



ICOPROMO

Intercultural competence for professional mobility
*Compétence interculturelle pour le développement
de la mobilité professionnelle*



Multicultural Teams and Language Issues: A quantitative study

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PART I: BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

1. Introduction

The second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have witnessed an unprecedented tendency towards internationalisation at all levels. In this respect, the professional world has undergone changes which have affected not only the way people work but also the way people relate to and communicate with each other. Indeed, if something could be said about trends that affect the whole planet it is that it has become a vibrant intercultural environment.

The ICOPROMO Project has been focusing on the question of intercultural competence and professional mobility from 2004 to 2006. The quantitative study presented here is one of the activities carried out in the course of the ICOPROMO Project. Specifically, it is inserted within a wider action of research conducted by ICOPROMO team members with a view to exploring multicultural teamwork across Europe and delving into different aspects of intercultural competence in professional settings in particular.

The ICOPROMO Project has to be seen within the framework of the Second Medium-term Programme (2004-2007) of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), Council of Europe. This Second Medium-term Programme, entitled 'Languages for social cohesion, language education in a multilingual and multicultural Europe' has four themes, the ICOPROMO Project pertaining to the second (B), 'Communication in a multicultural society'. Since languages and language education across Europe have always been the chief concern of the ECML, the ICOPROMO Project has acknowledged this factor by placing an emphasis on the language issue in multicultural teamwork in the quantitative study.

2. Objectives

This study has the aims of:

1. Identifying the working languages of multicultural teams across Europe.
2. Identifying the relationship between the working language(s) and the native language(s) of the team members in terms of formal and informal exchanges and also in connection with the channels and frequency of communication.
3. Assessing the importance of language use and intercultural competence.
4. Relating communication skills needs to organisational training actions.

3. Methodology

A quantitative study was designed with these objectives in mind. The ECML supported this project with a research assistant for three months in 2005. A survey was designed to obtain information and views on the following subjects:

- Company data: location, the number of employees in the organisation and in the team
- Working language(s) of the team
- Language(s) used in informal activities
- Native languages the members of the team represent
- Means of communication used by team members
- Language education courses offered by the organisation
- Role of intercultural communication in the language education courses
- Special training/programmes in intercultural communication offered by the organisation
- Degree of agreement or disagreement with statements concerning specific language issues

The piloting of the study was conducted by the research assistant while working at the headquarters of the ECML in Graz in November-December 2005. It was agreed by the ICOPROMO team members that the piloting should be conducted via telephone conversation, a more direct means of approaching organisations and a quicker tool to obtain information.

The piloting provided us with relevant data and, with minor modifications, the questionnaire used during this phase of the study was adapted to a web based survey. The idea behind the new format was to allow for a wider audience to participate in the research. The online version of the ECML survey was created using the QuestionPro's online survey software (<http://www.questionpro.com>). Minor amendments were made to fit the on-line format.

The survey link was activated on Monday, March 27, 2006, and then forwarded to the companies by the members of the team. The total of 30 responses (including original 11 responses of the piloting) was received by Friday, May 26, 2006 when the link to the survey was deactivated. The data from the original 11 responses was typed in and included in the final analysis.

4. Profile of the respondents

Altogether, 30 responses were received from 28 different organisations located in 10 different countries (Finland, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, UK, Portugal, Austria, Spain, and USA). Therefore, this is considered to be a representative sample not only in the number of participants but also in the organisations that are represented and in the different countries, located all over the Continent (with the exception of one organisation in the USA).

The country with most companies was the UK, with a total amount of 7 respondents, followed by Portugal (6) and Austria and Finland (both with 4). The countries with a smallest number of respondents, only 1, were Denmark, Germany, Spain and the United States of America. The organisations represented in the study range from ICT business areas ('Vodafone Portugal'), to language organisations ('British Council') with a wide variety between both: banks, sport and social clubs, council of ministers' secretariat, etc.

As far as the number of employees in the organisation, out of the 30 companies that responded to the survey, most of them are either very large organisations with over 1000 employees (9 companies – 30% of respondents) or small enterprises with less than 20 (8 companies – 26%). Companies with 100-500 employees also represented a considerable number of respondents (7 companies – 23%).

When participants were asked about the number of members in their own teams (not in the organisation), only 24 respondents answered this question indicating a more exact number of people in their teams. The numbers varied from 3 up to 215. Only one team had over 40 members (215). The remaining 23 companies responding to this question had 40 and fewer members in their team.

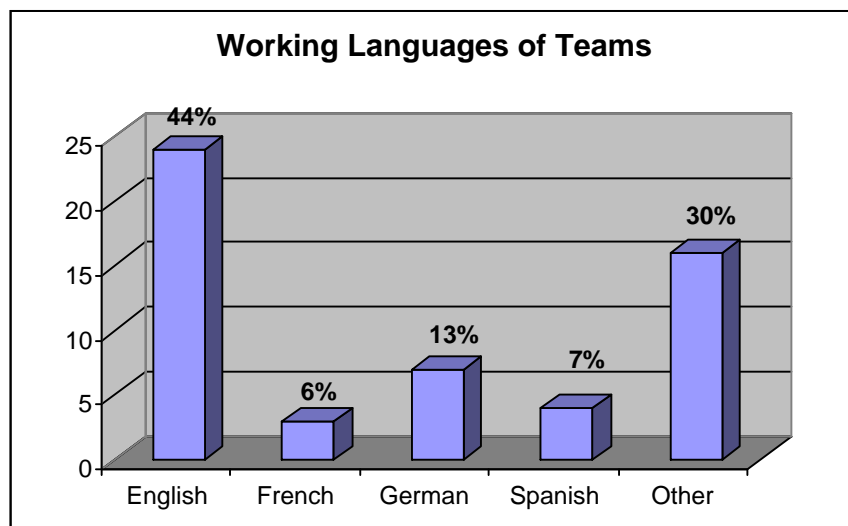
Therefore, the average organisation participating in the survey is rather large, with over 1000 employees, with an average of teams of less than 40 members.

PART II: FINDINGS PERTAINING TO THE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

5. Identifying the working languages of multicultural teams across Europe

5.1 Working language(s) of the teams

The most popular answer was **English** with **44%** of respondents choosing this option. French was the least chosen option (6%).



These findings reveal that, even though English (44%) is, no doubt, the working language of most of the organisations surveyed, multicultural teams not do always adopt this international language. On the contrary, German (13%), Spanish (7%), French (6%) are used as working languages in multiple organisations, with a wide array of other languages (30%) also coming to the foreground.

The option 'Other' was chosen by 30% of respondents and included such languages as Romanian, Dutch, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Flemish, Italian, Slovak, Czech, Tagalog, Russian, Estonian, and Mandarin.

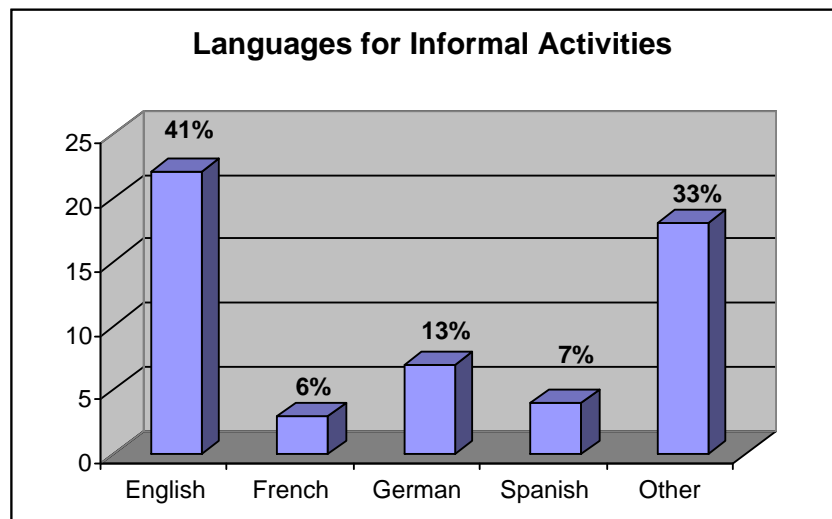
These data can be somehow determined by the geographical location of the organisation in question as well as the number of participants from each country: UK (7), Portugal (6) Austria and Finland (both with 4), Finland (4), The Netherlands (3), Switzerland (2) and Denmark, Germany, Spain and the United States of America (1).

Consequently as far as the working language of the team is concerned, in Europe we observe both, a tendency towards using English as an international language, but also a tendency towards using the local language(s). An interesting piece of data, as one respondent pointed out, is that English is used for international matters, whereas other local language(s) (over 20 local languages in the case of this particular company) seem to be used for local matters.

5.2 Identifying the relationship between the working language(s) and the native language(s) of the team members in terms of formal and informal exchanges and also in connection with the channels and frequency of communication.

5.2.1. Relationship between working language of the team and the language(s) used in the informal activities

The responses to this question very slightly varied from the answers to the previous questions. Again, most of the respondents (41%) chose English, and again French was selected only by 6% of respondents. The option 'Other' was chosen by 33% and included such languages as: Finnish, Swedish, Romanian, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Arabic, Tagalog, Slovak, Czech, Flemish, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian. One respondent again pointed out that also for informal activities in their team English is used for international matters and over 20 local languages for local matters.



5.2.2. Channels and frequency of communication

The relationship between the working language of the team and the channels and frequency of communication is summarised below:

Overall Matrix Scorecard										
	Question	Count	Score	Multiple times a day	Daily	Once every few days	Weekly	Monthly	Occasionally	Rarely/Never
1.	Personal Contacts	30	1.900							
2.	Meetings	22	2.955							
3.	Visits	18	3.167							
4.	Phone (including conferencing)	28	1.750							
5.	Internet/Intranet Communication	19	1.684							
6.	Email	29	1.172							
7.	Video Conferencing	18	6.111							
			Average	2.677						

It appears that within the teams, **e-mails** tend to be the most common way of communication with 90% of respondents choosing to use this means multiple times a day for inter-team communication. E-mails are followed by **Internet/Intranet communication** (84% of respondents), **personal contacts** (67%), and **phone (including conferencing) communication** (61%). **Video conferencing** appears to be the least common means of communication within the teams.

Not all teams have personal contacts on a daily basis. On average, personal contacts seem to take place once in every few days. It seems that, in some instances, multicultural teamwork goes hand in hand with geographical dispersion, which asks for a different mode of communication.

On average, meetings are held weekly although a closer look at the data shows that there is a wide variation in the different organisations, with some of them having multiple meetings a day and with others (possibly those that are geographically dispersed) with occasional meetings.

As with meetings, visits take place monthly on average. However, there is a representative percentage of participants who report having visits multiple times a day, daily or every once every few days. The high percentage allocated to monthly visits probably indicates that organisations seem somehow to have routine formal types of contact.

Telephone contacts occur, on average, once every few days, although the majority of the respondents acknowledge using this means of communication several times a day. It is also interesting to observe how 7% of the participants state using the telephone scarcely, only on a weekly basis. The use of the telephone, including conferencing, is the third most frequent type of contact after the email and internet / intranet communication. Interestingly, telephone conversations occur more frequently than personal contacts. They present the obvious advantage of allowing wording and rewording the message,

asking for clarification and checking understanding even though the interlocutor is physically far away. That is to say, it combines some of the advantages of face-to-face communication with the advantages of means of communication used for remote contact such as email or internet.

Internet / intranet communication is the second most popular means of communication among team members, with a significant 84% of participants expressing the use of internet / intranet communication several times a day. At the other end of the continuum, 11% acknowledge resorting to it occasionally. These data clearly indicate that multicultural teams make use of the opportunities the internet / intranet offer for professional communication.

According to the respondents, email has become the main mode of communication among multicultural team members. Without doubt, a clear 90% of the participants states sending and receiving multiple emails a day. Only 7% (the same 7% who indicated not using the internet / intranet?) deem that email is not their preferred or most commonly used means of communication.

It is obvious that the use of the new technologies has changed the way people working in teams communicate, which, therefore, accounts for the increasing number of teams that work in different time and zone areas all over the world. However, contrary to what one might expect by looking at the data above, video conferencing is the least preferred means of communication among multicultural team workers, with 55% of the participants affirming resorting to it rarely or never.

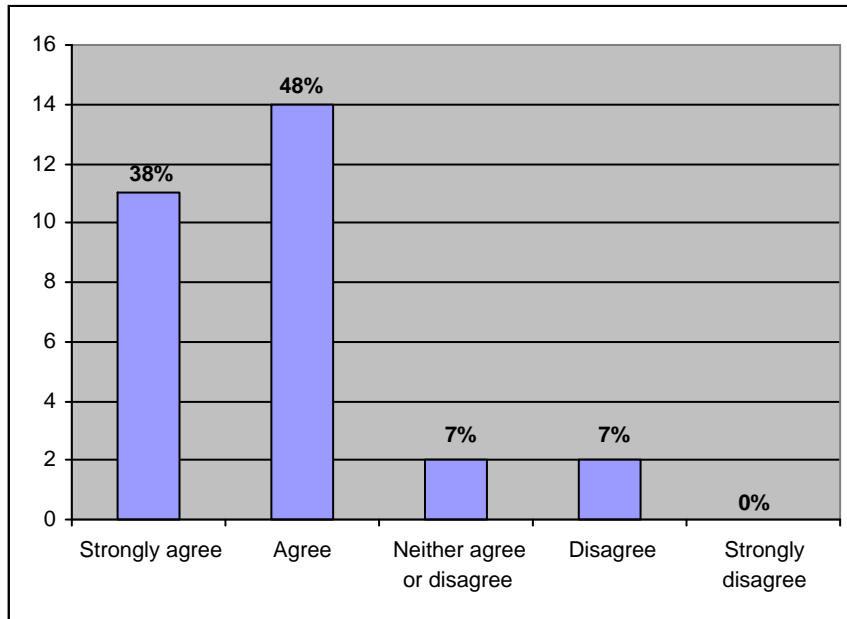
In conclusion, not all multicultural teams make extensive use of the possibilities the new technologies offer. Visual and oral modes of communication such as email, internet/intranet and telephone are clearly preferred to audiovisual means such as video conferencing.

Finally, the data reveals that face-to-face communication occupies a modest fourth position after email, internet/intranet and telephone contacts. It would be interesting to know to what extent multicultural team members are aware of the fact that the internet or emails do not seem to be as good and clear instruments of intercultural communication as face-to-face interaction. Indeed, misunderstandings often emerge in exchanges of emails and individuals may not be aware that internet and email contact can be even counterproductive.

5.3. Assessing the importance of language use and intercultural competence.

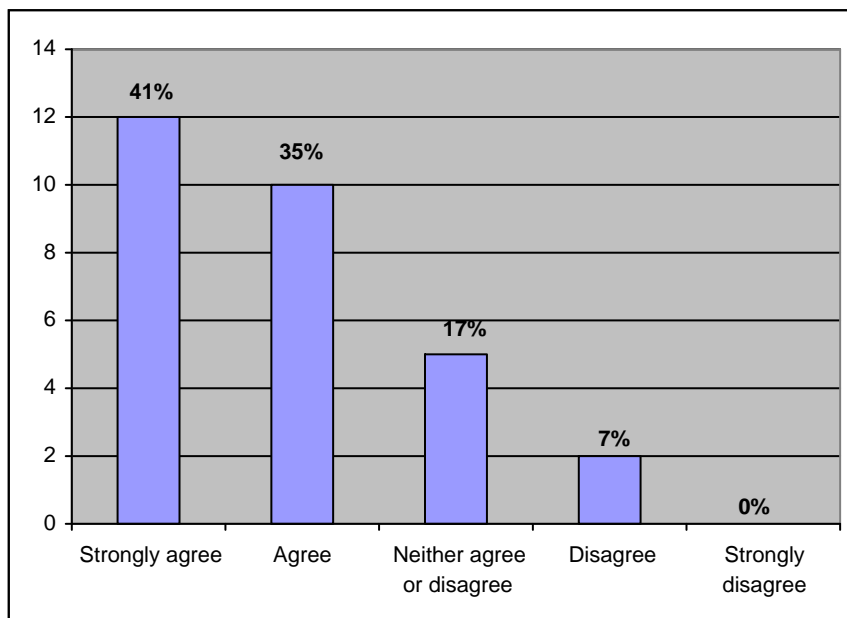
5.3.1. “Native speakers of the team’s language have an advantage in communication situations.”

86% believe that native-speakers of the working language have an advantage.



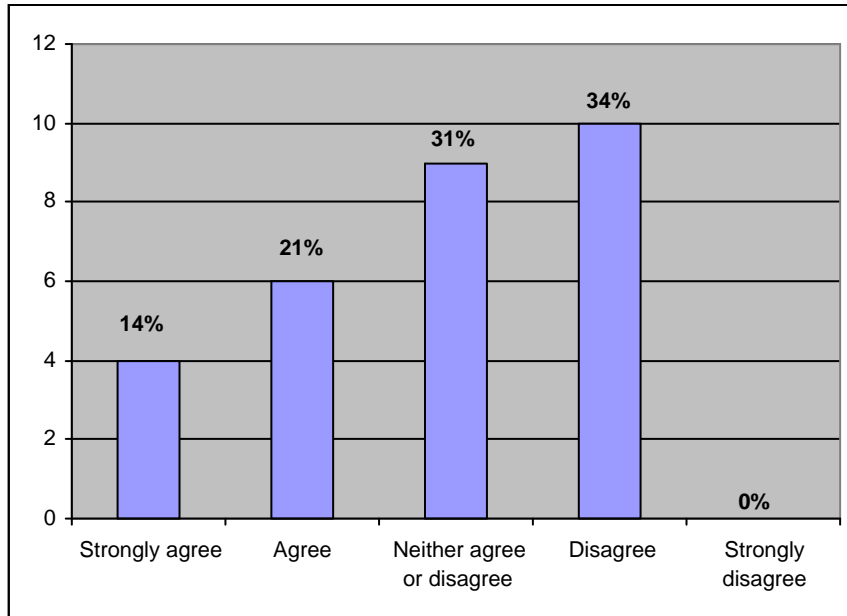
5.3.2. “Native speakers of the team’s language should make particular effort to ensure that everybody understands them.”

There is a clear majority in favour of this statement, whether the language in question be English or something else or whether the language in question is the dominant language of the organisation. This may be perceived as an acknowledgement that language conveys power which needs to be managed fairly within the team or may reflect a simple concern for efficiency in communication.



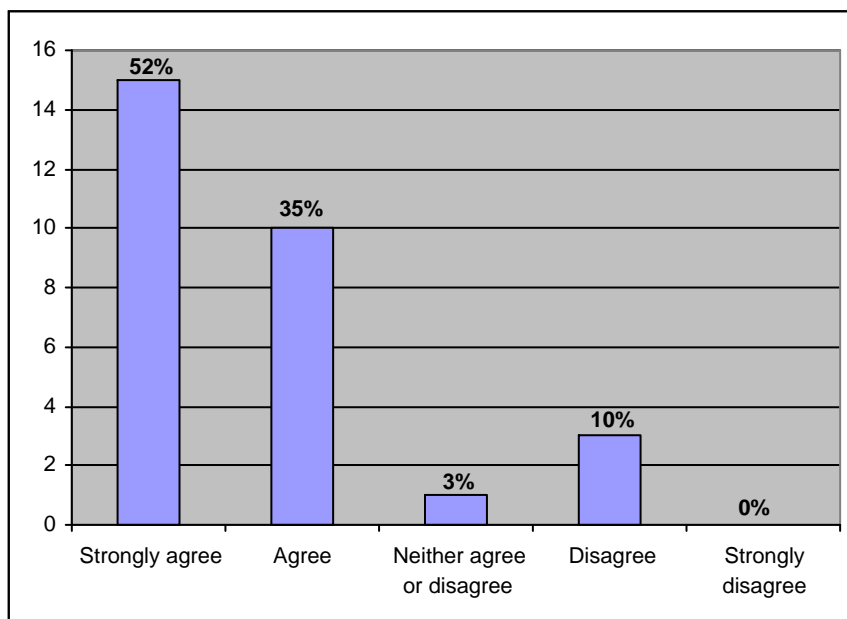
5.3.3. “Native speakers are more influential in the team than non-native speakers because of their linguistic capacities.”

Further to the previous question, these responses would suggest that language is primarily treated as a tool for efficiency. The majority (65%) do not feel that native language competence in itself confers influence on team members.



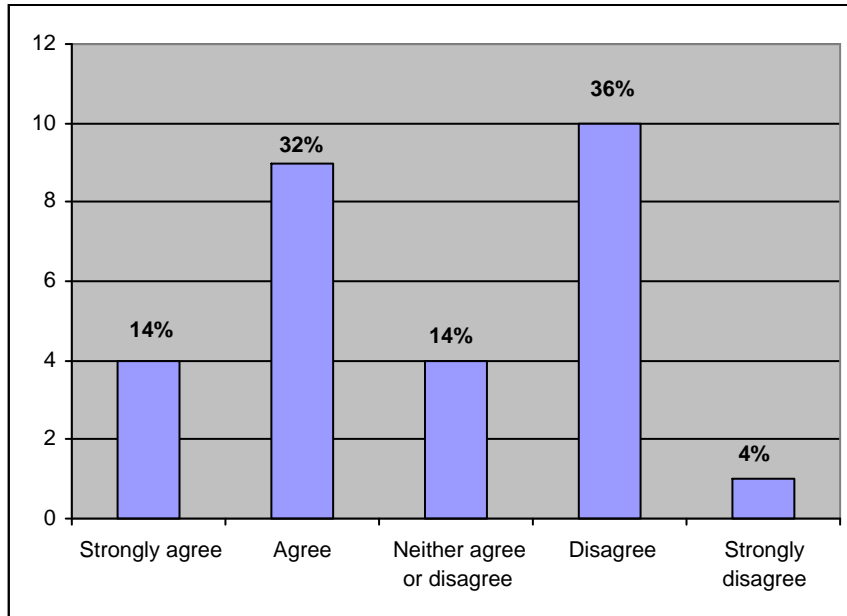
5.3.4. “It is important that all members of the team are fluent in the working language of the team.”

87% see competence in the working language as important to the team. Whilst native speakers are obliged not to take advantage of their position, non-native speakers are obliged to become fluent.



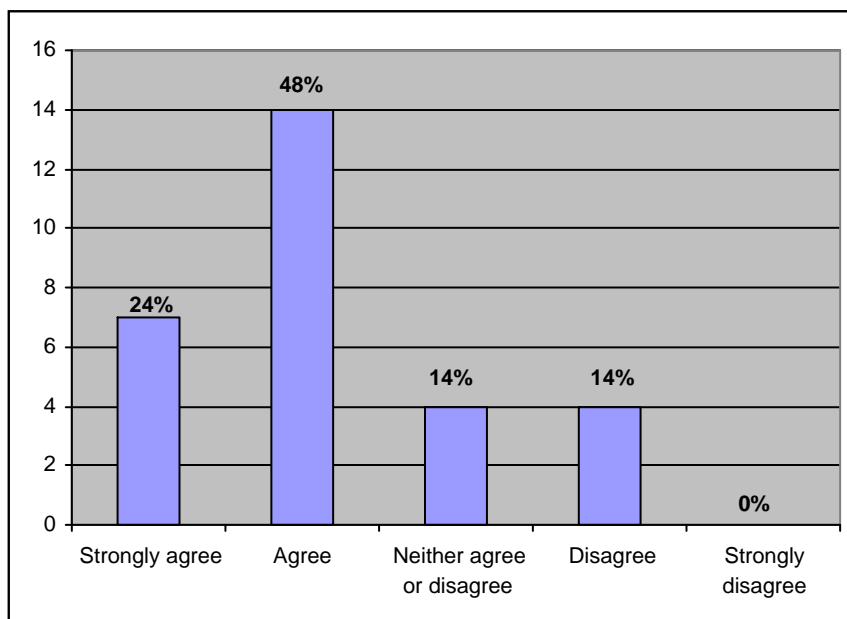
5.3.5. “Language problems are a major source of misunderstandings in comparison with intercultural differences.”

46% agree with this and 40% disagree. This question concisely expresses the rather uncertain views expressed throughout the survey concerning the relationship between language and intercultural competence.



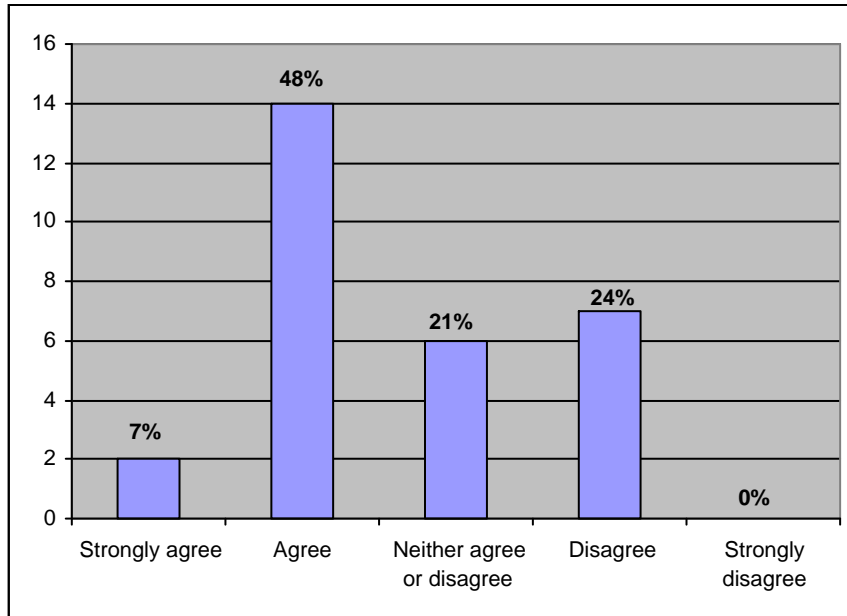
5.3.6. “A special attention is paid to clarifying and explaining aspects in order to avoid misunderstandings.”

72% agree with this. This reinforces the previous responses stressing the importance attached to efficiency and clarity in communication.



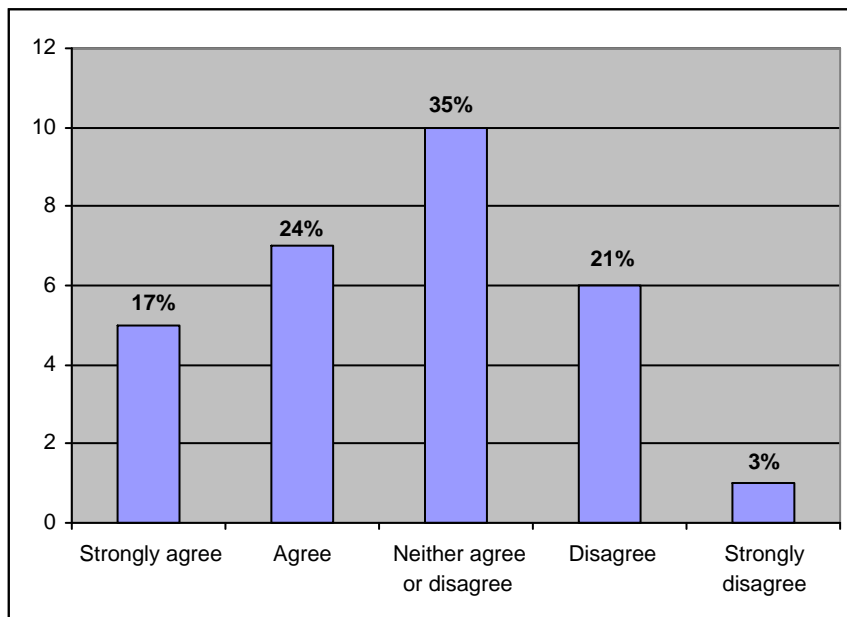
5.3.7. “A conscious effort is made to ensure that all members actively participate regardless of their fluency in the working language.”

A small majority of 55% agree with this. To some extent the question departs from the focus on language and strays more into generic issues of team management and protocols.



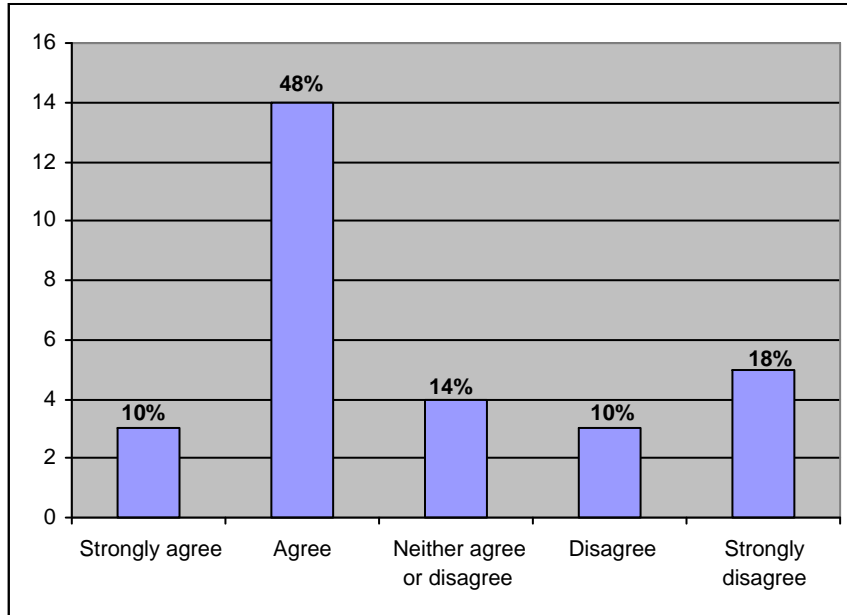
5.3.8. “Intercultural differences, including the communication styles increase the effectiveness of the team.”

The largest response here is for ‘Neither agree nor disagree’, which is in itself unusual. This reinforces the suspicion that there is a reluctance to lend weight to intercultural issues as explanatory or influential factors.



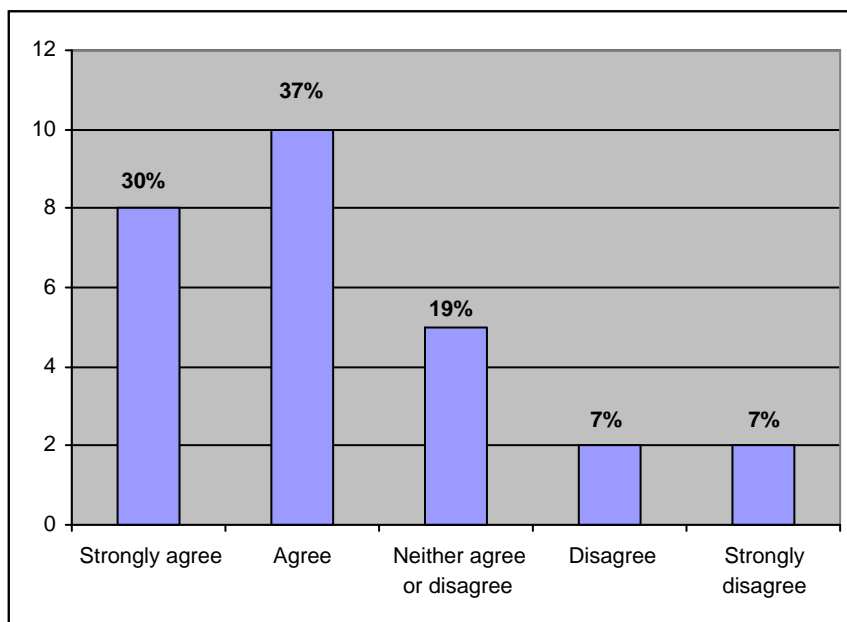
5.3.9. “It happens frequently that team members switch from one working language to another.”

58% report frequent language switching but a high proportion (18%) strongly disagree with this.



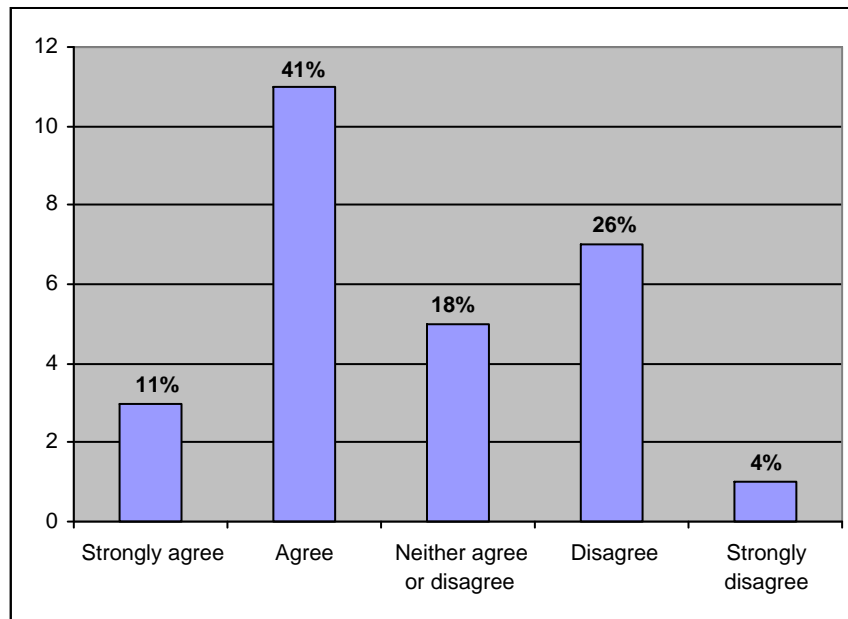
5.3.10. “In most cases the change of language occurs due to the composition of the group, e.g. their native tongue.”

This clear response (67% in favour) confirms that the working language is only challenged by the native tongue of the group. No third option appears to present itself regularly.



5.3.11. “Sometimes the specifics of the discussed subject impose the change of language in the team.”

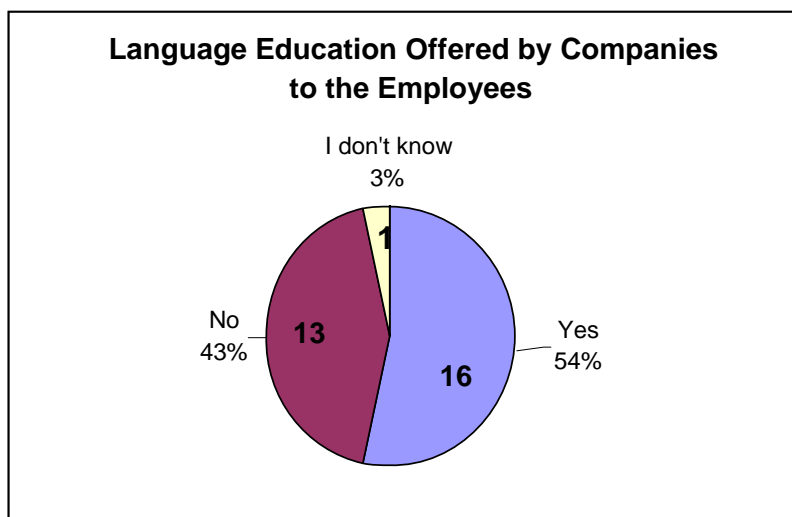
Where the native language is used instead of the working language it is most often because of the subject under discussion.



5.4 Relating communication skills needs to organisational training actions.

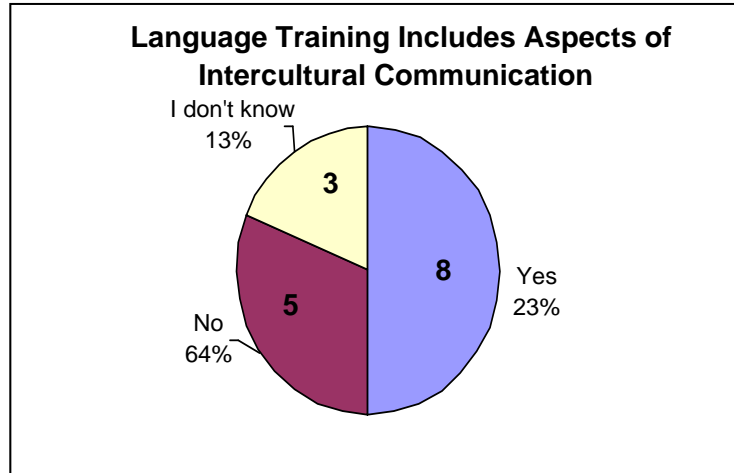
5.4.1. Is your organisation offering language education courses to employees?

Out of 30 respondents, only one gave a ‘Don’t Know’ answer to the questions. The majority of organisations claim to offer language education courses to their employees (54% of the respondents). However, 43% do not provide any language training.



5.4.2. If yes, does the language education include aspects of intercultural communication?

Out of 16 companies that responded positively to Q.8, 8 claim that the language training offered by their companies to employees also includes aspects of intercultural communication.



5.4.3. Is your organisation offering special training programmes in intercultural communication to the employees?

The majority of organisations do not offer any special training programmes in intercultural communication for their employees (64% of respondents). The fact that multicultural teams exist and communicate frequently within these organisations using all the technological means discussed appears not in itself to give rise to concerns about the efficiency of intercultural communication. It may be, where inefficiencies are perceived or conflicts arise, that such concerns are attributed mainly to interpersonal or technological issues. For further discussion of this matter, see the section on Limitations, below.



6. Limitations and Conclusion

The overall purpose of the study was to obtain views from working multicultural teams on the relationship between issues of language and intercultural in their communications. The respondents were asked to consider this matter in a general sense without relating their answers to specific aspects of team operations or organisational context. Furthermore, it can be difficult in a brief survey such as this to phrase questions impartially so that they apply equally to all respondents of whatever native language and in whichever location. The diverse responses received here gave rise to difficulties in the analysis of the data in places.

Nonetheless, the findings suggest that email is a critical tool for multicultural teamwork and deserves further study. English has a strong but by no means ubiquitous position as a working language for these teams. It is used for reasons of convenience and efficiency and is complemented in team situations by the use of shared other languages for the purpose of informal communication. Whether it be English or another language, clarity and efficiency of communication in the selected working language is important to teams, with native-speakers being obliged to help others and non-natives speakers obliged to develop fluency.

Language use and competence generally attracted relatively positive and discerning responses from respondents. The same cannot be said for intercultural competence. Whilst there is clearly some level of awareness of the matter, it does not attract the same degree of clarity of response or action. The reason for this may have something to do with terminology and definition but it would appear that teams feel less able to identify and act on matters of intercultural competence. It is generally felt to be part of the communication process but not more than that.

Further work in this area might look more closely at:

- The nature and impact of email communication in multicultural teams.
- Occasions of language-switching – technical or informal (social)?
- Conflict occurrence and resolution – the role of language and culture.