Impact of Using English as a Corporate Language
Globalization and Shrinking Domestic Market

- Companies must use English in order to compete globally
- Ageing and shrinking population
- Decreasing sales
- Human resource shortage
- Japanese companies need to globalize
Language issues in International business

- Interdisciplinary by nature, need to be researched and analyzed by scholars in international business including management research, organization studies and business communication and, (socio)linguists
- Language in business is researched by increasing numbers of researchers in the field of international business and management as well as (socio)linguistics for last decades mostly in Europe.
- Little empirical research has been conducted to find out impacts and implication of using English as a common or official language for business purposes in Japan.
English as Global Common Language

- English has grown into the single most important business language
- Companies must use English in order to compete globally
- Major MNEs including some Japanese companies are now using English as their official language. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, Neeley 2011)
- E.g. Nokia, SAP, Philips, Rakuten, Nissan, etc.
- May provide many benefits to MNEs.

(Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a and Piekkari et al. 2014)
Charismatic president of Eigo, Co. announces its English-language project. The company's bold plans have attracted a great deal of media attention. Some people are very critical making a comment such as,

“It’s stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is manly Japanese.”

(Honda’s CEO, Takanobu Ito)
World Englishes: Kachru's Three Circles of English

In the age of Superdiveristy …

Japan is still largely Monolingual, Mono-cultural and Mono-ethnic society, with very small ethnic minorities.
Japan:

- Monolingual & historically isolated society
- English Japan was not colonized by the western power
- Never been forced to use any other languages than Japanese.
- Generally perceived as a monolingual country,
- Diversity in language and ethnicity is increasing in recent years (Azuma 2010, Gottlieb 2008).
Japan: Monolingual & historically isolated society

• English has been perceived as a survival skill, competence to be learned for communication outside Japan rather than using it within the country. (Torikai 2005).

• Foreign languages are learned predominantly to fulfill an external need.

• People feel there is very little need to use foreign languages internally, and, therefore, are not very motivated to learn them. (Yoshida K., 2002).
English has NO Official Status in Japan

- Japan belongs to the Kachru’s expanding circle, where the language has no official status.
- English is widely studied as the first foreign language.
- Not sharing the basic cultural values and traditions with the English-native countries.
- Non-Christian society
Research Questions

What are the goal and purposes of the language policy?

What are the impacts and implications of the language policy?
Methodology

• EIGO Co., A Japanese company that has implemented English as their official corporate language.
• Interview: open ended unstructured interviews
• 20 participants
• HR officials: HR Director and Global HR manager
• Former employees
• Current employees
What are the purposes?

• HR director and GHR manager:
  • To seek the best talents globally
  • To create synergy within the whole group with English as a common communication tool
  • To enable much faster access to worldwide information
  • To broaden their views
Conspicuous absence of multilingualism in the company.

Mono-lingual and mono-cultural working environment.

Only Japanese are working using only Japanese language.

No immediate needs to use any other languages than Japanese.
Monolingual & Monocultural Company

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What happened?

“When I joined the company, it was a completely Japanese environment. So, when President announced the policy, I felt very uncomfortable. We had to use English in meetings. Besides, my job is sales for domestic Japanese clients, and all of my clients are Japanese. I felt no needs to use English. The policy was enacted in 2012. In the beginning, Japanese was banned inside the company. I was required to write internal E-mails and Nippo (daily report) in English. It took very long time to write English, so I used Google translation. For the first six months, it was a little bit chaotic.

However, gradually we found balance. Now we can use Japanese for internal communication… we speak Japanese to each other in the office.”
“When we started, we tried to change everything into English, and we felt that we must do everything in English even at unimportant meetings or conversations. And then, we realized that it was inefficient and meaningless, and better to use it naturally depending on counterparts or members. I think that is the recent trend in our company…in that sense it is not good to put all in English, it is right to think about places and occasions, and use English as an appropriate tool. It is easy to misunderstand there, but we are doing that.”
English only policy did not work!

“...At first, I was overwhelmed. As all day was unreasonable, there was a time when we decided to speak in English for 30 minutes in the beginning. Each department had set its own rule. Then, we will not talk ...

From when it became OK to use Japanese? ------ There was no official announcement. It became gradually, at a business department, one by one. So it's hard when I got a new boss, as I said earlier, it depends on the boss. All my bosses were Japanese.
English is still used in some departments.

Which departments were talking in English?
----I guess it's R&D development. The department recruited oversea talents, so they have to do so. The R&D has 70% overseas. There are also many from China and India. I don’t know if there are Taiwanese. There are some Koreans.
1. The language policy imposed challenges:
2. Business was impeded.
3. Communication problems:
   Presentations were prepared and performed OK in English
   But, no discussions followed.
4. Managers’ meetings are done in English but no small talk.
5. Now only company wide meeting is done in English in most departments.
6. Unique “English” have been developed in a few departments that consists of multilingual/multicultural employees.
“The English-only policy did not work as planned.”

- The policy did not work out except for a department/departments where multilingual employees worked.
- Now considered largely a “failure”
- What went wrong?

- “It’s stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is manly Japanese.” (Honda’s CEO, Takanobu Ito)

- Is it really stupid or ridiculous?
When I started studying about the company,

- I was trying to find the characteristics of ELF/BELF in Japan.
- But....
- English was not used in the company except for a very few departments.
- English-only policy was not working!
ELF as a contact language

- English proficiency is not a problem.
- It was not an ELF/BELF environment.
- English was used among the Japanese employees who shared the same L1s.
- The company failed to create a corporate wide multilingual/multicultural environment.
ELF = Multilingualism/multiculturalism

• ELF presupposes multilingual and multicultural environment/community
The Key is; Multilingual & Multicultural Perspectives

- For English as an official language policy to work:

- It is necessary to plan the language policy in the multilingual and multicultural perspectives.

- The company needs to aim for creating an environment that supports multilingualism, and multiculturalism.

- ELF/BELF can work only in such an environment, where new ideas are created and shared by diversified employee base, which, in turn, can generate new values for the business.
6 years passed...
The “declaration” has worked.

• The company succeeded to create the corporate image of a Globally and Internationally oriented company.

• Greater diversity in the workplace
Pedagogical implications

• Providing “ELF” learning communities/environments at early stages:
  • An international camp for students with the Content based English learning opportunities may be effective such as;
    • a sports camp or a music camp for kids who are speakers of different L1s
    • theater courses for English plays for ELF students
    • cultural exchange courses where students learn from each other
  • ELF practicing opportunities for diversified students from neighboring courtiers (e.g. for Japan: China, Taiwan, Korea or South East Asian countries)
Importance of Corporate Language Policy

• Japanese companies are not aware of the complex language issues in international business
• Languages function and evolve organically
• Meaningless to mechanically translate Japanese into English
• Multilingual and multicultural diversities in corporate organization would contribute to business’s organic growth.
• Rethinking of management, organization, human resource management in terms of language and cultural aspects is necessary,
• In the English only policy, tangible and intangible management knowledge accumulated in the company in Japanese and tradition of business know-how do not work
• It is important to establish clear consciousness and language policies and policies concerning Japanese as a native language and the role of ELF (English as a common language) as a second language
Reference


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