

Anke Settelmeyer

What management assistants of retail services and medical assistants need to read, write, speak and listen to in the workplace

Abstract: Requirement analysis is an empirical method to achieve systematically detailed information about the written and oral requirements employees have to master in the workplace. A few examples may illustrate that they contribute to the transparency of linguistic and communicative requirements. They provide an empirical base to develop language proficiency systematically in courses or in the workplace.

Résumé : Les analyses des besoins sont une méthode empirique qui permet d'obtenir de façon systématique des informations détaillées sur ce que les salariés doivent maîtriser sur leur lieu de travail à l'oral et à l'écrit. Quelques exemples montrent qu'elles contribuent à la transparence des besoins langagiers et de communication. Elles constituent une base empirique pour développer de façon systématique les compétences langagières en cours ou sur le lieu de travail.

1 Introduction

The European Commission highlights linguistic and communicative skills as key competencies, for learning in education, training and in a profession, for social inclusion and employment. Research has therefore been done on skills and competences needed in the workplace. Some of the studies reveal competences that individuals possess or should possess. Others are requirement analyses and focus on situations revealing what employees or trainees need to read, write, speak and listen to in the workplace. This article endeavours to demonstrate that requirement analyses may contribute to the transparency of linguistic and communicative requirements in the workplace and constitute therefore an empirical base to reflect on linguistic integration of migrants.

Anke Settelmeyer, Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Bonn, Germany,
E-mail: settelmeyer@bibb.de

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2 Requirement analyses and the linguistic integration of adult migrants

Lessons for the linguistic integration of adult migrants in the workplace can be learned from two categories of requirement analyses – those with a migrant-specific and those with a non-migrant-specific approach.

2.1 Requirement analyses with a migrant-specific approach

These studies mainly focus on jobs with a high percentage of migrant employees, especially on jobs with low qualification requirements in industry or in the cleaning sector (Grünhage-Monetti 2010). In addition, there are studies that focus on potential job opportunities for migrants. In Germany, the intention is that doctors and nurses recruited from abroad should fill the growing shortage of employees in this branch. Since linguistic and communicative competences are indispensable for these professions, migrants must pass a language test if they wish to access to one of these occupations. Requirement analyses are a prerequisite for the development of such tests. In any case, requirement analyses are also used to develop language courses.

2.2 Requirement analyses with a non-migrant-specific approach

Alongside research on writing in the workplace, such as that performed by police officers or lawyers (Jakobs 2005), and on specific types of conversation, e.g. in the medical sector, there are more recent studies that examine oral and written requirements trainees need to fulfil at the learning venues of the company and the vocational school. Research on vocational training is carried out because the poor levels of literacy and communicative competences revealed by PISA and other studies in schools could have a negative impact on training outcomes.

While migrant-specific requirement analyses focus on a narrow range of occupations, studies with a non-migrant-specific approach widen the range of occupations investigated to include, for example, design draughtsmen, industrial mechanics, electronics technicians, and occupations in the medical and the retail sector. Studies with a non-migrant-specific approach thus might open up new vistas for the linguistic integration and, moreover, for the employment of migrants in general.

The findings presented in this article are based on a study of the linguistic and communicative requirements trainees need to manage at companies and vocational schools. The study was carried out by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. Data was collected using document analysis, participant observation and qualitative interviews with stakeholders. Investigating management assistants for retail services (clothes), motor vehicle mechatronics technicians, and medical assistants (general surgery), the sample covers different branches and occupations with high participation rates (Settelmeyer, Widera, and Efinig 2014). Since this article omits linguistic and communicative requirements that relate exclusively to training situations, such as record books, the results are applicable both to trainees and employees.

3 Describing linguistic requirements

After outlining the daily operations that comprise linguistic and communicative requirements, the requirements of some typical and relevant operations will be described in more detail.¹

3.1 Management assistants for retail services

Management assistants for retail services need to master the following tasks:

- merchandise management – e.g. control stock, check incoming merchandise, and transfer stock;
- communication with customers – e.g. sell, reserve and exchange goods, deal with complaints, and work at the checkout service area;
- communication within the company – e.g. deal with letters from management, new suppliers or trade unions, organise and improve daily work;
- training activities in some companies – informal activities such as reading journals and sometimes formal training such as communication with customers.

Checking incoming merchandise is one typical operation within merchandise management. Trainees/employees need to read attentively delivery notes (highly structured texts, often set out as a table, with long numbers and technical terms in some cases) and tick off articles or make short notes if an article is missing or

¹ I would like to thank Kerstin Schneider for her many suggestions.

damaged. The requirements with regard to transferring stock from one branch office to another in a chain store are very similar.

One of the predominant activities of a management assistant is communication with customers in order to sell clothes and accessories. They need to welcome customers in a polite and adequate manner. When the customer asks for help, the management assistant starts a consultation following a conventional sequence, probably using the wording of the company. Enquiring about the demands of the customer, they listen attentively to what the customer says, both explicitly and non-explicitly. Management assistants need to use an adequate register regarding the stock, the department – young fashion or exclusive clothes – and the customer. In any case, utterances should be respectful, polite, diplomatic and confidential, sometimes humorous or calming, if the customer is under stress. Moreover, management assistants need to reveal their expertise by using technical terms, if this is appropriate, to provide information on the product. In addition, interviewees highlight the importance of being authentic in conversations: “Because if we say that you [the trainee] have to tell it the customer this way, it won’t work. The conversation would be artificial. Not authentic.” Hence management assistants have to create their own style of communication with customers in order to get in touch with them.

3.2 Medical assistants

The daily work of medical assistants covers the following:

- receiving and guiding patients – e.g. welcome patients, organise workflows and monitor time schedules;
- carrying out diagnostics and treatment – e.g. assist in examinations, treatment and emergency cases, conduct laboratory work;
- working “backstage” – e.g. perform administrative work, procure and manage materials requirements;
- communication in a common space – e.g. pick up or give instructions, ask questions currently. This space is indispensable in order to delegate special tasks rapidly and to reorganise work as the need arises.

At reception – At reception, medical assistants enquire about the demands of the patients arriving for surgery. If necessary, they complete personal data of the patient in the computer and note whether there are any problems. They then ask the patient to sit down in the waiting room or in front of the surgery. When patients enter the surgery just to pick up a prescription, the medical assistant makes out the prescription by opening the data sheet of the patient and choosing the drugs needed. The

prescription is generated and printed out by the computer. All this work has to be done rapidly in order to avoid queues of patients at reception. Moreover, medical assistants need to monitor appointments in the time schedule accurately, arrange a doctor's appointment with the patient, and write down the name of the patient or erase names when appointments are cancelled.

Conversation with patients needs to be polite and friendly. Because of the great number of patients, medical assistants have to avoid longer conversations with patients. This means that short utterances dominate. Medical assistants need to master a lot of routine tasks with recurrent wording and sometimes special tasks, such as rejecting the demand of a patient. All day long, they make short notes with to do's in order to record things that they need to deal with later.

Working "backstage" – In contrast to the requirements described above, working "backstage" comprises a lot of writing and reading. Medical assistants need to complete the data sheet of patients after a hospital stay or treatment by a specialist. They fill in information they ascertain from the doctor's letters, e.g. diagnosis or new drugs the patient needs to take, although this type of text full of technical terms primarily addresses the physician rather than a medical assistant. Moreover, they need to document treatment procedures by entering technical codes into the data sheet of the patient, a standardised and structured form. They therefore sometimes need to consult a manual to find the right number. In order to ask for further information, they phone specialist surgeries, hospitals or pharmacies. They have to fill in a great variety of prescription forms, sometimes with special needs, e.g. orthopaedic shoes. Finally, medical assistants procure and manage material requirements by writing e-mails to suppliers to requisition articles such as toner cartridges or bandage material. They use an adequate register and meet the formal and content-related conventions of this type of text. All the work needs to be done very carefully and correctly, faults can damage the health of patients.

The work processes in the surgeries visited were organised efficiently so that the work could be done rapidly. Short oral and highly formalized written utterances perfectly complemented the organisation of work in these settings.

4 Conclusions for the linguistic integration of adult migrants

The main purpose of the symposium on the linguistic integration of adult migrants organised by the Council of Europe in 2016 was to discuss to what extent and in what ways scientific evidence can be used to support the linguistic inte-

gration of adult migrants. In this article, the substantial contribution of requirement analyses was described.

Requirement analyses reveal systematically and in a differentiated way what written and oral utterances are like. The examples illustrate that the linguistic requirements management assistants for retail services and medical assistants need to manage vary enormously both within the occupation and between occupations. Requirement analyses provide an empirical basis for conceptualizing occupation-specific language courses and developing learning materials, such as scenarios, that fit closely to the wide range of linguistic needs at the workplace.

Linguistic requirements in the workplace can be interpreted as a meaningful and relevant input to improve linguistic competences. Managing requirements in the workplace also means acquiring occupation-specific language proficiency. From this point of view, the company is one important learning venue to develop these competences. Up to now in Germany, improving linguistic competences and working in the company have often been seen separately. Firstly, migrants need to participate in a language course, partly via internships in companies, then they have to look for work. Only a few training models promote combinations of work and language learning in the workplace. Unfortunately, employees do not usually acquire in the workplace the occupation-specific theoretical knowledge that is indispensable to a better understanding of workplace procedures. Training models that support language acquisition and theoretical instruction in the workplace should be developed and tested.

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