Code-switching in newly-formed multinational project teams: challenges, strategies and effects

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Code-switching in newly-formed multinational project teams: Challenges, strategies and effects

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Theme: Cross-cultural team dynamics and intergroup processes

Abstract: Based on an ethnographic-like case study comprising observations and interviews with members of three newly-formed multinational project teams, our study explores the micro-processes of interactional teamwork and captures how the three teams develop strategies for managing the challenges of code-switching in their interactions. Findings from our study suggest that teams interpret the impact of code-switching challenges differently in spite of the fact that they are performing similar activities, suggesting that adopting (clearly-defined) rules for managing interactions may not be as effective as the presence of other factors within the teams. Our findings extend theory on the use of a common working language in multinational teams and go beyond this by illustrating how individual teams establish practices for handling the challenges of code-switching, and the effects of these on team interactions.

Keywords: multinational company, multinational teams, common working language, code-switching challenges, team dynamics and processes, teamwork strategies, ethnographic-like case study

Introduction

Although previous studies in international management have addressed issues regarding language and interactional processes in multinational teams (MNTs) (e.g. Brannen and Salk, 2000; Brett and Crotty, 2011; Canney Davison, 1994, 1996, with Ward, 1999; Gassmann, 2001; Govindarajan and Gupta, 2001; Janssens and Brett, 1997; Lagerström and Andersson, 2003; Price, 1996; Shachaf, 2008; Teagarden et al., 2005), these are often 'stumbled' upon but are not necessarily the main research questions (Tietze, 2014). Thus, to our knowledge, only a small number investigate the theme of 'language and communication in international teams' in its own right. This body of research includes Del Carmen Mendez Garcia and Perez Canado (2005), Hinds et al. (2014), Kassis Henderson (2005) and Tenzer et al. (2014).

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However, these four studies obtained their data primarily from interviews, and only one conducted observations of authentic interactions (Hinds et al., 2014), so they tend to focus on retrospective perceptions about the challenges and opportunities generated by language use in teams. Yet, as Tietze (2014) points out, empirical cross-disciplinary work that tracks language activity across multinational companies (MNCs) would contribute valuable insights to the field.

The present study aims to contribute to this goal by focusing on multinational project teams and by using an empirical approach based on direct observation of their interactional processes. Researchers frequently attribute difficulties in multicultural situations to national culture (e.g., Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). However, findings from the current study indicate that the challenges of working in groups with people from different cultural backgrounds involve a more complex range of factors (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Milliken and Martins, 1996; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Salk and Brannen, 2000; Sarangi, 1994; Stahl et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 1996).

In the rest of this paper, we first briefly review the literature connected with code-switching in newly-formed multinational project teams, drawing on international management frameworks. After explaining our ethnographic-like case-study methodology, we address our research questions by drawing out insights from across our three case study teams with regard to the challenges of code-switching, the strategies the teams used to handle them, and the effectiveness of these strategies. We then discuss our findings, acknowledge some limitations, explore practical implications and make some recommendations for future research.

Literature review: Theory and research questions

Dual impact of the challenges of code-switching

Code-switching in the workplace has been defined as changing from the common working language of the international company (Harzing and Feely, 2008; Neeley et al., 2012), or international team (Hinds et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2014), to the use of another language that other members of the company or team may or may not speak or even understand. Previous

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research has acknowledged a dual impact of this practice when doing business globally. On the one hand, code-switching has been considered to be a helpful strategy when working in international business contexts, since the use of other languages in addition to English is seen as a valuable means of accomplishing the tasks at hand (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Cogo, 2010; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Klimpfinger, 2009) and of building common ground and solidarity among participants (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Chew, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2010; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Janssens and Brett, 1997; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Poncini, 2003; Tenzer et al., 2014; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010). On the other hand, in spite of these advantages, researchers have also reported that code-switching, even for pragmatic purposes, is often not met with appreciation. Instead, it may be considered as annoying, rude and disrespectful, triggering feelings of frustration, exclusion or mistrust, regardless of the intentions behind this behaviour (Harzing and Feely, 2008; Hinds et al., 2014; Neeley et al., 2012; Tenzer et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, it is only very recently that the international management literature has addressed the issue of code-switching in MNTs. Hinds et al. (2014) used ethnographic interviews and observations to report on both positive and negative reactions to code-switching, and the strategies used to cope with such switches. Their article focused on subgroup dynamics and power struggles through language-related decisions and behaviour. On the basis of 90 interviews in 15 MNTs in three German automotive companies, Tenzer et al.'s (2014) work investigates how different types of language barriers − including code-switching − impede trust formation in MNTs. Nevertheless, while both of these studies investigate the impact of code-switching processes in MNTs, their findings pertaining to code-switches are reported in the aggregate across the teams rather than on a team-by-team basis. Work to date therefore remains largely incomplete as to how the dynamics and processes actually occur within specific teams. Our research addresses this gap and sheds light on the dual impact of code-switching practices in MNTs at the micro level and shows how processes unfold in three separate teams. With this context in mind, we will address our first research question: *What challenges related to the impact of code-switching do newly-formed, short-term multinational project teams experience in their interactions in the formative stages?*

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Strategies to manage language-switching challenges

Another gap in the extant research involves a more in-depth understanding of the strategies adopted by teams to handle the language switches. To our knowledge, only two recent studies in the international management literature appear to address this area of research in global teams. Hinds et al. (2014) report that strategies used by non-German speakers to handle the code-switches of their German-speaking teammates include asking for translations or explanations, asking that English be spoken, not taking the code-switching personally, empathising with their German colleagues or declaring the code-switching to be rude. Canney Davison and Ward (1999: 77) argue that, in order to compensate for any inequalities in linguistic ability, and to ensure a level-playing field for all members, international teams need to establish and follow a set of rules for effective language use, such as 'giving time out to talk in mother tongues so that people can explore and define what they want to say and paraphrase it back into the working language'. Therefore, this is another theoretical strand that our paper will address in a second research question: *How do teams manage their code-switching challenges and to what extent do they learn to do so effectively?*

We build on this theoretical foundation to illustrate how teams devise a set of strategies – either formally or informally – to allow the optimising of task achievement and team dynamics by managing code switching. In fact, from a general standpoint, the rules a team adopts serve as crucial guidelines (Argyle et al., 1981) to govern team interactions and behavioural dynamics (Earley and Gardner, 2005; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994). Yet, tightly structured 'ground rules' do not imply being rigid, but rather creating an 'agreed field to play in' (Canney Davison and Ward, 1999: 104). This flexibility of rules has been underscored in the management literature (Larson, 1992; Ouchi, 1979; Shapiro, 1987). Overall, to reduce the creation of anxiety in MNTs, activities need to be sufficiently organised to enable task performance, but not so structured that they hinder individual responsiveness (Hanges et al., 2005) or prevent processes from flowing naturally (Smith and Berg, 1997). The current research will offer insights into a more in-depth understanding of what may happen when rules to manage code-switching in MNTs are missing or are too rigid. This is yet another area in the literature that needs to be more systematically investigated.

A second point related to rules also deserves further attention. In fact, rules and norms regulating group decision-making and collaborative exchanges may or may not be formally

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defined (Davis, 1973; Larson, 1992). When explicit mechanisms, such as a written 'social contract' (Peterson, 2001), are not employed, informal agreements about what constitutes appropriate behaviour remain implicit. These more subtle, less visible, forms of control work quite effectively, thanks to a sense of community, cooperative action and commitment among group members (Ouchi, 1979). Such internalised patterns of social behaviour, involving an embedded degree of trust, therefore develop to govern personal relations and structures (Doney et al., 1998; Granovetter, 1985; Peterson, 2001). In fact, trusting relationships constitute a model of group control that emphasise the soft aspects of social processes whereby trust, mutual respect and strong interpersonal relations are essential for the project's successful implementation (Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999).

Effects of code-switching challenges and strategies on team dynamics and processes

This link between team performance and the soft aspects of teamwork underlines the importance of informal and interpersonal processes, which are thought to be more resilient than formal procedures (Edelman, 1990; Granovetter, 1985; Larson, 1992; Leana and Van Buren III, 1999; Shapiro, 1987; Sitkin and Roth, 1993). As a matter of fact, positive interpersonal relationships and social communication foster trust building, enable the development of a more cohesive team, optimise working conditions (Teagarden et al., 2005), and lead to goal achievement (Liang et al., 2015). Yet, other than the two recent studies by Hinds et al. (2014) and Tenzer et al. (2014), the link between code-switching and interpersonal team relations in MNTs remains largely unexplored in the management literature, a focus that we will address in our third research question: *What effects do code-switching challenges and the strategies devised to cope with them have on team dynamics and processes?*

What differentiates our study is that we examine the micro-processes within three project-teams carrying out their interactions using English as a *lingua franca* in a MNC in France, to capture how the three MNTs respond to code-switching during their four problem-solving tasks. Our research therefore fills a gap that is 'long-overdue' (Tenzer et al., 2014) by examining the effects of language on MNTs. More precisely, our investigation sheds light on the impact of code-switching challenges, the (in)effectiveness of strategies devised by each team to handle the switches, and the effects of these on team dynamics and processes.

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Method

Research site

We conducted our research in a multinational company located in France, and obtained data involving three newly-formed multicultural teams carrying out four problem-solving tasks within a management integration programme.[1] For reasons of confidentiality, we use the pseudonym Global Player in all references to the company and aliases have replaced the names of people, functions and events. In this programme, and among other activities, participants were put into problem-solving teams, using English as a common language,[2] to find solutions to four corporate issues. To complete their tasks, the teams needed to establish team-working practices to help them handle their interactive processes.

Each project-team workshop we observed took place in four distinct periods:

1) Presentation to the entire cohort[3] of the task to solve by a corporate expert
2) Problem-solving and decision-making interactions in project teams[4] – teams were given approximately one and a half hours to solve their problems; each team was coached by a *moniteur*
3) Presentations to the entire cohort by two or three teams chosen at random
4) Debriefing sessions in each project team with the team's *moniteur*

Research design

Our ethnographic-like case-study research design (Creswell, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Heigham and Sakui, 2009; Hood, 2009; Stake, 2005; Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2009) enabled us to investigate how teams of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds try to make sense of their context and develop strategies for working together. Observation records, combined with interview comments, provide examples of how the programme participants

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[1] This paper is part of a larger study involving the interactive processes of multicultural project-team meetings (Vigier, 2015).
[2] Some teams were designated as French-speaking although the majority were designated as English–speaking teams.
[3] We were invited to attend the problem-solving workshops for three different cohorts.
[4] There were seven project teams in cohort 1, nine teams in cohort 2, and ten in cohort 3; we were able to observe one team per cohort.

(felt they) dealt with, and attempted to overcome, the challenges of code-switching while working in these multinational project teams using English as a *lingua franca*.

To address the research questions, we examined interaction in multicultural project-team workshops and obtained three types of data: observations of team interactions, observations of follow-up team debriefing sessions, and interviews with the project-team participants. Our complete data-set includes 37.5 hours of observations of project-team workshops and over 49 hours of interviews. We used the computer software programme for qualitative research methods, NVivo (Bazeley, 2009), to store, organise and code these data. We analysed and coded the data in the original language in which they were collected: English for the observational data (interactions and debriefs) and English and/or French for the interview data.

Participants

In this section, we present the three teams observed.[5] The tables below provide the nationalities and language fluency for the thirteen members[6] of Team K (Table 1), the twelve members of Team G (Table 2), and the eight members of Team T (Table 3). English fluency includes mother tongue speakers (MTSs) and second-language speakers (SLSs) who were either fluent speakers (FSs) or less-fluent speakers (LFSs). Fluent speakers refer to SLSs who had had previous international experience (Canney Davison and Ward, 1999).[7] French fluency indicates whether the participants were French-speaking or non-French speaking.

The tables also include the components of cultural diversity per team: percentage of French members (representing a majority within the teams), percentage of different professional sectors, percentage of females, average age, age dispersion between the youngest and the eldest members, average number of years of Global Player (GP) corporate tenure, and average number of years of overall corporate experience.

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[5] These are subsequently referred to as Teams K, G and T for reasons of anonymity.
[6] There were thirteen members in Tasks 1 and 2; twelve members in Tasks 3 and 4.
[7] The mother tongue speakers (MTSs) in the three teams observed were American (3), Canadian (1), Australian (1) and Indian (1); the fluent speakers (FSs) were Dutch (1), French (1) and Swedish (1); and the less-fluent speakers (LFSs) were Brazilian (1), French (20), Italian (2) and Romanian (1).

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Table 1. Team K's members.

13 members	Nationality	English Fluency	French Fluency
1	India	MTS	Non-French-speaking (Audrey-K)
1	USA	MTS	Non-French-speaking (Emma-K)
1	Netherlands	FS	Non-French-speaking (Zachary-K)
1	Romania	LFS	French-speaking (Parker-K)
1	France	FS	French-speaking (Olivia-K)
8	France	LFS	French-speaking (Ethan-K, Jacob-K, [James-K – left the team after Task 2], Leo-K, Lucas-K, Mark-K, Michael-K, Wyatt-K)

Note: 69.23% French; 53.85% professional diversity; 23.08% females; 36.39 average age; 27 years age dispersion; 3.05 years GP corporate tenure; 13.16 years overall corporate experience. MTS: mother tongue speaker; FS: fluent speaker; LFS: less FS.

Table 2. Team G's members.

12 members	Nationality	English Fluency	French Fluency
1	Australia	MTS	Non-French-speaking (David-G)
1	USA	MTS	Non-French-speaking (Madelyn-G)
1	Sweden	FS	Non-French-speaking (Tyler-G)
1	Canada	MTS	French-speaking (Samuel-G)
1	Italy	LFS	French-speaking (Joseph-G)
7	France	LFS	French-speaking (Benjamin-G, Elizabeth-G, James-G, Logan-G, Nathan-G, Ryan-G, Sarah-G)

Note: 58.33% French; 50% professional diversity; 25% females; 34.66 average age; 21 years age dispersion; 5.65 years GP corporate tenure; 12.15 years overall corporate experience; MTS: mother tongue speaker; FS: fluent speaker; LFS: less FS.

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Table 3. Team T's members.

8 members	Nationality	English Fluency	French Fluency
1	USA	MTS	Non-French-speaking *(Jordan-T)*
1	Brazil	LFS	French-speaking *(Anna-T)*
1	Italy	LFS	French-speaking *(Kevin-T)*
5	France	LFS	French-speaking *(Allison-T, Brandon-T, Carter-T, Dylan-T, Luke-T)*

Note: 62.5% French; 62.5% professional diversity; 25% females; 39.5 average age; 30 years age dispersion; 4.41 years GP corporate tenure; 15.22 years overall corporate experience MTS: mother tongue speaker; FS: fluent speaker; LFS: less FS.

Case study findings

In each case study we report the challenges pertaining to the impact of code-switching, i.e. the use of asides in French, the practices and strategies the teams used to manage these switches, and the effects and effectiveness of these.

Case study 1: Team K

In Task 1 French was spoken in asides throughout the assignment. Moreover, the team experienced a number of other difficulties relating to communicative processes. The second task was even more troublesome so between the second and third tasks the team decided to establish rules to help manage their interactions. One interviewee commented on the team's written rules, which included guidelines concerning the use of asides in French:

> *The non-French speakers said…"respect us, speak English"…so that was the rule* (Jacob-K–interview).[8]

Overall, the assessment of the '*speak-English*' rule appeared to be fairly positive (Vigier, 2015). However, a code-switching episode occurred in Task 4. Despite the rule stipulating

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[8] Jacob-K-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.

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the use of English at all times, in one particular speech event Olivia-K made a very brief statement in French. When others in the group shouted '*in English*', she apologised (Vigier, 2015). Two interviewees gave their accounts of this language-switching incident. Firstly, Audrey-K claimed that:

> *Zachary-K lost...what they were saying...and then...I think he got personally offended of it...because he was really, really that frustrated* (Audrey-K-interview).[9]

Olivia-K commented on the particular '*speak-English*' rule at length:

> *In a specific incident, in the last task, while being extremely aware of this rule, I wanted to make...an aside to someone in particular; ... I summed it up...in three words, in French, to tell him what I wanted to say...and at that particular moment, I don't know how many...who...said "...in English, in English!"...[The rules are good but not]...such rigidness* (Olivia-K-interview).[10]

For Olivia-K what appeared to matter most were positive intentions, not necessarily respecting the rules to the letter:

> *I think that what works well...in relations, it's when we are convinced of the positive intentions...of others. ...It's true, we are different, we don't operate the same way, we don't have...the same country, the same profession...but as long as...we have the conviction of positive intentions, we will make it* (Olivia-K-interview).

These intentions apparently seemed lacking since Audrey-K believed this language-switching example clearly illustrated the lack of trust within the team that prevented them from reaching the 'performing'[11] stage of their four-phase development:

> *There were people who could not trust simply some of the other people. ...We could not really reach the performances...at the last stage* (Audrey-K-interview).

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[9] Audrey-K-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.
[10] Olivia-K-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.
[11] Tuckman, 1965, with Jensen, 1977.

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Case study 2: Team G

In Team G's first task, owing to the frequent use of French (10 instances in 1 hour), Madelyn-G advised the group to speak English to respect the non-French speakers.

In Task 2, although five asides in French appeared to have occurred, Ryan-G expressed the need for such switches:

> *When there are twelve of us…the advantage of having a small sub-discussion rapidly [in French]…is that…if we have a question…we can at least ask our neighbour* (Ryan-G-interview).[12]

In the third task, French appeared to be used only five times, either to the whole group or in side dialogues. When this occurred, Elizabeth-G and Madelyn-G reminded the team to speak in English and, overall, people seemed to have shown respect for the non-French speakers by avoiding the use of French as much as possible.

In Task 4, French was used, or English and French were mixed, to ask for clarification, to find the right expression in English or to suggest additional ideas to include in the slides.

Basically, during Team G's four problem-solving workshops, asides in French appeared to help the group move forward:

> *The aside of…10-15 seconds…allowed us…to catch onto the argumentation…more rapidly… Sometimes I judged [asides in French] useful…because when they responded to each other…(laughs)…it was like a ping-pong ball…and it was difficult to stop them* (James-G-interview).[13]

> *People…for whom…English was a hindrance…sometimes…spoke up saying: "OK, I'm making a small aside in my mother tongue…(laughs) because it will be faster". …We were successful…using…these asides in French* (Logan-G-interview).[14]

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[12] Ryan-G-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 2.
[13] James-G-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.
[14] Logan-G-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.

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Unlike the situation in Team K in which a code-switching incident revealed a lack of trust and a frustrating working climate even during the team's final task, members of Team G seemed to abide by an unwritten rule in which asides in French were apparently handled effectively thanks to humour and a cheerful atmosphere within the team. For example:

> *I was happy to work with this group because…we were fairly close-knit, we got on very, very well, we managed to be serious when it was necessary and then to have funnier moments* (James-G-interview).

Case study 3: Team T

In Task 1, like in both Teams K and G, French was sometimes used in asides (6 instances in 50 minutes). Yet, even in Task 1, Jordan-T, the only non-French speaker in Team T, was tolerant and understood it was natural for the French to make asides in their own language:

> *The French…naturally will migrate to that. …However, the ones that are more culturally aware…all of a sudden they will realise what's happening because it's just natural for them to...speak in…their language…and they will say: "Oh, wait a second. I see...Jordan-T's listening, so we need to speak in English"* (Jordan-T-interview).[15]

In Task 2, French was again used for different reasons. Allison-T spoke in French to encourage Dylan-T to contribute an idea. During the role-assignment process, both Brandon-T and Dylan-T lightened the atmosphere by deliberately mixing English and French and by not taking themselves too seriously.

In Task 3, a fairly long aside in French involving most of the participants was set off by Dylan-T's comment that he had not understood something. Yet, Jordan-T, the only non-French speaker, did not complain about this use of French, but remained tolerant.

Finally, in Task 4, owing to the strong convictions, triggered by the nature of the particular problem-solving task, there was a greater involvement on behalf of all team members, and

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[15] Jordan-T-interview: Original in English; interviewed after Task 1.

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simultaneously an increased use of French (7 instances in just over 1 hour, sone instances lasting for 2-3 minutes continuously). In three such speech episodes, to show respect to Jordan-T, the only non-French-speaker in the team, Anna-T requested '*in English*', Kevin-T apologised and Allison-T translated:

> *…Once I was…near Jordan-T and somebody [said], "Well, I'm speaking French because I have a problem" and I did translate to him, but he didn't ask me to do it* (Allison-T-interview).[16]

Basically, throughout the four tasks, the team appeared to have abided by an unwritten code of conduct, like the unwritten rule that Team G eventually developed. Brandon-T described his feelings about the team's effective handling of code-switching thanks to people's values:

> *A lot of respect;…each person gave others time to speak…to interact;…it's a friendly atmosphere…as long as you stick to these values…of openness, respect…and of trying to understand what the others are saying* (Brandon-T-interview).[17]

Discussion

In this section we draw out insights from the case studies on the challenges related to the impact of code-switching that the teams experienced, the relative (in)effectiveness of the strategies they used to address them, and the effects of these.

The impact of code-switching challenges

As we have seen, all teams resorted to code-switching, i.e. the use of asides in French, the language of the majority of the members in each team (see Tables 1, 2, 3), in spite of the fact that using English as a common language constituted one of the main features of the project teams investigated. More particularly, people used French to choose a role (T2),[18] aid with understanding (K4, G4, T2, T3), check with their neighbours before speaking (G2, T2), collaborate to find the right words (G4, T2), encourage fellow teammates to contribute an idea

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[16] Allison-T-interview: Original in English; interviewed after Task 4.
[17] Brandon-T-interview: Original in French; interviewed after Task 4.
[18] T1 refers to Team T's first task; G2 refers to Team G's second task, and so on.

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(T2) or express strong convictions (T4). The challenge for them was to make sure French was used as little as possible so as not to exclude the non-French speakers.

Although all teams strove to maintain smooth communication by reducing both the frequency and the length of their switches to French, the impact of the code-switching challenges was dual. Members of Team G felt that brief and occasional asides were helpful (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Chew, 2005; Cogo, 2010; Ehrenreich, 2010; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Janssens and Brett, 1997; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Klimpfinger, 2009; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Poncini, 2003; Tenzer et al., 2014; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010) when the fluent speakers spoke back and forth to each other '*like a ping-pong ball*' and that these asides were '*successful*', '*useful*' and '*faster*' (G4) since they enabled the group to move forward. Even so, the team still seemed to show respect by using French as little as possible (G3). Likewise, people in Team T used French with humour (T2) and Jordan-T, the team's only non-French speaker, tolerated the need for fellow teammates to resort to French to clarify certain points (T3). In fact, he understood it was '*natural*' for the other members of his team to '*migrate*' to French (T1), so when this happened he did not complain or make an issue of the situation (T1, T3). However, the respectful and tolerant behaviour with regard to the use of asides in French as a resource to facilitate teamwork in both Teams G and T contrasted sharply with the reaction to the use of French in Team K, in which non-French speakers became '*offended*' and '*frustrated*' when French was spoken in a brief aside, after which several team members shouted '*in English, in English*' since they felt it was a violation of their '*speak-English*' rule (K4). Such incidents demonstrated that the use of asides in French appeared to have offended the non-French speakers who did not appreciate being left out of the conversations; thus, code-switching as a tool to aid SLSs in Team K apparently was considered as impolite (Harzing and Feely, 2008; Hinds et al., 2014; Neeley et al., 2012; Tenzer et al., 2014) and generated a reverse effect on this team's interactions compared to the use of French in the other two teams. In response to the first research question, using French in asides was either considered a help (Teams G and T) or a hindrance (Team K).

The (in)effectiveness of strategies to manage code-switching

In response to the second research question, our investigation has revealed that (1) it was necessary for the teams to devise procedures for managing the critical challenge of code-switching and (2) that these strategies differed across teams. More precisely, in order to

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ensure respect for the non-French speakers and to optimise the work, Team K devised a formal, written '*speak-English*' rule. Conversely, after short dialogues in French, the '*more culturally aware*' in Teams G and T would – orally – remind people to revert to English (G1, G3, T1, T4), some would apologise (T4) and others would translate (T4). Key findings that have emerged from our research are therefore that establishing rules – through a formal (Team K) or informal (Teams G and T) process (Davis, 1973; Larson, 1992; Ouchi, 1979; Peterson, 2001) – was beneficial for handling the challenges of code-switching.

Nevertheless, as we have seen in the case studies, although all teams had their own rule-setting processes and structures (explicit for Team K, implicit for Teams G and T), people in both Teams G and T were tolerant of any deviation from their code-switching rules, whereas Team K's rule-breaking incident involving an aside in French offended and annoyed team members (K4).

Several procedural features might account for these differences. Basically, Team K's rules appeared to be '*rigid*', '*unnatural*' and '*extreme*' (Vigier, 2015) so were apparently not flexible enough (Larson, 1992; Ouchi, 1979; Shapiro, 1987; Smith and Berg, 1997) to allow for any exceptions once they were in place. This actually worsened the situation by not enabling a restoration of the trust that seemed to have disappeared when the interactive processes '*got out of control*' (Vigier, 2015) and led to the establishment of rules in the first place. In contrast, in Teams G and T, both rule-setting and rule-implementing processes seemed to be based on trust, mutual respect and strong interpersonal ties (Doney et al., 1998; Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999; Granovetter, 1985; Peterson, 2001; Sitkin and Roth, 1993), so were apparently more lenient and flexible. This in turn had a positive impact on the functioning of Teams G and T thanks to a pleasant environment and a climate of confidence as opposed to the frustration and distrust that prevailed in Team K. Thus, although Team K's formal rules were devised to improve dysfunctional team operations, they actually aggravated processes by being too rigid to allow for any individual responsiveness (Hanges et al., 2005) or for the natural flow of processes (Smith and Berg, 1997). Overall, the more subtle rules and practices in Teams G and T appeared to be more resilient than the formal procedures (Edelman, 1990; Granovetter, 1985; Larson, 1992; Leana and Van Buren III, 1999; Shapiro, 1987; Sitkin and Roth, 1993) created in Team K.

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The effects of code-switching challenges and strategies on team dynamics and processes

Finally, regarding the third research question, the feelings of respect and trust as well as the positive atmosphere and humour in Teams G (G1, G3, G4) and T (T2, T3, T4) contrasted with the frustration within Team K (K1, K4) and, as we have seen, these interpersonal team relations clearly influenced team operations and performance. Therefore, in addition to managing their asides in French with rules (Argyle et al., 1981; Canney Davison and Ward, 1999; Earley and Gardner, 2005; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994), either formally (Team K) or informally (Teams G and T) (Davis, 1973; Larson, 1992; Ouchi, 1979; Peterson, 2001), other vital factors must have impacted significantly on team functioning and contributed to the effectiveness of the strategies adopted to cope with the code-switching challenges. Our data suggest that diversity in age, experience and corporate tenure had a significant effect on the team interactions (Vigier, 2015). This was apparently due to the fact that the senior members in Teams G and T tended to help or be more 'courteous' to the junior members (Liang et al., 2015) in these two teams, whereas many of the members of Team K were close in age, were at similar stages of their careers, had limited corporate tenure and may have had limited shared corporate culture, all of which tended to create a more competitive rather than cooperative atmosphere (Liang et al., 2015). This is in line with other research which has identified a range of other important elements, including: building solidarity and common ground (Brannen and Salk, 2000; Chew, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2010; Feely and Harzing, 2003; Janssens and Brett, 1997; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Poncini, 2003; Tenzer et al., 2014; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010), developing informal and interpersonal processes (Edelman, 1990; Granovetter, 1985; Larson, 1992; Leana and Van Buren III, 1999; Shapiro, 1987; Sitkin and Roth, 1993) and fostering the creation of a cohesive team (Teagarden et al., 2005).

In fact, in our investigation, the quality of the soft aspects of social processes appeared to have had a strong impact on team interactions by influencing how the challenges of code-switching were interpreted within each team. On the one hand, the positive interpersonal relations in Teams G and T helped these two teams deal with the challenges of language switches and develop appropriate strategies. On the other hand, although Team K was operating similarly to the other two teams, because the level of trust was apparently lacking and the relations did not seem as positive, this had a counter effect on the way the members of Team K reacted to language-switching challenges and strategies. Indeed, code-switching

appeared to be inappropriate for people in Team K, highlighting the fact that the starting point for the interactional aspects seemed to be the quality of the soft processes and interpersonal team relations, regardless of the types of rules devised and the efforts made to apply them.

Previous studies on MNTs (e.g., Canney Davison and Ward, 1999; Earley and Gardner 2005; Hinds et al., 2014; Klimoski and Mohammed, 1994) have highlighted the importance of establishing rules and procedures to enable the achievement of task objectives and simultaneously to help create strong interpersonal relations and build mutual trust and respect – and our findings support this. However, they go beyond this by showing how processes are put into practice and the difficulties that can arise in doing so. Our study shows that all teams experienced similar code-switching challenges, but that they each developed their own unique strategies for handling these and that the impact of both the challenges and the strategies affected the teams in different ways. It was our in-depth case study methodology that enabled this variation across the teams to come out clearly.

Acknowledgement of limitations

The present study has been subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, we were not looking at the code-switching processes of on-going teams but at short-term teams in the formative stages. Therefore, the particular teams examined had different ways of managing their processes than established teams would have had. So care should be taken not to overgeneralize the findings. A second limitation concerns the fact that the teams we studied were somewhat artificial in that they were created for an internal corporate programme. In particular, this study examined team assignments within a management integration programme rather than authentic interactions of real project teams, because there were confidentiality issues with the latter. Nevertheless, the teams we investigated were participating in a real integration programme, with real career goals for staff working for a real company. A third limitation relates to the fact that the participants were evaluated and coached by a *moniteur*. Consequently, their behaviour may have differed from that of members of authentic teams since many of the people in our teams were worried about how to behave in front of the *moniteur*. A fourth type of limitation involves our methodology, and more particularly, the corporate constraints to which we were subject. For example, Global

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Player selected the particular project-team meetings for us to observe, and did not allow us to audio- or video-record the team interactions.

Managerial implications and suggestions for future research

Despite the limitations, we believe some useful practical implications for managers have emerged from our case study.

Firstly, managers and corporate trainers need to draw attention to the crucial importance of being prepared to be confronted with a wide range of levels of fluency. Indeed, members of MNTs need to learn to be tolerant of language differences by accommodating others and staying attuned to everyone's linguistic needs. One way of accommodating LFSs might be to allow for code-switching to help them get their points across. Secondly, managers and corporate trainers should focus on the necessity of implementing a set of rules and practices to enable newly-formed teams to strive to carry out their interactions in a climate of mutual respect, trust and positive intentions so as to enhance team functioning and prevent any discomfort, dissatisfaction or frustration.

Further research on MNTs could help extend the insights obtained and the practical implications associated with them. Firstly, more qualitative studies on code-switching in real-life MNT interaction would enable growth in the body of research on 'language in international business' (Brannen et al., 2014). Secondly, longitudinal studies of authentic multinational project teams would enable investigation of the effects of time and tenure on code-switching. Researchers could also carry out studies focusing on specific process variables, such as the effects of diverse types of rules and/or of trust on code-switching patterns within established multinational project teams. Moreover, it would be valuable for future research to pay more attention to the impact of diversity in age, experience and corporate tenure (Vigier, 2015) on team dynamics and processes. Finally, other studies could investigate the impact on team processes of specific linguistic or cultural components, such as the role of monolingualism or differing leadership styles (e.g. Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015). The overall findings from any of the research studies suggested above would lead to practical recommendations and guidelines for managers and professionals in international business.

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