native speakers at work, English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF) discourse was common in daily communication and seemed to work well, where feelings of equality and trust were experienced by the non-native speakers. However, the communication between non-native speakers and native speakers was less successful; non-native speaking employees felt intimidated when communicating with their native speaking counterparts, who were able to use English more skillfully; this reduced trust between non-native and native speaking employees.

In summary, previous studies have provided insight into the language issues faced by multilingual and multicultural organizations. In working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse

backgrounds, language issues should be taken into consideration, as language is fundamental for effective communication and successful international operations. These findings, however, come primarily from the field of international business. In the studies of international NGOs, language issues remain relatively unexplored, and further research is required to better understand the issues in these multicultural and multilingual organizations. The present study explores language issues in an international NGO that provides medical support at the global scale. The main goals of the study are to investigate English language competence (as the common language) among international NGO staff and to determine the specific language actually used on international missions, based on a survey questionnaire. The definition of competence in this study is “a person’s knowledge of language”, which “includes a person’s ability to create and understand sentences” as well as “the ability to recognize ambiguous and deviant sentences” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 103).

## 2. Method

The present study investigated language issues faced by staff in an international NGO in order to determine their level of self-perceived competence in English and the language most commonly used on missions. The following two research questions were addressed:

1. How competent in English do staff working on international missions perceive themselves to be?
2. What is the most commonly used language among staff on international missions?

### 2.1 International NGO

The participants in this study belonged to an international NGO based in Switzerland that specializes in providing medical humanitarian aid to those in need due to conflict, epidemics, malnutrition,

or exclusion from healthcare. The international NGO comprises a linguistically diverse cohort of people, and has approximately 47,000 local and expatriate staff who work in 70 countries. The NGO has a policy stipulating that English be used as the common language during training and international missions. The organization, however, has no language and cultural training program yet for those who engage in its missions all over the world.

### 2.2 Participants

Thirty expatriate staff ( $n = 30$ ), aged 24-54 years (mean = 34.9 years), participated in the survey questionnaire. The sample consisted of 12 male and 18 female staff members, and the duration of their employment with this NGO varied from 3 weeks to 10 years (mean = 3.1 years). The participants worked in different sections in the organization including medical, logistics, and finance. Their nationalities also varied; there were eight Spanish participants, as well as four Kenyans, three Argentines, three Americans, two Greeks, two from the United Kingdom, and one each from Algeria, Czech Republic, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Somalia, and Switzerland. The participants were native speakers of various languages: Spanish was the first language for 10 people, while it was English for eight people, French for two, Greek for two, and Arabic, Assamese, Basque, Catalan, Czech, German, Kikuyu, and Kiswahili for one each. In addition, the participants were fluent in other languages: one additional language for 10 participants, two languages for 11, three languages for seven, four languages for one, and seven languages for one.

The participants were randomly selected by the training department while they attended a training seminar on crisis management in Nairobi, Kenya. About 20 minutes were provided for completion of the questionnaire. To aid in the design of the survey questionnaire, a contact person provided information

on missions from a staff member perspective. Based in Tokyo, this individual was directly involved with a number of global health emergencies.

### 2.3 Questionnaire design

The survey questionnaire was designed based on the information provided by the contact person, focusing on language difficulties that international NGO staff may encounter on global missions. The paper-based questionnaire includes questions about the comprehensibility of unfamiliar English accents, as the researcher suspected that different accents might hinder communication. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items written in English, including one open-ended question and nine close-ended questions with a 5-point Likert-scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). To measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire's reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used.

### 2.4 Procedure

The researcher emailed the survey questionnaire as an attached PDF file to the contact person, and requested that it be distributed during the training seminar in Kenya. The training department randomly selected 30 participants, and the contact person monitored them during the 20-minute period provided for completion of the questionnaire. The return rate was 100%; all questionnaires were collected and mailed to the researcher immediately after their completion.

### 3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of close-ended questions regarding language issues among staff. To measure the reliability of the survey items, the Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) internal-consistency method was used. For all items in close-ended questions (Q1-Q9), the reliability was low ( $\alpha = .44$ ).<sup>1)</sup>

Q1, Q2, and Q3 were concerned with competence

Table 1. Results of Close-ended Questions

		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	strongly disagree		neutral		strongly agree
					1	2	3	4	5
1	I am competent in comprehending what expat/local staff say in English.	30	1.9	0.6	0.0%	3.3%	3.3%	73.3%	20.0%
2	I am competent in talking in English to expat/local staff.	30	1.9	0.6	0.0%	3.3%	3.3%	73.3%	20.0%
3	I have difficulties comprehending English with unfamiliar accents.	30	2.0	1.1	3.3%	10.0%	3.3%	46.7%	36.7%
4	If I don't share the same 1st language with expat/local staff, I use English.	30	2.5	1.1	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	50.0%	16.7%
5	If I don't share the same 1st language with expat/local staff, I use French.	30	4.2	0.4	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
6	If I don't share the same 1st language with expat/local staff, I use Spanish.	30	3.3	1.2	16.7%	43.3%	0.0%	36.7%	3.3%
7	Expat staff most commonly use English on international missions.	30	3.7	1.0	10.0%	73.3%	0.0%	10.0%	6.7%
8	Expat staff most commonly use French on international missions.	29	3.8	0.7	3.3%	82.8%	6.9%	3.3%	3.3%
9	Expat staff most commonly use Spanish on international missions.	29	2.1	0.8	3.3%	6.9%	0.0%	75.9%	13.8%

Note. *n* : number, *M* : mean, *SD* : standard deviation

in English. In Q1 and Q2, 28 respondents (93.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were competent in both comprehending English and talking in English to expatriate/local staff. However, in Q3, 26 respondents (83.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had difficulties comprehending English spoken in unfamiliar accents.

Q4, Q5, and Q6 concerned the language used among staff members who did not share the same first language. In Q4, 20 respondents (66.7%) agreed that they used English, and 10 (33.3%) disagreed. In response to Q5, all (100%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they used French. However, in Q6, 12 respondents (40.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they used Spanish if they did not share the same first language to whom they were speaking, while 18 (60.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Q7, Q8, and Q9 concerned the most commonly used language among expatriate staff during international missions. In Q7, only five respondents (16.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that English was the most commonly used language, and 25 respondents (83.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Q8, two respondents (6.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that French was the most commonly used language, whereas 25 (86.1%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and two respondents (6.9%) were neutral. On the other hand, in Q9, 26 respondents (89.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that Spanish was the most commonly used language on international missions, while three respondents (10.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 2 displays the results of the open-ended question on language difficulty (Q10). Nine respondents expressed their difficulty in comprehending the following local languages on international missions: (a) tribal languages in Nigeria (Hausa), Central African Republic, Niger, Congo, and Sudan; (b) Creole in Haiti; and (c) Arabic in Yemen. Four respondents also reported

Table 2. Results of Open-ended Response

Category	Frequency
Local language issues	9
	Tribal lang (Africa) (6)
	Creole (Haiti) (2)
	Arabic (Yemen) (1)
Accents	4
Language issues with staff	Spanish/French 3
	English 1
	Total 17

problems with accents, although they did not specify whether they were referring specifically to English accents. Furthermore, three respondents described issues related to the common language used on international missions; two of them mentioned that Spanish was the most commonly used language on their missions. In Haiti, all expatriate staff spoke Spanish, not Creole, while in Sudan, even in the presence of an English speaking staff member, other staff communicated in Spanish. Another respondent reported that French was the most commonly spoken language on a mission in South Sudan. He was one of the two non-French speakers on the expatriate team, while more than half of the team were French.

#### 4. Discussion

This section addresses the two research questions based on the results of the questionnaire reported in the previous section. Research question 1 focused on how international NGO staff perceive their English competence in working on international missions. The respondents generally perceived themselves to be competent in English; in two questions (Q1 and Q2), almost all participants indicated that they were competent in comprehending English and speaking in English with expatriate/local staff. Conversely, based on their responses to Q3, 83.4% had difficulty in understanding English spoken in unfamiliar accents. This was consistent

with four responses to the open-ended question (Q10) on difficulty with accents, which were presumed to be referring to English accents. Collectively, the responses suggest that while participants perceived themselves as being competent in English, they may struggle to communicate well with individuals with unfamiliar English accents.

One reason for the participants' difficulty in understanding unfamiliar accents may be a lack of exposure to varieties of English. Smith and Nelson (2006) pointed out that familiarity with different speech varieties aids cross-cultural communication in English. This principle applies to both native speakers and non-native speakers of English; Smith (1987) noted that "the greater the familiarity a speaker (native or non-native) has with a variety of English, the more likely it is that s/he will understand, and be understood by, members of that speech community" (p. 266). Since unfamiliar accents seem to hinder communication among staff, phonology training should be provided for exposure to unfamiliar accents differing in terms of intonation and pronunciation. Furthermore, as Smith (1987) argued that English proficiency affects the intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability of speakers, it may be important to measure English proficiency, using standardized assessments, to avoid inaccurate self-perceptions of competence. Under all circumstances, international NGO staff should have a strong command of English so that they can fully engage with global missions; some may need to improve their English proficiency to better understand unfamiliar accents.

Research question 2 concerned the language most commonly used among staff on international missions. The survey results revealed a variety of issues. English was not treated as the common language by many staff members. While 20 (66.7%) indicated that they used English when they did not share the same first language with other staff (Q4),

only five respondents (16.7%) considered English to be the most commonly used language on international missions (Q7). The survey also showed that in general, French was not the most commonly used language (Q5 and Q8), with the possible exception of missions in South Sudan (Q10). Spanish seems to be used more commonly than French or English. Twenty-six respondents (89.7%) said that Spanish was the most commonly used language on international missions (Q9), and 12 (40.0%) reported using Spanish when they did not share the same first language with other staff (Q6). These results are consistent with two responses in the open-ended question (Q10) that articulated concern regarding the dominance of Spanish in Haiti and Sudan. This differs from the results of Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2012) study on an international NGO in which English had the highest status among the four official languages, although several other languages were also spoken. In the current study, Spanish seemed to be the most commonly used language among the NGO staff, which is consistent with the fact that the first language of 10 respondents was Spanish. When a particular language group is in the majority, it may dominate communication, regardless of the official language policy. Alternatively, English-only policies may actually deter English use among staff. Neeley, Hinds, and Cramton (2012) noted that non-native speaking employees experienced feelings of anxiety regarding the language mandate and mistrusted native speaking counterparts who had a language advantage, which led to inefficient communication. Similarly, in the current study, some participants may have avoided interacting in English with staff due to language-related apprehension and mistrust. It is not clear what accounts for the dominance of Spanish among the participants; language issues are not straightforward, and may be more multidimensional than indicated by the results of this study. Further

research should be conducted to gain more insight into the underlying issues regarding the use of a common language among NGO staff on international missions.

Several limitations of the current study should be mentioned. First, the sample size was too small to generalize the results to the entire NGO. Thus, it is essential to collect additional data from expatriate staff and other personnel, such as trainers and administrators, to capture a wider variety of perspectives on language issues. Research design was another weakness of the study, which relied solely on survey data. It would have been preferable to have interviewed the participants, to gain more detailed information on the language issues that staff face on global missions.

## 5. Conclusion

The current study investigated self-perceived English competence among international NGO staff, as well as the language most commonly used on international missions. The questionnaire results show that while staff perceived themselves as being competent in English, they also had difficulty with unfamiliar English accents. This suggests that they, both native and non-native speakers of English, require more exposure to a wider variety of English speakers, to allow more effective communication with speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Also, it may be useful to use standardized assessments of English proficiency to corroborate self-rated competence. The issues related to use of a common language among the staff were complex. It was clear that English was not the most commonly used language, which was inconsistent with official language policy of the NGO. Instead, Spanish seemed to be the language predominantly used by the respondents. It is not clear what caused staff to speak Spanish, although feelings of fear and mistrust may have been a factor. Further research is required to

better understand these issues and generate recommendations for improved communication.

Efficient communication is crucial for sharing knowledge and achieving success in multilingual and multicultural environments. To facilitate efficient communication among NGO staff on international missions, future studies including larger samples should be conducted to generate more robust recommendations for addressing language-related issues.

## Footnotes

- 1) The low reliability might be due to reverse wording of questions. For instance, Q1, Q2, and Q3 ask competence in English with reverse wording; Q1 and Q2 are positively worded as “I am competent ...”, while Q3 is negatively worded as “I have difficulties ...”. By reversing the scoring of the negatively phrased Q3 (e.g., if a response says 2, it is scored as 4 instead of 2), the reliability for all items (Q1-Q9) is acceptable ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

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**研究ノート**

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## 国境を越えて働く際の言語的課題

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### 要 旨

国際非政府組織（NGO）の影響が増大しているが、NGOスタッフの間では言語問題が存続している。本研究では、世界規模で医療・人道援助を専門とする活動に従事するNGOのスタッフが直面する言語問題を調査した。本研究でのNGOは、世界の様々な国の出身者が集まる多文化・多言語の組織であり、英語がグローバルミッションの共通言語である。本研究の目的は、NGOスタッフが自己の英語能力をどう評価しているかという点、またグローバルミッション中に実際に使用される共通言語を特定することであった。本研究では、5段階のリッカート尺度を使用した紙ベースの調査アンケートを採用し、30名のスタッフに配布した。その結果、回答者は一般的に自分が英語能力を有すると評価しているのに対し、聞き慣れないアクセントの英語を理解するのは困難と感じていることが判明した。また、NGOの言語方針に反して、グローバルミッションでの英語の使用頻度が低いことや、スペイン語が主に使用されていることが判明した。アンケート調査におけるサンプルサイズや、複数のデータ使用の欠如など、本研究の限界についても述べる。

### キーワード

英語能力の自己評価、共通語、国際非政府組織

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