

Languages and Culture: the pillars of international projects

Let me start my talk with two quotes:

I chose these two quotes because I firmly believe in the power of languages and culture in shaping our world.

I also believe that these two fundamental human attributes, language and culture, will become more and more important in the years to come, as we develop and change into a true global community.

Multinational strategists, shareholders and stock market analysts might have very different views... But in the end, their businesses, their profit margins are as much subjected to the power of languages and culture as any other international project, whether it is scientific, in our case with ITER, or simply educational.

My talk will be short as I know we all want to get started as quickly as possible. These are the points I would like to cover.

What do I mean by an international project?

Simply, the gathering of different people from different nations, different cultures, different languages, different ethnic groups, different religions, basically the gathering of differences with a common goal to achieve.

That common goal can be to advance science (for example to provide energy from fusion),
that common goal can be to advance education (for example to create new ways of learning or of teaching through European programs),
that common goal can also be to find solutions to severe world crises (for example the United Nations and all the other supra-national international organizations), and
that common goal can also be to simply advance the economy by doing business (in the case of multinationals for example).

Most of the time, languages are not given enough importance when embarking on an international project:

The general attitude is that the priority should be given to the core knowledge everyone in the project brings to the project – which can be knowledge in sciences, in marketing strategy, in politics, in manufacturing, in economics or in management.

Languages are often thought to be something one can acquire later on, once the “serious stuff” has been done or even worse, that languages are of no importance at all and that among “specialists”, everyone understands each other.

But how many times has this attitude been proven wrong?

Only recently last July, when Alcatel-Lucent lost billions of dollars due to lack of cultural understanding and especially due to the language barrier.

One of the comments made in the Herald Tribune was that “since Alcatel was a French company, the new CEO needs to speak French, at the very least”. In other words the former CEO had been chosen knowing he could not speak French...

This is a vivid example of what can happen when languages are not taken seriously.

Languages and language learning should not be afterthoughts, relegated to when we have some extra time...

The lack of proficiency in languages can prove to be very costly and can turn a project into a fiasco if not given enough of a role.

What can languages do for international projects?

Languages create links, do away with barriers, promote understanding, explain differences and basically induce harmonisation and respect.

Languages can be a shared communication tool, an effective means of communication, can be a way of learning about others.

So why are languages still not given the recognition they deserve? Why are languages and language learning still the last part we look at when forecasting our training budget? Why are languages still not considered as an inherent part of the business world and why are linguists not called upon to share their knowledge in setting up projects? Why is the teaching of languages still so far behind in terms of innovation and inventiveness? Why are there still so many people in the world who only speak one language, their mother tongue? These questions should no longer be asked in the 21st century...

What is the role of cultures in an international project?

Let me speak here of the experience I have had working for the Agence Iter France.

The ITER project gathers over 32 different nationalities and I know, many more cultures if we consider the regional and ethnic ones.

The number of languages spoken by the people working for Iter is probably close to the hundred, if not more, when we include all the Indian dialects and languages.

When all these different people come to learn French in our multicultural classrooms, they bring with them their histories, their identities, their vast knowledge...In fact they bring their worlds.

When working with them, the thought that comes most to mind is how incredibly diverse cultures are and how incredibly lucky we are to be able to work with them.

Their cultures put together provide exponential knowledge, as if each culture added to the first simply multiplies the learning by 100.

They, by their mere presence in the class, teach us much more than we could ever teach them. All these different cultures are an incredible source of learning and of sharing. All these different cultures are a source of inspiration and of humility.

An international project which does not recognize the cultures of each participant cannot really be called an international project.

There should not be "one" culture which dominates the others, just because it is dominant in a specific area. There should not be "one" culture all participants adhere to, just because it is that of the majority.

Each culture has its own role to play, each culture needs to be recognized and heard.

Each culture has an infinite number of assets to bring to the project community and this can only be done if each culture has enough room to express itself.

Why should we automatically think that our way of doing things is the best just because it has worked among one single culture?

On the contrary, international projects are the perfect opportunity to question old habits, old beliefs and to invent new ideas, new ways of doing things.

Times are changing and so is the visibility of languages and culture: there are more and more people who are realizing that languages and cultures are paramount to the success of international projects.

This is most of the time unfortunately due to the profit losses incurred or to the management of crises which could have been avoided if languages and culture had been given their proper roles to play from the beginning.

Unfortunately, intercultural and language experts are generally called in to “fix it” once the problem has arisen... and not before.

The European Union has called this year the Year of Intercultural Dialogue because it recognizes the importance of understanding the differences and the diversity which exist within Europe.

Europe’s success as a Union also hinges on the acceptance, understanding and promotion of these differences.

The UNESCO has called this year, the year of International Languages because it knows how fundamental languages are to furthering international cooperation and defending the rights of everyone to a proper education.

Languages can do this, languages can promote education and knowledge.

The lifelong learning program of the European Union which will last until 2013 is the perfect opportunity for all of us to invent, innovate and think languages and culture differently.

Next year is the European Year for Innovation, which means we can all participate in this innovation and that we can all contribute to inventing new ways of using languages and culture.

We, professionals, need to give as much importance and visibility to

languages and culture as we can and I hope that today will help bring new light and a strong one to languages and culture.

We need new thinkers, new philosophies, we need to invent new ways.

Let me take this opportunity to introduce you to the facilitators of the workshops who answered my invitation most graciously and have taken time off their busy schedules to be here with us:

First Sandrine Dickel, from the Europe Education Formation France Agency who will be leading the workshop on “Is there a European culture” along with Daniel Lustin and representing the Janus project and Hassan Lablack representing the project.

Then, Françoise Cazenave-Pendaries, Director of Human Resources at ITER who is leading the workshop on the challenges of intercultural recruitment.

Next, George Simons, the creator of Diversophy and well-known intercultural specialist who is leading 2 workshops on which culture for which organization?

Then Eric Cattelain, linguist and intercultural researcher, inventor of Unideo who will be leading the workshop on the keys to intercultural dialogue.

And last but not least, Stella Dadzie, a specialist in diversity issues and the author of Trial and Error, who will be leading the workshop on Languages to Bridge the gaps.

Today, thanks to these workshop leaders and to all of you participants, I hope we will be inventing new ways of doing things and new ways of thinking.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a very “creative” day.