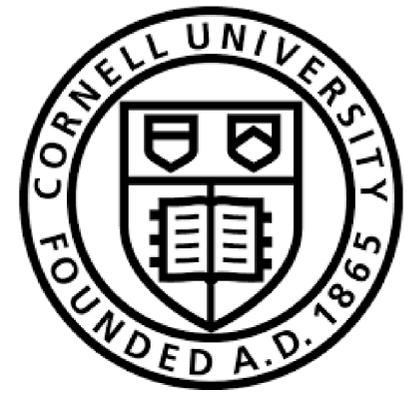




CAHRS ResearchLink



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Talk and Let Talk: The Effects of Language Proficiency on Speaking up and Competence Perceptions in Multinational Teams

The Challenge

In global firms multinational teams (MTs) are a way of life. Increasingly these firms find it essential to assemble just the right mix of talent from around the globe to tackle complex tasks. Typically MTs perform much if not all of their work using a common language which, while necessary, can have its drawbacks. For example, it is unlikely that all team members will be equally proficient in the chosen language. This can cause problems for team members who are less facile with the language and, thus, find it difficult to contribute to the work of their teams in a timely and meaningful way. These personal challenges, in turn, can accrue to the team level. A few recent studies suggest, for example, that asymmetries in language proficiency in MTs undermine trust and confidence among team members and often lead to the formation of cliques and uneven levels of influence that hamper team processes and eventually undermine team performance. Overall, though, little is known about the ways in which language proficiency affects those who work in MTs or the ways in which variations in language proficiency within teams affect their ultimate performance. The present study was designed to shed light on these issues.



Key Findings

Following are the key findings of the study:

Pertaining to Team Members:

- ◇ Initially, it was expected that in MTs those with low language proficiency would be more hesitant than those with more advanced language skills to speak up during working sessions. And in general they were.
- ◇ Further, those who spoke up less frequently during team activities were also judged by their teammates to be less technically competent to perform team tasks. This was true even when their actual levels of task-related competence were statistically factored out, so it is likely that peers interpreted their relative reticence as an indicator that they had little to contribute to the work at hand.
- ◇ In sum, then, it is clear that in MTs members who struggle with the prevailing language suffer a double whammy. First, they tend to find it difficult to make meaningful inputs to team activities on a timely basis. Second, their teammates are prone to think that their reserve reflects a lack of task-related knowledge or ability. These dynamics are particularly likely to occur when teams are performing their work face-to-face. They are less prevalent when team members are dispersed and communicating online.

Pertaining to Team Performance:

- ◇ Variance in language proficiency within teams exerted no direct effect on the extent to which various team members spoke up during team activities. In other words, it didn't matter much whether teams had members with basically equal language skills or a mix of language skills when it came to their participation in team tasks.
- ◇ Nonetheless, their actual participation rates really mattered. When some members dominated the conversation, it was difficult for participants to make accurate judgments about the technical competence inherent in their teams. Conversely, when everyone on the teams contributed more or less equally, team members were much better at making these assessments.
- ◇ And, as it turns out, it was critical for team members to have good fix on the collective level of task-related expertise available in their teams. When teams misjudged this, team performance suffered.
- ◇ Overall, the relationship between level of participation in team activities, accuracy of team competence assessments, and team performance was much stronger when teams communicated face-to-face than when they communicated via computer. This is because some of the variance in these factors was removed when the work was done online.



Implications For Practice

Of course, it is important to staff MTs with members who are - individually and collectively – competent to perform the tasks at hand. It is just as important, though, to make sure these skills are fully utilized. This, in turn, requires that all team members take an active part in team activities. When they don't, other team members tend to underestimate their task-related skills which clearly detracts from team performance, and may be problematic for them personally as well.

It is best, of course, when all team members are fully conversant in the prevailing language. But in global firms this may not always – or even usually - be possible. Next best, as the present study shows, is to make a concerted effort to assure that those who lack adequate language skills participate fully in team activities. This is particularly important when teams are performing their tasks face-to-face.

As an initial step, it is important for team leaders to set expectations with respect to speaking up during team sessions, putting special emphasis on the personal and organizational benefits that accrue when everyone is fully in the game. When at work, team leaders and members should make conscious efforts to assure that all participants have opportunities to speak up, going so far as to elicit input from those who are holding back. This may require corollary efforts to restrain those who tend to dominate discussions or talk over hesitant colleagues. Team members should be encouraged to learn about and engage in the fine art of active listening – fully focusing on what is being said; taking time as necessary to summarize, restate, and reinforce the points being made; and providing positive (versus critical) feedback. Team members who continue to struggle with the language should be encouraged to engage in supplemental forms of communication with their team members such as one-on-one discussions and the many emerging technologies designed to enhance discourse among dispersed and virtual teams.

Even as these efforts take effect, team leaders must stress how important it is to regularly make accurate assessments of the task-related competence of everyone on their teams. Above all, this requires that participants be wary of any tendency to interpret taciturnity in team sessions with a paucity of technical competence, and admonished to keep their focus on the quality of contributions being made. Failure to make this distinction, as the present study shows, is not only unfair to the individuals involved but also detrimental to securing the trust and confidence required to make high quality decisions and rational resource allocations in pursuit of superior team performance.

Specifics of the Study

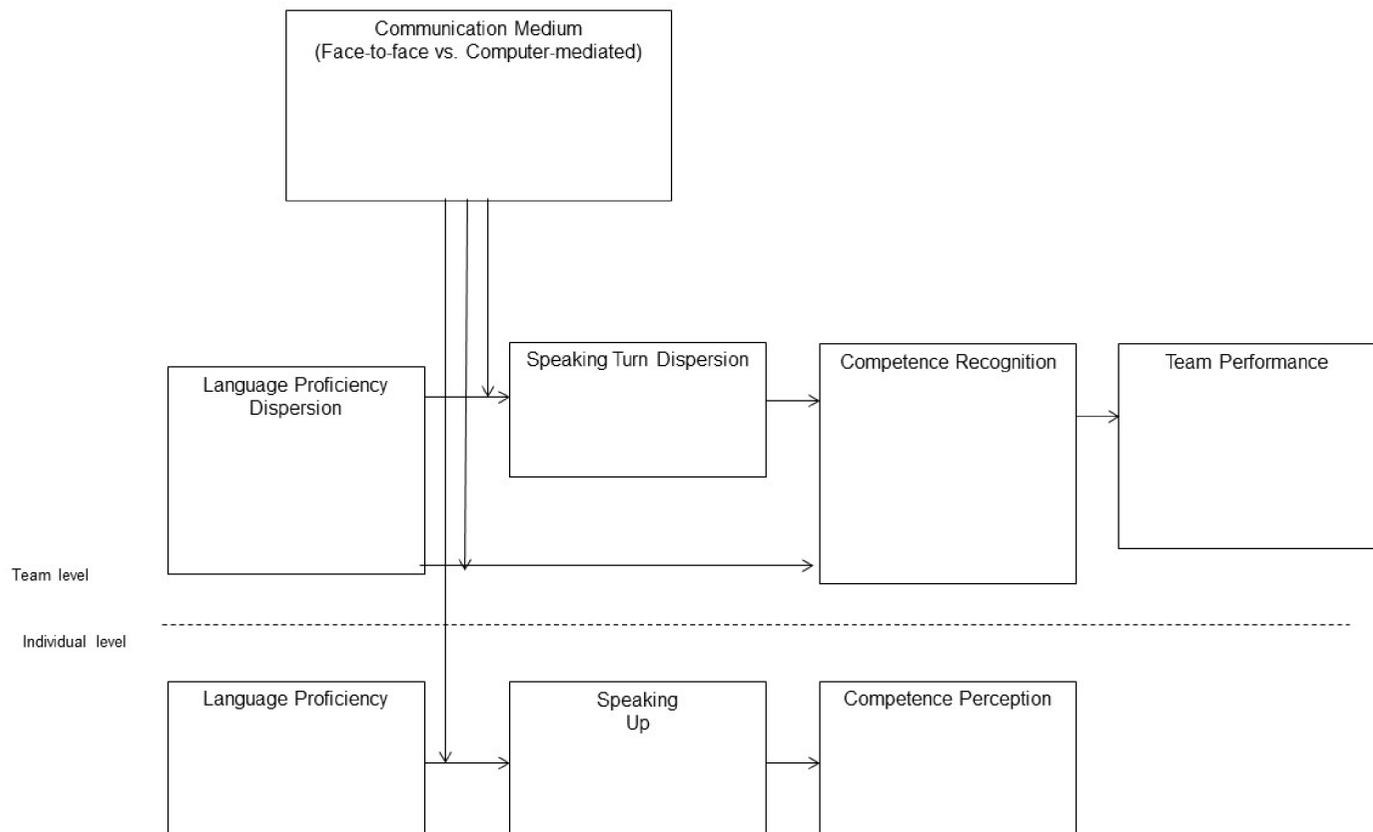
Participants in this study were 204 graduate students from various fields of study within a major United States university. The students were assigned to 51 teams each of which consisted of two non-Asian American members and two Chinese members. Each team was randomly assigned to complete a problem-solving exercise either face-to-face (with all participants in the same room) or via a text-based, computer-mediated chat system (with all participants in different rooms). Team performance was tracked on an ongoing basis. At the end of each session, participants completed a questionnaire to obtain perceptions of their teammates' language proficiency, as well as their levels of task-related competence.

The model that guided the study is shown in Figure 1 on page 4. The hypotheses deriving from the model, as well as the results obtained, follow.

Team Members

Three hypotheses pertained to team members (the lower portion of Figure 1):

Figure 1



- ◇ Hypothesis 1a: Communication medium moderates the relationship between individual's language proficiency and speaking up, such that the relationship is stronger (more positive) in face-to-face teams than in text-based, computer-mediated teams.

This hypothesis was supported. Team members with relatively low language proficiency were significantly more likely to speak up when communicating via computer than when communicating face-to-face. Those with relatively high language proficiency, however, spoke up at about the same rates irrespective of mode of communication.

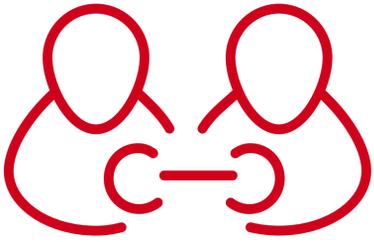
- ◇ Hypothesis 2a: A group member's speaking up is positively related to others' perceptions of his or her [task-related] competence.

This hypothesis was also supported. Team members who spoke up less during working sessions were judged by their teammates to have lower levels of task-related competence than those who spoke up more during the sessions.

- ◇ Hypothesis 4: The indirect relationship between one's language proficiency and others' perceptions of his or her [task-related] competence via speaking up is moderated by communication medium, such that the positive indirect effect is stronger in face-to-face teams than in text-based, computer-mediated teams.

Both elements of this hypothesis were supported as well. First, the path from language proficiency to ratings of task-related proficiency was mediated by the frequency with which team members spoke up during team sessions. Further, this path was more significant when the communication was face-to-face than when it took place via computer.

Team Performance



Five hypotheses pertained to team performance (the upper portion of Figure 1):

- ◇ Hypothesis 1b: Communication medium moderates the relationship between dispersion of language proficiency and speaking turn dispersion, such that the relationship is stronger (more positive) in face-to-face teams than in text-based computer-mediated teams.

This hypothesis was not supported. There was no significant relationship between the dispersion of language proficiency within teams and the overall frequency with which team members spoke up during team sessions irrespective of method of communication.

- ◇ Hypothesis 2b: Speaking turn dispersion is negatively related to [task-related] competence recognition within teams.

This hypothesis was supported. When communication was relatively evenly distributed across team members during working sessions (i.e., when speaking dispersion was higher), there were relatively small gaps between teammates ratings of perceived vs. actual task-related competence of their teams. But when the communication was more concentrated among a relatively few team members (i.e., speaking dispersion was lower), these gaps tended to be wider (i.e., team members did a poorer job of assessing the overall task-related competence of their teams).

- ◇ Hypothesis 3: Competence recognition mediates the negative relationship between speaking turn dispersion and team performance.

This hypothesis was supported. There was no direct relationship between the diffusion of communication within teams and the performance levels of those teams. But there was an indirect relationship because of the effect of error rates in ratings of teams' task-related competence on team performance. Widespread communication was a good thing because it led to more accurate ratings of team capabilities (as noted above) and, in turn, this fostered higher levels of team performance.

- ◇ Hypothesis 5: The indirect relationship between language proficiency dispersion and competency recognition via speaking turn dispersion is moderated by communication medium, such that the indirect relationship is stronger (i.e., more negative) in face-to-face teams than in text-based computer-mediated teams.

This hypothesis was not supported. The expected indirect relationship did not materialize in either face-to-face or text-based computer-mediated teams.

- ◇ Hypothesis 6: The indirect team-level relationship between language proficiency dispersion and team performance via competence recognition is moderated by communication medium, such that the indirect relationship is stronger (more negative) in face-to-face teams than in text-based, computer-mediated teams.

This hypothesis was supported. The expected indirect relationship was significant for teams working face-to-face, but not for teams communicating via computer.

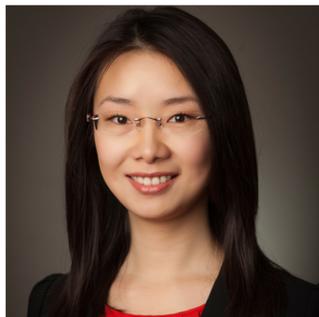
Conclusion

When working in MTs, those who are comfortable with the prevailing language speak up significantly more often than do those who are less comfortable with the language. Further, the more team members speak up the more it helps peers get an accurate fix on their task-related competence. The practical effect of this is that more reticent team members are likely to be judged less capable of contributing to their teams' work which, in turn, can have negative consequences for their careers. This is particularly true when the work is performed face-to-face. The effect is muted considerably when team members communicate via computer-based technology since this makes it easier for those who struggle with the language to hold their own during team activities.

Moving up to the team level, once again the extent to which members speak up during team sessions is key. When a few members dominate the discussions, team members have more difficulty judging the overall competence that exists within their teams which, in turn, leads to lower levels of team performance. So, again, the key lies in finding ways for all team members to be engaged in team deliberations and then taking a further step to assure that team members know how to and are motivated to assess each other's – and thus their collective – task-related competence based on quality of contributions rather than eloquence of elocution. It is easier to accomplish these actions when team communication occurs via text-based technology than it is when the work it is done face-to-face.

The present study was conducted in a laboratory setting using student subjects. The extent to which the findings generalize to MTs in actual organizations remains to be seen. Further research is necessary to clarify this issue, as well as to examine a number of related issues. For example, how do the observed dynamics in the present study unfold over time and in teams using various combinations of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication and/or a wider variety of alternative technologies to keep in touch? To what extent do the dynamics studied play out in terms of career implication for individuals? What are the key factors that mediate the relationship between the accuracy of team-level competence assessments and level of team performance? As always, then, we strongly encourage the many CAHRS partner companies with MT operations to engage with CAHRS researchers (and perhaps others) to explore these and related issues not only in the interest of greater fairness to employees with diverse language skills but also in the interest of enhancing the performance of their MTs worldwide.

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