

**A Report on the Relevance of Language Barriers to Work Based
Learning/Employer Engagement.**

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report attempts to provide a survey of where language barriers have been identified as problematic in employer engagement and work based learning (WBL) initiatives. In addition, it will identify relevant issues and debates in sociolinguistic studies.
- 1.2. The intention is to explore the current issues and ideas relating to practice and to link these to existing theories of language in professional contexts.
- 1.3. It is also an attempt to identify some possible solutions and to suggest further research pathways that may yield outcome.

2. Summary of Findings

- 2.1. On the following pages there is a more detailed description of the findings. This section identifies the general themes.
- 2.2. The issue of language barriers in the context of employer engagement and WBL is identified as a key factor in a number of recent reports on the matter.
- 2.3. There are also a number of suggested strategies and solutions highlighted that may help to overcome the problem of language barriers.
- 2.4. There are a significant amount of socio-linguistic theories and debates concerning language and 'discourse communities', some of which relate specifically to occupation and some of which relate to cultures within education.

2.5. Although language barriers are identified as problematic, there is not a coherent and proven strategy to overcome such a problem across networks.

2.6. There are some potential solutions which may be worth following up in more detailed research.

3. Reports where language barriers are identified

3.1. Work-based learning: illuminating the higher education

landscape.

Iain Nixon, Kevyn Smith, Rob Stafford, Steve Camm (June 2006, The Higher Education Academy)

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/wbl_illuminating.pdf

This report offers a summary of the current state of HE and WBL and is based on a study carried out by the Higher Education Academy.

3.2. On language barriers

The report notes that *'everyone has a view on what work-based learning means and they use a wide range of terms interchangeably (e.g. workplace learning, work-related learning, vocational learning). This all goes to confuse the situation and undervalue the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. It is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an institution's and employer's perspective, irrespective of the terms used. This will be the first step in establishing a common language.'*

The report goes on to note *'Overcoming cultural differences and language barriers to establish a shared strategic intent will require substantial time and effort on both sides. Additional resources will be required.'*

3.3. Higher Education and the Workplace – supporting employer engagement in engineering and physical science.

Richard Dales and Carol Arlett (June 2008, The Higher Education Academy)

hca.ltsn.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/events/conference/2008/Richard_Dales.doc

3.4. This report stems from the 'Engage' project; an initiative led by the HE Academy Engineering Subject Centre (EngSC) under the banner *Facilitating Dialogue between Employers and Engineering, Physical Sciences and Materials Academics in Higher Education*.

3.5. On language barriers.

Several points emerged from partnership meetings regarding language. The report states '***The playing field is a 'muddy' and complex one with a wide range of stakeholders all having an interest in the agenda; it is not always clear what the role and contribution of these stakeholders are and this makes partnership working difficult.***

In addition a key point to emerge from the project is that '***Education has been slow to respond to the needs of the employers and the language used can be mystifying. These are challenges as well as being real opportunities for HE. Flexible responsiveness seems to be key.***

3.6. Exploring Employers' Perceptions of Employer Engagement

Maria Hughes and Barry Smeaton (2007, The Learning and Skills Development Agency)

http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/docs/lisn_employer_engagement.pdf

3.7 This report brings together findings from LSDA research projects on employer engagement, exploring a range of issues and focusing on the perspective of employers. A number of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and Business Development Units (BDUs) were involved in the project and were encouraged to assess their own participation in the process.

3.8. On language barriers

The report states that when providing training ***‘The language used is not always comprehensible. In larger companies staff may be familiar with jargon, but not necessarily staff in small firms.’***

The LSDA produced a framework for responsiveness which indicated what colleges needed to do to improve their employer-facing work in relation to the principles of responsiveness. The colleges then undertook a self-assessment of their provision to assess the extent to which it met the principles of responsiveness. The self-assessment process was undertaken in a common format, based on the framework of responsiveness.

One of the key issues of the framework used to gauge the success of an employer and provider engagement is that ***‘Jargon-free language is used.’***

Some of the feedback from colleges on the use of jargon-free language included the following statements:

“A constant difficulty in education!”

“When specialists are brought into the enquiry loop, jargon is inevitable and there have been examples of this occurring, especially between training staff and engineers.”

“Some staff have a tendency to use technical language inappropriately and this acts as a barrier to communication.”

“Technological subjects involve jargon and therefore it is impossible to avoid its inclusion.”

3.9. Linking Professional Associations with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Relation to the Provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Professor Andy Friedman and Christina Williams with Sarah-Louise Hopkins and Lowri Jackson (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills March 2008)

<http://www.parnglobal.com/uploads/files/23.03>

3.10. This project, undertaken by the Professional Association Research Network (PARN) aims to encourage mutually beneficial links in terms of better communication and understanding as well as joint working between professional bodies and higher education institutions (HEIs) and other education and training suppliers in relation to CPD.

The project holders used two surveys, one for professional bodies and one for HEIs, along with 26 case study interviews of professional bodies.

3.11. On language barriers

The project takes into account some existing research in order to set out a valuable survey of the current landscape on the issue of employer engagement where yet again language barriers are seen as key.

Observations include:

“Parties in the market need to consider the language around CPD, the different understandings of its uses and its various permutations into ‘professional development’, or ‘executive training’ in order to build successful partnerships.”

Specifically on the issue of CPD and the ways in which it is packaged for employers, the writers notice an interesting tension regarding commercial and academic language-

‘What is interesting here is that the motivation for deciding content of the courses is very much explicitly decided to be market driven as opposed to product driven. The emphasis is on what will give most added value for the employer. This is a very commercial approach to course development and the perception of educational value. The language used here is very commercial, even the use of ‘value added’ as a learning outcome is a phrase that would be unheard of in ‘university’ speak. In comparison, HEI promotional material tends to focus on the quality of the product they are offering, rather than contextualising it in the market or responding to market needs. City of Bath College, on the

other hand, are “...not selling qualifications but selling business solutions”.

Some common concerns about language use are identified and are also applicable as a summary of the opinions of the other reports taken into account.

It states ***‘Speaking the same language is crucial to successful relationships between HEIs and professional bodies. It was often noted in the professional body interviews that professional bodies, commercial suppliers and HEIs are using a bewildering array of different terminologies.’***

Two interesting points also emerge from interviews.

- a) Some of the more successful working relationships between professional bodies and HEIs took place when those managing the relationship had academic backgrounds and could speak to providers using academic language in a brokerage scenario (which will be explored in more detail later in this report).
- b) Some professional bodies felt that they may have to prove their credibility and academic rigour when dealing with academics. This could include the perceived need for the use of an **‘academic register’** in exchanges between participants. From this, it is reasonable to surmise that this is a two way street and that academics may feel that they need to prove their professional credentials and to those who have job savvy.

4. Some Existing Strategies

4.1. Networking

PARN states the following:

‘Events, committees, or online industry forums are all mechanisms for bringing all of the parties together to discuss and understand each other’s perceptions and needs and to begin to develop a shared language. Even something as simple as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting’s ‘International Calendar of Events’ on their website can bring together a variety of players and inform each other of what is happening.’

4.2. Brokerage

A Summary of Reports on Work-Based Learning/Employer Engagement.

James Chappell (Linking London Lifelong Learning Network, 2007)

<http://www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/docs/Work-based%20learning%20%20employer%20engagement%20report.pdf>

James Chappell suggests that an organisation such as Linking London could mediate between HEIs and employers in order to negotiate the cultural and language barriers that may be present. He recommends that:

‘This could help facilitate a coherent offer from the network to employers. A brokerage service could also operate as one, client focused, point of contact for employers and address issues such as the perceived language and cultural barriers between education and work.’

4.3. Common Language

Existing systems such as the National Occupational Standards (NOS) provide a potential model for using a common language which links industries, sectors

or occupations in order to facilitate successful communication. This is an example of how sector skills councils (SSCs) employers and standard setting bodies can work in partnership to agree a language appropriate for good practice.

However the challenges involved in taking this model and applying it to the multitude of knowledge bases involved in HEIs and occupational settings is vast. Nonetheless, there may be lessons to be learned from such strategies that can be adapted to the employer engagement process.

5. Language Issues and Debates

5.1. *The Language of Work*. Almut Koester (London: Routledge. 2004)

Koester identifies the concept of **discourse communities**; which in this context relates to workplace areas where specific language is used as a part of an **occupational dialect**. This includes the use of **specialist lexis** or **field specific semantic fields** where a shared vocabulary is used by those 'in the know.'

Koester writes, '***people working together in the same organization or field have mechanisms of intercommunication and use professional genres and specialist lexis. Linguists refer to such professional groups as discourse communities in order to emphasize the important role that language plays in their constitution.***' (15)

5.2. *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. Vijay K Bhatia (London: Longman. 1993)

Bhatia focuses on the issue of genre, specific 'types' of language interactions used in specific contexts (e.g. memos, interviews, diagnosis etc) that exist in workplace situations.

Bhatia quotes Swales when identifying the concept of genre: ***'it is a recognisable communicative event characterized by a set of communicated purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognizable purpose (s).'*** (13)

Tension may arise when those familiar with a particular genre interact on a professional basis with those familiar with another, the outcome being the impression that the participants speak a different language. In a scenario where members of different discourse communities claim expertise on a shared subject, barriers occur.

5.3. *Language, Society and Power*. Linda Thomas, et al. (London: Routledge, 1999)

This text focuses on the issue of power in language interactions and in particular the ways in which language can be used to promote or undermine particular **ideological standpoints**. The authors note that in work based discourse communities, the attitudes and values of the profession are promoted in the occupational dialect.

‘The resources of each language allow for different discourses, which can reflect and reinforce the ideology of the groups they are used by....socially powerful groups can use language to perpetuate their ideologies. Because we do not always interrogate language use, assuming it instead to be a ‘natural, obvious’ medium of representation, we can become normalised to the ideological perspectives that discourses encode, seeing them instead as ‘common sense’. (33)

When cultures that have different values and ideologies meet, there can occur a culture clash and one of the main ways this can be seen is in a breakdown in communication.

This is relevant to an extract from a professional body interview undertaken by PARN:

“I think the other thing is you’d also have to re-think, again it’s the jargon. Enterprise, innovation, entrepreneurship. They mean things in universities. I’m not sure they mean exactly the same thing in the commercial world and sometimes I think universities get hooked up on an academic appreciation of terms where they should be looking at,

‘alright, who’s our major competitive provider? what are they calling themselves?’, and very often it’s surprising. It’s nothing that you would expect a university labelling to be ...”

5.4. *Language and Society*. M.A.K. Halliday (London: Continuum, 2007)

This study looks at the issue of **pragmatics** in language, that is, the at times unspoken codes connected to language use. Halliday highlights the ‘codes’ of language. These are the complex and subtle ways in which language users position themselves when speaking or writing. He writes ***‘codes are different patterns and habits of speech adopted by speakers of the same language as a result of sub-cultural variation.’*** (236) Bernstein states that although these codes do not have any particular value in themselves, society assigns value to them: ***‘clearly, one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibility. Society, however, may place difference on the orders of experience elicited...through the different coding systems.’*** (237)

If complex terminology and jargon (be it professional or academic) is viewed as being higher in a language hierarchy then those who do not possess or use such jargon may feel alienated from its speakers and as a result become an unwilling participants in an interaction. This is further emphasised in a scenario where one participant seeks to instruct another on an area of their own expertise (teaching grannies to suck eggs).

5.5. 'Unpacking Academic Discourse.' *Discourse Processes*. Kris D. Gutierrez (Vol 19. Number 1, 1995)

This article suggests that education is not a simple exchange of information for learning, but a way in which a certain type of 'studious' behaviour is promoted. Gutierrez states that academic discourse privileges language 'competence' above other skills and that '**competence in...society is illustrated by one's ability to interact in culturally appropriate ways with other members of society who are already competent**'. (28) As such, there is the danger that academics expect others not only to show knowledge, but to show it in a certain way which bends to the academies values which in turn positions the academic higher in the pecking order. Imagine a situation where a training programme doesn't value the fact that a trainee can demonstrate knowledge but only their ability to communicate in a certain manner regardless of its practical worth to the learner. The complaint that CPD etc simply asks participants to 'jump through hoops' is common to many.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

6.1. Technology

6.2. *The future size and shape of the higher education sector in the UK: threats and opportunities.*

Nigel Brown et al. (Universities UK, 2008)

http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/Size_and_shape2.pdf

This comprehensive report defines three scenarios which could occur in the HE sector over the coming decades. One of the things that unite all three is the expected proliferation of technology in education. One scenario predicts

that ***‘Serious and continued investment in digital learning systems and wireless technology allows an increase in the scale and reach of higher education programmes and provides 24/7/365 opportunities for learning at this level. The scale of operation and the ability for students and teachers to communicate remotely significantly reduces unit delivery costs, making higher education more affordable to students who have to meet the cost of their own fees.’***

The use of technology as a communicative tool could have a serious impact on language barriers. For example, academics and professionals could engage with one another over a computer mediated programme of study where the technology itself acts as a broker which employs a common language accessible to all participants and which does not privilege one discourse community over another.

The use of technology as a leveller in terms of communication it certainly worth considering and further research into the matter is suggested.

6.3. Internal Sub-Divisions

6.4. *Other Floors, Other Voices: A Textography of a Small University Building.*

John M. Swales (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998)

In this ‘textography’ Swales examines the discourse community of a small American university. His findings reveal that within this setting, rather than seeing one coherent discourse or occupational dialect, many sub-discourse communities are evident. He asks **‘is a university a discourse community, or rather a college, or only a department, or only a specialization within a department?’** (21) Many of the reports encountered during this research

identify the communication barriers between employers and HEIs and others providers, but few identify language between and within HEIs, colleges and departments, not to mention HR departments, managers and staff. It may be that language barriers are far more widespread and limiting than initially anticipated.

6.5. Flexibility

6.6. The PARN report suggests some potentially fruitful ways of approaching language barriers.

It was suggested that professional bodies also needed to take a strategic approach and assess carefully what they wanted out of relationships, and build on existing relationships. One group suggested that professional bodies needed to “adopt a fair and general approach to HEIs in general e.g. in badging provision”. To do so, they need to take into consideration the difficult and complex attitudes around badging and accreditation and avoid bureaucracy where it is not necessary. They ask: “Could a QE rather than a QA approach be more helpful?” One group offers an interesting suggestion for networking, breaking down language barriers, and more cohesive potential: “Consider usefulness of volunteers who come from HEI background and offer career breaks”.

This level of diversification and flexibility towards employer engagement which places a burden of responsibility on both professional body and the provider could expand the concept of the relationship as more of a dialogue rather than a deal and could have significant impact on the communicative effectiveness of the exchange.

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