

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## ANALYSING THE FEASIBILITY OF LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPING IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IN A CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

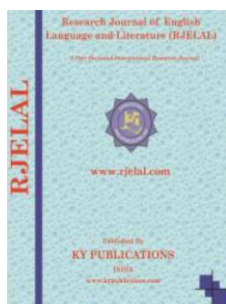
SURAJIT SEN

Ph. D. Research Scholar

EFL University, Shillong Campus

E-mail: [surajitsen.wcs@gmail.com](mailto:surajitsen.wcs@gmail.com)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.374>



### ABSTRACT

Post liberalisation and the opening of world market economies have resulted in the growth of globalisation. This has brought in newer prospects for the growth of multinational companies around the world. With time, this has resulted in the demand for better work force. This requirement has been fulfilled by the diasporic employees leading to displacement of people on account of better job opportunities around the world. However, challenges have also surged with the commissioning of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural workforce within an organization. Not just that, but also the clientele has also become multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Inter-cultural and cross-cultural dynamics within and without these organisations have created several problems, especially in terms of business communication. Inability to understand cultural variations often lead to conflicts and misunderstandings blocking the smooth passage of business communication. Linguistic landscaping (LL) can be seen as a way to minimise, if not totally control this situation. LL is language of signs and bill-boards in commercial places. It is now extensively used in commercial offices as a means to inform the public in general about the workings of the office. No doubt, this has helped in reducing cultural hiccups, but a lot need to be done.

Taking cue from this, this paper tries to analyse whether LL can be used as a means to mitigate the issues and challenges that usually emerge during business communication in a cross-cultural setting. Much thrust has been given on the use of non-verbals in a cross-cultural business setting, where major stumbling blocks erupt in business communication.

**Key words:** linguistic landscaping, business communication, non-verbals, cross-culture

### 1. Introduction

Globalisation has rendered the world into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural village. Changing dynamics of economics resulting in better socio-economic opportunities have led to displacement of people both within and outside a country. Growth of diaspora is proof of this fact. With a surge in newer

prospects, especially in multi-national companies, there has also been a synonymic swelling of diasporic communities joining the work force. Cross-cultural dynamics in an organizational set-up creates one of the biggest impediments in business communication. Linguistic and cultural variations often lead to conflicts and misunderstandings

creating blockades in the communication process. A feasible solution to this hindrance could be linguistic landscaping within the organization.

## **2. Hypotheses:**

To verify whether linguistic landscaping can be a feasible way to avoid communication hiccups in a cross-cultural business setting, the following hypothesis is set:

Linguistic landscaping in business communication is feasible and it can mitigate problems issuing from cross-culturalism.

## **3. Methodology:**

To ascertain the verifiability of the said hypotheses, a pilot study has been conducted in the city of Shillong, Meghalaya. The target groups have been the employees of business entities like banks, post offices and corporate houses on the one hand and on the other, the consumers/customers who maintain business transactions with them.

## **4. Data Source:**

The sources of data are both primary and secondary. Primary data has been collected from the aforesaid business offices in the city of Shillong, Meghalaya primarily by means of structured questions. Secondary data has been collected from published works based on linguistic landscaping, business communication and cross-cultural communication.

## **5. Sample:**

The technique of simple random sampling has been employed here. The sample size taken is 100 (hundred), with 30 (thirty) for employees and 70 (seventy) for customers.

## **6. Business Communication:**

Business communication is often described as the sending and receiving of both verbal and non-verbal messages (Murphy, Hildebrandt, & Thomas: 1997; Roebuck: 2001; Ober: 2001). This definition is further enhanced by Hanna and Wilson (1998), who state that business communication is the process by which messages are generated, transmitted, received and interpreted through verbal or non-

verbal means in an organizational setup. Hynes (2005), states that business communication is the way by which organisations plan, lead, organise and control their resources to achieve their objectives. This communication can be either formal or informal in nature. Looking into the functional aspects of business communication, Argenti (2007) opines that it includes media relations, online communications, marketing, product communications, internal communications, community relations and product advertising.

The importance of business communication can be understood from the fact that it is required for exchanging information and opinions, making plans and proposals, making agreements and decisions, sending, receiving, and executing orders and sales. This view has been widely accepted by learners, practitioners and teachers alike, who feel that communication is the lifeline of any business organization. (Blalock, 2005; Kotler, 2006).

Business communication as a skill is highly valued by business employers and employees alike. They feel that having good communication skills is vital for the organizational success (Dilenschneider, 1992; Rushkoff, 1999; Certo, 2000; Roebuck, 2001; Du-Babcock, 2006). Philip Kotler (2006), views communication as a means by which an organization makes attempts to apprise and advise, influence and convince, and remind customers, either directly or indirectly, about the goods, services and brands which they are selling. In this sense, Kotler (2006) says that communication signifies the voice and opinion of the brand. It is a way by which the gap between the customers and the sellers is bridged creating a healthy means of dialogue for a better relationship.

Shockley-Zalabak posits that organizational communication is "both similar to and distinct from other types of communication" (1999: 28). It is further stated that communication within an organization is just more than the diurnal interactions among those who work in a firm. In fact, it is the process by which a firm creates and shapes occasion. Shockley-Zalabak (1999) continue to state that the study of business communication focuses on the methods and procedures of

interaction by means of which individuals within and outside the organization are able to acquire information, develop opinions, attain decisions, make agreements on mergers and acquisitions, enter and leave organizations, and establish proper relationship with one another. It is through communication that individuals in an organization are able to synchronise their actions to attain and accomplish organizational and individual targets.

Effective communication takes place when the intended meaning of the sender or encoder and the perceived meaning of the receiver or decoder are essentially the same although this should be the goal in any communication, it is not always achieved. Effective communication should occur at a minimum cost in terms of resources spent, for example, time, which is an important resource (Alamry and Alghalby, 2007).

The necessity of business communication can be understood from the fact that if the employees of an organization do not possess sound communication skills, then there is bound to be lack of coordination among teams and groups. All their efforts to find feedback from workers and managers alike will be affected. Customers would then have a tough time in placing orders as the services required to deliver the orders would surely consume a lot of time. With this happening, the company will stumble and eventually fail (Nelson and Economy, 2005). If the companies and their managers do not encourage the employees to develop better communication skills, then it suffers from a high rate of risk in that they do not utilise their resources to the optimum and falter in their strengths (Vicker and Hein, 1999).

## **7. Linguistic Landscaping:**

Landry and Bourhis (1997), the exponents of the term linguistic landscape, define it as the “visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region” (23) in their seminal work *Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study*. Further they state that it is “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings [which] combines to form the

linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (25). Expanding the range of this definition, Shohamy and Gorter have incorporated to linguistic landscape the “language in the environment, words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces” in *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery* (2009: 1). Redefining linguistic landscape, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) state that it is “any sign or announcement located outside or inside a public institution or a private business in a given geographical location” (14) in their work *Linguistic landscape as symbolic construction of the public space: The case of Israel*.

The basic premise of linguistic landscape (LL) analysis is that visual language use in public spaces represents observable manifestations of circulating ideas about multilingualism (Shohamy, 2009: 110). The LL constitutes the very scene made of streets, corners, circuses, parks, buildings where society’s public life takes place. As such this carries crucial socio-symbolic importance as it actually identifies and thus serves as the emblem of societies, communities, and regions (Hult 2009: 90). To Hult (2009), the basic premise of LL analysis is that visual language use in the public spaces represents observable manifestations of circulating ideas about multilingualism (Shohamy 2006: 110). LL analysis is concerned with how a specific public space is symbolically constructed “by a large variety of factors such as public institutions, associations, firms, individuals, that stem from most diverse strata and milieus” (Ban-Rafael 2006: 8).

## **8. Cross-culturalism:**

Different cultural groups speak a different language. Diversity of language is and should always be respected and by all. However, in many situations people are subjected to differential treatment because of the language they speak. It is because their preferred language is different from the one used for official or business purposes and is seen to be associated with a particular class or category. Discrimination occurs when a prejudicial treatment is levied upon a particular person or a group of people who speak and use a particular language, which may be their mother tongue. It is a known fact that communication is made through the use of

language. Language uses words to convey ideas. There may be times when the language used by a native speaker which is his/her second language may not be grammatically correct or the words may not be placed in the proper order or even pronounced properly. In such situations, communication still takes place as there is a considerable amount of understanding between or among people. However, if the words are not used correctly, as in to say semantically and lexically, then communication is bound to break as understanding becomes difficult. This could be because of one's mother tongue where certain words do not have an equivalent replacement for the second language used, or if the speaker merely translates from his/her mother tongue to the second language. Pragmatically too, language can affect the flow of communication when it comes to interaction in second language. A word in one language could mean totally different in another. Though the speakers of second language make a considerable effort to enhance their pragmatic knowledge, yet cultural aspects remain causing much problem thereby affecting pragmatic knowledge as both the languages spoken and learnt do not meaningfully connect.

Culture is seen as something that shapes our values and provides us with an identity which makes us different from one another. Cultural identities are framed on the basis on one's country of origin, race, ethnicity, gender and religion. In an organizational set-up, where there are workers hailing from different cultural identities, miscommunication is inevitable. In situations such as this, miscommunication could lead to conflicts. However, on a careful study of such conflicts, it can be found that the root of such conflicts heavily lie on the lack or inability on the part of one or both the communicators in understanding each other's cultural variations. As such, it becomes imperative to study cross cultural communication which looks at how communication should be processed with people of varying cultural backgrounds working and communicating with each other. Cultural conflicts can only arise when the values and norms of behaviour differ culture-wise. One may misunderstand the values and norms of the other as

one may not uphold the others' views leading to the creation of misunderstanding arising into conflict. Culture plays an important role in the way one thinks, sees, hears and interprets. Hence, the same words or non-verbal signs can have different connotations to people from a different culture, even though they may be using the same second language. Further, in cases of translation, the risk for misunderstanding is greater as both the parties concerned in the process of communication do not understand each other. Cultural differences could arise from the following factors too:

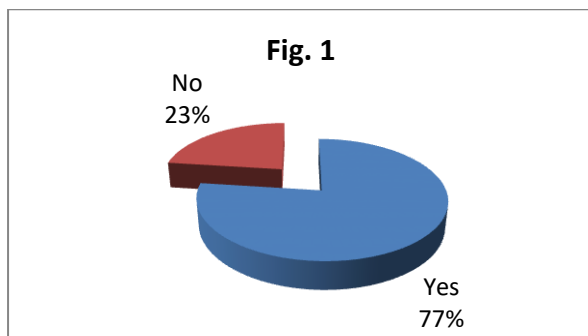
- Behaviours
- Semantics
- Word connotations
- Tone differences
- Differences of perception
- Non-Verbal messages conveyed through body movements, facial expressions, and the physical distance between the sender and receiver

#### **9. Data analysis:**

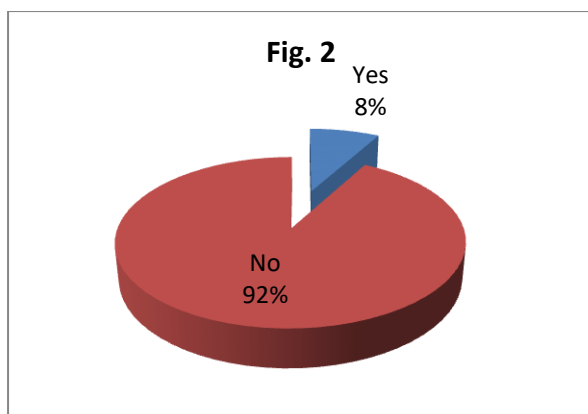
It is but clichéd to state that most of the business communication transacted in India and abroad is done by the usage of the English language. In India, majority of the educated masses have a considerable knowledge of English, in as much as to say that they are able to read or write or speak English. However, there are many who still do not know the language. They may either be conversant in their Mother Tongue or first language, or in Hindi, a common language of conversation among Indians, though many still do know how to read or write in Hindi. In such a situation, understanding business communication and carrying it forward to get the desired result is at times herculean. Keeping this in mind, 5 (five) questions each were asked to a group of both employees and customers to find out their opinion on the problems they face because of a multi-cultural workforce or customer line. Data has been collected from 3 (three) banks, 2 (two) post offices, and 2 (two) corporate offices (mobile service providers). The analysis of the same is provided as:

#### Employees

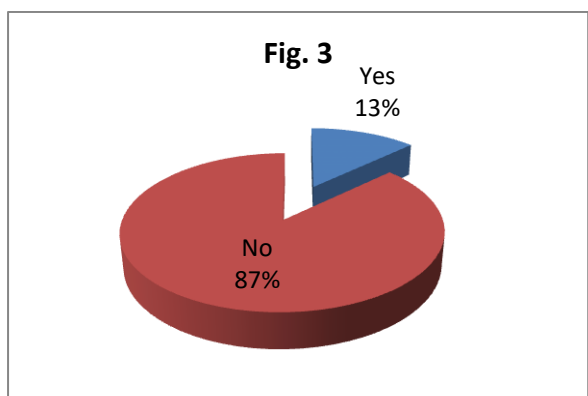
1. Do you think it is difficult to communicate with your customers who perhaps do not understand a common language (herein English)?



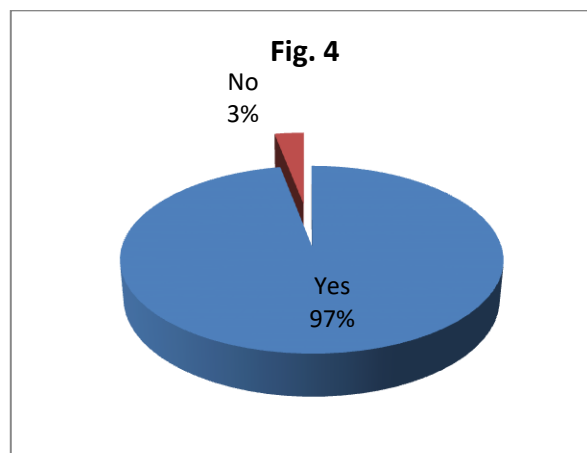
2. Are there any Verbal means of communication (herein written) in multi-language for the benefit of employees and customers?



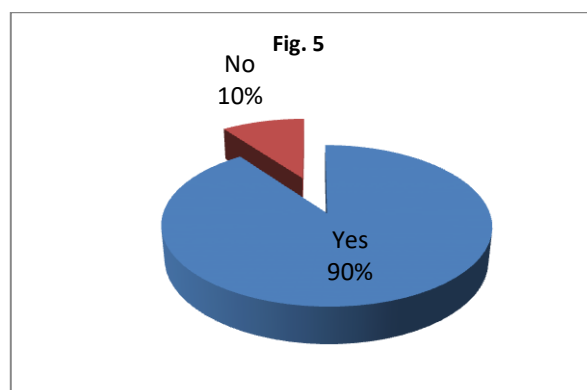
3. Does your organisation provide proper signboards in multi-language for easy dissemination of information to the customers?



4. Do you feel it would be better if multi-lingual signboards were put up in your office?

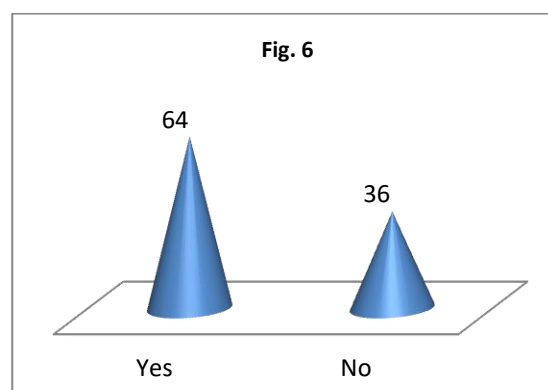


5. Do you feel, much of the errors that arise because of not understanding the written language (herein English) by many could be solved by multi-lingualism?

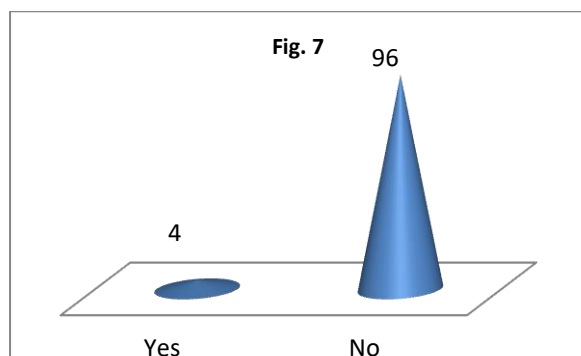


#### Customers

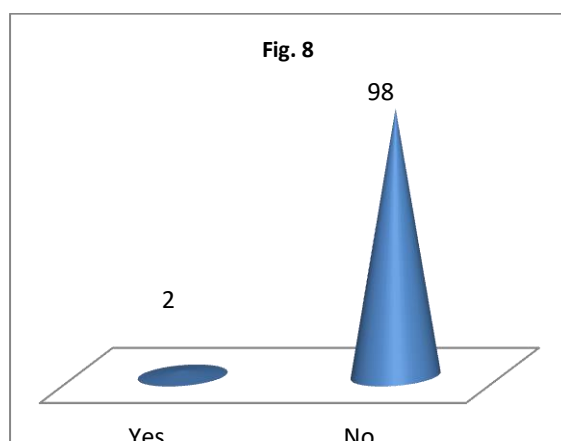
1. Do you think it is difficult to communicate with employees who perhaps do not understand the language in which you converse?



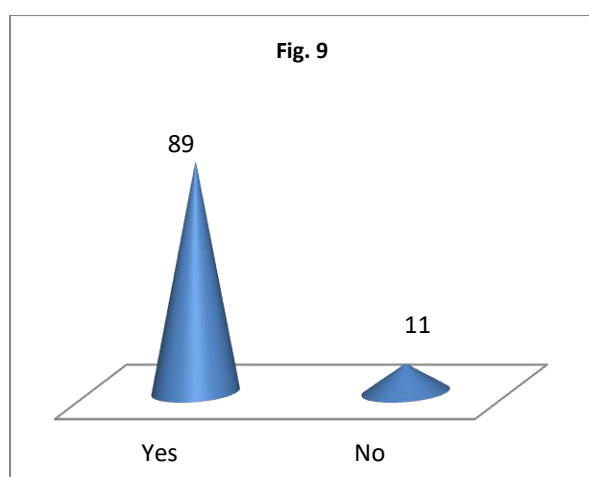
2. Do companies or offices provide you with such documents which are written in languages other than English for you the read and understand (herein may be your mother tongue or any other language)?



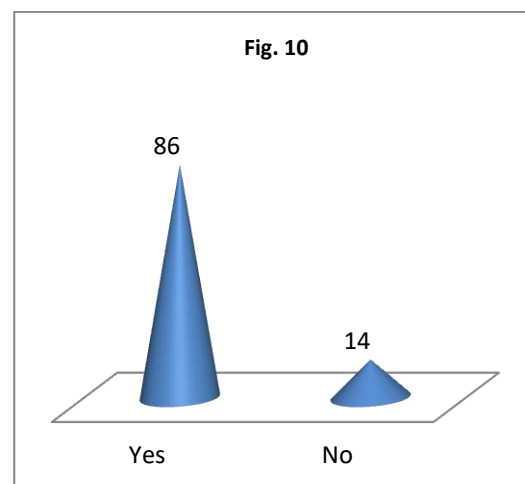
3. Does your organisation provide proper signboards in multi-language for easy dissemination of information to you?



4. Do you feel it would be better if multi-lingual signboards were put up at public offices?



5. Do you feel, much of the errors that arise because of not understanding the written language (herein English) by many could be solved by multi-lingualism?



#### 10. Data interpretation:

Form the data that has been analysed above, the following table is made:

Item	Employee		Customer	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Difficulty to communicate who do not understand a common language (herein English)	77%	23%	64%	36%
Use of any multi-lingual means of verbal communication for benefit of employees and customers	8%	92%	4%	96%
Use of signboards in multi-language	13%	87%	2%	98%
Use of multi-lingual signboards will be better	97%	3%	89%	11%
Errors can be solved by multi-lingualism	90%	10%	86%	14%



From this table, it is clear that both employees and customers do face difficulty in communicating with each other when the common language (herein English) is not properly understood by both the employees and customers. It is understood here that though people understand the English language and are able to speak, read and write in English, yet there are some who are incapable of doing the same. This becomes a major problem in communication in any organization where the major stake holders of the organization, i.e., the customers are unable to communicate properly with their service provider due to language barrier.

In situation like this, LL in communication can be of serious benefit to customers as well as the organization at large. However, the irony is this that organizations do not provide such amenities that would benefit both the parties. From the survey conducted, it is clear that organizations do not offer multi-lingual means of verbal communication, (herein written documents) for conduct of proper business transactions. It has been found that the forms/performas, etc., which are provided by organizations to the customers are usually written in English. In some places only, the use of Hindi as a substitute language is found. Moreover, it is often difficult to understand the jargons used in those forms by the customers. Many-a-times, the forms are not filled in properly by the customers because they are unable to understand what it means. This has been noted in several cases in banks and in mobile service providers' office. More than often, customers are stranded in the offices finding it difficult to locate the exact counter they are to visit due to lack of proper indications in other language. It is seen that almost all the offices have signboards inside, but all of them are usually written in English. However, the post offices provide signboards in other languages too, as the use of Hindi and Khasi has been seen. This is definitely problematic for those who do not understand English. At times, customers are made to run from table to table to get to the right place for doing their work. As such, it is felt that such signboards indicating all necessary communication should be put up in the offices for better understanding and communication. Majority

of the respondents feel that if multi-lingualism is used in the forms/performas, then it will surely help them in understanding the forms well and the amount of errors will be reduced.

#### **11. Business Communication and Linguistic Landscaping: Assimilation in business cross-culturalism:**

It is yet to be tested whether LL can be used in Business Communication keeping in mind that Business Communication deals mostly with business transactions. Since, LL mostly deals with public and commercial signs, hence, using LL for business communication within the office of an organization will require some serious thoughts. It is, however, important to note that in today's world, the workforce is diverse and so are the customer bases. Multi-culturalism is the tone of today's business entities. Clientele of business houses are varied and they are from different cultural background. As such, differences in understanding communication leading to communication barriers and blockades will be there.

In this regards, Linguistic Landscaping can be a novel way to overcome those barriers created by multi-culturalism. From the interpretation of the data that has been analysed, it is clear that employees as well as customers feel that LL can help them in the long run to assist in the smooth flow of business communication.

#### **12. Conclusion**

Linguistic Landscaping is undoubtedly a major tool to solve various issues relating to multi-culturalism and cross-culturalism. Much of it is yet to be explored and more needs to be studied and analysed from diverse points of views. One such aspect of analysing LL is with Business Communication. Through this paper, attempt was made at understanding the feasibility of using LL in business communication in a cross-cultural business setting. It is understood from the data collected and analysed that LL is very essentially required by offices for their daily business transactions keeping in mind that both their workforce and their clientele are culturally varied. Problems arising due to cross-cultural communication can be largely mitigated if LL

is used for any form of verbal business transaction in the offices. Thus, the hypothesis stands valid in this case.

### 13. Recommendation

Based on the study conducted, it is, therefore, suggested that companies/offices may try using LL in business communication within the precincts of their office. Also, the same can be tried with all types of forms and performas which are used by customers for any type of intimation or official work, like the forms for withdrawal/deposit of money in banks, or in post offices. The same can also be tried in mobile service providers offices too, where client bases are culturally vast and varied.

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