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# “The fight against exclusion from the labour market begins ... in the workplace”: Work-related second language development towards inclusion and participation

**Abstract:** Communicative competence in the language of the workplace is a key enabler for sustainable inclusion in the labour market and society for migrant workers. The research project “German at the workplace” delivers empirical results to inform work-related second language (L2) development. The company ethnography gives evidence of the role of language as a key vocational competence in modern work practices. Together with the linguistic analysis of authentic oral exchanges and documents it gives suggestions to language professionals and policy-makers for improving L2 development at and for work.

**Résumé :** Pour les travailleurs migrants, la capacité à communiquer dans la langue parlée sur le lieu de travail est un facilitateur clé pour une intégration durable au marché du travail et à la société. Le projet de recherche « Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz » (« l’allemand au travail ») rend compte des résultats empiriques pour soutenir le développement d’une langue seconde liée à l’emploi. L’ethnographie de l’entreprise atteste que la langue comme compétence professionnelle essentielle joue un rôle dans les pratiques actuelles. Linguistes et décideurs empruntent à ces résultats et à l’analyse linguistique des échanges oraux et des documents pour soutenir le développement de la L2 au travail et pour le travail.


## 1 Second language matters

In Germany, where the research was carried out, migrants have been contributing substantially to the economic and social development of the country over the last half century. While overrepresented in low-paid, dangerous and vulnerable jobs, and over-proportionally threatened by long-term unemployment, they are still underrepresented in education. Yet their L2 development is particularly

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fundamental for sustainable inclusion and participation in work and social life. In tune with the focus of social learning theories on the learning potential of work, interest for work-related L2 development is increasing.

Funded by the VolkswagenStiftung, the study group *Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz* ('German at the workplace') carried out the research project "Deutsch am Arbeitsplatz (DaA) – Research on workplace communication as a basis for organizational second language development", 2007–2009. The study groups consisted of researchers and practitioners of renowned institutions of adult education in Germany and Austria.<sup>1</sup> The project investigated workplace communication in different sectors in order to get empirically sound insights on language requirements and to improve work-related L2 provision. The focus was on little-investigated fields such as communication on the shop floor of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in food processing, electrical appliances, metal, and plastics as well as a logistics enterprise. SMEs are a constituent part of the German economy and offer employment to large numbers of migrants. One large industrial goods manufacturer was included because of its experience in work-related language development. Care of the elderly was also included because it employs an extremely high percentage of migrants and reports a constant growing need for workers.

Thanks to the good contacts of the providers represented in the study group, it was not difficult to find 15 companies willing to release a few employees for an interview with researchers who wanted to find out about language requirements, and were ready to report on their findings. Awareness of the role of communication in work practices among staff and managers had grown in the last decade in comparison to the attitude revealed in a survey conducted by the Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung in the EU Project "Setting up Partnerships against Social Exclusion at the Workplace", 2000–2002. The opinion of most employers and providers then can be epitomised by the surprised comment of a supervisor in a phone interview: "Why communicating at the workplace? They are there to work!"

Some 15 years later both staff and management agree that language skills are necessary "to understand the work and to produce quality, to communicate goals, to ensure procedures" (works manager); to create a feeling of belonging: "Integration means fun, esprit, irony, a language, the language of the company"

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(manager) – “You must talk about all sort of things every day, ’cause there is always something new” (metal worker).

When it came to recording authentic oral interactions at work and in the breaks for linguistic analysis, the DaA study group was confronted with great reservations. It took a year to build trust. Only then was it possible to record some 70 oral interactions at work for further analysis.

The project results were articulated in two parts: company ethnography and linguistic analysis of a corpus of authentic oral interactions and written texts.

## 2 Company ethnography

### 2.1 Methodology and research questions

For the company ethnography 33 semi-guided qualitative interviews were carried out with different stakeholders in companies: migrant and non-migrant employees, supervisors, heads of personnel and human resources, managers, members of the workers’ councils, and in one case the owner himself. A content-analytical evaluation of the interviews was integrated with the findings of the participant observations. The results were presented in various articles and informed company profiles, which are used in training for providers and teachers to raise awareness of the challenges and specific features of workplace L2 development.

The leading questions of the research focused on the communicative requirements linked to tasks and roles, on the factors impacting on communication, and the consequences of L2 development for practice and research.

### 2.2 Key findings

The research verified our key hypothesis of the central role of communication in modern work practices based on international literature (e.g. Boutet 2001) and VET (vocational education and training) didactics (e.g. Dehnbostel 2008). Communicative competences are vital for employability and vocational competences independently of economic sector, trade, qualification profile, position. We were and are of course aware of the differences in requirements according to the sectors: in order to promote L2 development in less obvious sectors than care, such as food, metal or plastic processing industries, it was necessary to show that skilled and semi-skilled workers in all sectors need communicative competences to access the labour market, to secure their jobs, to participate in vocational education and training, to progress in their career and escape the low-pay trap.

We took care to bring evidence of the impact of structural changes on communication practices and their implications for new or more complex language skill requirements for shop floor staff. Table 1 shows a few tendencies.

**Table 1:** The language of change

Structural changes	Language requirements	Quotes from the DaA interviews
Decentralised work organisation	Communicate and explain decisions/solutions to colleagues and management	“The employee has to make independent decisions at night. He also needs to justify his decisions” (operation manager)
Quality assurance	Communicate work processes	“We have so-called 5 minute talks every morning to discuss quality assurance” (operation manager)
Automation, robotisation, new technologies	Communicate changes	“You cannot rely on work routines. Sometimes there are small changes – you have to read it thoroughly every time” (worker)
Certification/auditing	Describe and explain own error management	“The auditor ... asks the workers on the shop floor, points to the defect-catalogue and asks: ‘What do you do in case of such an error?’” (head of personnel)

Health and safety legislation, client orientation, personnel appraisal, innovation and the consequent need for training, and a multilingual workforce are further examples of structural change impacting on communication: communicative competence has become a key vocational competence for all employees in all sectors and positions. It is a central factor of inclusion and participation in working life, in order to perform tasks, exercise rights and duties as an employee, improve career prospects, participate in relevant social networks, and strengthen ones’ professional identity.

### 3 Linguistic analysis

The linguistic analysis examined 56 conversations, 100 e-mails, and various notices and bulletins of the collected corpus in terms of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and functions, laying the foundation for a description of work-related German based on authentic data.

### 3.1 Methodology and research questions

The recorded oral exchanges were transcribed and analyzed according to the main categories and levels of *Profile deutsch 2.0* (Glabionat et al. 2005), the German implementation of the CEFR. The analysis aimed at finding out which communicative functions occur in the investigated work contexts, on which linguistic levels they are realised (in terms of grammar and vocabulary), and whether there are sector-specific communicative functions and realisations.

### 3.2 Key findings

Our findings suggest that communicative functions (not only) in the workplace are not scalable, but range across all A and B levels as regards grammatical complexity. The consequences are twofold. First, “strictly following *Profile deutsch* progression ... does not prepare for the actual communicative practices ... in their workplaces”, unless they wait years before joining the labour market (Knötig 2010: 16). Secondly, “communicative functions in the workplace ... can be consciously formulated within the constraints of a specific grammatical level, even the lowest (A1) level, making them much more accessible ...” (Knötig 2010: 16). Recommended are: focusing course design on a progression according to functions rather than grammar, and awareness-raising activities for German-speaking colleagues and managers. At present, alternative teaching approaches like the scenario technique and language awareness training for different workplace actors have been developed. Innovative arrangements like *Sprachpaten* (‘language champions’) for nursery school assistants, who support migrant employees in coping with the complexity of language in real working life.

Among other insights, the DaA study group stresses the prominent role of prosody in spoken interaction. By changing intonation, a question can become an ironical remark or a command, as in the DaA data. Politeness is conveyed through intonation. Stronger attention to prosody is vital for L2 development in the context of work, where power relations shape interactions.

Of consequence for L2 didactics is another insight: the “transgressive” cases of oral communication following the written ‘monologue’ model – e.g. health and safety instructions– and of written communication following the oral ‘dialogue’ model – e.g. birthday invitation to colleagues via e-mail. The growing use of communication technology is expected to enhance this tendency, which L2 didactics has to take into account.

As to the importance of vocabulary for specific purposes, the DaA corpus shows a differentiated role for technical terms: a minor role in informal work-

place oral exchanges and a great(er) role in formal communication (reading and writing of documents/manuals, health and safety instructions, etc.). Recommended is the development of learning strategies at word, sentence and text level, and of communicative strategies for cultural appropriateness.

Finally, only one example of sector-specific communicative functions could be found: describing a procedure while undertaking it, which seems to be typical of person-related care.

## 4 Conclusions

The lessons to be learnt from the DaA research address policy-makers as well as educationalists. Sustainable integration of migrant workers is an economic and democratic issue. Work-related L2 development is an instrument towards that end and needs policies which

- recognize the joint responsibility of all parties involved (employers, the state, migrants, providers);
- regulate the financial responsibility of employers (as in France and Switzerland);
- recognize communicative skills as vocational skills (not only for migrants), as in France;
- give incentives for supporting work-related L2 development;
- trigger cooperation among relevant parties such as ministries, social partners, migrants' organizations, researchers, practitioners;
- turn time-limited projects into regular provision.

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