

## **The use of the English language in transnational corporations: the case of a wood industry of national capital**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to discuss the role carried out by the English language in the process of innovation and knowledge production in transnational corporations, in the globalized society. It is a case study that focuses a big Brazilian company, of capital 100% national, acting in the industrialization, improvement and commercialization in the wood branch, in Ponta Grossa city, Paraná-BR. The information about the company was collected from the Department of Human Resources, and the results showed that the positions of the high step demand an advanced and fluent knowledge of the English language, whereas the other steps, even the lower ones, use the language in level of technical knowledge in the daily activities. It was concluded that, even being a company of national capital, the English language is takes part in the performance of everyday activities.*

*Key words: English Language, Globalized Society, Company of National Capital*

### **1. Introduction**

The world went through deep transformations in the economical and social system. The society today is called “the knowledge society” or “the society of the human capital” (CRAWFORD, 1994). For Ianni (1996) it is “the globalism era”, and for Lastres (2001), it is “the knowledge era”. Due to the coming of the Industrial Revolution there was a technological explosion; in the knowledge society this process occurs in way even more accelerated.

The scientific information is put on the market with great speed, and mainly through digital mechanisms. New knowledge and consequent technological innovations are generated starting from this information. The language used by the digital mechanisms is the English language.

This article discusses the role carried out by the English language in the context of the globalization, in the process of transformation of the information in knowledge and the spreading of the latter by transnational companies. A case study of a company is presented, with the purpose of illustrating the way this language is used in a Brazilian company of capital 100% national.

For the case study, five forms were elaborated where each of them requested numeric data, according to position and department, regarding the following topics: 1) number of employees; 2) necessary knowledge of the English language; 3) form of acquisition of the knowledge; 4) use of the English language in the daily activities; and 5) financial incentives offered to the employees. Those collected data were later worked by the author, making

possible a quantitative analysis of the situation of the idiom in the several steps of all the departments of the company.

## 2. English language, Information and Knowledge

The economy based on knowledge is one of processing of information, and uses technology and telecommunications to produce and diffuse it. For Crawford (1994), the scientific research, the education, the ownership of the information, and the knowledge are the base of the wealth generation.

The information is the principal resource for the production of knowledge. That resource, in its “raw state”, appears firstly codified mostly in English. This process can be illustrated in the following way:

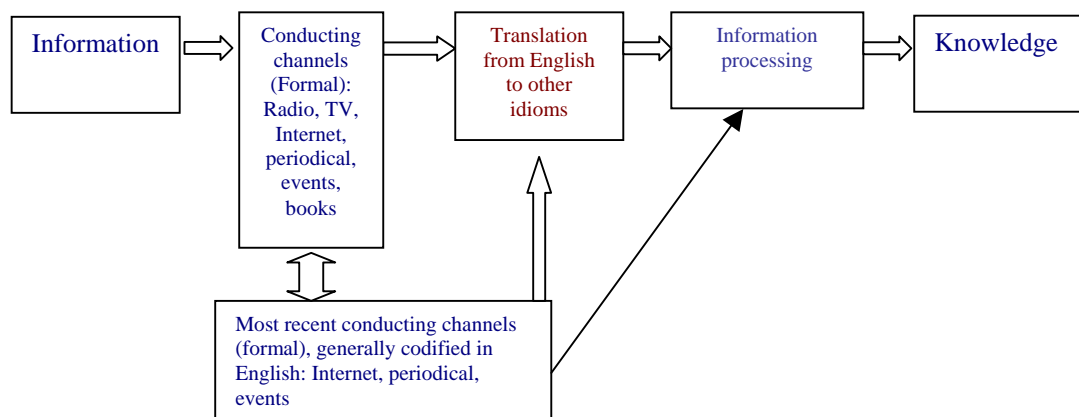


Illustration 2.1: Transformation process from information into knowledge.

The diffusion of the knowledge requests technology to transport it and a common language to communicate the latter. Still, over 50% of the world population speaks English fluently as first or second language, and most of the scientific research is published firstly in English, which is the main language in the scientific communication. The growth of the the English as a universal language is accelerating the spread of the knowledge among people all over the world (CRAWFORD, 1994).

Used worldwide in the computer science, the English language performs the role of universal mediator in communications, being employed in 85% of the international phone calls, in 75% of the world correspondence and in 80% of the published scientific books (CARMO, 1998).

Foucault (*apud* Mendonça, 2000), says the existence of the language is sovereign, for the words receive the task and the power of representing the thought. The best form of interpreting a thought is decoding it from the original source, otherwise one might take the risk of understanding it not according to the author's originality, but according to the optics of the person who translates it in the first instance. This way, the communication becomes fast and efficient when everyone involved in the same process or situation and having to share information, speak the same language. It is avoided deviations of concepts, or distortions of information.

### **3. Globalization, transnational corporations and the English language**

In "Manifesto Comunista", Marx and Engels ( *apud* Carmo, 1998 p.7) foresaw a universal interdependence of the nations, and the exploration of the world market for the bourgeoisie, today performed by the multinational companies and transnational corporations. Carmo (1998) states that a multinational company operates in a certain number of countries, adjusting their activities and products to them, while the transnational one operates on the whole planet, as if it were a single nation, selling the same products, in the same way, everywhere.

The multinational companies are the great responsables for spreading the knowledge throughout the world as they train and send workers to the company branches in several parts of the planet (CRAWFORD, 1994).

In "A Era do Globalismo", Ianni (1997) talks about the reality of the globalized society, that converges to the transnational division of the work. The industries, financial centers, trade organizations, printed and electronic media are not concentrated in dominant countries anymore. Instead, they redistribute the process in several countries and continents, leading to a consequent disterritorialization.

Within this process, that is the transition from the multinational company to the transnational corporation, some principles have to be reviewed, and one of them is the adoption of the English as language pattern (CARMO, 1998).

The transnational corporation workers, under penalty of limiting their area of information acquisition and therefore harming their knowledge production, necessarily have to improve their command of the English language. By doing it, they are qualified to face the challenges and look for innovations, proposed in their functions.

According to research accomplished by Case and Scher (2002), the larger is the percentage of the foreign capital in a company, the more advanced is the fluency in the English language required from their employees, usually executives of the high step.

Then, it is possible to state that the English language is widely used in transnational companies, either in the work routine, or as way of researching new technologies.

### **4. The importance of the English Language in a company of national capital**

The company studied, here codified as S. C., is a Brazilian company of capital 100% national. The S. C. acts in the industrialization, improvement and commercialization wood branch. Founded in 1987, it has since been producing frames from noble woods for works of art and panels for the building site. The whole production, in spite of national and international competitors in the same business, has guaranteed absorption in North America and Europe. The company's structure is divided into several processes, which includes, among others, the ones of sawmill, kettles, greenhouses, planes and refining of wood. For the supervision and support of the entire process the company counts on the following departments: commercial, administration, human resources, production, maintenance, process engineering, quality control, department of wood and materials supply. The company can count on 866

collaborators ranging from managers, supervisors, technicians, administrative and operational personnel.

As in most of big industries, the positions of the high step are in the hand of a small minority, while the great majority divides the most elementary functions, as it can be observed in the table below:

Steps	Positions	Amount	%
1 <sup>st</sup>	Managers	5	0,58
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Supervisors	11	1,27
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Administrative assistants / People in charge / Analysts / Inspectors	61	7,04
4 <sup>th</sup>	Operators / Auxiliaries of Production / Mechanics / Electricians / Technical	789	91,11
Total of employees		866	100

Source: The author.

Note: Data worked by the author.

Table 4.1 - Distribution of Positions.

Due to the exportation, all the production follows a pattern according to the customers' specifications. Edvinsson (1998) says that the relationship of a company with their customers is of fundamental importance for the value of the company. The S. C., following the same ideology, pursues the improvement in the relationship with their customers by using clear communication, which enables the translation of all their longings. This guarantees a faithful and satisfactory commercial relationship for both parts. For this purpose, the company maintains contact with the customers in a constant way, either through the Commercial Department that assists the customers already existent and search other new ones, or through the Department of Process Engineering, that is in charge of maintaining the production patterns as requested. In this process of interaction, it is necessary that the communication be made in English, due to the customers foreign nature.

The Commercial Manager establishes and maintains contacts with the customers in the several countries of North America and Europe, where the production is placed. It also elaborates brochures and booklets with new products, containing all the specifications and descriptions concerning size, used material, as well as the final product.

The Department of Process Engineering translates the information about the specifications of the products, and reads the instruction manuals as well. The next step is to take the processed information to the Department of Production. Through this organizational knowledge, all the workers are involved in the communication process, even the operators and production auxiliaries.

Even if it is a national company, the S. C. uses the English language daily. The table below portrays how it is used:

Usage modalities	No. of people in the company	%
Receiving and sending e-mails	5	0,58
Participating in video-conferences	6	0,7
Receiving foreigner visitors	6	0,7
Making and it receiving phone calls	9	1,04
Participating in meetings	10	1,15
Reading instruction manuals	11	1,27
Identifying products and inputs	866	100

Source: The author.

Note: Data worked by the author.

Table 4.2 - Use of the English language in the daily work.

Case and Scher (2002) verified that 48,71% of the executives declare to be fluent in the English language. Similar situation is detected in this present research, being verified that the highest positions are the ones that possesses larger fluency in the language. As the level of the step decreases, it is also decreased the fluency in the language. This way, in the positions of 1<sup>st</sup> step - Management, the fluency should be larger due to the type of the communication with the customers, which is direct and daily. In the positions of 2<sup>nd</sup> step - Supervision, the used level is the intermediate, since it is in this department where the reading of manuals is made and, later on, the processed data and instructions are taken to the subordinates. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, composed by Administrative Assistants, People in charge, Analysts and Inspectors, the most used level is the basic. Finally, in the 4<sup>th</sup> step, the used level is the elementary technical knowledge, adapted to the needs of the departments of Production and Process Engineering. Nevertheless, it is not required that the workers previously learn it.

In the table below is possible to observe which knowledge level of the English language is demanded by the company, according to the specifications just given above:

Knowledge level	Amount	%
Basic	53	6,12
Intermediate	17	1,96
Advanced	5	0,58

Source: The author.

Note: Data worked by the author.

Table 4.3 - Necessary knowledge demanded by the company.

According to the research, all the employees have direct or indirect contact with products and inputs, and they identify them in English. Although the company does not demand the knowledge, 91,34% of the workers use elementary technical English, inherent to the daily activities of handling products and inputs. The manufactured pieces have names as dental, blocks, blanks, which leads to a faster communication and understanding in the production and commercialization processes.

Before this fact, the Human Resources Manager sees the need of creating a type of glossary to be used in the industry. It would be a visual one, not abstract but concrete. In order to compose its counterparts, there could be a model of every piece, with the English name written on the surface, facilitating the understanding and the internalizing of each manufactured piece.

The research points that 2,54% of the workers acquired the basic knowledge while in high school, and 6,4% in language schools or with private teachers. It is also revealed that in 0,8% of the cases, the previous knowledge of the language makes possible, or facilitates, the hiring of a candidate to the certain vacancy existent in the company.

The company, for considering that the English language provides new knowledge for their workers and verifying the growing need on the global market, finances up to 50% of expenses to the study of the language. Among their employees, 8,54% of them benefit by this initiative of the company.

Until the end of 2003, the employees would divide in study groups, and they would have classes with an English teacher in her own residence. Due to the growing need of acquiring a more effective knowledge, the company cogitates that these classes should be ministered in a language school, which could provide better support during the learning process.

The fact that they are having the opportunity of learning a new language, with the support of the company, made the workers feel more valued and motivated. They also learned that, despite the difficulties of learning, they would have, on the other hand, a larger stability if their knowledge were improved, even in a small extent.

Even the employees of low step, although having a certain resistance to changes, end up taking part in the process unconsciously, getting used to the names in English, since there is no equivalent term in Portuguese.

## **5. Final considerations**

The study reveals the role of the English language in the process of generating knowledge from information in the globalized context. It is possible to verify that the language is used intensively by multinational companies and transnational corporations, main responsables for spreading the knowledge throughout the world.

In the company S. C., of capital 100% national, this need grows every day, due to the concern of the company in maintaining the level of competitiveness of their products in the international market. Looking for maintaining this competitiveness, the company works on interpreting their customers' needs by means of a clear communication, which translates those needs in improvements in the production process.

The fluency in the English language is detected mainly in the high step. But the company is also looking to improve the knowledge in the other steps. With this vision, the company finances up to 50% of the course for 8,54% of their employees. For the other workers, the creation of a specific technical glossary is being studied.

In 0,8% of the cases of vacancy in the company, previous knowledge of the language increases the chances of getting a job, mainly for the positions of the first step.

The larger objective of this work is to evidence the fact that the English language is an indispensable instrument in search of the professional and commercial growth, thus increasing competitiveness in the new context of the society.

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