

International Workplace Pedagogy: Towards a Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Workplace Learning Environment

21.5.2026

In Finnish: Kansainvälisyystyöelämäpedagogiikka: kohti kielellisesti ja kulttuurisesti tietoista työelämän oppimisympäristöä

Introduction

The rapid transformation of working life, globalization, and the internationalization of the workforce challenge organizations to develop new ways of supporting employees' competence development and their integration into working life. Workplace pedagogy provides a framework for addressing these challenges, focusing on the smooth integration of individual competence into working life and on supporting learning through work (Helin et al., 2020).

International workplace pedagogy (IWP) extends this perspective to multilingual and multicultural work environments. This may also involve situations where a single employee enters a workplace while using a new language as their primary means of communication. IWP views workplaces as learning environments in which professional competence, workplace language development, and a sense of belonging are constructed simultaneously. This article outlines the key theoretical foundations of the concept and discusses its relevance for the development of working life. The article is part of the publication series of the EU co-funded

Co-Work Workplace Partner – Ecosystem for International Collaboration project.

Workplace Pedagogy and Learning at Work

Workplace pedagogy is grounded in the idea that learning is an integral part of working. Workplace learning is experiential and participatory in nature, emerging from everyday work practices (Billett, 2001). Learning does not occur solely in formal educational settings but continuously through work tasks and interaction (Eraut, 2004). Workplaces can therefore be understood as learning environments where the organization of work, interaction, and guidance significantly influence the development of competence.

From the perspective of situated learning, learning occurs through participation in social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). New employees typically begin with limited responsibilities but gradually move toward full participation. This process is described as legitimate peripheral participation and is central to integration into working life.

In addition, workplace learning can be understood as a connective process in which individuals relate knowledge acquired in education to workplace practices and contexts (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). This highlights the importance of bridging the gap between education and working life and emphasizes the continuity of learning.

Foundations of International Workplace Pedagogy

International workplace pedagogy brings multilingualism and multiculturality into the framework of workplace pedagogy. At its core is the view of the workplace as a linguistically and culturally constructed learning environment where work, learning, and interaction are inseparable.

IWP is based on three key principles:

1. Learning occurs through work and interaction
Competence, language skills, and a sense of belonging develop through participation in work tasks and shared practices.

2. Language is a shared resource
Language is not merely an individual skill but a feature of workplace practices. Language awareness refers to the ability to recognize the role of language in work and to adjust practices accordingly (Lehtimaja et al., 2023).

3. Onboarding is a pedagogical process
Onboarding is understood as a structured, gradual process that supports participation and the development of competence.

The Workplace as a Multilingual Learning Environment

In multilingual workplaces, learning the language used at work often occurs informally in everyday situations. In addition to work tasks, learning is connected to interaction, observation, and collaborative problem-solving (Eraut, 2004).

From the perspective of expansive learning environments, workplaces support learning when employees have opportunities to participate in a variety of tasks and develop their competence (Fuller & Unwin, 2004). This is particularly important when employees' linguistic or cultural backgrounds differ from the dominant norms of the workplace.

Research in the Finnish context has demonstrated that collaborative language learning is a key dimension of workplace learning in multilingual environments (Korpela et al., 2024). Language develops through participation in workplace practices rather than solely through formal instruction, that is, by using the target language in the contexts where it is needed.

Workplace Communities and the Construction of Belonging

Integration into working life is not only a matter of competence but also of belonging. A sense of belonging is constructed through interaction and participation in shared practices (Rajamäki, 2021). Workplace integration can also be understood through the lens of language socialization, in which new employees simultaneously learn work tasks as well as the linguistic and interactional practices of the workplace through participation in everyday activities (Roberts, 2010; Lønsmann, 2017).

In international workplace pedagogy, the workplace community plays an active role in facilitating inclusion. This includes:

- shared onboarding practices,
- enabling participation in various work situations,
- recognizing informal interaction as significant,
- and creating psychologically safe environments for using a developing language.

Diverse work communities can also generate added value for organizations by combining different perspectives and competencies (Stahl et al., 2009). However, this requires a conscious effort to utilize diversity, such as enabling participation across differences in background, experience, and age.

The Pedagogical Role of the Employer

International workplace pedagogy emphasizes the employer's role as a facilitator of learning. The role of the employer extends beyond organizing work to creating conditions that enable learning and participation.

Pedagogical competence in the workplace includes:

- structuring work tasks from a learning perspective,
- integrating language awareness into onboarding,
- and developing practices that support learning (Helin et al., 2020).

The culture and atmosphere of the workplace are central in determining whether a new employee is able to participate and learn actively. From an IWP perspective, employers and work communities can also observe and shape the workplace as a physical and social environment that facilitates inclusion. In practical terms, this may involve simple actions such as labelling objects in multiple languages or even in a single shared language, supporting both professional vocabulary development and a sense of belonging.

Relevance for Working Life

The relevance of international workplace pedagogy for working life can be examined through three key dimensions:

1. Labour availability and retention
The effective use of international labour requires the ability to integrate new employees into the workplace. Work-based learning is also associated with increased organizational innovation and adaptability (Angove, 2019). Pedagogically structured onboarding, understood as an ongoing process, supports employee retention and engagement.

2. Utilization and development of competence
International employees bring diverse competencies, whose effective utilization requires open and inclusive workplace practices.

3. Workplace development
Multilingualism and multiculturality can serve as sources of innovation and new thinking when supported intentionally. This is particularly a leadership issue.

Conclusions

International workplace pedagogy provides a framework for understanding workplaces as learning environments in which linguistic, professional, and social learning occur simultaneously.

It shifts the focus from individual language proficiency toward the shared responsibility of the workplace community in enabling learning. Such an approach supports integration, competence utilization, and the development of inclusive and diverse work environments.

International workplace pedagogy thus represents a key approach for responding to transformations in working life in both regional and global contexts.

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