

# Developing an Understanding of English as a Global Language for a Business Setting

## 1. Introduction

A great deal is written about communication in the workplace, much of it, according to Holden (2002) based not on observation but on theory. Indeed, Holden, states that there is a dearth of linguistic data based on what actually happens in real workplaces. In this area Holmes' work in New Zealand workplaces, involving many hours of recordings and interviews, making up "the largest and most representative corpus of naturally occurring workplace interaction internationally" (Holmes 2002), appears to be leading the way.

That the majority of communication related to international business takes place in English is a fact that seems to face little challenge. English is increasingly becoming a global language, with estimates that nearly one quarter of the world's population, or between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people, are already fluent or competent in English (Crystal 1997). This trend is likely to continue in the foreseeable future (Kachru 1992, 1997) and in the field of business even more so than in other areas. But it is not numbers alone which make English a global language. According to Crystal, English not only has a large number of first language (L1) speakers in a number of countries, but it has also been made the official language in a number of others (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria and Singapore) and a priority foreign language in many more. Kachru (1985) describes the spread of English as three concentric circles. The countries where there are most L1 speakers of English (e.g. UK and USA) represent the 'inner circle'; the countries which were formerly colonised and where now English is the official language (e.g. India and Singapore) form 'the outer circle'; and those where English is increasingly being taught as a foreign language (e.g.

China, Russia and Japan) are in the 'expanding circle'. These developments, coupled with economic developments on a global scale, new communications technologies, the explosion in international marketing and advertising and mass entertainment have also promoted the continued expansion of English as a global 'lingua franca'.

Whether we consider it a good thing or not for English to hold this position, we need to keep in mind the caution of writers such as Phillipson / Skutnabb-Kangas (1999: 21), who remind us of "the responsibility to examine how a command of English relates to contemporary power structures". Pennycook (1994: 24), too, warns us that "to view [the spread of English] as beneficial is to take a rather naively optimistic position on global relations and to ignore relationships between English and inequitable distributions and flows of wealth, resources, culture and knowledge." Nevertheless, the importance of English as a global language is likely to continue to grow in the foreseeable future and in the field of business, arguably even more so than in other areas. As Amey (in Graddol *et al.* 1999:17) says: "Although there are some concerns about American imperialism, there is a belief that young people need English to be internationally competitive. That's the trend in places like Malaysia and the one emerging also in South America."

Many future business interactions in the global arena are therefore likely to take place in English between speakers from different national/cultural backgrounds, only some of whom will be first language speakers of English (Graddol 1999: 57). Indeed, according to the data presented by Crystal (1997) and others, the number of interactions between L1 speakers of English and speakers of English as a second language (L2) and those between L2 and L2 speakers will continue to grow and will become more numerous than those between 'native' speakers of English. This does not mean, however, that all the world's communication problems will be solved. As Hofstede (1997) and others (Roberts *et al.* 1992; Scollon / Scollon 1995; and Trompenars / Hampden-Turner 1997) have indicated, the cultural perspectives or 'frames' through which we view reality influence what and how we communicate, indeed 'program' our mind in certain ways, presenting the possibility of much misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Bilbow (1997: 461) states that: "The world of business is shrinking: and as it does, languages and cultures

are colliding in the workplace with increasing regularity." The question then arises of what sorts of skills and competencies are required for successful communication in English in a global context, particularly, but not only, in L1-L2 and L2-L2 interactions. Thus the aim of this project was to identify the communication skills necessary in such interactions, particularly in the context of a multinational company.

## 2. The multinational companies case study

For this project, two multinational companies were identified for the purpose of gathering linguistic data on the use English as a global language in the workplace. The terms 'international', 'multinational' and 'global' are often used interchangeably in business literature, particularly with reference to companies and company operations. Levitt (1983), however, differentiates between these terms as follows: an international company is one which simply exports what it does at home; a multinational company is one which adjusts its operations to the regions and countries in which it operates; and a global company is one which has a world-wide strategy for selling standardised products all over the world. Both of the companies used for this study best fit the definition of 'multinational company', in that they are part of a larger worldwide operation which adapts its products to the markets in which they are located, in this case Hong Kong and Malaysia. The parameters outlined for suitable companies for this study were that they should:

- fit the above definition of 'multinational company';
- have a sizeable number of employees (say 40 to 50) in each of the chosen sites (it was thought that a larger sample would provide a greater mixture of cultural and linguistic backgrounds); and
- have (a) workplace(s) where English is used quite extensively but not predominantly.

For reasons of confidentiality the pseudonyms Seacargo International (Malaysia) and Drinksoft (Hong Kong) will be used for the two companies which agreed to be part of the study.

## 2.1. Company Profiles

### 2.1.1. Seacargo International

The Seacargo International Group is a cargo inspection and testing company with a network of over 200 offices and laboratories worldwide. The company was founded in 1898 in the United States of America, but is now incorporated in Europe, where it has its head office. Seacargo International was incorporated in Malaysia in 1986 under the Companies Act of 1965. The company has offices in Kuala Lumpur and other parts of Malaysia and employs approximately 50 people throughout Malaysia. With the Kuala Lumpur office acting as the head office, and the other smaller offices spread throughout the country, Seacargo International is capable of carrying out inspections anywhere in Malaysia. The main activities of Seacargo International include: loading and discharge inspection of edible oils, petroleum products, bulk and bagged dry cargoes, chemicals and general cargoes; general condition marine inspection; cargo and marine insurance survey; calibration of storage tanks, vessels and pipelines; and laboratory testing services. Company employees deal with 'clients' (from office employees to ships' crews) from all over the world. The Kuala Lumpur (KL) office which has some 16 people, including the General Manager for Malaysia, is the particular workplace being observed and analysed in some depth for this study, although the smaller offices throughout Malaysia were included in the employee survey.

### 2.1.2 Drinksoft

The Hong Kong Group of Companies (HKGC, not their real name) is part of a very large group of companies which operate across the globe in a range of areas including property, aviation, marine services, trading and industrial operations and, of course, beverages. Drinksoft is one of 12 companies, and the largest of those operating in the

beverages sector in Hong Kong and mainland China. A well-known American soft drink brand was first imported into Hong Kong in 1928. HKGC acquired the rights to bottle this brand in Hong Kong in 1965. In 1991 the HKGC beverage section built the world's tallest modern bottling plant in the New Territories (HK), which gradually took over the company's other bottling operations in Hong Kong. At that time distribution and marketing systems were further upgraded, with the introduction of vending machines, a large fleet of vehicles and a computerised pre-sell and tele-sales system for rapid ordering and delivery. In addition, innovative advertising campaigns were introduced in the nineties.

The building in the New Territories is 19 storeys and 147 metres high and provides more than 70,000 metres of usable space. The plant includes production facilities, a warehouse, materials storage, a complete floor dedicated to waste water treatment, loading and parking areas and office / administration facilities. Some 1,100 people are employed in this operation. Today Drinksoft is the leading ready-to-drink beverage manufacturer in Hong Kong, accounting for over 80% of the local carbonated soft drinks sector and over 85% of the cola market. It is also one of the ten largest bottlers of a famous American brand of cool drink products in the world.

## 3. Methodological approach

It was decided to adopt an ethnographic approach for this study, with the emphasis on first trying to understand the selected workplaces within their own context and on their own terms, as much as possible, and then gathering linguistic data about the use of English as a global language. Le Compte / Schensul (1999: 9) state that an ethnographic study is generally marked by the following characteristics:

- it is carried out in a natural setting, not a laboratory;
- it involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants;

- it presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviours;
- it uses inductive, interactive and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build local cultural theories;
- it uses multiple data sources, including both quantitative and qualitative data;
- it frames all human behaviour and belief within a socio-political and historical context;
- it uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.

Genzuk (2002) states that the ethnographic research method has three key features or principles: naturalism, understanding and discovery. Naturalism reflects the view that the aim of social research is to capture human behaviour in 'natural' settings, as opposed to, say, laboratories. It also means that the researcher should try to minimise her/his effect on those being observed so as not to upset this natural balance. Understanding refers to the fact that behaviour must be observed and analysed within its own terms of reference or cultural framework. That is, the researcher must first try to understand the culture of the group in order to explain the behaviour of group members within the particular cultural framework. Discovery refers to the fact that ethnographic research should be inductive or discovery-based. That is, the focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened and possibly even changed as the research progresses, as opposed to research which sets out to test a particular hypothesis.

We can see that the two views described above are not dissimilar. Another important aspect of ethnographic research is, according to Van Maanen (1995), its 'storytelling', which – although it is questionable how objective such accounts can be – nevertheless has the legitimacy of being based on what was learned *in situ*. Saville-Troike (1982: 108) warns of the 'observer's paradox', that is, the inability of the observer to know what would have happened had she/he not been present: in this sort of situation, it is always difficult to gauge whether, and to what extent, the presence of the researcher is impacting on the normal flow of interactions amongst employees. In the case of this study, it is felt that a very good rapport was established

with key representatives from both companies during worksite visits. This rapport was maintained for the duration of the project largely through the regular use of email and by keeping the companies informed of the progress of the study through sharing preliminary findings and copies of relevant academic papers developed by the researcher.

#### 4. Data gathering instruments and procedures

Data gathering for this project consisted of the following procedures and instruments:

- Field visits to both companies and observation in company offices and work sites (eg Kuala Lumpur and factory in New Territories, Hong Kong);
- Formal and informal discussion with the senior contacts in each company;
- Formal and informal discussion with other staff including semi-structured interviews with a number of staff in each company;
- Surveys from 82 employees;
- Analysis of a number of workplace documents (faxes, emails, company reports).

Each of these instruments / procedures is described below and the analysis of data thus gathered is then presented in the next section.

##### 4.1. Field visits and observation

It was considered that a couple of visits to each workplace would allow the researcher to become familiar with both the workplace and the employees, and would also allow the employees to become acquainted with the researcher, minimising the possible effects of the researcher's presence on the behaviour of the people being studied.

Preliminary data gathering from both companies, focussing largely on company background and linguistic aspects, included the following:

- meetings with senior staff;
- observation of workplace communication practices and filed notes;
- gathering documentation, such as marketing materials and company profiles with information about both companies;
- gathering of some written documents (faxes, reports and letters) related to the companies' everyday operations in English;
- informal discussion with a variety of staff members from various sectors of the companies;
- more formal semi-structured interviews with a number of individual staff (both at senior and middle management level).

#### 4.2. Semi-structured interviews

A set of interview questions was drawn up after the first half day of informal meetings and observation in the Malaysian company. Semi-structured interviews were carried out on the second day, based on the following set of questions, which were modified as necessary:

1. What is your position in the company?
2. What does your particular job/position involve?
3. In your work, which of the following do you need to do in English?
  - speaking face to face with clients
  - e-mail
  - fax
  - letters
  - telephone communication
  - report writing
  - negotiation
  - other
4. Which of the above is most important in your particular job?
5. Would you like to improve any particular areas/skills? Which?
6. Are different accents/pronunciation in English a problem for you?

7. In the course of your work have any misunderstandings occurred because of the use of English with other English-as-a-second-language speakers?
8. Would you like to make any final comments about your use of English in the workplace?

#### 4.3. The employee survey instrument

The worksite visits described above proved very useful to familiarise the researcher with each work context sufficiently to be able to develop a survey that would be relevant to employees and provide further useful data on the use of English in the workplace. A draft was developed and sent electronically to a contact person in each company with the request for it to be tried by at least four people in each company. This was done and useful feedback was received which led to a few minor modifications. The front page of the survey contained a letter from the researcher briefly outlining the research project and the purposes of the survey and reassuring participants of full confidentiality. The survey instrument consisted of four parts, as follows:

- Part A (questions 1 to 4) required background details about the respondent and contained an English language self-rating scale in the macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- Part B (questions 5 to 7) contained three sub-sections on the use of English in the particular workplace;
- Part C (questions 8 to 10) asked for written comments related to the use of English in the workplace;
- Part D asked for personal details, which the covering letter made clear were optional.

Part B (questions 5, 6 and 7) was divided into three sub-sections, as follows:

- Question 5 contained a number of items on the use of English at work, divided into 21 'speaking and listening' and 'writing and

reading' tasks. Respondents were asked to estimate how often they undertook the tasks listed on a five point Likert scale (1 'never or rarely', 2 'every few weeks', 3 'every week', 4 'almost every day', 5 'several times per day').

- Question 6 required respondents to gauge the level of English required for the same communication tasks, again on a 5 point Likert scale (1 'none or almost no English required', 2 'quite low level of English required', 3 'reasonable level of English required', 4 'quite high level of English required', 5 'very high level of English required').
- Question 7 asked respondents' level of agreement with 14 statements relating to workplace English language use on a five point Likert scale (1 'strongly disagree', 2 'disagree', 3 'unsure', 4 'agree', 5 'strongly agree').

Part C of the Questionnaire asked respondents to write comments on:

- the English language skills that were of most use in the course of their work;
- whether they had seen an increase or a decrease in the use of English in the company in the previous 5 years; and
- any other comments they would like to make about the use of English in their workplace (with suggested possible areas for comment).

## 5. Gathering relevant data

### 5.1. Field visits to Seacargo International

This company was first visited in July 2002 over two days and again in September 2002 for one day. During the first visit the researcher met staff, obtained information about their roles and observed office functions. The second day was spent interviewing office staff, 12 in all, including the General Manager, the Branch Manager, the

Marketing Manager, surveyors and the Office Administrator. Interviews lasted for between 20 and 45 minutes. Recording of the interviews was considered, but at this stage it was felt that this might be too intrusive so notes were taken instead. The interviews served to provide a very good picture of what the company actually does and as a sound basis for the later development of a detailed survey to more fully investigate the use of English in the workplace.

E-mail contact continued to be maintained with the General Manager and his Office Administrator until the second one-day visit, which took place in September 2002. This visit was very useful in providing a more detailed picture of the company's operations and allowed the researcher to clarify some of the earlier impressions. It also provided the opportunity to continue to 'build the rapport' which Le Compte / Schensul (1999) remind us is so important in ethnographic research. The chief contacts for this company for all matters related to this project were the CEO and, in his absence, his Office Administrator.

### 5.2. Field visits to Drinksoft

The Hong Kong company was first visited for one day in September 2002, after some regular e-mail contact with the Senior General Manager Personnel and the Assistant Manager, Learning and Development. This is a much larger company, and the first visit was aimed at familiarising the researcher with the scope of its operations. The researcher was shown over the whole plant and had the opportunity to observe the size, variety and extent of its activities. She also had the opportunity to speak informally with a number of employees, including telemarketers and other employees, who were happy to clarify their use of English in the course of their work. The General Manager, Personnel and the Assistant Manager, Learning and Development spoke to the researcher at some length (some two hours). The General Manager discussed issues related to globalisation and how he viewed the role of English in the company and in the Hong Kong context. The Assistant Manager, Learning and Development discussed the company's desire to develop in particular middle managers' skills so as to reach high levels, including English language

skills. She also discussed the company's plans for ongoing staff development. Eight people at managerial level and above were consulted individually in interviews lasting for between 20 and 40 minutes. Although the semi-structured interview schedule above was used, these interviews tended to be even broader, encompassing each interviewee's role in the company and the extent of their use of English to carry out their work. As with the KL company, it was decided not to record interviews but to take copious notes instead.

The second visit took place in July 2003, after the employee survey had been administered and the analysis of findings had begun. The researcher met with the two key contacts (the Senior General Manager Personnel and the Assistant Manager, Learning and Development) and discussed the development of her research with them, particularly findings of the initial analysis of the employee survey. The researcher was also informed that a new CEO would be taking over shortly. The previous CEO had been a first language speaker of English whereas the new CEO was 'Asian' and, presumably, an English-as-a-second-language speaker. The Senior General Manager anticipated that this could signal changes for the company, perhaps in management style.

### 5.3. Administering the employee survey

Initial interviews served to acquaint the researcher with the operations of the companies and the role of different employees in those operations. They also provided a background and a framework for the development of the survey instrument. The survey was sent to each contact person in early May 2003, with instructions for its administration. In the case of Drinksoft, the contact person was asked to give the survey to coordinators, assistant managers, managers and more senior positions, and also to telemarketers. In the case of Seacargo, the survey was administered to all except clerical staff (this included managers, assistant managers, surveyors and administrative / technical staff). Both contact persons were asked to give staff strong assurances of confidentiality, since it was felt that staff might be reluctant to admit, for example, their need to improve English skills, if they thought their superiors would see the survey. For this reason

multiple copies of the survey were sent with envelopes in which respondents could seal their survey upon completion. They could then give the sealed envelope to the person coordinating the survey in their workplace. The surveys were then bulk mailed back to the researcher by the end of May 2003. 36 completed surveys were received from Seacargo and 46 from Drinksoft.

## 6. Data analysis

This section presents an analysis of the data gathered in the various ways described above, namely: field visits; formal and informal discussion with staff; the employee survey; and relevant communication documents. In most cases data for each company will be reported separately, since there are some differences, perhaps the main one being the stronger emphasis on writing in the HK company; however, data from both companies will be brought together in a discussion of the issues.

### 6.1. Data from field visits and interviews

#### 6.1.1. Seacargo International

The semi-structured interview was a first attempt at identifying which areas of English communication workers considered most important for the work of Seacargo International. Staff were asked about their use of workplace English in a variety of communication modes, including face-to-face communication, e-mail, fax, letters, telephone, report writing, negotiation, and any other areas they wished to name. While they considered both oral and written English important, oral communication was considered slightly more important. Under the 'other' category, carrying out investigations emerged as an important function for surveyors, involving possibly face-to-face, telephone, e-mail and fax modes and culminating often in a written report.

Although quite high levels of English might be required for report writing, from the samples made available to the researcher, it would appear some reports are fairly standard, while the details of each particular case might change. However, since investigations might involve high financial stakes for clients, insurance companies and other interested parties, the resulting reports are extremely important documents. This is stressed by surveyors, who indicate that after an investigation, clients often require very detailed reports. The General Manager (who is a native speaker of English) indicated that he often checks reports to ensure that there are no errors in English.

Surveyors also reported that misunderstandings during the course of their work mean delays, which in turn cost money. Seacargo staff in the Kuala Lumpur office, except for the General Manager, who is Scottish, are of Malay or Indian or Chinese background and all are speakers of English as a second language. Since in their line of work they have to speak to ships' crews and officers from all over the world in English (i.e. often L2 to L2 situations) this sometimes proves difficult for all those who are involved, with the variety of accents in English adding to the difficulty. During interviews it emerged that if there are communication difficulties with crews during a cargo inspection or in some other context, usually someone else from the company being inspected is brought in to facilitate communication, but this person is rarely a professional interpreter / translator. This would seem to involve some risk element for both parties, as all sorts of goods could be involved in an inspection, so understanding by both parties becomes crucial.

Several of those interviewed indicated that the other languages they speak (Bahasa Malaysia, a Chinese language, Tamil and others) are also important for their work, and are used with clients if and as appropriate, and possibly more with local clients. This reflects the use of a number of languages in Malaysia, which are balanced in subtle ways to serve a variety of social, communicative and pragmatic purposes (Le Vasan 1994, Norrish 1997, Gill, 1999, Nair-Venugopal 2000, 2003, Ting / Sussex 2002). However, for all intents and purposes, English is regarded by these employees as the 'language of business' and certainly the one that would be used for emails and other correspondence and for reports. The General Manager also stressed that English is an absolute requirement for the job of surveyor

with his company, although this must also be balanced by the necessary technical skills.

### 6.1.2. Drinksoft

Much of the discussion in the interviews with staff focused on what each person did in the organisation and on how the company operates, and also on how and when English was used in the course of their work. A surprising number of the managers interviewed were quite young (in their mid-twenties or early thirties). The researcher was informed that it is currently a deliberate company policy to have very young and dynamic teams. In regard to language use, it soon emerged that English is used in a great deal of written documentation, while Cantonese is used for much everyday oral interaction, both internal and external. In any case, it is company policy that all reports must be in English. Records of meetings and e-mails are also all likely to be in English. However, the company policy is also to employ people who speak Cantonese and more recently, Putonghua. Some forms, proformas and safety procedures (for internal purposes) are in Chinese, but most other writing for the company is in English and occasionally material for external clients may be printed bilingually. Several studies on the use of English in Hong Kong (Lundelius 1997, Candlin / Bhatia 1998, Chew 2000) have found a similar emphasis on English for writing and Cantonese for speaking. In his study of graduates in the workplace Lundelius (1997: 123) found that:

recent university graduates during the first two years of employment operate bilingually. They frequently present English language reports while speaking Cantonese and they hold meetings in Cantonese while the minutes are taken down in English.

At Drinksoft, spoken English was unlikely to be used internally unless there was a native English speaker present. Apart from this, most internal oral interaction was likely to be in Cantonese, particularly for socialising and informal interaction. One of the managers (who was extremely fluent in her interaction in English with the researcher) stated that during the course of her work in a normal day she would probably speak English only with the 4 or 5 'native speakers' who work there. Externally (e.g. for telemarketers) if the client was an



English speaker, English would be used, otherwise the language would be Cantonese or, in some cases Putonghua. This would also seem to be supported by other research (Du Babcock 1999, Chew 2000). Du Babcock states that the use of English in everyday spoken interactions is in many cases positively discouraged, thus making it difficult for many Hong Kong employees to achieve high levels of proficiency.

At Drinksoft, English is required for all managerial and many other positions and is listed in recruiting advertisements, with applicants often being tested to ensure their English language skills meet the company's requirements. The view that English is important for their work and for business was often expressed both by employees and superiors. Superiors also indicated that they thought the levels of English of their employees needed to improve. This is also in line with current thinking amongst business leaders in Hong Kong, who are preoccupied with what they perceive to be falling levels of English among Hong Kong school leavers and university graduates. In this regard, in 1997, Au, Chief Executive of the Hang Seng Bank, stated:

Unfortunately, the Hong Kong education system has failed to produce a sufficient number of the quality staff that employers are looking for. In the area of language proficiency, which is the most important tool for effective business communication, I have observed a decline in standards. (Quoted in Bhatia / Candlin 2001: 98).

The Hong Kong government, too, has actively taken up the challenge of promoting English for business with injections of funding for more teachers and for English in the workplace programs (Bhatia / Candlin 2001). Upper management at Drinksoft indicated that they encouraged personnel to attend English programs. However, there was also a more recent need seen for people to improve their skills in Putonghua, especially as the company established stronger ties with cities in mainland China.

## 6.2. Analysis of the employee survey

82 completed questionnaires were returned, 46 from Drinksoft and 36 from Seacargo International. For the purposes of this analysis, responses from both companies will be combined, as it is felt that this is a better way to draw out the linguistic practices in multinational contexts. However, any marked differences will be indicated and the written comments from each company will be reported separately, as they reflect different contextual realities.

### 6.2.1. Part A – Characteristics of the cohort

The gender and job category of the cohort are shown in Table 1. In some cases it appears there was some reluctance to state position within the company in order to avoid identification, hence the large number missing for this item.

<i>Gender</i>		<i>Job category</i>	
Male	46	Manager/Assistant Manager	13
Female	32	Coordinator/Supervisor/Senior surveyor	13
Unstated	4	Executive Officer/Surveyor	30
		Clerical/ secretarial/ administrative	9
TOT	82	Unstated	17

Table 1. Gender and job category of cohort.

### 6.2.2. Part A - Language background

Respondents listed nine languages that they could speak including Cantonese/'Chinese', Malay, Mandarin/Putonghua, Tamil, English, French, German, Japanese and Arabic. The great majority of KL employees reported they were bilingual in Malay and English while the great majority of HK employees were trilingual in Cantonese, Mandarin/Putonghua and English. Respondents were asked to put the language they spoke best in the number one position. In total, only 7 people placed English in the number one position, with 44 indicating Cantonese and 27 Malay as the language they knew best. However, overall 62 respondents placed English in the number two position (39 from HK and 23 from KL).

Responses to question 2 (language used at home with family and friends) show that only 11.4% use English in this context, while 55.7% use Cantonese, 5.7% 'Chinese', 34.3 % Malay and 4.3% Tamil. Only a relatively small number (9.9%) reported that English was their language of instruction in primary school, while this increased to almost 53% in secondary school. Of the 45 people who completed the higher education question, almost 92% indicated that the language of instruction was English.

Macro-skill	% Rating as fluent or very fluent		
	Drinksoft	Seacargo	Combined results
Listening & understanding	56.5%	58.3%	57.3%
Speaking	58.7%	41.7%	51.2%
Reading	71.7%	52.8%	63.4%
Writing	67.4%	44.4%	57.3%

Table 2. Macro-skills rating on self-rating scale.

The English macro skills self-rating question (Question 4) produced very little difference on the surface. As shown in Table 2, the lowest scores for the HK respondents are for speaking and listening while reading and writing are rated higher. This confirms the information that emerged during interviews (that is, that English is used more for reading and writing). The picture is slightly different for KL respondents, who indicated they were least fluent in speaking and writing. This might reflect everyday language use in the company, with employees using Malay, Tamil or a Chinese language for a great deal of office interaction, while only surveyors need to write much English. Speaking skills had the greatest combined number who rated themselves as 'basic' (8.5%), with 'basic' ratings for listening and understanding at 7.3%, for reading at 6.1% and for writing at 7.3%. The lower scores for speaking in both companies also reflect the opinions conveyed during interviews: that is, a number of workers in both companies expressed a desire to be more fluent in interpersonal communication.

### 6.2.3. Part B – Use of English at work, Question 5

In the first part of this section (i.e. questions 5.1 to 5.21) respondents had to indicate on a five point Likert scale how often they used English for the listed tasks. The average scores for this section are shown in Table 3. In response to which tasks were carried out most frequently in English the one that emerged as the highest overall was 'reading emails / faxes' (M 4.11), followed by 'writing emails / faxes' (M 3.90), 'reading letters / memos' (M 3.73), 'reading reports' (M 3.46), 'writing letters / memos' (M 3.11), 'writing brief informal reports' (M 2.85) and 'speaking on the telephone' (M 2.84).

Questions	Tasks	Mean
Q5.1	Speaking face to face with workers in same company	2.46
Q5.2	Speaking face to face with clients	2.24
Q5.3	Speaking on the telephone	2.84
Q5.4	Oral presentation to people in the company	1.96
Q5.5	Oral presentation to outside clients	1.70
Q5.6	Participating in discussions in meetings	1.96
Q5.7	Having business discussions with clients	1.83
Q5.8	Other speaking / listening tasks	1.89
Q5.9	Writing letters / memos	3.11
Q5.10	Writing emails / faxes	3.90
Q5.11	Writing brief informal reports	2.85
Q5.12	Writing formal reports	2.57
Q5.13	Writing minutes of meetings	1.89
Q5.14	Preparing advertising materials	1.62
Q5.15	Writing project proposals	1.80
Q5.16	Writing recruitment material	1.39
Q5.17	Reading letters / memos	3.73
Q5.18	Reading emails / faxes	4.11
Q5.19	Reading proposals	2.62
Q5.20	Reading reports	3.46
Q5.21	Other writing / reading tasks	2.54

Table 3. Use of English at work for various tasks.

In percentage terms, the respondents indicated they carried out the above tasks in English 'frequently', 'almost every day' or 'several times per day' as follows: 91.3% for reading emails/faxes; 88.9% for writing emails/ faxes; 88.9% for reading letters and memos; 77.8% for reading reports; 67.9% for writing letters/memos; 63.8% for writing

brief informal reports; and 51.9% for speaking on the telephone (see Table 4). This seems to reflect information already obtained in interviews: that is, in these particular multinational contexts, English would seem to be used much less for interpersonal communication (either among workers or with clients) and much more for 'indirect' communication with clients through reading and writing. Another item which received a reasonably high response rate was 'writing formal reports', with 51.2% of respondents indicating they did this 'frequently', 'almost every day' or 'several times per day'. This is likely to occur more at Seacargo International (66.7%) than Drinksoft (41.3%) and would reflect the work of surveyors, who need to write reports as a result of inspections in the course of their work.

Ranking	Task	No *	%
1.	Reading emails/faxes	74	91.3%
2.	Writing emails/faxes	72	88.9%
3.	Reading letters/memos	72	88.9%
4.	Reading reports	63	77.8%
5.	Writing letters/memos	55	67.9%
6.	Writing brief informal reports	51	63.8%
7.	Speaking on the telephone	42	51.9%
8.	Writing formal reports	41	51.2%

Table 4. Tasks carried out most frequently in English. (Note: \* Respondents who indicated they did this frequently, every day or several times per day.)

The tasks which least required English included 'writing recruitment material' (M 1.39), 'preparing advertising material' (M 1.62), 'oral presentation to outside clients' (M 1.70), 'writing project proposals' (M 1.80), 'having business discussions with clients' (M 1.83), 'writing minutes of meetings' (M 1.89) and 'oral presentation to people within the company' (M 1.96). It could be argued that the first two items above are very specialised and would normally be carried out only by the relevant section/officer in each company; one would therefore not anticipate a high score on this item. Oral presentation, however, which normally receives a lot of attention in business courses, attracted quite a low response rate with only 20.1% of respondents indicating they used English for 'oral presentation to people in the company' frequently, almost every day or several times per day and only 13.9%

indicating they used English similarly for 'oral presentation to outside clients'. One is left to wonder if we are in fact emphasising the right sorts of skills, or those most required in the workplace, in business courses. Items 5.8 and 5.21 asked respondents to list any other tasks. Only 5 people listed any other tasks, and some of these would seem to be unrelated to work. The 'other' tasks listed included: speaking with family and friends; reading a newspaper, dealing with a child's school lesson/homework, talking to the boss; and carrying out selling over the telephone.

#### 6.2.4. Part B – Use of English at work, Question 6

The questions in this section were aimed at gauging respondents' perception of the level of English needed to complete the tasks listed. Table 5 shows the average responses for this question. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the tasks that respondents indicated that required the highest levels of English tended to overlap with those that they indicated they carried out most frequently in questions 5.1 to 5.21. Their highest responses to the tasks that they considered that required a 'reasonable level of English', 'quite high level of English' and 'very high level of English' were as follows: reading emails/faxes 85.1%; reading letters/memos 85%; writing emails/faxes 83.8%; reading reports 81.3%; reading proposals 80.1%; writing letters/memos 78.9%; speaking on the telephone 77.3%; and writing formal reports 70.1%.

Questions	Tasks	Mean
Q6.1	Speaking face to face with workers in same company	2.36
Q6.2	Speaking face to face with clients	2.85
Q6.3	Speaking on the telephone	3.09
Q6.4	Oral presentation to people in the company	2.49
Q6.5	Oral presentation to outside clients	2.66
Q6.6	Participating in discussions in meetings	2.50
Q6.7	Having business discussions with clients	2.63
Q6.8	Other speaking / listening tasks	2.22
Q6.9	Writing letters / memos	3.18
Q6.10	Writing emails / faxes	3.29
Q6.11	Writing brief informal reports	2.79
Q6.12	Writing formal reports	3.18
Q6.13	Writing minutes of meetings	2.68
Q6.14	Preparing advertising materials	2.64
Q6.15	Writing project proposals	2.76

Q6.16	Writing recruitment material	2.40
Q6.17	Reading letters / memos	3.26
Q6.18	Reading emails / faxes	3.29
Q6.19	Reading proposals	3.14
Q6.20	Reading reports	3.23
Q6.21	Other writing / reading tasks	2.47

Table 5. Levels of English required for different tasks.

As shown in Table 5, the mean for most responses is not quite as low as for questions 5.1 to 5.21, presumably because even if some tasks are not carried out often, they would still be considered to require quite high levels of English proficiency. One of the responses which had the lowest mean and was thought by 44.4% of respondents to require only a 'reasonable level of English' was question 6.1, 'speaking face to face with workers in the same company'. This is not surprising, since almost all respondents in this survey are second language speakers of English and presumably are much more skilled and comfortable when communicating in their first language(s) with colleagues in the workplace.

#### 6.2.5. Part B – Use of English at work, Question 7

Questions 7.1 to 7.14 aimed to gauge the attitude of company employees to their use of English both at work and, more broadly, in a business context. On all questions in this section a high level of agreement was expressed except for question 7.8 with which only 17% of respondents agreed and which stated: 'I can do my job very well without much use of English'. Table 6 illustrates average responses for this section.

Q.	Tasks	Mean
Q7.1	Need to use English at work almost every day	4.32
Q7.2	Use English at work with almost everyone	3.29
Q7.3	Use English at work with colleagues who speak only English	3.38
Q7.4	Use English with many of our clients	3.68
Q7.5	Need to improve spoken English skills	4.16
Q7.6	Need to improve written English skills	4.15
Q7.7	English is necessary for me to do my job	4.44
Q7.8	Can do job very well without much use of English	2.38
Q7.9	Better chance of promotion if improve English	3.78

Q7.10	English is a very important language for business	4.61
Q7.11	English considered a very important language in my country	4.42
Q7.12	Other languages just as important in my job	3.51
Q7.13	Misunderstandings occur when people from different cultures use English	3.62
Q7.14	Feel cannot be as fluent in English as in my first language	3.69

Table 6. Perceptions about English in a multinational work environment.

The percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements is illustrated in Table 7. The opinions expressed in this section reflect a strong sense of the importance of English for these particular companies and for their employees. Respondents indicated awareness that English is an inextricable part of their working life and a desire to improve their proficiency in both spoken and written English (questions 7.5 and 7.6 had a mean of 4.16 and 4.15 respectively). This is borne out by the comments made in the following section of the survey.

Rank order	Statement	% Agree or strongly agree
1	English is a very important language for business	97.5
2	English is considered a very important language in my country	93.8
3	English is necessary for me to do my job	92.6
4	I need to use English at work almost every day	91.4
5	I need to improve my spoken English skills	86.6
6	I need to improve my written English skills	86.6
7	If I improve my English skills I will have a better chance of promotion within my company	70.7
8	Sometimes I feel I cannot be as fluent in English as in my first language	69.2
9	I use English with many of our clients	60.5
10	In my job other languages are just as important as English	59.8
11	Sometimes misunderstandings occur when people from different cultures use English	59.7
12	I use English at work only with colleagues who speak only English	58.8
13	I use English at work with almost all the people I work with	50.1
14	I can do my job very well without much use of English	17

Table 7. Agreement with statements about multinational work environments.

### 6.2.6. Part C - Analysis of the comments section of the survey

The last part of the questionnaire asked respondents to provide any other comments but guided their responses through three major questions asking: which English skills were of most use in their work (Question 8); whether the use of English in the company had increased or decreased in recent years (Question 9); and any other comments about the use of English and other languages in the workplace (Question 10). Responses to these questions from the two companies show some similarities but differ in some important aspects, which reflect the different demands of the two workplaces. The two sets of responses are reported separately first and then some comparisons are made.

#### 6.2.6.1. Seacargo International

The total number of respondents from Seacargo International was 36, but not everybody made comments in response to all three questions, and those who did, provided very brief responses (particularly in comparison to Hong Kong respondents). Responses to Question 8 show equal emphasis on aspects of oral English (also referred to as international/interpersonal communication) and report writing. This largely reflects the work of the larger group of employees, i.e. the surveyors, who need to interview boat crews from other countries and write reports on their inspections:

I need [English] to communicate with ship's personnel of different nationality and to make reports on completion of my job.

Only one person said English would be useful for discussion at meetings. Comments referring to the level of English required in the course of their work were weighted slightly to medium and high levels (indicated by six respondents) with five saying they required low levels of English. Responses to Question 9 showed that some people (8) thought there had been an increase in the workplace use of English, whereas 10 people thought there was not much change. One employee described the situation as follows:

While I am around I try to use as much English with my colleagues, even though all of them are Malays whereas I am Hindu. I found that most of the time they prefer to use the mother tongue but some of them try and improve English at the same time. I think with them we should try to speak in English all the time. I found that there is an increase in usage of English in my workplace.

Responses to Question 10 reveal that a number of employees (9) see English as useful and important. The same number also indicated they wanted to improve their English and suggested that the company should provide English language training for staff. The following statement was written identically by some eight respondents, showing that the matter had been discussed by workers:

The company should provide training to staff or send their staff for [an] English course.

#### 6.2.6.2. Drinksoft

Responses from this group provided much more detail and almost all respondents were forthcoming with comments. By far the greatest number of respondents (39) named writing as the area where they most used English, with emails often mentioned as the medium. Eleven also named reading (where again the reading of emails was stressed) and around 11 named oral communication, with three naming listening. The following comment is typical:

Writing and reading are frequently used in my work. Speaking and listening will only be used with English [speaking] colleagues.

The great emphasis on writing is not surprising, as English is used for much written communication in the company, whereas most oral communication takes place in Cantonese, as indicated during interviews. This situation reflects to a large degree the trend of many business contexts in Hong Kong. Another employee was more specific about the communicative uses of English.

[English is used] to solve customers' complaints; to introduce our company to foreign visitors; to join our workplace English song competition; for translation; and for placing notices on the board.

In reply to Question 9, a larger number of employees (18) thought there had been an increase in English communication in the workplace, with 11 saying they thought there had been no change, 7 indicating they thought there had been a decrease and 5 indicating they had 'no opinion'. Those who indicated an increase tended to link this closely to the use of computers and the increased use of email:

From my observation, most of us have increased the use of English, such as for email communication and for internal memos or bulletins.

Question 10 showed 14 thought that English is very important or useful, with 6 reporting they wanted to improve their levels of English. Only 5 thought they did not have much need of English, while 2 added that Putonghua is now also important for their work. The following comment reflects the situation very well:

English is a very important language in my job as my company is a US company. All the time I have to deal with my native English boss or even overseas colleagues. Mandarin is also quite important in my job as most of our sister companies are in China and Taiwan. It is a common language to communicate with them.

The results concerning these questions in the two workplaces seem to reinforce field visit findings and reflect considerably the work patterns in the two workplaces. The need to use written English in Drinksoft had already been clearly indicated, thus the comments merely confirm earlier impressions and the responses in Section B of the survey. Similarly, the fact that the Malaysian company stressed oral communication and report writing also reflects the nature of the work undertaken by the largest group of employees, the company surveyors.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

These two multinational companies present some quite different issues as regards the use of English in the workplace, although there are also some common factors. In the case of Seacargo International in Malaysia, both spoken and written English would seem to be important, with face-to-face communication regarded as highly important, particularly to enable surveyors to carry out their work efficiently. However, there are high stakes contexts where written communication must also be of a high level, particularly in the context of investigations. Drinksoft displays all the characteristics of the use of English more generally for business in Hong Kong, with linguistic practices showing the use of English for written communication and Cantonese for oral communication to carry out company business. Although there is a feeling that this form of 'diglossia' has become somewhat the norm in Hong Kong, more recent analyses (Pennington 1998, Bolton 2000, Bolton / Lim 2000) indicate that the situation is in fact more complex. We have also seen that more recent trends in both government and business contexts in Hong Kong indicate that higher levels of fluency in both spoken and written English are required and are being encouraged.

Amongst the issues that seemed to be of importance at Seacargo International was that of understanding English spoken with different accents. Surveyors had to deal with ship's crews from all over the world and often the different accents proved difficult for all concerned, whether L1 or L2 speakers of English. As varieties of English become more widespread and the number of varieties increases, the issues of intelligibility and levels of fluency become more crucial for the use of English as a global lingua franca. Following some research on this issue, Smith (1992: 88) concludes that:

Being a native speaker does not seem to be as important as being fluent in English and familiar with several different national varieties [...]. The increasing number of varieties of English need not increase the problem of understanding across cultures, if users of English develop some familiarity with them.

The question, of course, will be whether people will make the effort to become familiar with all but the varieties of English related to their immediate context. In any case, close to 92% of all respondents to this survey reported they use English at work almost every day, so this is something that affects and will continue to be of importance to both companies.

As for fluency, we have seen that in the case of Seacargo International, there was a group of employees who had evidently discussed this issue and felt that the company should make provisions for its employees to improve their levels of fluency. Employees at Drinksoft also expressed a strong interest in improving their English language skills, both in interviews and in the survey. At both sites, workers expressed the belief that English was important for their work. The results of the employee survey indicate a very strong desire by almost 87% of employees in both companies to improve both their written and spoken skills, with 70% believing improved English skills would give them a better chance of promotion within their company. In both cases workers' responses perhaps reflect the pressure coming from government and business generally, in both Hong Kong and, more recently, Malaysia, for highly skilled bilingual / multilingual workers, with English as one of the languages in which one is expected to be fluent.

Another major issue seems to involve email communication. Around 90% of employees reported the tasks they carried out most frequently in English were reading and writing emails/faxes (although from field observation, this relates mainly to emails and not to faxes). This is an area of communication that presents problems of its own, among other reasons because it has characteristics of both spoken and written language, as well as short forms and abbreviations which can lead to misunderstandings. As Waldvogel (2001: 9) states, "because email lacks many of the cues present in other communicative forms it is open to wide interpretation." In the context of multinational companies, where intercultural communication is the norm rather than the exception, this can become a major problem.

Almost 60% of respondents in this survey agreed that misunderstandings can occur when people from different cultural backgrounds speak English, although it is interesting that this scored a much higher rate of agreement from employees in Malaysia (80%)

than those in Hong Kong (44%). This is understandable, given the almost daily contact that employees from Seacargo International have with crews from all over the world.

Another difference between the two companies emerges with oral presentation, which occupies a major place in business courses (perhaps justifiable for educational reasons), but is not ranked as one of the areas requiring major attention, either for internal company purposes or for external reasons. Overall, 20% of employees indicated they used English for internal oral presentation 'frequently, almost every day or several times per day' and 13% similarly for external purposes. The differences between the two companies in this area are quite marked, with 35% of Malaysian employees indicating they used oral presentation internally and 26% externally. In the Hong Kong Company, however, only 10% of employees indicated the use of English for internal presentations and 5% for external purposes. This again reinforces the possible use of Cantonese and possibly other languages for a great deal of spoken communication.

In conclusion, this study of the linguistic practices in these two multinational workplaces also raises a number of questions concerning education for business communication in English. For instance, are we targeting the sorts of skills that higher education students will need in real multinational workplaces? And how do we prepare students for email communication, an extremely dynamic medium reflecting elements of both written and spoken language? Finally, what can we do to prepare higher education students, whether L1 or L2 speakers of English, for greater tolerance of the different accents and varieties of English which they will inevitably meet in the global marketplace? These are issues which business schools around the world should be concerned with, for these are the linguistic skills with which employees in multinational workplaces will need to be equipped in the 21st century. Such skills will be required not only by companies wishing to be successful, but also by employees themselves who see such linguistic skills as pre-requisites for advancement and promotion in the global workplace.

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