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Multilingual Franca: Workplace Language Use Within Multinational Corporations in French West Africa

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ABSTRACT

The proposed paper features the results of a survey and follow-up interviews that assessed workplace language use within 20 multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in French West Africa. Participating corporations, headquartered in nine different countries, operate in over 100 countries and represent 13 major industries. Sixty-six French West African engineers identified (1) their corporation's official workplace language, (2) the percentage of time employees speak English versus French, (3) the weaknesses in nonnative employees' English skills, and (4) recommendations for ESL instruction at French West African universities. The present study confirms that English is the official language of nearly every MNC operating in French West Africa; however, employees in none of these MNCs work exclusively in English as both English and French are intertwined during daily operations. The results support Janssens & Steyaert (2014) call for a *multilingual franca* workplace, where mixed language use is tolerated. The results also confirm Sacco's (2017) findings that the exclusive use of English as the lingua franca of international business within multinational corporations is unrealistic in many contexts.¹

INTRODUCTION

English is THE *lingua franca* of international business (Fixman, 1990; Mair, 2003; Crystal, 2003; Feely & Harzing, 2003; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2004; Bono & Vey, 2005; Neeley, 2012; Kelm, 2014). There is little debate about that fact. English is the official language of all U.S.-owned multinational corporations and of most non-U.S.-owned multinational corporations. English is the language of all corporate communication between global teams from emails to formal presentations, from teleconferencing to summit meetings at corporate headquarters. It is used in overseas locations between native English-speaking managers and their overseas staff of engineers, technicians, agronomists, etc. The reason is clear for English as the official lingua franca: communication between global teams becomes an operational Tower of Babel if a multitude of languages are permitted (Neeley & Kaplan, 2014).

Business English as the Lingua Franca (BELF) is defined by Louhaila-Salminen et al. (2005) as the use of English "as a 'neutral' and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – 'non-native speakers' or 'learners.'" (2005, 403-4). The community of BELF users include native speakers of English (NSEs) and a

¹ This is my second foray into BELF research. Sacco (2017) in *GABC* is the first. I believe we applied linguists and Language for Specific Purposes researchers have much to contribute to BELF research in collaboration with experts in the field.

plethora of nonnative speakers of English (NNSEs) worldwide. NNSEs, representing six continents, are as varied in English expertise levels from CEFR A1 to C1 (Council of Europe, 2017). A global videoconference might include NSEs from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia and NNSEs from the Netherlands, China, Cameroon, Hungary, Vietnam, and Egypt, all with different accents and varying levels of English. BELF can also include a context where the Japanese CEO requires the use of English among its Japanese employees in Japan and throughout its global operations (Neeley, 2017).

Despite the dominance of English, mixed language use has woven itself into the fabric of overseas operations in most multinational corporations (MNCs). Many researchers including Grandin & Dehmel (1997); Fredriksson et al. (2006); Hinds et al. (2013); Neeley & Kaplan (2014); Sacco (2017) and Vigier & Spencer-Oatley (2017) have studied mixed language use within large multinational corporations, including many U.S.-owned MNCs. Brazilian engineers and managers, for example, speak Portuguese with their colleagues in Brazil while they use English with their American bosses and with colleagues around the world. Operating in two or more languages in the corporate workplace is a phenomenon that Janssens & Steyaert (2014) call the *multilingual franca* workplace. The *Multilingual franca* workplace enables nonnative English speakers to use their native language to facilitate the completion of their work activities. It is the only occasion where nonnative English speakers do not operate at a disadvantage vis-à-vis native English speaking colleagues.

Numerous researchers (Sanger, 1992; Grandin & Dehmel, 1997; Feely & Harzing, 2003; Bono & Vey, 2005; Beyene, Hinds & Cramton, 2009; Harzing, Köster & Magner, 2011; Neeley & Kaplan, 2014; Neeley, 2017) cite unfair competition felt by nonnative English speakers versus their native English speaking colleagues. Beyene, Hinds & Cramton, C.D. (2009) liken the disadvantage for nonnative speakers as “walking through jelly.” English impacts hiring, salary increases and promotions just as native English speakers would experience the disadvantage of making a presentation in Turkish or Arabic. Neeley & Kaplan (2014) cite trust issues with nonnative English speakers: “We need to be extra cautious, because the Americans’ mastery of the language may lead them to take advantage of us and try to fool us.”

There are some corporate examples in which only English is spoken even with the presence of a global staff at an overseas site. Kelm (2014) reported that English is only spoken in workplace settings in the small multinational firms he studied. For example, Kelm cites the case of a Korean company operating in Peru. Korean and Peruvian managers communicate only in English. Despite having lived in Peru for several years, the Korean managers do not speak Spanish with their Peruvian colleagues. Kelm does not mention, however, whether the Peruvian colleagues communicate in Spanish or in English with each other when their Korean colleagues are not present. Though Kelm’s study is significant, especially in describing workplace language behavior in small multinational firms, it is important to study language use in large multinational corporations and in a variety of corporate settings.

Sacco (2017) studied workplace language behavior in a U.S.-own global agribusiness in the U.S. Unlike Kelm (2014), Sacco discovered that English is not even the lingua franca of milling operations *inside* the U.S. In a rice mill in the northwestern U.S., Sacco witnessed the existence of dual language zones: English is the predominant language used in the corporate offices, but Spanish dominates on the mill floor. Spanish dominated on the mill floor because of limited English proficiency (LEP). Even though the agribusiness executives want to enforce its English as

a lingua franca policy among its Hispanic mill workers, a perfect safety record remains intact because communication between Hispanic coworkers in Spanish is compact and efficient, especially in a dangerous industrial area where high decibel levels can interfere with communication. Dual language zones are found throughout U.S. agribusinesses because of the predominance of Hispanic workers. The dominance of Hispanic workers in this industry and others makes English-only operations impractical in most contexts within the U.S.

Sacco tested the English-only policy of the same U.S.-owned global agribusiness in its overseas operations. Sacco interviewed NNSE engineers working in 11 countries on four continents. The countries include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Germany, Ivory Coast, the Netherlands, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Vietnam. Mixed language use also takes place in overseas operations like it does at the rice mill in the northwestern U.S. One respondent admitted: “few of us work with English in our day to day.” Another respondent working in Germany stated: “The main language is German for local communication, but if more than one other employee or country non-German speaking is involved, English is the language.”

French West Africa is the focus of the present study because of the paucity of BELF research on Africa. The first studies (Vandemeeren, 1998, 1999) focused on NNSE workers in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Hungary. Later studies focused on NNSE workers in Scandinavian countries (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Most, if not all, of these workers possessive English proficiency far superior to that of French West African engineers, agronomists, IT experts and technicians, the focus group of the present study.

The Focus on French West Africa

French West Africa is an area worth exploring for BELF research. It consists of eight countries comprising a population of close to 175 million. Rich in natural resources and home to several of Africa’s largest ports, French West Africa has attracted multinational corporations such as Nestle, General Electric, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Olam, Caterpillar, Unilever, Schlumberger, Ericsson, Deloitte and several others. Attracted by the high quality of engineering, agronomy, and business education, several business leaders have described graduates as technically educated as any graduates on any continent (Le Bot & Aka, 2015; Akpess, 2017; Diomande, 2017). However, LEP is the Achilles Heel of French West African engineers and it presents a huge challenge for MNCs operating in French West Africa.

French West Africa seems to defy the hegemony of BELF. LEP is one major reason. To illustrate, the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook evaluates English proficiency as one of its 340 criteria using TOEFL scores. Magoosh (2016) reported that French West Africa ranked as the lowest of any region in the world in TOEFL scores. That includes southeast Asia, central Asia, and even countries like Haiti and Mongolia. The countries under study include Ivory Coast (60), Guinea (61), Mali (63), Senegal and Burkina Faso (64), Togo (66), and Benin and Niger (70). These TOEFL scores contrast dramatically with those of France (88), Denmark (98), and the Netherlands and Austria (100). Neeley & Kaplan (2014) reported that Japan’s TOEFL score was the lowest in the world. In 2015, Japan scored 71, higher than any of the French West African countries (Magoosh, 2016). The overall mean for TOEFL scores worldwide in 2015 was 82.² Given these scores, LEP impacts workplace communication and overall corporate operations.

² To put these low scores in perspective, Magoosh states: “Less than 80: This is generally not a good TOEFL iBT score. If you below on 80 on the TOEFL, it will be hard to get into an English language university, unless you go for

THE STUDY

The current study was conducted to ascertain workplace language use in MNCs operating in French West Africa where French is the official language of countries from Senegal to Cameroon and from Niger to Ivory Coast. Past BELF studies (Vandemeeren, 1998, 1999, for example). have focused on mixed language use within MNCs operating in Europe where English skills are much better developed than in French West Africa. In French West Africa, students in engineering, business, computer science, agronomy, and mining are educated in French; English serves as the primary first language in schools usually in classes of 40 to 60 students.³ Most do not have the opportunity to study abroad in an English-speaking country or intern in English, and many have never actually interacted with a native speaker of English.

Additionally, the study expanded workplace language use from one U.S.-owned MNC to a variety of foreign-owned MNCs headquartered throughout the world. The current study includes other industries in addition to agribusiness, the focus in Sacco (2017). The study also limited itself to French West African engineers, ignoring language use by employees in mills, plants, and factories.

The research questions involving language use in French West African operations included the following:

1. Is English the official workplace language in European, Asian, and African-owned MNCs?
2. Does mixed language use occur in the MNCs and is mixed language use permitted and tolerated?
3. If mixed language use is permitted, what percentage of the time do engineers work in English versus French?
4. Were French West African engineers interviewed in English or in French during their job interview or in a combination of both languages?
5. Given the dominance of English as the global language of business, in which language does each respondent author his or her LinkedIn account?
6. Will the respondents identify weak areas in their English? If so, what are those areas of concern?

The author contacted French West African engineers (via LinkedIn) who are employed with MNCs operating in French West Africa affiliates. The 20 MNCs included four French, three each from the US and Switzerland, two each from the Netherlands and the UK, and one each from Sweden, Norway, China, Singapore, South Africa, and Togo. The MNCs represented 13 industries among

conditional acceptance.” The minimum average score recorded on the TOEFL for students applying to U.S. colleges and universities is 66. The maximum is 105 (Papageorgiou, 2015).

³ The author observed numerous ESL classes in secondary schools in Ivory Coast. Given the large classes, most teachers focus on grammar and not on developing communication skills. This teaching philosophy contributes to low TOEFL scores.

them the digital industry, food processing, agribusiness, oil and gas, telecommunications, banking, professional services, utilities, heavy equipment, chemicals, and energy management. The number of employees in these corporations ranged from 10,000 to 335,000 and they operate worldwide ranging from six to 191 countries.⁴

Table A: Participating Multinational Corporations

MNC	Headquarters	Employees	Countries	Industry
Nestle	Switzerland	335,000	191	Food processing
GE	USA	295,000	170	Digital industry
Cargill	USA	150,000	70	Conglomerate
Unilever	Neth/UK	169,000	99	Conglomerate
Schlumberger	France	100,000	85	Oil & Gas
Shandong Kesai	China	10,000	6	Chemicals
MTN	South Africa	17,500	21	Telecommunications
Orange	France	155,200	28	Telecommunications
FrieslandCampina	Netherlands	22,000	33	Agribusiness
Schneider Electric	France	144,000	100	Energy management
Ericsson	Sweden	106,000	67	Telecommunications
AGGREKO	UK	10,000	50	Utilities
Olam	Singapore	25,000	70	Agribusiness
Barry Callebaut	Switzerland	10,000	30	Agribusiness
Société Générale	France	145,000	66	Financial/banking
Louis Dreyfus	Switzerland	21,000	100	Agribusiness
Yara Int'l	Norway	13,000	50	Chemicals
Deloitte	UK	264,000	150	Professional services
Caterpillar	USA	98,400	43	Heavy equipment

The survey was limited to four questions from which written responses were elicited:

1. Is English the official language of your corporation?
2. In your current position what percentage of the time do you and your coworkers speak English vs. French at your workplace?
3. During your job interview, were you interviewed in French, in English or both?
4. Do you see any English weaknesses French West African universities should be addressing?

The author verified language use in each respondent's LinkedIn account and asked follow-up questions to key respondents.

⁴The author conducted this study during his tenure as a visiting professor and consultant at the *Institut national polytechnique Félix Houphouët-Boigny* (INP-HB) in Ivory Coast.

Job titles of the managers surveyed reflected a range from interns and lower-level management (field technician) to upper-level management (country managers and directors of human resources). They include a cocoa value chain coordinator, quality assurance supervisor, senior marketing manager, regional marketing head, head of field service operations, and health, environment and safety engineer. Of the 66 managers and executives surveyed, 56 were men, 10 were women.

Twenty multinational corporations participated in the survey. The distribution of respondents per MNC include Unilever (8), Olam (6), Barry Callebaut (5), MTN (5), General Electric (4), Nestle (4), Schneider Electric (4), Cargill (4), Yara International (3), Ericsson (3), Orange (3), Société Générale (3), Schlumberger (3), Louis Dreyfus (3), DHL (2), Aggreko (2), FrieslandCampina (2), Caterpillar (1), Deloitte (1) and Shandong Kesai (1). Respondents currently work in five French West African countries: Ivory Coast, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. Few potential respondents chose not to participate in the survey.

FINDINGS

Question 1 asked whether English is the official language of the respondent's corporation. Eighty-five percent of respondents identified English as their corporation's lingua franca. These corporations include General Electric, Nestle, Deloitte, Olam, Cargill, Caterpillar, Unilever, Schlumberger, Aggreko, Ericsson, DHL, MTN, Shandong Kesai and FrieslandCampina. Only three MNCs however, Orange, Schneider Electric, and Société Générale, which are French-owned corporations, identified French as their lingua franca. Respondents for the three Swiss-owned companies (Nestle, Barry Callebaut, and Louis Dreyfus), where French is heavily spoken, identified English as their lingua franca. One MNC, Chinese-owned Shandong Kesai, encourages workers to speak the native language in each of the six countries where their plants are located, but English is the official language used in global communications.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the study is Question 2. It surveyed the percentage of time French West African engineers spend speaking English vs. French in their workplace. In seven MNCs, engineers spend more time speaking English than French with bosses and coworkers. These MNCs include Ericsson (at 74%), Nestle, Schlumberger, and Caterpillar (each at 70%), Unilever (at 68%), FrieslandCampina (at 60%) and Aggreko (at 50%). Conversely, in 10 MNCs French West African engineers speak more French than English with bosses and coworkers. French dominance as the workplace language is not unexpected for MNCs like Orange, Louis Dreyfus, Schneider Electric, Barry Callebaut and Société Générale, but it is for MNCs such as GE, Yara International (a Norwegian MNC), MTN (a South African MNC), and Olam (headquartered in Singapore).

Despite, the dominance of French in some MNC workplaces, all respondents report the use of English with global teams and all emphasize the importance of English as a prerequisite for employment and promotion. *"Ivoriens generally speak to each other in French while they speak English to non-French speakers,"* one respondent noted. Another (a Deloitte engineer) noted even more succinctly: *"You must speak English if not no Deloitte."*

Table B: Percentage of Time Speaking English Versus French

MNC (Headquarters)	English	French
1. Ericsson (Sweden)	74%	26%
2. Nestle (Switzerland)	70%	30%
3. Schlumberger (France)	70%	30%
4. Caterpillar (USA)	70%	30%
5. Unilever (Neth/UK)	68%	32%
6. FrieslandCampina (Neth)	60%	40%
7. Aggreko (UK)	50%	50%
8. GE (USA)	45%	55%
9. Louis Dreyfus (Switz)	37%	63%
10. Olam (Singapore)	33%	67%
11. Yara Int'l (Norway)	30%	70%
12. MTN (South Africa)	23%	77%
13. Orange (France)	16%	84%
14. Schneider Electric (France)	16%	84%
15. Barry Callebaut (Switz)	13%	87%
16. Société Générale (France)	10%	90%
17. DHL	5%	95%

Insufficient data from Cargill, Shandong, Deloitte

Question 3 asked respondents if their job interview was conducted in French, in English or in both languages. Sixty percent responded that their job interview was conducted in both English and French; 28% were interviewed only in English and 12% only in French.

Question 4 addressed the weaknesses in nonnative employees' English skills, and the recommendations for ESL instruction at French West African universities. Responses were uniform. For writing, the respondents identified all working documents such as emails, proposals, reports and the development of PowerPoint presentations. Additionally, they identified speaking as a weak area involving activities such as local meetings and international videoconferences where French-speakers have to present proposals, negotiate and defend positions. Examples include the following:

“Yes, some weaknesses in technical English & report writing. We are usually using network for this & doing a lot of mystake!”

“PowerPoint and presentation skills should be a focus. Before that, of course social English is also key. So that, student will get confidence and have less fear in having a conversation/meeting in English.”

One MNC's Director of Human Resources in Ivory Coast revealed:

“We are happy with our engineers’ technical skills but not with their ability to work in English. Particularly, the listening comprehension skills of our team are weak. Participating in videoconferences is critical . . .”

It was noteworthy to reveal which language respondents used for their LinkedIn sites. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents selected English as their LinkedIn language versus 35% in French. In English-dominant MNCs, French West Africans generally authored their LinkedIn site in English. These include Cargill, Unilever, Ericsson, Aggreko, MTN, Yara International, and Caterpillar. However, there were two exceptions with workers at GE and Olam where half of the respondents used English and half used French. Unexpectedly, respondents at Orange (an official French lingua franca MNC), all three respondents used English. Respondents in French and Swiss-owned companies such as Nestle, Barry Callebaut, Louis Dreyfus, Schlumberger, and Schneider Electric generally authored their LinkedIn site in French.

Table C: LinkedIn Sites	In English	In French
Olam	3	3
Orange	3	0
Unilever	6	1
GE	2	2
Ericsson	3	0
Schneider Electric	1	3
Aggreko	2	0
Barry Callebaut	3	2
MTN	4	1
DHL	1	1
Société Générale	1	2
Schlumberger	1	2
Nestle	0	4
Louis Dreyfus	1	2
Yara International	2	1
Cargill	3	1
Shandong Kesai	1	0
FrieslandCampina	2	0
Deloitte	0	1
Caterpillar	1	0
Total	40	26

DISCUSSION

The Dominance of English and Multilingual Franca

English is the official language of nearly every MNCs in French West Africa regardless of the nationality of the MNC. One would assume that English serves as the official language of U.S. multinational corporations operating in French West Africa and the results of the study confirm this assumption. Moreover, English is also the official workplace language in nearly every European, Asian, and African-owned MNC. Respondents reported that exclusive English use occurs between global teams 100 percent of the time. Videoconferences, proposals, PowerPoint presentations and all written communication between global teams take place in English. English is highly valued in all the MNCs operating in French West Africa and few engineers and technicians are hired without possessing at least A2 skills. General Electric, for one, will send some newly hired employees to Ghana for intensive English language study.

English may be the official language of nearly every MNCs in French West Africa, but no MNC requires engineers to work exclusively in English and there is no mandate to do so. Mixed language use occurs in the MNCs permitting the use of French and English. This revelation confirms the findings of mixed language use at GAI worldwide where nonnative English speaking engineers communicate with colleagues in their native language regardless of country and continent. Job interviews within the 20 MNCs generally reflects the tolerance of mixed language use. The majority of MNCs interview job candidates in both English and French. Only 40% either interviewed only in French or in English. In the context of a *multilingual franca* workplace, French is used among French speakers for general communication, socializing, brainstorming, proposal generation, and problem solving. Amadou D., the country manager for DHL in Niger, admits: “*Yes English is the official language of DHL, but speaking French is condoned when interacting with French speaking colleagues.*”

Working in one’s native language in French West Africa is efficient and less fatiguing. It allows workers to put their best foot forward without the pressure of fluency in English. The use of a common mother tongue creates and maintains interpersonal relationships and knowledge exchange (Frederikkson et al. 2006). Forcing all employees to work in English would short circuit their engineering and business skills. Few French West Africans, given the findings in Magoosh (2016) and the current study, could work in English exclusively.

In the MNCs like Unilever where English is the dominant language even in French West Africa (60% English-40% French), many engineers are sent to English-speaking affiliates or participate in Unilever’s three-year Future Leaders Programme, which is taught in English. For example, after studying abroad for six months in the UK and the US, Youssouf B. worked for Unilever in India for seven months before completing the Future Leaders Programme.

In French West Africa, Unilever also employs native speaking English executives, which leads to more English use. Despite these factors, respondents claimed that they still speak French 40% of the time. General Electric parallels Unilever’s overseas placement patterns. One respondent working in Ivory Coast works daily with native English speakers and French West Africans who have had numerous assignments in English-speaking countries. Though one of the best English

speakers of the recently graduated engineers in Ivory Coast, the respondent, a B1 English speaker, claims that compared to his colleagues, his English ranks in the lower 20th percentile.

English plays an important role for MNCs that identified French as their official language. Even though their job interviews were conducted only in French, all reported that English is an important skill required of all job applicants. One respondent, who works for Orange, the French telecommunications corporation noted: “French is the official language, but English is used in meetings, conference calls, report writing, and PowerPoint presentations.

Language Deficiencies

Nearly all respondents pointed to weaknesses in two of the four skills: speaking and writing. Reading comprehension was not cited by any of the respondents. Nor was listening comprehension. However, Cargill’s Director of Human Resources in Ivory Coast, an Ivorian educated at Georgia Tech, pointed out significant problems with listening comprehension, which is critical to successful participation in videoconferences and face-to-face interactions with native English-speaking colleagues (Akpey, 2017). At Cargill, job interviews entail face-to-face interaction in addition to interviews via videoconferencing. Interviewees face a variety of accents, some native and some nonnative as they face once they are hired. One university in Ivory Coast has no US or UK ESL professors, limiting students to ESL instructors from Ghana and Ivory Coast. To illustrate, one engineering student at the technical institute in Ivory Coast asked the author if he were from London even though he speaks with a thick Chicago accent. Executives from Cargill and General Electric both noted that French West African engineers possess excellent technical skills, but their workplace English skills were mostly deficient.

Language deficiencies was the theme of a report conducted jointly by the French and Ivorian governments in 2015. The two governments sponsored a survey to identify the needs and expectations of key companies and institutions in Ivory Coast in terms of training engineers and senior technicians. The focus of the study was Ivory Coast’s leading polytechnic institute, one of the best universities in French West African. Seven companies (including two multinational corporations) and five business associations (including three chambers of commerce) participated in the survey. Insufficient English skills ranked near the top of concerns for both the businesses and associations. The commission’s report stated in its overall assessment that . . .

The teaching of English needs to be strengthened. The level of English is insufficient to practice trades offered by Ivorian companies. The activity of these is often turned towards the international as well at the regional level. Relationships with customers, suppliers and internal business relations require fluency in English. Many alumni have told us that they have suffered from a low level of English after school. If fluency in reading is often correct, the oral practice should be the subject of a special effort. (p.8)

One multinational corporation elaborated on the skills needed for success using both English and French:

It is necessary to develop the capacity to lead a team, to motivate it, to be able to convince, to defend its ideas, to organize, to demonstrate methodology, to know how to manage a planning and to pilot a project. The Institute's engineers are considered deficient in oral and written communication. (p.20).

Most respondents wished their French West African universities had better prepared them for working in multinational corporations where English is the dominant workplace language. Most called for more oral and writing practice; most pointed to a focus on creating PowerPoint presentations and making oral presentations in class; many asked for affordable study-abroad opportunities; one respondent wished that his engineering classes had been taught in English:

"I think that some technical program like thermal transfert have to be in English."

In the near future, it will be difficult to implement the advice suggested from respondents. Their ESL courses from elementary school to the university are crammed with 40 to 60 students in small classrooms where three students share a block desk designed for two students. Large classes make oral and written communication or a focus on ESP or workplace language instruction virtually impossible. High school and university students that the author interviewed during his three-month stay in Ivory Coast could only complete simple communicative tasks; one PhD candidate could describe his family, for example, but could not describe his research field—a field that a multinational corporation will expect him to show fluency in.

CONCLUSION

"Englishnization," the "all English all the time" mandate coined by Rakuten's CEO Hiroshi Mikitani, is far from taking root within MNCs in French West Africa. English, however, is the dominant language of multinational corporations operating in French West Africa and English will continue to stand atop the pedestal of workplace languages. Even when French is the official language of certain MNCs like Orange, Société Générale, French West African engineers will not get hired without some level of English. Given the data provided by respondents, they expect that English will grow in importance and corporation expectations will require more sophisticated workplace language skills.

Mixed language use is not going away any time soon in French West Africa. Speaking French in the workplace is condoned and there is no sense from respondents that the policy will change in the near future. There is no movement among the MNCs in the current study to eliminate the use of French, unlike Mikitani's mandate or Spanish at GAI as described in Sacco (2017). Enhancing global performance via stronger English skills seems to be the primary concern of MNCs operating in French West Africa. Speaking French within MNCs allows native French speakers to work in their dominant language and relieves the pressure of working in English. Socialization is another reason as the respondents are living and working in a French-speaking country. "One cannot ask a French speaker to give up speaking French to another French speaker, even at work," responded a business leader in Ivory Coast (Kouassi, 2018). Lack of confidence in their English skills is yet another reason mentioned by an Ivorian ESL professor who has had decades of experience teaching

engineering graduates who now work for MNCs throughout French West Africa (Etrin-Ehoussou, 2018).⁵

Respondents in the present study pointed out their English-language weaknesses which parallel the findings in Magoosh (2016). There is a significant gap between the expectations of MNCs and the English skill levels of French West Africans graduates. Although the author did not officially test the CEFR ratings of the 66 respondents, we do have some inkling of their English levels. Students at INP-HB in Ivory Coast averaged between A2 - Elementary English to B1- Intermediate English (Sacco, 2019).⁶ The French West African nations who averaged between 61 and 70 on the TOEFL iBT (Magoosh, 2016) places them at B1 – Intermediate English. A B1 rating is far from workplace proficiency. Cambridge English (2016), in citing data from over 3,000 corporations worldwide, reports that nearly 50% of corporations require *advanced to native ability* in English. That translates to C1 – Advanced English and C2 – Proficiency English. The current difference between A2/B1 and C1/C2 is huge.

Narrowing the gap will require a partnership between MNCs and institutions of higher education (IHEs). IHEs must better understand the English needs of the MNCs and MNCs must help fund IHEs to strengthen language and culture instruction. GE, for example, recently funded The GE Center for Global English, a \$70,000 contribution to strengthen the language resource center at INP-HB in Ivory Coast. Respondents in the current study provided specific recommendations, calling for a more realistic ESL curriculum that mirrors the tasks they do in the workplace. They prefer simulation communicative activities such as:

- Participating in mock job interviews,
- Designing and executing PowerPoint presentations,
- Role playing in mock videoconferences,
- Writing memos, proposals and reports,
- Defending proposals and reports, and
- Giving oral presentations.

Both MNCs representatives and respondents would like to see engineering, agronomy, IT, and business courses taught in English as is the practice of more and more European professional schools. Content-based instruction in English would provide the technical lexicon and discourse needed to work in a global context and CBI would add hundreds of hours of English immersion. Sacco (2019) describes a scenario one French West African university hopes to implement to narrow the gap. It includes . . .

1. Five completed engineering, agronomy or business courses taught in English;
2. One required month-long immersion study-abroad program in Ghana, the U.K. or the U.S.
3. One required 10-week summer internship in English with a multinational corporation
4. Passing the Cambridge English B2 Vantage Exam.

⁵ Known in French as “le complexe,” the “complex” refers to a French West African’s lack of confidence in speaking English, the fear of making mistakes, of looking foolish with one’s interlocutor.

⁶ INP-HB, one of the top polytechnics in French West Africa, will soon impose an English-language graduation requirement at Cambridge English B2 Vantage with a future requirement at C1 – Advanced English by 2025 (Siaka, 2018).

As for MNCs, Neeley & Kaplan (2014) recommend the development of a language strategy which is critical to manage their NNSE employees. The author's discussions with senior officials and survey respondents indicate that there seems to be no formal language strategy, at least in French West African locations. Interviews take place in house, except for Unilever and Cargill which require interviews via global videoconferencing. No MNC uses Neeley & Kaplan's 360-degree evaluation of job candidates, which solicits feedback from all stakeholders: subordinates, peers, supervisors, and clients. Language training is hit or miss. Few of the respondents participated in language and cultural training.

The current study focused on French West African engineers and their reporting of workplace language use. The next study might use a top-down approach focusing on HR directors and senior managers of the MNCs surveyed in the present study. What is MNC's official language policy? What is their MNC's language level expectations? What are their employees actual English-language levels? What is their perception of employee performance in English? Is remedial language training available? What impact does LEP have on global operations? Is there a relationship with feeder universities to address LEP? What are their future challenges in terms of language use? Is the MNC considering Englishnization as a mandate? And the roles and impact of native language use in both French and English need to be acknowledged and researched.

Despite the multilingual franca atmosphere, the current study sheds no light on the sociocultural impact of French West Africans using English with colleagues in other countries. Future studies will determine if the findings of BELF researchers apply to French West African engineers. Using a "bottom-up approach" (Kingsley, 2013; Radley, 2016) to better understand the linguistic and social challenges (Lønsmann, 2014) and the pressures on employees' language practices, both English and French, would be profitable.

Finally, strengthening professional English skills will make French West African engineers more globally competitive, but the key question is whether they will stop speaking French to each other as their English levels rise. Will the multilingual franca phenomenon end in French West Africa? Will employees adopt the "all English all the time" mandate of Englishnization? The author recently queried a business leader in Ivory Coast. His answer? "Come back to Africa and see for yourself" (Kouassi, 2018).

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