



Evaluation of accident risk in companies employing foreign workers

1. Case metadata

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2. Organisations involved

Servizio di Prevenzione Igiene e Sicurezza negli Ambienti di Lavoro, Az. Ulss 22 di Bussolengo,

U. O. di promozione della salute nei luoghi di lavoro, S.P.I.S.A.L.

3. Description of the case

3.1. Introduction

Errors of communication in the workplace can cause accidents and injuries and must be evaluated. Communication between workers is a crucial factor in safety management and company information and training processes often take it for granted that the language is understood. However, an experiment conducted in six companies in a Local Health Authority area in Italy, Veneto, showed that 25% of foreign workers were unable to understand safety signs or the safety information and training provided by the employer. The study showed that those workers had been in Italy for at least 5 years. Accident risk assessment in companies employing immigrant workers must therefore include assessment of Italian language skills.

Accidents in the workplace are less and less the result of inherent danger of the machinery and the place of work and more and more linked to the organisation of work and the conduct of workers. Therefore risk communication training for both management and workers is very important. Attention to communication problems in the workplace should not only focus on workers in general, but also on the communication between companies, for example in the case work is contracted out to an external firms with foreign owners. Poor understanding of Italian is one of the main occupational safety



problems that arise in companies with immigrant workers. Around a quarter of the victims of fatal accidents in the workplace in Veneto are immigrants.

The Veneto Regional Council has financed a number of health and social projects aimed at the immigrant population of the region, including the 'Occupational Safety and Integration for Immigrants' project, which recognises that communication errors are among the causes of accidents. The project tackled the problem of foreign worker integration in Italy and was divided into three sub-projects.

Project 1

The first project is 'Building Safety', financed by INAIL (the Italian Industrial Accidents Insurance Institute), which prints the newspaper 'The Veneto Building Site', a 16-page colour tabloid, with a circulation of 50 000 to 70 000 copies. The newspaper, printed in five languages (Italian, French, English, Albanian and Romanian), dealt with some safety issues specific to the construction industry, together with problems of more general interest, such as the risk of carbon monoxide in the home, dangers of heat stroke and dehydration in summer and effects of alcohol on health. It also supplied information about organisations and jobs likely to be of interest to foreign workers. This choice was dictated by the view that there is a serious situation regarding accidents in the construction industry, requiring immediate action. Some items of information necessary to workers' safety and empowerment had to be provided in the workers' own language, due to the urgency of hazardous situations.

Project 2

The second project supplied training agencies with a tool designed to tackle prejudice and communication errors associated with the multicultural workplace. This project, entitled "Changing Places, a tool for correct intercultural communication in the workplace", provided a 2 to 3-hour training module designed for inclusion in training for employers, executives, company health and safety officers, workers' safety representatives, workers, supervisors and apprentices. The specific aim of this sub project related to non-verbal communication, indicating some of the main forms of communication error which can increase the likelihood of accident and injury in the workplace and identifying countermeasures.

Project 3

The third sub-project, entitled: '*Top of the class, a test to assess Italian language comprehension and skills*', is related to accident risk assessment in companies employing foreign workers. The 'Top of the Class' project has been devised to tackle the issue of Italian language learning among immigrant workers and uses the Common European Framework developed by the Council of Europe to classify foreign language skills.

3.2. Aims

The case study is from now on focused on project 3: Top of the class. Ultimately, the project gives companies a tool to assess and promote knowledge of Italian among foreign workers, a pre-requisite for safe behaviour and social integration.

3.3. What was done, and how?

Knowledge of Italian by foreign workers must be viewed as a crucial factor to ensure that they understand safety regulations and consequently behave safely and correctly. Accident risk assessment must include assessment of understanding of the language used in company training and safety signs.

The 'Top of the Class' test assesses comprehension of a written text. The test was formulated with reference to the parameters identified by the Common European Framework Reference for Language Learning and Teaching devised by the Council of Europe, which identifies six language skill levels (elementary or basic user A1-A2, intermediate or independent user B1-B2, and advanced or proficient user C1-C2).

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So as not to exclude workers who have not developed reading and written comprehension skills, the test can be administered in different ways:

- if the worker is illiterate or had little comprehension of Italian (poor reading skills, unable to read on their own) *guided testing* was required;
- if, after a brief explanation, the test is filled in independently by the worker (able to read alone), *independent testing* is sufficient.

The test contains 40 questions, divided into four parts with a progressive level of difficulty, based on the first levels of the Common European Framework:

Part I: basic skills level

A test specifically aimed at illiterate workers and/or those with little knowledge of basic Italian. The first part is designed to assess basic vocabulary knowledge. 10 pictures were shown illustrating verbs for common actions in the workplace, e.g. *scavare* (dig, excavate), *sollevare* (lift, raise), *spegnere* (switch off, extinguish), and the worker had to match the 10 words at the bottom of the page to the 10 pictures.

Part II: basic level A1

This test is aimed at workers with a basic knowledge of Italian. The worker must read or listen to a short story which includes common everyday words. Comprehension of the text is assessed on the basis of 10 true/false answers. The answers are divided equally between those requiring direct reference to the text and those requiring rephrasing of the information (discovery of interference).

Part III: basic level A2

This test comprises 10 multiple-choice questions relating to notices and phrases used in the working environment.

Part IV: independent level B1

This test assesses advanced language comprehension by people with a good education level and those who have lived in Italy for some years.

A trial was conducted in five companies operating in the marble industry in Valpolicella (Verona), one of the main marble processing districts in Italy, and in a major Italian food company. Both industries have a high concentration of non-EU workers. The experiment was conducted using a questionnaire with progressively difficult questions.

The experiment was supported by acknowledgement in law of the principle, which had long been advocated in health and trade union circles. The recently passed *D.Lgs. n. 81 del 9 aprile 2008* [Legislative Decree No 81 of 9 April 2008] *Testo Unico sulla sicurezza del lavoro* [Consolidated Occupational Safety Act] finally enacted the principle that information (Art 36(4))¹ and training (Art 37(13))² materials must be comprehensible to workers and enable them to obtain the necessary knowledge and skills in regard to occupational health and safety. The 'Top of the Class' test was trialled in an initial group of companies in June 2007 and the trial was completed in November-January 2008. The company organised interviews with the workers during their shifts, providing a room with tables and chairs. In some cases the workers arrived separately, while in others they arrived in groups of three or four. The reasons for the study were explained to the workers by staff

¹ The contents of the information must be easily understandable to workers and allow them to acquire the required knowledge. If the information relates to foreign workers, it must be given after an assessment of their comprehension of the language used in the information process.

² The training materials must be easily understandable to workers and enable them to acquire required occupational health and safety knowledge and skills. If the training relates to foreign workers, it must be given after an assessment of their comprehension and knowledge of the language used in the training process.

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from the Health Authority that developed the project. Comprehension was assessed by language-picture pairing exercises (Part I) or multiple-choice questions (Parts II, III and IV), and scored on a 10-point scale. The answers were classified in line with their progressive scale of difficulty. This allowed real-time assessment of the worker's comprehension level. Workers who scored a minimum of 6/10 correct answers in each part of the test were placed in the first category (green), and those who scored a minimum of 6/10 in the first three parts were placed in the second category (amber). Workers who did not achieve the pass level for comprehension (6/10), were placed in the third category (red).

The average time taken to run the test in the room provided by the company was 40 minutes, including time taken to explain the reasons for the trial to the workers and how to fill in the answers, the time taken by the workers to fill in the questionnaire and time for explanation of the correct answers. The trial was conducted during working hours in the morning; the environmental conditions in which the workers were tested is relevant, as some of them required a certain amount of concentration to answer.

A total of 103 foreign workers with 23 nationalities took the test. The foreign workers in the marble industry are mainly from Ghana and Morocco, while most immigrant workers in the food industry are from Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal. Few East European workers are employed in these important sectors of Verona's economy, as they are mainly employed in the construction industry. Some of the workers who took the test had been in Italy for as long as 30 years. The workers were classified by their date of arrival in Italy, from 1977 to 2004, so none of them had been in the country for less than 3 years. Eleven of the workers tested arrived in the 10-year period 1997-1986, 56 in 1987-1996, and 34 in 1997-2004. Once their skills level had been identified, the workers were classified on the basis of the results obtained as described, into three 'traffic-light' categories, identified by the following colours:

Green: comprehension level allowing participation in safety and occupational skills training courses. 37 workers (36%) fell into this category;

Amber: comprehension level sufficient to understand the information and training provided, but not sufficient for full social integration, so reinforcement of basic Italian is required. 40 workers (39%) fell into this category;

Red: comprehension level insufficient to guarantee understanding of information, especially written information, or to ensure training and communication in the workplace is adequate. These 26 workers (25%) need to take Italian literacy courses.

The 'Top of the Class' test can be administered by the personnel of Company Safety and Health Departments or company training course providers. It is important for the Workers' Safety Representative (WSR) to be involved and for sufficient information to be given about the importance of the project to ensure the safety of all workers (internal marketing). A test can be validated by administering the same questions to the same workers after a period long enough to assume that the questions will have been forgotten, but not long enough for the workers to have changed their previous situation, i.e. improved their Italian skills. A period of approximately 10 to 15 days between the first and second tests can be deemed sufficient. If the answers to the second test are similar to the first, the test can be considered valid.

The operational model for the test was presented to Employers' Associations and Trade Unions from the province of Verona at a presentation conference held on 5 June 2008 at the end of the project.

3.4. What was achieved?

The experiment, conducted in 6 companies with a total of 103 workers, indicated a worrying situation, despite the fact that the foreign workers interviewed had already been employed for several years.

The printed leaflet (see figure 1 and 2) illustrates in detail the results of the research and describes the research model and timing, the countries of origin of the immigrant workers, their educational level and the length of time they had lived in Italy.

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Figure 1. Leaflet about the project



Source: Servizio di Prevenzione Igiene e Sicurezza negli Ambienti di Lavoro

Figure 2. Leaflet about the project



Source: Servizio di Prevenzione Igiene e Sicurezza negli Ambienti di Lavoro

The operational model for this test was agreed with Employers' Associations and Trade Unions from the province of Verona at a conference held on 5 June 2008 to present the results of the project.

The purpose of the 'Top of the Class' project is to ensure that the workers who need it are registered for language classes, including those held by the local education authorities in our Region. A major national company which took part in the 'Top of the Class' experiment is now planning to run Italian literacy classes after assessing the problem at its own premises in Veneto.

The experiment established that the average time taken for administration/completion of the test was 40 minutes per worker at the company's premises, excluding time for organisation. The test may be organised and run by the company's Health and Safety Department. Both employers and employees benefit from language skills assessment, and learning Italian allows greater occupational safety and better social integration for foreign workers.

3.5. Success factors

- o Involvement of Employers' Associations and Trade Unions from the province;
- o Trial to test the intervention in practice (in the marble industry);
- o Both employers and employees benefit from language skills assessment, and learning Italian allows greater occupational safety and better social integration for foreign workers.

3.6. Further information

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3.7. Transferability

The model has been trialled and can be exported to other areas and to any company with a significant percentage of immigrant workers.

4. References, resources:

Information provided by the company/organisation in the framework of the Good Practice Award Competition 2008/2009.