

Fluent speakers of a firm's corporate language are seen as higher status within teams

Many international firms have an official language to solve communication headaches, but it can sideline contributions from less-fluent employees.



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The benefits of learning a foreign language are often touted for improving cognition as well

as career prospects. But knowing a language isn't an on-off switch. There are different degrees of fluency and different psychological effects to speaking with others who might know the language better than or not as well as you do.

Anyone who has ever learned a foreign language has likely, at some point, experienced being the worst communicator in an audience of peers, unable to express ideas clearly. Many will have also experienced having the highest fluency, speaking so proficiently that the ideas *sound* good, regardless of whether they *are* good. In the workplace, and particularly in multinational teams, there can be real knock-on effects to how well team members can express themselves in the corporate tongue.

How official corporate language fluency and status relate

People are granted status by peers based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, social class, appearance, skills, experience and language proficiency.

When an organization has a corporate language — often English — fluency can confer status and informal influence on team members.

IESE's [Sebastian Reiche](#), with Felipe A. Guzman of IESEG School of Management, looked at the role of [fluency among non-native language speakers](#) in a paper published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. They found that team members with a better command of the official corporate language acquired informal influence as their less-fluent peers granted them special status. The more proficient members were likely to speak up more frequently and emerge as leaders.

Reiche and Guzman looked at self-managed teams, where structure and hierarchy play less of a role, to examine what language fluency does to status and influence. They also compared non-native speakers among themselves, rather than comparing native with non-native speakers.

They then tested a model where an informal hierarchy was established, with language fluency begetting informal influence by means of status. Noticeable fluency differences become cues for less-fluent colleagues to grant status to those who speak the corporate language better, as their communication abilities are seen to represent the team best.

Influential voices, three studies

Informal influence is important in reaching organizational goals. It's also generally a normal and even desirable team function, bringing to light key ideas and insights.

In a series of studies with business school students, and later with German-English bilinguals and with native/non-native Spanish speakers, the authors looked at the relationship between fluency and different indicators of informal influence, such as voice behavior.

"Voice is a behavior that focuses on expressing constructive ideas or opinions to challenge the status quo," says Reiche. "High-status group members can use voice to influence their team. We expected fluent (aka high-status) team members to use voice behavior more often, and for teams to have the expectation that such members ought to speak up."

Their studies confirmed that fluency in the corporation's official language was a factor in assigning status to team members. This status was then used to exert informal influence using voice behavior. It was also tied to them being seen as more leader-like.

Put simply, fluency in the corporate language gives some team members a leg up, designating them as informal leaders and spokespeople.

This intersects with recent research from [Yih-Teen Lee](#) suggesting that people from [high-status nationalities are more likely to be considered "leadership material."](#)

Different lingua franca, different behaviors

An important nuance also emerged on the role of fluency in different organizational contexts.

In highly international teams where the official corporate language is the lingua franca and spoken by all staff daily, proficiency has less impact on status. Such teams are not constantly code-switching, and all members are required to speak up. Attitudes to language mistakes are more forgiving.

Conversely, environments dominated by one nationality, where the local tongue is the lingua franca, are more competitive. In these teams, individuals who are more fluent in the corporate language are more likely to receive status and emerge as informal leaders.

Listening for insight in less obvious places

For those who might be the not-totally-fluent member of their team, the authors recommend being proactive in discussions to avoid being sidelined, even if this means asking for language training support.

“HR managers need to be receptive to these requests,” says Reiche. “Team members should be patient with less-fluent coworkers and also implement formal mechanisms to include their ideas.”

Across the board, we need to remember that good speaking skills don’t always result in speaking with substance. It’s easy to be biased in favor of someone who presents their ideas well — but in functional teams, all voices should be taken into account.

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