

**The Use of BELF at the Human Resources Department of Nestlé's Baby Food Factory**

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### **Abstract**

English is the most used language in the Western business world, and English proficiency has become a highly regarded skill. Previous research describes the phenomenon of English as the business lingua franca (BELF), with its focus on vocabulary and simple grammar. Studies have shown that a common corporate language benefits organizations in terms of time optimization, cohesion, and an increase of efficiency. Specialized departments such as Human Resources frequently require extensive knowledge of specific job-related jargon, which has been proven to be a struggle for many employees. Using a survey and semi-structured interviews about English proficiency and the use of English, this paper analyzed in what ways BELF is used, whether BELF is exploited beneficially by two HR employees of the Nunspeet Nestlé factory, and whether improvements can be made. The findings imply a significant lack of BELF proficiency, time-consuming translations using Google Translate, and a preference for speaking and writing in Dutch by the Dutch native participants, regardless of the proficiency of international employees.

Key words: BELF, common corporate language, Human Resources, lingua franca

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis seeks to examine English as the business lingua franca within the Human Resources department in Nestlé's baby food factory in the Netherlands. Nestlé S.A. is the largest food and beverage company in the world, with more than 330,000 employees worldwide and 1 billion products sold worldwide each day (Nestlé, n.d.). According to one participant in this study (personal communication, 2 June, 2020), Nestlé's objective is to help establish a better and healthier world and to inspire people to live healthy lifestyles. By means of innovation, they want to contribute to society while also guaranteeing the long term success of the organization. In the Netherlands, its head office is located in Amstelveen, and the factory in Nunspeet (Nestlé, n.d.). Employees are diverse and come from all over the world. This is also the case within their Human Resources department, where English is spoken on a daily basis. However, business English differs significantly from the English that is used in everyday life. The business-related jargon which is used in HR departments all over the world has to be acquired from specific courses or learning on the job. While English is the common corporate language at Nestlé (Neeley, 2012), a significant difference between Dutch native speakers and international employees might cause a lack of cohesion within the factory due to a preferred use of Dutch. Power struggles (Takino, 2017) between Dutch-speaking employees and international employees might interfere with the quality of communication within the factory. The question then presents itself whether the English proficiency within the department is adequate for the tasks that the employees have to perform. What action does Nestlé take to ensure good communication within its factory, and can improvements be made? Surveys and interviews will be completed with two participants from the HR department. Their responses will be measured by comparing them to Fredriksson et al.'s (2006) qualifications for a successful common corporate language, while also focusing on

Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen's (2010) definition of English as the business lingua franca (BELF). The conclusions will be based on previous research and the participants' own experiences with English at their workplace, and will determine how BELF is used and whether improvements can be made.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In the Netherlands, the English language is frequently used in the corporate sector. Around 21.3% of all companies in the Netherlands use English to communicate with other organizations in addition to Dutch, and 14.4% of employees converse both English and Dutch with their coworkers (TaalUnie, 2017). According to research conducted by the European Commission (2012), the Netherlands is among the top countries in English proficiency, with 90% of the population claiming to be able to speak English as a foreign language.

English as a means of communication has a pivotal role in the global economy. With over 6000 languages spoken all over the world, the use of a lingua franca, often English, has been instrumental in enabling communication between people, nations, and cultures. Lingua franca communication refers to communication between people with different mother tongues, who interact with each other in a language they both understand with different degrees of proficiency (Hua, 2018). Including non-native speakers, English is the most used language and lingua franca around the globe and, according to Eurostat (2012), it is the most taught foreign language in Europe. However, in countries where English is not the native language, high proficiency in English can be challenging. According to Hummel (2014), there is a significant difficulty to learning a second language with limited exposure. Moreover, for Dutch citizens, speaking English on an everyday basis is rare. Even though English is taught from primary school in the Netherlands until the last year of secondary school (SLO, 2015),

only 56% of people surveyed by the European Commission (2012) claim to be able to read a newspaper or magazine in English. While this number seems low in comparison to the usage of English in a business context, Dutch citizens have a relatively high level of proficiency compared to other countries in Europe (European Commission, 2012). Additional statistics from Eurostat (2019) show that about 48% of Dutch citizens with a position of manager, professional, technician, or associate professional think that they are proficient in their best-known foreign language, which is generally English or German (p. 15). This percentage decreases to as low as 20% when considering other professions, such as clerical support, skilled manual workers, and elementary occupations.

Ever since organizations from all over the world established relations outside of their country of origin, English has been a key aspect in achieving success on an international scale (Takino, 2017). Nestlé originated as a Swiss organization in 1866 (Nestlé, n.d.), but is now one of the largest conglomerates with a big portion of the market share. Despite its Swiss origins, the company has established English as their business lingua franca. For many global organizations, the use of this lingua franca has been beneficial to employers, but also to employees, who are able to work in different countries without possessing the native language (Takino, 2017). Consequently, many international organizations such as Nestlé have a wide range of cultures and languages among employees. Numerous multinational corporations (MNCs) in Europe have chosen English as their “common corporate language”: the language chosen by an organization to be utilized in most or all correspondence (Fredriksson et al., 2006, p. 407). This does not exclude the fact that other languages are still being spoken; Fredriksson et al. identified that a common corporate language is often introduced to “increase efficiency by overcoming misunderstandings, reducing costs, avoiding time-consuming translation and creating a sense of belonging and cohesion within the firm” (p.

409). These criteria, according to the study, are vital to ensure the daily communicative functions to run smoothly. However, while time-consuming translation could be resolved by using a common corporate language, Fredriksson et al. overlook the fact that language trainings and courses can take much time. These will also cost companies a significant amount of money.

While a common corporate language is advocated in many studies, the use of English can be a contributing factor to misunderstandings and problems within a company. According to research by Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012), conversing fluently in English has been proven to be difficult, but also asking for clarifications or facilitating discussions has been deemed challenging. Consequently, employees that use their second language to communicate are frequently under considerable stress according to Hummel (2014, p.21). She explains that adult learners are used to communicating flawlessly, and that “hesitating and stumbling in a second language can be a frustrating and intimidating experience.” L2 learners are often expected to be fluent in English, and as people age, this social expectation can be more intimidating. A study by Takino (2017) investigating native and non-native speakers within the same organization found that, especially when native speakers are present within the company, a “loss of power” has been described to be a main factor of frustration among non-native employees when their linguistic competence is taken away (p. 22). While there are no native English speakers in the factory, some Dutch native employees prefer to use Dutch instead of English, even though some coworkers do not understand the language (anonymous participant, personal communication, 29 May 2020).

As mentioned previously, the level of proficiency in English varies greatly among workers in the Netherlands, but employees who claim to be proficient are never above 50% (Eurostat, 2019). This thesis examines the ubiquitous role of English in the context of

multinational organizations. The term that will be used to define English in a business context is BELF: English as the business lingua franca. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) use the term BELF to describe business-related communication that requires specific jargon in order to be successful. It is not focused on correct linguistics, but rather on clear instructions and content to efficiently transfer information. Specific vocabulary and genre conventions are needed to operate in the business world, which is why BELF differs from standard English that is taught in secondary schools and typical English courses.

While many departments within an organization come into contact with BELF, the Human Resources department suffers additional pressure. According to Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), these employees are responsible for recruitment, complaints, resignations, training, and much more. Their research highlights that this interdepartmental position requires not only an extensive vocabulary but also good proficiency in English to be able to effectively communicate and assist any employee. Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012) emphasize the importance of business English in their research in Malaysia, which is placed in the top 30 countries with best English proficiency alongside the Netherlands (Education First, n.d.). It is clear that many HR employees in Malaysia, regardless of high English proficiency, struggled to keep their expertise current with the rising demand of English proficiency. As well as Fredriksson et al's study, this research highlights that many employees struggle frequently with doing their daily tasks in English, such as writing official documents and communicating with other employees who do not share the same mother tongue.

Even though Nestlé is a Swiss organization, it has adopted English as its common corporate language (Neeley, 2012). According to Neeley, a professor of business administration at Harvard University, Nestlé saw a great efficiency improvement after hiring new employees based on their English proficiency. Although it does not have a language



policy within the Nunspeet factory where this research will occur, the organization advocates the use of English to ameliorate communication between offices worldwide. Nonetheless, the implications that arise within organizations as a result of a common corporate language are rarely discussed. Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) argue that a lack of attention to these implications causes frustration and misunderstanding among employees, without an efficient solution to the problem. Moreover, as Wilson (2001) explained in his book on Human Resources Development, there is a need for foreign language training within organizations in general. Wilson identifies English as a way to gain access to other cultures, which should not be overlooked with regard to cross-cultural empathy and how this can be beneficial to the organization. For example, the book reported that international meetings and phone calls improved significantly when both parties spoke the same language. If employees are willing to make mistakes, refuse to desist when a conversation with an international partner is going awry, and are willing to take risks, both parties will be more satisfied with the business transaction.

This thesis will provide an analysis of Nestlé's approach to good communication and BELF within the HR department of their baby food factory in Nunspeet. P1<sup>1</sup> (personal communication, June 2, 2020) stated that, in addition to food production, this factory also houses the application & technology, engineering, project team, supply chain, finance, HR, and safety and health departments, including the Nestlé Quality Assurance Centre (see Table 1). This implies a vast array of education levels, with both lower educated employees and higher educated employees working in the same facility. The participant also mentioned that an estimated 10% of 355 employees do not speak any Dutch at all. To ensure good communication, Dutch and English courses are provided to all employees whose English or

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<sup>1</sup> See methodology for further information on participants

Dutch is not up to a certain standard. This service is provided by an external partner, Taalbuuro Symbol. This language training business sends multiple teachers to the factory to devise a teaching plan and teach classes on both languages. All employees who are selected by their line manager go through an intake process to determine whether they can apply for language classes. These employees are divided into groups according to their level of proficiency, and then receive classes and homework worth 1.5 hours per week for ten weeks.

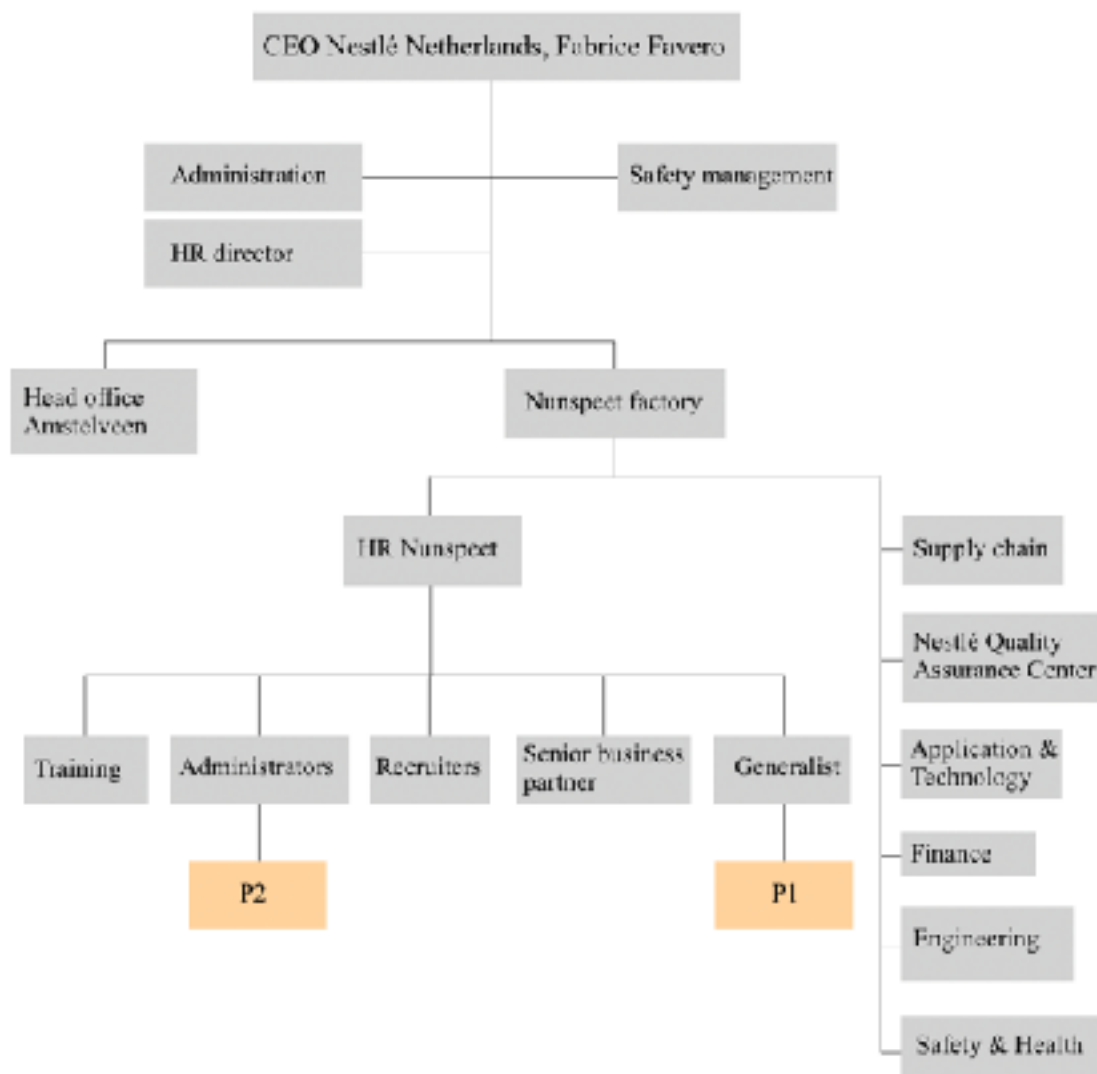


Table 1. Organizational chart Human Resources Nestlé Netherlands

The Nunspeet Human Resources department consists of seven employees who use English to communicate with other employees within the company and with some HR coworkers in their department (Anonymous participant, personal communication, May 29, 2020). The department consists of an HR administrator, one recruiter, a senior business partner, training employees, and one HR generalist (see Table 1). As mentioned previously, these employees are responsible for recruitment, complaints, resignations, trainings, and much more.

This research will investigate whether the average level of English proficiency is sufficient for the job that the HR representatives execute, how using English might affect their performance, and what options for improvement there might be regarding the use of English within the factory. Whether the degree of English proficiency is sufficient will be measured by analyzing how English affects the quality of their work. This will be analyzed after semi-structured qualitative interviews with two employees. It will determine whether the English classes provided by the organization are beneficial to all employees and facilitate in improving the use of BELF. Characterization of BELF in multinational organizations is important for our increased understanding of the problems that might occur, and solutions that can be provided. The research question is as follows: In what ways is English as the business lingua franca used within Nestlé's Human Resources department in Nunspeet, the Netherlands?

There are two subquestions:

SQ 1: To what extent do the participants have suitable English proficiency for their jobs?

SQ 2: To what extent is Nestlé's common corporate language exploited efficiently and beneficially based on the experiences of the two participants?

The last subquestion will be answered by measuring Fredriksson et al.'s requirements of a beneficial common corporate language to the approach to English used by the factory.

### **3. Methodology**

For this research, a qualitative method with interviews was adopted to gain a more detailed understanding of BELF at Nestlé's factory in Nunspeet. This qualitative method does not average out responses and takes into account the individuals' subjective experiences, as explained by Dörnyei (2007). Dörnyei also mentioned that a qualitative approach is open to new details and patterns that may emerge during the study. It focuses on the participants' views on the situation being studied, which is what this study tried to accomplish. A survey was constructed to determine the proficiency of both participants, and to gain a better understanding of how they use English at their job. The survey was used to measure the participants' English proficiency, and how Nestlé accommodates employees who need to improve their English. Based on Schilling's explanation of sociolinguistic interviews in Podesva and Sharma (2013), a semi-structured approach was chosen for a natural conversation, which can provide more insight and/or more detailed answers. Interviews provide insights into the participant's own experiences, while also having the liberty to interpret the meaning of what is being said (Dörnyei, 2007).

#### **3.1 Participants**

Nestlé's HR department consists of seven employees. An email (Appendix A) was sent to the HR administrator (P2) who forwarded the email to the whole department. The HR generalist (P1) responded that they were willing to fill out the survey and do the interview. Both participants perform different tasks within the department that cover a full range of

responsibilities, such as handling complaints and resignations, organizing the department, and communicating with the head office in Amstelveen (see Table 2). The participants can thereby provide an adequate, generalized overview of the department as a whole.

	<b>P1</b>	<b>P2</b>
<b>Position</b>	HR Generalist	HR Administrator
<b>Responsibilities</b>	Middle management, advisor, supervisor, employee evaluations and promotions, absenteeism, evaluation of incidents, mediation.	(Personnel) administration, contracts, letters, all correspondence, absenteeism.
<b>Date of interview</b>	29 May, 2020	9 June, 2020
<b>Duration of interview</b>	16:56 minutes	17:28 minutes

Table 1. Participant information

### 3.2 Materials

Data were collected using a survey and semi-structured interviews. A survey was used to determine the participants' English proficiency, and to gain a more detailed understanding of their position within the organization. The survey (Appendix C) was sent in English, since the ethnicity of P1 was not known at the time of writing. This survey contained six personal questions about the participant and seven questions about their English proficiency. All six personal questions were open-ended. Three of the proficiency questions utilized 5-point Likert scales asking participants to indicate their English proficiency. One question contained a yes/no answer. The remaining three questions were open-ended, asking for a detailed description of the organization and its use of English. Based on the given answers, sixteen individualized interview questions were constructed for P1, and seventeen for P2. The

interview for P1 (Appendix E) contained three questions about their position within the organization, seven questions about communicating with other employees outside of the HR department, and five questions about the organization itself. The interview for P2 (Appendix F) contained two questions about their position within the organization, four questions about communication with coworkers of the HR department, seven questions about employees outside of the department, and four questions about the organization. In order to identify the current situation regarding English proficiency, the questions asked encompassed any problems that the participant might encounter, solutions that are offered, and the involvement of the organization.

### **3.3 Procedure**

The survey was constructed using Google Forms. The link to the online survey was sent to the participants via email on 24 May 2020. They were asked to fill in the survey a couple of days before their interviews, so the answers could be analyzed and used in the interview questions. Once they submitted their answers, they could not return to the questions to change any responses. These responses were saved automatically and could only be viewed on the Google Forms website by the author.

The interviews were in Dutch (Appendix E, F). Prior to the surveys and interviews, the participants were asked to consent to the distribution of their data to the Utrecht University Theses Archive (Appendix B), and the recording of the conversation. Ethical approval was obtained from both of the participants. The interviews were conducted via phone because of COVID-19 quarantine measures at the time of writing (see Table 2 for more information). An inductive approach was adopted to analyze the interviewees' answers. As defined by Hashemnezhad (2015), an inductive approach requires examination and

comparison of the interviews, which are then combined into a statement. It examines the topics and themes emerging from the interviews. While Hashemnezhad describes an inductive approach as a way to generalize all responses, this study set out to consider the participants' responses separately as well to emphasize some of the individuals' divided opinions.

The answers given in the interviews were analyzed to see where possible problems occur, what kind of solutions the employees are provided with or provide themselves, and how they feel about the use of BELF at work. Answers were compared and conclusions were deduced from the presented information in combination with the aforementioned theory on BELF. The data were used to formulate a conclusion and to determine whether applicable advice is to be given to the organization regarding the use of English at the Nunspeet factory.

#### **4. Results**

This research set out to answer the following questions: in what ways is English as the business lingua franca used within Nestlé's Human Resources department? To what extent do the participants have suitable English proficiency for their jobs, and to what extent is Nestlé's common corporate language exploited efficiently and beneficially based on the experiences of the two participants? Answers to the interview questions seem to reveal a significant gap in knowledge of English business jargon. Both P1 and P2 struggle to use business English during their job, and some responsibilities are assigned to other coworkers due to this lack of BELF. P1 and P2 speak to an average of six to eight people a day, and approximately two do not speak Dutch and use English to communicate.

Concerning subquestion one about English proficiency, it seems that both respondents' proficiency is not up to par, although they claim this does not affect their ability to do their job well. First, some background information is given about the participants' proficiency. As

mentioned in the methodology, the survey (Appendix C, D) contained six questions about the participant in question and their current position within the company. Neither of the respondents are expats, as they are both Dutch natives. Both participants speak English, Dutch, and German. English was not a required language when P1 applied for their job, but it was mandatory for P2. P2 mentioned certain English requirements when they applied for their job, but this was not on a business level and was believed to be average. The second section of the survey required respondents to give information on their English proficiency. The overall response was very positive. A question in the survey asked what their average level of proficiency was compared to other employees, P2 replied with average while P1 replied with more advanced than the average. P1 stated that they did not speak English to HR coworkers very frequently, but P2 spoke English more than once a day. P1 speaks to coworkers outside the HR department in English approximately once a day, while P2 speaks English to other coworkers approximately once a week. They both claimed their level of English to be adequate for the job they do. Both respondents obtained their English proficiency from high school, college, and learning on the job. P2 said they had to learn HR jargon throughout the years, but overall they thought it was sufficient for their job. P1 said that their vocabulary was not up to par for their job, after five years of working at the factory. Concerning communication with other employees, both participants mentioned that they struggled sometimes with conversing in English. Google Translate is often used to facilitate them, and was mentioned several times. P2 frequently sent emails instead of using direct verbal communication, because this was easier for them and they could take considerable time to find English translations. However, they do think that the overall communication goes quite well. Overall, vocabulary seemed to be the most difficult factor for both respondents. When asked about written English, P2 mentioned that many documents were handed over to other



employees who possessed a more advanced proficiency in the English language. Some were written by the respondent themselves, but P2 did not have enough knowledge of business English to write most formal documents. P1 stated that they would regularly use Dutch words in English emails when they could not think of the English translation. They claimed this had a satisfactory result. Regarding misunderstandings, P1 mentioned that a frequent problem was the accents of certain coworkers. A solution they use is word repetition and asking questions to make sure the interlocutor comprehends what is communicated to them. They have never experienced an unsatisfying ending to a conversation. Both respondents stated they never experienced any pressure or discomfort when communicating in English. P2 did mention that it takes significantly longer to produce a sentence in English than it does to produce one in Dutch.

Subquestion two was about Nestlé's common corporate language being exploited efficiently and beneficially within the Nunspeet factory. This does not seem to be the case. According to the survey, there were no English requirements for P1's position in the job description. However, when asked whether P1 thought a certain requirement for English proficiency was needed to do their work, they replied that the organization should have asked for a certain degree of English due to the fact that Nestlé is a multinational corporation. There were some requirements for English in P2's job description. In the interview, P2 stated that they did not require a specific level, but that a basic level of English was vital to the job. Concerning communication with employees throughout the factory, P2 mentioned that much information was communicated via memos. These are written in both Dutch and English and are displayed at several locations in the factory. Much communication occurs on the medium Intranet, to which all employees have access. Dutch is the main language used, but much information that is to be read by the whole company is written in English. When asked

whether there was too much English in the factory, P1 said there was not enough of the Dutch language within the factory, since it was a Dutch location. They commented that every employee should speak Dutch, and not English. Interestingly, P2 claimed that there is not enough English within the factory. P1 mentioned courses for English and Dutch were provided by the organization, which could be given one on one or in a group. This is dependent on the proficiency of the employee in question. Some employees join a group for two weeks to learn and speak solely Dutch, but their proficiency declines significantly when they join the organization, since English is often the preferred language of communication. P1 commended the organization for giving enough resources to improve their English and Dutch proficiency. They thought Nestlé provided enough facilities to improve an employee's English or Dutch. Even though courses are available, it seems these are only for employees who require basic English proficiency with no specialization available such as business English. Both participants commented that their proficiency was good enough and no additional courses were needed, as determined by the teachers and the participants themselves. P1 has stated that the environment within the organization surrounding English proficiency is quite lenient; perfect English is not expected of any employee, and asking for clarification is encouraged.

## **5. Discussion**

With respect to the first subquestion it was found that both participants seem to lack the proficiency in business English that is required to perform their tasks. Fredriksson et al. (2006) argue that a common corporate language increases efficiency, reduces costs, avoids time-consuming translation and creates a sense of belonging and cohesion within an organization. While the respondents claim to not experience any problems, much time is spent

on translation. The respondents have mentioned that English has facilitated them in communicating with other employees, thereby increasing efficiency. However, Google Translate was found to cause time-consuming problems. From the interview it seems that P1 struggles with the jargon that is required for their job. While both respondents stated that their level of English is satisfactory for their job, it is clear from both interviews that their communication skills would decline if Google Translate was not an available source. As Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) argued about BELF the most important aspect is vocabulary, and people in a business environment should focus significantly less on grammar. If these requirements are not met, certain information might be unclear and misunderstandings disrupt the work. Both respondents might possess enough English grammar and basic vocabulary. Nonetheless, the findings suggest a lack of business English proficiency which they need for their job. The results showed that both respondents prefer to speak and write in Dutch instead of English. While it seems logical to use Dutch when it is someone's native language and their interlocutor will understand what is being communicated, Wilson (2001) explained that a common corporate language is a way to gain access to other cultures, which can be beneficial to the organization. This theory is applicable to any language used within an organization, but it focuses on the common corporate language that a company enforces. He reiterated the importance of foreign language training, and while Nestlé does provide this service both participants have said that they do not need these resources, even though the respondents reiterated the use of a translation source every day.

The second question sought to determine whether English as the common corporate language was exploited efficiently and beneficially by the Nunspeet factory based on the experiences of the participants. Even though Nestlé has adopted English as the common corporate language, as discussed in Jacob (2003) and Neeley (2012), the criteria of cohesion,

time efficiency and cost efficiency mentioned by Fredriksson et al. do not seem to be applicable to Nunspeet's factory. The employees' differing opinions on the use of English might signify a loss of cohesion within the factory; surprisingly, P2 desired less English within the factory and more Dutch, regardless of English being the common corporate language. The classes taught by Taalbuuro Symbol, while beneficial to the employees, is time-consuming and not cost-effective. It does, however, improve efficiency within the factory, as both participants have mentioned that communication between them and other employees is going well. Fredriksson et al. (2006) and Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012) state that many employees experience pressure while speaking English as their second language, and that asking for clarifications can be challenging. Contrary to expectations, this phenomenon did not occur among the two participants. As P1 mentioned in the survey and in their interview, Nestlé's stance on English proficiency is quite lenient. This relieves the pressure believed to be present when perfect English grammar and pronunciation is expected. No pressure or discomfort are present, and both participants are not afraid to ask a question about a certain word or sentence in English to any of their coworkers. It is interesting to note that some type of power struggle might be present within the factory. The study by Takino (2017) discussed a power struggle between those who speak their native language at their job, and those who do not. While P2 does not seem to have this struggle, P1 mentioned that they would like everyone to speak Dutch. While they do realize that this might be impossible for some of their older employees, they still value the use of Dutch within the factory. However, research within Finnish organization Kone by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) suggests that this can lead to more segregation: some employees found there to be a hierarchy between people who spoke Finnish and the people who did not, despite having English as their common corporate language. While Dutch could be used as the common corporate language at the factory level,

most Europeans already have slight knowledge of English, as it is the most spoken language in Europe as a second or foreign language (European Commission, 2006). Using a language that is already known by many new employees is beneficial to the employer, since it is time and cost-effective. Takino (2017) argues that English is the most important skill to have for professionals who wish to work internationally, since this is often the preferred language. Moreover, a common corporate language such as Nestlé's is instated to make sure every employee can communicate with any coworker within the organization to ensure cohesion, as mentioned by Fredriksson et al. (2012). A horizontal hierarchy regarding language use ensures fewer power struggles among employees.

This study set out with the aim of assessing the use of BELF at the HR department of Nestlé's Nunspeet factory. While Nestlé has ensured a comfortable environment for non-native English speakers, this may have resulted in inadequate English proficiency. As Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012) mentioned in their research, the demand for business English rises every day in the corporate world, and it is sometimes difficult to be met. The results of this study show that both respondents do not seem to possess the required business English jargon that is often used in their profession, even though both participants claim their level of English is good enough for their current job positions. The demands for a successful common corporate language, as mentioned by Fredriksson et al., might be met if more extensive training is implemented. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, however, their study fails to address the question of whether a common corporate language also reduces costs for trainings and resolves any time-consuming issues. Alternatively, hiring employees based on their business English proficiency might be more profitable for the HR department, and may ensure cost efficiency and no loss of valuable time.

## 6. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to investigate the use of BELF within the Human Resources department of Nestlé's Nunspeet factory in the Netherlands. This study has shown that, while regular English is enforced, BELF is not frequently used within the HR department. This leads to the use of external resources, such as Google Translate, and help from other coworkers in regards to communication within the organization. The most important finding to emerge from this study is that much HR-related jargon is not in the participants' vocabulary. This is evident from their frequent use of translation resources to find translations for business-related words. P1 mentioned that they frequently used their phone during a conversation with a coworker to find a specific word. This causes time problems; certain words have to be translated by the participants first in order to communicate effectively with coworkers and employees. Some aspects of the job, such as writing official documents, are transferred to other HR coworkers as a result of a lack of business English. While there are courses available to facilitate the need for better English, these are limited to employees who speak little English. Furthermore, no business English is taught in these classes, and there are no one on one sessions, as these are restricted to basic English vocabulary and grammar. While no immediate negative consequences of a lack of BELF have been reported by the HR generalist and HR administrator, their responses imply that both participants need a more extensive business English vocabulary. The findings suggest that the emphasis on regular English in classes is beneficial to many employees in the factory who are not required to use specific jargon, such as production workers. However, HR employees do not seem to benefit from this scheme.

This work contributes to existing knowledge of BELF, and the way in which it is used in large organizations. There seems to be little focus on business English within the HR

department, and the objective of BELF as an efficient means of communication, as explained by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) does not seem to be used effectively. The HR department does not seem to take advantage of all the benefits of a common corporate language mentioned by Fredriksson et al. (2006): more time could be saved, and work could be completed satisfactorily when the participants have significant knowledge of the common corporate language. Nonetheless, the participants did not feel uncomfortable, nor did they experience any pressure while conversing or writing English, indicating a positive environment in which lower English proficiency is accepted and respected by employees and employers.

The small sample size and the focus on one factory do not provide a representative overview of the way in which BELF is used within the whole HR department or in other HR departments in the Netherlands. The study was limited to interviews and surveys due to the COVID-19 measures at the time of writing. The factory could not be visited for any useful observations. Further research, using a broader range of employees, could shed more light on the use of BELF within the HR department and the factory as a whole. Whilst this study did not point to any directly severe consequences of an absence of BELF, it did partially substantiate the need for more business English within the Human Resources department in the factory. Further research in this field would be of great help in determining the positive impact of using and teaching BELF, and in which way this could be implemented.

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## Appendix

**Appendix A.** Email sent to the HR administrator, including reply. Names and other identifying information have been removed.

Email:

Beste Mevrouw X,

Ik heb uw emailadres verkregen van [...], een collega van [...], betreffende mijn bachelorscriptie. Ik ben een derdejaarsstudente Engelse Taal en Cultuur aan Universiteit Utrecht, en ik ben op het moment bezig met mijn scriptie. Het onderwerp is Engels als communicatietaal op een HR afdeling bij een multinationale organisatie. Nu vroeg ik mij af of dit onderzoek verricht kan worden bij Nestlé, ergens in de komende weken.

Het onderzoek gaat om gesprekken die tussen HR en dergelijke medewerkers gevoerd worden in het Engels, omdat de moedertalen van de gesprekspartners niet overeen komen. Hiervoor zou ik een aantal medewerkers van de desbetreffende HR afdeling willen interviewen, en een vragenlijst zal afgenomen worden. De vragenlijsten kunnen online worden ingevuld. De interviews duren maximaal 30 minuten per persoon, en kunnen telefonisch of via Skype gedaan worden in verband met de Coronamaatregelen. De resultaten van de vragenlijsten en interviews zullen dan geanalyseerd en uitgewerkt worden in mijn scriptie — hierbij hoeven geen namen vernoemd te worden als anonimiteit gewenst is.

Als u mij hierbij kan helpen, of als u verdere vragen heeft, dan hoor ik het graag van u.

Met vriendelijke groet,

Ilona Mol

Reply:

Beste Ilona,

Bedankt voor je mail. Je mag in ieder geval mij en mijn collega [...] (HR Generalist) hiervoor benaderen. Wellicht kan je inderdaad een skype meeting opzetten?

Mijn mailadres heb je, die van mijn collega is: [...]

Ik heb nog een aantal collega's benaderd, wellicht laten deze ook nog wat horen.

Met vriendelijke groet,

## Appendix B. Consent form

Responses cannot be edited

### English as the business lingua franca

This survey is part of a research paper carried out by Utrecht University student Ilona Mol for her bachelor's thesis. This research focuses on English as the business lingua franca at the HR department of a multinational organization in the Netherlands. You will be asked seven questions about your English proficiency and other general information, which will be followed by an interview at a later date. Please answer all questions as honestly as possible. If you prefer not to answer a question, please write X. Some questions will require you to put your answer on a linear scale; other questions will be open-ended.

To ensure complete anonymity, your name will not be publicized in this paper. This thesis will become available in an online database by Utrecht University that is open to the public. Note that if you decide to participate, you may stop participating at any time and you may decide not to answer any specific question.

If you have any questions regarding this survey or any other part of this research, please do not hesitate to contact me at [i.mol@students.uu.nl](mailto:i.mol@students.uu.nl).

By clicking the "I AGREE" button, you consent with your personal data being processed as described above. You have read, understand, and agree to the terms mentioned.

I agree

**Appendix C.** Survey P1 (personal information has been removed)

Question 1: Compared to the level of English you hear/read at your job, what would you say your current level of English proficiency is? 1 = low proficiency, 2 = less than average, 3 = average, 4 = more advanced than the average, 5 = advanced proficiency

Low 1          2          3          4          5 Advanced

Question 2: How often do you speak English with your coworkers from the HR department? 1 = almost never, 2 = once a week, 3 = once a day, 4 = more often than once a day, 5 = I only speak English with my coworkers

Almost never 1          2          3          4          5 I only speak English with my coworkers

Question 3: How often do you speak English when carrying out your job (i.e. talking with other employees of the organization)? 1 = almost never, 2 = once a week, 3 = once a day, 4 = more often than once a day, 5 = I only speak English with my coworkers

Almost never 1          2          3          4          5 I only speak English with my coworkers

Question 4: Do you feel your current level of English proficiency is sufficient for the work you do?

**Yes**

No

I'm not sure

Question 5: When you applied for this position, what were the requirements for your level of English proficiency?

Answer: Not any

Question 6: Is there any training offered by your employer that facilitates you in acquiring English at a more advanced level? If so, what kind of training does your employer provide?

Answer: Niet gehad maar op verzoek wel mogelijk. Klassikaal les of 1 op 1.

Question 7: How did you acquire your current level of English? E.g. high school, university/college, extra courses?

Answer: School, ervaring, door gewoon te doen, google translate, cultuur Nestle is ook niet dat het 100% goed moet, een Nederlands woord er tussen is gewoon prima.

**Appendix D.** Survey P2 (personal information has been removed)

Question 1: Compared to the level of English you hear/read at your job, what would you say your current level of English proficiency is? 1 = low proficiency, 2 = less than average, 3 = average, 4 = more advanced than the average, 5 = advanced proficiency

Low 1          2          3          4          5 Advanced

Question 2: How often do you speak English with your coworkers from the HR department? 1 = almost never, 2 = once a week, 3 = once a day, 4 = more often than once a day, 5 = I only speak English with my coworkers

Almost never 1          2          3          4          5 I only speak English with my coworkers

Question 3: How often do you speak English when carrying out your job (i.e. talking with other employees of the organization)? 1 = almost never, 2 = once a week, 3 = once a day, 4 = more often than once a day, 5 = I only speak English with my coworkers

Almost never 1          2          3          4          5 I only speak English with my coworkers

Question 4: Do you feel your current level of English proficiency is sufficient for the work you do?

**Yes**

No

I'm not sure

Question 5: When you applied for this position, what were the requirements for your level of English proficiency?



Answer: English besides Dutch.

Question 6: Is there any training offered by your employer that facilitates you in acquiring English at a more advanced level? If so, what kind of training does your employer provide?

Answer: No, but sure if I should ask for it.

Question 7: How did you acquire your current level of English? E.g. high school, university/college, extra courses?

Answer: school; MBO and HBO

**Appendix E.** Transcript: interview with P1 (altered to leave out any filler words and irrelevant information such as personal information, indicated with [...]).

I: Ik moet dit nog even opgenomen hebben: heb ik uw toestemming om dit op te nemen?

P1: Ja, natuurlijk

[...]

I: Kun je kort je taken omschrijven?

P1: Ik ben HR generalist slash HR business partner. En wat doe ik dan [...] ik heb de verantwoordelijkheid van een scope van het middle management, dus dat zijn de teamleiders en supervisors. En de manager doet dan het [Management Team]. Daar doen we alle HR gerelateerde taken, behalve administratie en de recruitment, dat is verdeeld onder die andere expertises. Het gaat om evaluaties van mensen hoe het ermee gaat, nieuwe mensen of mensen die promotie krijgen, of mensen die ermee stoppen, om dat te begeleiden. De gesprekkencyclus die daarbij komt kijken. [...] Veel ziekteverzuim, coördinatie daarvan, en natuurlijk alle ad hoc dingen met incidenten die gebeuren, bemiddeling, conflicten hanteren.

I: U benoemde in de vragenlijst dat er geen niveau-eisen worden gesteld aan uw positie. Bent u het eens met deze keuze, of vindt u dat er wel aan een bepaald niveau voldaan moet worden?

P1: [...] Ik denk wel dat dat goed is om dat inderdaad in die vacaturetekst te zetten. En misschien dat het ook benoemd kan worden in het gesprek of naar gevraagd kan worden. Ik denk dat iets van een test of certificaat te ver gaat voor mijn functie, dat is niet nodig. Ik denk wel dat de HR administrators meer Engels spreken.

I: Was u op de hoogte van het feit dat u wel Engels moest spreken met sommige medewerkers, of kwam u daar pas achter toen u werd aangenomen?

P1: Ja en nee, ik had wel zoiets van het is een multinational, dus er zal wel wat Engels bij zitten. Al doende heb ik heel veel bij geleerd. Ik was wel heel erg jong toen ik begon, ik was 21 of 22? Dus dan denk ik dat je überhaupt niet zo goed weet waar je aan begint, dus ik was daar niet echt mee bezig. Maar het kwam niet als een verrassing ofzo voor mij.

I: Hoeveel verschillende mensen spreekt u ongeveer op een dag voor uw werk, en hoeveel daarvan spreken geen Nederlands? Heeft u een indicatie?

P1: Op een normale dag, ik spreek zelf niet zoveel medewerkers ik spreek meer hun lijnmanagers. Er zitten wel 1 of 2 Engelsen bij. Laten we zeggen ongeveer 6 mensen per dag die ik spreek.

I: Loopt u ergens tegenaan in de communicatie?

P1: Ik heb op zich wel een slecht vocabulaire, daar red ik mij niet altijd mee, maar goed ik moet zeggen ik Google dan ondertussen op Google Translate en dan is het ook wel prima. Ik moet zeggen, de mensen die hier komen zijn over het algemeen expats die Engels spreken, die beseffen zich heel goed dat een hele fabriek in Nunspeet zich aan hen probeert aan te passen. En daar hebben ze niet hele hoge standaarden voor. Er is geen afgewezen cultuur als ik iets niet goed doe ofzo. We beseffen allemaal wel van we zijn in Nederland he, met allemaal buitenlandse mensen en we moeten het doen met elkaar. En als ik daar een keer een Nederlands woord tussendoor gooi dan weten hun wel vaak in het Duits wat het betekende, of ik Google ondertussen even op Google Translate, en dat zeg ik dat ook gewoon. En dat is ook gewoon oke. Dus ik ondervind daar geen problemen van ofzo. Het is vooral een stukje cultuur eromheen.

I: Wat vind je echt goed gaan tijdens de communicatie? Bijvoorbeeld qua oplossingen, zoals Google Translate die je al noemde.

P1: Ja [Google Translate] is eigenlijk wel voldoende voor mijn werk. Ik heb geen externe verantwoordelijkheid, wat ik doe is heel intern gericht. Het maakt dus niet heel veel uit of ik fouten maak. Ik denk dat ook dat misschien wel anders is voor de HR administrators. Die spreken ook met buitenlandse collega's. [...]

I: Stel je gesprekspartner kan niet goed uitleggen wat hij of zij bedoelt in het Engels, wat doet u dan?

P1: Ja over het algemeen, de expats die komen die spreken allemaal echt fantastisch Engels eigenlijk. Maar als het heel moeilijk wordt dan zou ik ze gewoon vragen om het voor hun zelf even in Google Translate te zetten en mij wat woordjes te sturen bijvoorbeeld. Wat dat betreft is het heel laagdrempelig. Ik ondervind daar geen moeilijke situaties van ofzo. De mensen zijn heel behulpzaam en begripvol daarin.

I: Dus er is nooit een gesprek geweest waarvan je dacht, "dit is niet gelopen zoals ik wilde"?

P1: Nee, nee. Ik heb wel laatst een salarisvoorstel gedaan, dat was een Mexicaan. Dat is ook nog wel weer met een heel accent, dat vind ik dan wel lastiger. Maar dan is het maar net hoe je er zelf mee omgaat, dan blijf ik het gewoon herhalen en checken of ik het goed hoor en goed begrijp, en in zulke situaties als het wel uitmaakt dat we elkaar goed begrijpen, zoals bij een salarisvoorstel, dan stuur ik er gelijk een mailtje achteraan. En dan ga ik er vanuit dat hij hierop terug mailt als hij het niet begrijpt. Maar eigenlijk gaat het wel goed.

I: En als je echt kijkt naar geschrift, hoeveel schrijft u dan in het Engels?

P1: Alleen mailtjes af en toe.

I: En dat gaat wel gewoon prima zonder problemen, behalve dan met Google Translate soms?

P1: Ja, eigenlijk wel. En ook van een aantal mensen waarvan ik weet dat ze een aantal Nederlandse woorden kunnen typ ik er ook wel wat Nederlandse woorden bij. Of mijn grammatica is niet goed. Maar in mijn functie is de taal niet het belangrijkste. Als ik een keer

de grammatica niet goed heb dan doe ik dat gewoon en dan vind ik het goed zo. Ik vind het zonde om tien minuten bezig te zijn met een mailtje om het perfect Engels te maken.

I: Je zou niet zeggen dat je echt druk ervaart tijdens het Engels spreken, je vindt het wel gewoon makkelijk afgaan?

P1: Ja, ja prima.

I: En je vindt het ook niet ongemakkelijk?

P1: Nee.

I: [...] U praat ook met het hoofdkantoor in Amstelveen — praat u daar ook weleens Engels mee, en zo ja, hoe verloopt deze communicatie?

P1: Dat doe ik eigenlijk weinig. Er zijn wel samenwerkingsverbanden gestart. We hebben dus wel met de HR businesspartner een samenwerkingsverband opgericht. Ik moet zeggen dat loopt nog niet heel actief in verband met Corona [...].

I: Je benoemde in de vragenlijst dat de organisatie klassikaal of 1 op 1 lesgeeft in Engels als men dat graag wil. Kan je deze keuze zelf maken tussen klassikaal of 1 op 1? Weet u iets van de kwaliteit van deze lessen?

P1: [...] Afhankelijk van het niveau word je in niveau A, een paar mensen in niveau B, en 1 iemand krijgt 1 op 1 les. Volgens mij is dat echt op basis van het niveau. Dat zal wel op verzoek moeten zijn van de line manager. We staan wel voor ontwikkeling, en dat is allemaal heel mooi, maar het moet wel wat betekenen voor je functie. Dus dat zal wel relevant moeten zijn voor je werk, en nodig moeten zijn voor je niveau. Ik denk niet dat ik daarmee aan hoeft te komen, ja ik hoef niet echt veel Engels te praten.

[...]

I: Vind je dat het bedrijf voldoende hulp biedt bij de communicatie tussen HR en andere medewerkers in het Engels?

P1: Ja, ik ervaar er zelf gewoon niet zo problemen mee. En het lijkt me wel vanzelfsprekend als je bij een multinational gaat werken, en zeker ook het opleidingsniveau op de afdeling HR is toch wel HBO, ja ik denk dat je dan mag verwachten dat iedereen goed Engels spreekt. Of dat ze zelf aangeven als dit niet het geval is. In die zin vind ik het eigenlijk wel oke gaan.

I: Welke onderdelen van je werk worden alleen in het Engels gedaan?

P1: De HR business partner meeting. Verder eigenlijk niet echt. Als ik mijn manager moet vervangen in het MT. En natuurlijk mijn 1 op 1 gesprekken met Engelse line managers. [...]

I: En vind je dat er teveel of te weinig in het Engels gecommuniceerd wordt?

P1: Ik denk op zich teveel. Voor mijzelf vind ik het niet zoveel erg, en ik betrap mezelf er wel op dat ik snel Engels gebruik als ik weet dat iemand niet van Nederlandse afkomst is. Maar ik vind eigenlijk, voor onze fabriek, weet je we zijn in Nederland, we zijn een Nederlandse fabriek, vind ik wel dat Nederlands ook de voertaal moet zijn. En daar heb je gewoon te maken met jongens in de fabriek die niet allemaal een talenknobbel hebben of een HBO diploma met vanzelfsprekend Engels erin. En daar moeten we wel rekening mee houden. Vaak als expats naar Nederland komen dan worden ze naar de nonnen gestuurd en wordt er twee weken alleen maar Nederlands gesproken. Die komen daar Nederlands sprekend van terug, maar het kost moeite om dit vol te houden. Ik merk dat wij zelf snel overschakelen naar Engels, terwijl we eigenlijk gewoon Nederlands moeten blijven praten.

[...]

**Appendix F.** Transcript: interview with P2 (altered to leave out any filler words and irrelevant information such as personal information, indicated with [...]).

I: Oke nu ik aan het opnemen ben, kan je herhalen dat ik je toestemming heb om dit op te nemen?

P2: Ja.

[...]

I: Kan je je taken omschrijven?

P2: Ik ben werkzaam als HR administrator, en dat betekent dat ik onder andere samenwerk met collega's om samen alle administratie, alle personeelsadministratie wat hier gebeurt zeg maar, de contracten, de brieven, de contracten met het UWV, alle correspondentie dat je je erbij kan bedenken. Dus van werkgever naar werknemer. De personeelsadministratie, verzuimsysteem.

I: Deze contracten, zijn die in het Nederland of in het Engels?

P2: Ja alles, de arbeidsovereenkomsten is in het Nederlands. Het merendeel wat hier werkt spreekt ook Nederlands zeg maar.

I: In de vragenlijst benoemde u dat er bepaalde niveau-eisen worden gesteld aan uw positie/ Wat voor niveau was dit?

P2: Ik denk gewoon gemiddeld, echt om te kunnen communiceren met collega's. Er was niet een advanced niveau vereist. Maar je moet je voorstellen dat ik ook met HR collega's uit het buitenland converseer, en Engels is niet hun voertaal en die van mij ook niet, dus voor ons is het allebei het makkelijkste om in het Engels te communiceren. Maar dit is heel informeel eigenlijk. We hebben natuurlijk een aantal medewerkers die geen Nederlands spreken, en dat is prima. En dan converseer ik ook in het Engels. Maar dat is eigenlijk het Engels wat ik ooit

op school heb geleerd, en nog steeds in mijn werk gebruik. Dat is op zich niet heel zakelijk Engels.

I: En hoeveel verschillende mensen spreek je ongeveer op een dag voor je werk?

[...]

P2: Ik denk zeker wel een stuk of 8. [...] Zeker wel 2 spreken Engels.

I: Ondervind je enige problemen met betrekking tot de communicatie tussen u en uw HR collega's?

P2: Ja, soms wel. Maar we converseren ook via Skype en per mail, qua documenten. En dat helpt wel vaak om dingen te verhelderen. Het is in de Skype call ook lastig om met veel mensen tegelijk elkaar goed te begrijpen en te horen.

I: En als je ergens tegenaan loopt, worden er dan oplossingen voor bedacht? Zoals Google Translate bijvoorbeeld?

P2: Dat gebruik is inderdaad wel zelf [Google Translate]. Als ik moeite heb om een bepaald woord te vinden. Nu je het zegt, ik gebruik het inderdaad wel regelmatig. Het is een soort informeel contact. En dan zeg ik gewoon 'ik weet niet wat het Engelse woord is voor...' nou ja soms weet iemand anders het dan wel.

I: Wat vind je goed gaan qua communicatie tussen jou en de HR collega's?

P2: Ondanks dat we werken op afstand, er zit een heel team in Oekraïne en in Spanje. We doen wel goede dingen, goed voor global. We werken volgens global standaarden, en dat proberen we ook duidelijk te maken voor de medewerkers hier.

I: Is al het jargon dat komt kijken bij een HR medewerker altijd duidelijk te begrijpen in het Engels, of moet u woorden weleens opzoeken?



P2: Nee, ikzelf eigenlijk niet. Hiervoor heb ik ook bij een grote Amerikaanse organisatie gewerkt, dus daar sprak ik veel meer werken. Ik merk wel dat mensen die niet die ervaring hebben weleens moeite hebben zeg maar.

I: Dus je leert het echt wel een beetje tijdens je baan.

P2: Ja, zeker.

I: Dus over medewerkers buiten HR. Loopt u daarin ergens tegenaan in de communicatie

[...]

P2: We gebruiken Intranet en we gebruiken een email adres. Als wij dingen willen doorgeven zoals een memo, dan wordt die via email verstrekt. Vooralsnog eigenlijk altijd in het Nederlands. Soms toevallig gaat er vanmiddag een memo uit, en die hebben we toevallig ook in het Engels opgesteld, dus dan Nederlands eerst en daaronder in het Engels. Zo doen we het steeds vaker, maar het is wel iets wat we zelf moeten vertalen, dus dan is het makkelijker om in het Nederlands te doen. Dat is dus per email via ons Intranet. We hebben ook nog fysieke memoborden.

I: Worden deze memo's ook begrepen door iedereen?

P2: Nee op zich wel, gaat prima. Soms krijgen we wat aanvullende vragen, maar dat is meer praktisch.

I: Stel uw gesprekspartner kan niet goed uitleggen wat hij of zij bedoelt in het Engels ,wat doet u dan?

P2: Dan blijf ik het wel proberen denk ik, ik heb geen alternatief ofzo. In het Engels reddend we ons meestal wel met handen en voeten.

I: Wordt er ook gebarentaal gebruikt als het lastiger gaat?

P2: Nee, niet dat ik weet.

I: Heeft u ooit gesprekken gehad waar er geen bevredigend einde kwam aan het gesprek?

Door een misverstand bijvoorbeeld?

P2: Nee, niet echt eigenlijk.

I: U noemde ook documenten, moet u heel veel schrijven in het Engels?

P2: Nee, zeker niet. Het is ook niet mijn expertise, dus als iemand het beter kan, dan doe ik dat graag. Zakelijk schrijven vind ik toch wel wat anders. Ik doe het weleens uit mezelf, ik krijg weleens emails van collega's in het Engels en dan antwoord ik in het Engels terug, maar dat hoeft ik niet te doen. Ik doe het wel om soms iets duidelijker, om die collega tegemoet te komen.

I: En als je Engels spreekt of schrijft, ervaar je dan ook weleens druk?

P2: Nee, maar het duurt wel wat langer. Het kan wel frustrerend zijn als ik soms niet op een woord kan komen ofzo.

I: Dus je voelt je ook niet oncomfortabel erbij?

P2: Nee.

I: Vind je dat het bedrijf voldoende hulp biedt bij de communicatie tussen HR en andere medewerkers in het Engels?

P2: Ja, ik denk dat dit wel goed gaat. Ik weet dat er bepaalde cursussen zijn die mensen kunnen volgen als ze dat nodig vinden. Dus ja.

[...]

I: Zijn er enige aspecten aan je baan die volledig in het Engels zijn?

P2: Niet echt, Nestlé's online systeem is beschikbaar in meerdere talen, dus ik kan alles in het Nederlands doen.

I: Vind je dat er teveel Engels is in de fabriek op het moment?

P2: Ik denk te weinig, ten minste voor deze fabriek. Maar sommige mensen werken hier al 40 jaar, dus de gemiddelde leeftijd is aardig hoog. Ik heb natuurlijk veel Engels op school geleerd. Ik denk niet dat het echt nodig is, alleen.