

PREPARING APPRENTICES FOR MULTILINGUAL WORK SITUATIONS

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Apprentices are a linguistically diverse group, and multilingual workplaces are increasingly a reality for many employees. This article suggests ways VET programmes could prepare today's apprentices for multilingual scenarios. Drawing on a recent study, it recommends feasible actions that can be integrated into existing programmes.

Good communication is crucial for individual and company success. Hardly anyone would dispute this. Thus, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) has identified literacy and multilingual competence as key competences to promote in VET. A [case study from the Swiss-Liechtenstein border region](#)¹ (m-voc-study) showed that besides literacy in German, apprentices' multilingual competences could provide important advantages in multilingual work situations.

The m-voc study identified great programme- and company-specific differences regarding language learning and practice opportunities in VET, while stakeholder opinions were fiercely divided on for whom, why and which languages should be included in VET curricula, and how they should be taught. In response to these discrepancies and challenges, the authors of the m-voc study stress the value of promoting extracurricular experiences, as well as language awareness and mediation training as a way forward.

VERY DIFFERENT LINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE

The apprentices², who took part in the m-voc study, between them brought to their workplaces competences in **50 languages plus dialects** (mastered at different levels). Many perceived their workplaces as multilingual, as they came into contact with a total of 26 languages. This is illustrated by a bricklayer apprentice, who reported hearing "Croatian, Albanian, Spanish, Portuguese, High German, Swiss German [and] Czech" at work, while an electrician apprentice stated that **"it is normal for many different languages to be spoken in the construction industry"**. In contrast, some apprentices perceived the workplace as **monolingual**. A joiner apprentice said: "German is the only language spoken everywhere, which simplifies many things, but also leads to deficits in later working life".



Languages competences mentioned by apprentices

¹ The m-voc case study (<https://sites.exeter.ac.uk/m-voc/>) was partially funded by a Movetia International Cooperation Grant (Project number: 2022-1-CH01-IP-0006).

² Mechanical engineers, design engineers, metal builders, information technologists, electricians, painters bricklayers, carpenters, joiners and hairdressers (n=674). These learners are enrolled in a dual VET.

Differences also concerned the way languages were used in the workplace. Some apprentices reported sophisticated abilities which helped them to put their language skills into practice. **These featured linguistic mediation skills and willingness to use them; awareness of situations and purposes for which linguistic tools can be used. They also showed sensitivity to language needs of others and themselves, as well as of the wider world of work, while they saw all their languages as potentially valuable in the present and the future.**

These competences and understandings helped apprentices achieve a variety of practical, cognitive and social purposes in the workplace, such as **getting things done, making sense of information and learning new things. Further purposes included effectively team work and customer contact, as well contributing to a good working atmosphere and a sense of belonging.**

Others experienced the opposite, including **breakdown of communication and misunderstandings, as well as exclusion, discrimination and tensions.** This finding reminds us that language barriers can negatively affect communication and wellbeing – and potentially jeopardise quality, creativity and productivity. Such risks, the m-voc study shows, can be mitigated with the help of language sensitivity and mediation skills; a finding that is supported by previous research.

Preparation of future generation:

There is a need “to foster capable foremen who can communicate with the many employees from abroad in order to avoid any damage.”

Qualified VET professional

INTEGRATION OF MULTI-LINGUAL COMPETENCES IN VET

In order to prepare all apprentices for globalised workplaces in a more consistent – but feasible – way, we advocate the following approaches to complement existing curricula and practices:

Promotion of extra-curricular language experiences in VET: to increase take-up of optional language classes and mobility programmes, which tends to be low among VET students. Participation in international mobility programmes during VET, in particular, can be associated with the development of soft skills such as teamwork, language and communication skills, cultural understanding, adaptability and openness.

Integration of language awareness activities into VET: not only to enable reflection on individual language repertoires and future ambitions, but also on the functions and challenges related to multilingualism in the workplace, as outlined above. We know that linguistic sensitisation can reduce misunderstandings or inadvertent exclusion in the workplace.

Linguistic mediation practice in VET: to support effective and constructive communication at work. Mediation competences, which are about recognising and acting upon the linguistic needs of oneself and others, could be simulated and practiced in VET colleges and in workplaces. Such activities could be guided by the descriptors for mediation skills in the new CEFR companion volume. We expect the use of AI and other digital technologies to play a role in this context in the future.

Multilingualism required in the workplace / an advantage in the workplace:

“More languages, more customers”

Painter apprentice

“In my job, all languages are an advantage, because we have customers all over the world.”

Design engineer apprentice

“I work on a construction site, we speak all the languages there.”

Bricklayer apprentice

“These days, you need several languages in almost all professions.”

Information technologist apprentice

Curriculum disagreement:

“Language use should be built into lessons much more. Even in technical trades.”

Joiner apprentice

“I don’t expect a vocational college for mainly technical professions to offer much in the way of language learning.”

Mechanical engineer apprentice

“We don’t talk about foreign languages enough.”

Hairdresser apprentice

Potential language barriers:

“If certain customers speak a language other than German, dialect or English, this becomes a big communication problem.”

Hairdresser apprentice

“Damage can be caused if the work order is not communicated in a comprehensible way.”

Qualified VET professional

NEXT STEPS

As next steps, the authors recommend taking stock of good practices and materials that might already exist or could be adapted for the VET sector. The effectiveness of such materials would need to be trialled and systematically evaluated nationally and internationally.

For more information visit m-voc website or contact g.s.meier@exeter.ac.uk

m-voc study: Reports are available in English and German from the Project Website <https://sites.exeter.ac.uk/m-voc/>

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