

**Intercultural Competence in Intercultural Service Encounters:
Case of a Language School in France**
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interculturelles : cas d'une école de langue en France**
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Résumé de l'article

L'article étudie la compétence interculturelle (CI) des prestataires de services d'une PME, car son rôle dans les rencontres de service interculturelles est peu étudié. Pour être efficaces, les prestataires de services doivent s'adapter à leurs interlocuteurs par le biais de compétences en communication, car les services sont intangibles. Les rencontres avec les clients culturellement différents étant de plus en plus intenses, il faut considérer la CI des prestataires de services, définie comme une capacité à négocier les significations culturelles. Les résultats indiquent que la CI dans les services est renforcée par leurs caractéristiques et dépend donc fortement du contexte.

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Competencia intercultural en encuentros de servicio interculturales:
caso de una escuela de idiomas en Francia

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study the intercultural competence (IC) of service providers of an SME, as little is known about its role in the intercultural service encounters (ICSE). To be considered effective, service providers must adapt to their interlocutors by the means of communication competence, as services are intangible. Service encounters between culturally different providers and customers being more and more intense, it is necessary to consider service providers' IC, defined as an ability to negotiate cultural meanings. The results of our case study indicate that IC in services is enhanced by their characteristics and is therefore strongly context-dependent.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural service encounter, language, SME, France

Résumé

L'article étudie la compétence interculturelle (CI) des prestataires de services d'une PME, car son rôle dans les rencontres de service interculturelles est peu étudié. Pour être efficaces, les prestataires de services doivent s'adapter à leurs interlocuteurs par le biais de compétences en communication, car les services sont intangibles. Les rencontres avec les clients culturellement différents étant de plus en plus intenses, il faut considérer la CI des prestataires de services, définie comme une capacité à négocier les significations culturelles. Les résultats indiquent que la CI dans les services est renforcée par leurs caractéristiques et dépend donc fortement du contexte.

Mots-Clés : compétence interculturelle, rencontre de service interculturelle, langue, PME, France

Resumen

Este artículo estudia la competencia intercultural (CI) de los proveedores de servicios de una PYME, ya que su papel en los encuentros de servicio interculturales es poco estudiado. Para ser efectivos, los proveedores deben adaptarse a sus interlocutores por medio de la competencia de comunicación ya que los servicios son intangibles. Los encuentros con los clientes culturalmente diferentes son cada vez más intensos, es necesario considerar la CI de los proveedores, definido como la capacidad de negociar significados culturales. Los resultados indican que la CI en los servicios esta reforzada por sus características y, por eso, depende considerablemente del contexto.

Palabras Clave: competencia intercultural, encuentro de servicio intercultural, idioma, PYME, Francia



Intercultural service encounters (ICSE) between service providers and customers (Sharma *et al.*, 2012) can reveal some communication difficulties that occur due to cultural differences between individuals (Warden *et al.*, 2003). Intercultural (communication) competence, allowing the individual to perceive the Other with hindsight (Spitzberg, 2000; Arasaratnam and Banerjee, 2011), can help overcome these difficulties. The interest in studying this competence within small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) providing services is a result of: (1) an increasing interconnection and diversity of different parts of the world, which created a demand for individuals able to communicate effectively with culturally and linguistically different interlocutors (Jackson, 2012); (2) the need for SMEs to expand and reinforce the competences of their human resources to remain successful (Hamburg and Brien, 2014); (3) the “tertiarization” of the global economy (Zehrer, 2009), *i.e.* the service domination (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), inviting to study the competences of service providers as their main resource to deal with the intangibility of services (Gummesson, 2007).

As Bitner (1995) and Coulter and Coulter (2002) point out, customers who are buying a service have to believe in the promises given by the service provider. Thus, service providers’ (operational and relational) competences (Boyer and Nefzi, 2009) have to be at a high level, as services are intangible (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985). In international contexts, the intercultural competence (IC), as an appropriate and effective means of communication (Spitzberg, 2000), confers to service providers a higher degree of adaptation towards customers. Actually, it is possible to predict a positive outcome of a service encounter when service providers and customers have similar cultural backgrounds (Hopkins *et al.*, 2009; Sharma *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, the IC contributes to a relationship-oriented interaction (Usunier, 2018) and thereby to customers’ loyalty, as the latter depends partly on the feeling of sharing the same values with the service provider during service delivery (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012).

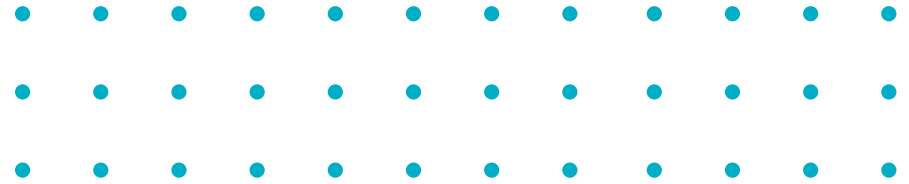
It is necessary to recognize the importance of IC in intercultural service encounters (Sharma *et al.*, 2012) within SMEs to address the lack of studies: on the ICSE (Barker and Härtel, 2004; Sharma *et al.*, 2009); on the IC as a moderator of intercultural service encounters (Sharma and Wu, 2015); on the IC in SMEs, as it is mostly studied in multinationals (Caligiuri and Tarique, 2012); on the relationship between IC and customer satisfaction (Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2014), as

the latter is essential for the competitiveness of the firm. To contribute to the literature on this topic, we want to understand how the IC is perceived in language services in France, by answering two questions: What are the specificities of the IC in ICSE? What are customers’ expectations in relation to the service encounter? We studied it in the language learning sector (within a school of English operating in France), in intercultural exchanges that are context-specific (Beamer, 1992). Therefore, by adopting an emic approach (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003), we want to understand the specificities of these interactions in terms of actors’ expectations and of the IC deployed in language services.

After the presentation of the literature review on the ICSE and on IC, we present the methodology, then the results on the context-specific IC within the studied French business unit. We conclude with a discussion and recommendations for future research.

Intercultural Service Encounters

Service encounter is an interaction between a customer requesting a service and a service provider. In an intercultural context, this encounter is qualified as an intercultural service encounter (ICSE), as it supposes a contact between individuals coming from different cultures. Although in both service encounters and ICSE the customer is part of the service production, “intercultural encounters complicate this by introducing consumers to a foreign culture”, which means that the service provider has to understand these foreign expectations to satisfy the customer (Warden *et al.*, 2003) and be considered effective. As cultural diversity in the workplace is increasing, firms must consider what knowledge allows for a better customer satisfaction (Hopkins *et al.*, 2009). Some research has demonstrated that the chances for a positive outcome of a service encounter are greater if the service requestor and the service provider have the same or similar cultural background (Sharma *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, companies must recognize this cultural diversity to build successful relationships with their clients (Bush *et al.*, 2001). Price and Arnould (1999) have demonstrated that this interaction can be, in case of recurrent nature of service encounters, a “friendly exchange” that might open a way to more intense friendships, which Spencer-Oatey (2005) words as a rapport-enhancement orientation or a desire to strengthen the relation. The rapport between individuals depends on the



individuals' perceptions of the rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Accordingly, in the context of service delivery, service providers and their customers judge social interaction and appropriateness regarding their expectations of the service encounter. These expectations are the result of their beliefs about behavior that can be prescribed/expected, unlike proscribed behavior that is socially forbidden (such as racist remarks). In addition, for an effective rapport-management, the service provider must be able to assess the face sensitivity (*i.e.* the respectability that the person claims from others) and interactional goals (transactional or relational) of the interlocutor (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). In relation to these goals and in the sense of Spencer-Oatey (2005), an effective service relationship would be the result of service provider's ability to balance between meeting his/her own needs and the needs of his/her interlocutor. The awareness of cultural differences is one of the factors affecting individuals' effectiveness in arranging the accomplishment of both actors' goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). As a matter of fact, different cultures may cause differences in actors' perceptions during service delivery (Warden *et al.*, 2003; Zhang *et al.*, 2008; Sharma *et al.*, 2012; Ang *et al.*, 2018), which in turn cause a positive or negative outcome of the service encounter (Sharma and Wu, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the competences that service providers need to attain a high-level adaptation to culturally diverse customers profile (Hopkins *et al.*, 2009). Sharma *et al.* (2009, 2012) have shown that IC and perceived cultural distance influence interaction comfort and satisfaction and that IC "has a stronger positive effect on interaction comfort [...] for employees vs. customers" (Sharma *et al.*, 2012).

Interactions in services are also considered as a negotiation that results in a contract outlining the obligations of both service provider and service requestor (O'Sullivan, 2002), as the customer is a co-designer or co-producer of the provided service (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). For Usunier (2018), these InterCultural Business Negotiations (ICBN), managed by a set of dispositional (profession, gender, personality) and situational aspects (repeated interactions over time, relational history, etc.), consist of a deal and a relationship. Differently perceived from one culture to another, these two components of negotiation can help distinguish deal-prone cultures from relationship-prone ones, *i.e.* pragmatism-oriented (*e.g.* American) from ideologist-oriented cultures (*e.g.* French) (Usunier, 2003), or, as termed by Spencer-Oatey (2005), transaction-based (aimed at accomplishing a concrete task) from connection-based cultures. The

latter are based on emotional bonds coming from a joint experience of the actors, they are problem solving and long-term partnerships oriented (Usunier, 2003, 2018). Nevertheless, depending on the communication and information exchange that is cross-culturally different, negotiation is culturally and linguistically coded in international contexts. It is therefore a context-specific exchange that can be apprehended through an analysis of its social and cultural environment (Beamer, 1992). In the context of services, the competence to answer clients' demands refers to both relational and technical ability of the provider to adapt to the client. According to some authors, it is the IC that allows its possessor to interact effectively (Spitzberg, 2000) in culturally diverse contexts (Dusi *et al.*, 2014). We are therefore interested in its specificities in the service sector, as the intangibility of services positions the competences of the provider at the forefront.

Intercultural Competence in Services

Understanding the mechanisms of service encounters in terms of application of the service provider's competences to the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) requires to analyze the characteristics of services. In fact, services being intangible (it is impossible to see, touch, taste, hear a service before buying it), simultaneous (production and consumption of the service occur simultaneously), heterogeneous (services are difficult to standardize because they are modelled by people's behavior) and perishable (services cannot be stored and used later) (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985), they rely solely on the promises related to the delivery of the service (Bitner, 1995). A service encounter requires the service provider to build trust and persuade, and the customer to trust him (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Therefore, service interactions are dependent on service provider's competences that the customer benefits from (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), and that include operational and interpersonal competences (inherent in personal qualities). The latter are particularly important for personnel engaged in high-contact activities as they have to compose with possible disturbances that customers may cause (Zomerdijk and de Vries, 2007). These relational competences rely on a service-oriented culture (Gremler *et al.*, 1994) and stimulate the creation of extended service encounters (unlike the encounters of a few minutes) that induce in turn customers' beliefs that providers are interested in them (Price *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, for a long-term relationship with customers (Webber *et al.*, 2012), these service



providers' competences have to be well perceived (Warden *et al.*, 2003). As a matter of fact, the affective content in service encounters is one of the elements on which depends the perceived service quality (Sharma and Wu, 2015), alongside the duration and the spatial proximity content (Price *et al.*, 1995).

The literature on this topic helps us to understand that language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012) and culture (Zhang *et al.*, 2008; Hopkins *et al.*, 2009) play an important emotional and functional role in service encounters and contribute to a boundary spanning ability (Barner Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). The latter regroups language skills and cultural skills composed of culture-specific skills (capacity to internalize the aspects of a domain-specific knowledge of values, norms and beliefs) and culture-general skills (ability to monitor one's cognitive and affective processes in relation to an objective and to abstract broader principles from specific experiences to integrate them in future interactions) (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). Cultural and language skills are therefore a shared cognitive ground with customers. In addition, studies have shown that the exchange between service co-producers depends largely on service providers' personality: those delivering high-quality services and fostering strong relationships are more extrovert and higher in agreeableness (Hurley, 1998), and strongly service-oriented (Webber *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the IC is positively correlated with the "sensation seeking" which corresponds to the motivation to communicate with culturally different individuals (Arasaratnam and Banerjee, 2011). The IC can be understood as an individual's ability requiring knowledge, competences and personality traits (Johnson *et al.*, 2006) to function effectively across multiple cultures. It is an ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to adapt the communication in accordance with interlocutors' multiple identities (Chen and Starosta, 1998). Some authors define it as a communication competence (Spitzberg, 2000) assigning to its possessor an intercultural sensitivity (Hammer *et al.*, 2003), or even cultural intelligence, enabling him to deal appropriately within culturally diverse context (Earley and Mosakowski, 2004). Deardorff (2006) considers IC as a set of personality traits that are generally attributed to an individual considered as respectful, empathetic, flexible, patient, interested in others, curious, open-minded, motivated, having a sense of humor, tolerant to the ambiguity and willing to suspend judgment. More specifically, studies have shown that service provider's performance in sale is modelled by the culture (Román and Iacobucci, 2010), which attributes a commercial role to the intercultural (communication) competence (Bush *et al.* 2001). Therefore, as a

set of resources allowing the individual to adapt his behavior to the specificities of an intercultural situation (Friedman and Antal, 2005), IC is a useful tool for service providers in ICSE (Sharma and Wu, 2015). As services are intangible and rest solely on the competences of service providers (Gummesson, 2007), IC can be considered as a strategic competence for international SMEs, especially as the latter benefit from being close to the customers (Torrès, 2003). As a strategic competence, it can also be useful, in Spencer-Oatey's (2005) terming, for maintaining the honor or the "good name" within a community.

In view with this and in line with our study of the IC in encounters between service providers and customers (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Paraskevas, 2001; Hopkins *et al.*, 2009; Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012) in a French business unit, a social aspect of service provider-customer relationship in relation to the French socio-cultural environment has to be considered. As a matter of fact, the relations with customers in France are defined by the reference to one's professional role (d'Iribarne, 2009), which implies that the behavior of French will be inspired by the professional honor (d'Iribarne, 1989) and by the image they have of their *métier* (d'Iribarne and Henry, 2015). The quality provided by the employee is therefore perceived through these elements. Accordingly, it can be perceived by employees as an effort to do a "good job", in which case the professional honor calls for the commitment. From clients' perspective, the quality implies "to submit" and respond to clients' "whims", in which case the professional honor calls for employees' resistance to these whims. This submission is often assimilated to the problem that a "real professional" takes pride in solving (d'Iribarne, 1989). Finally, it is interesting that, as a culture-specific behavior (Chevrier and Viegas-Pires, 2013), the devotion to the job in France also implies a terming associated to noble manners of behavior, such as "to offer" (unlike the American "to provide"), or even "to listen", "to prescribe", with reference to noble professions such as doctor's (d'Iribarne, 2009). In view of the above, the interest we have in the IC deployed by service providers of a French business unit is double: we want to understand its specificities by situating it locally (French context) and professionally (language service sector).

Research Methodology

We aim to understand how the IC is perceived in language services within the studied SME by studying the service encounters that take place in one of its



business units. Our research is based on a unique case study, insofar as it relates to a contemporary phenomenon studied in its context, rich in human interactions (Yin, 2018). A single case study allows us to attain a rich description of the context and closer examine the studied phenomenon, in this case the IC in ICSE, and thereby provide explanations of a situation specificity (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We seek to describe the observed reality through an exploratory approach and to understand the research subject through interpretations of the actors of the unit. Aiming at having a full picture of the studied phenomenon by analyzing it from different angles, we conducted a multiparadigm research (Romani *et al.*, 2018) and juxtaposed two paradigm lenses in our study. Therefore, our research offers a combination of separate analyses of the phenomenon (Romani *et al.*, 2018), to reveal interdependent aspects of a complex phenomenon, such as the IC, through interpretive and postmodern paradigms at the individual level. The former was useful for the study of actors' process of sense making in intercultural interactions such as service encounters between a service provider and a client sharing the same "frames of meanings" (d'Iribarne, 2009) in terms of education, historical background, etc. (Primecz *et al.*, 2015). We studied bi- and multi-cultural interpersonal interactions rich in diverse (contextual) meanings and interpretations (Romani *et al.*, 2018), which goes hand in hand with the single case study that was carried out. The postmodern paradigm completes the interpretative insofar as it focuses on the performativity of the language (Romani *et al.*, 2018), that is the main "tool" of service providers operating in the language sector. Furthermore, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data allowed us to understand better our research object, *i.e.* the IC within an SME's business unit. For the sake of anonymity, SME is named "English School" (ES).

ES has been operating in service sector for more than 40 years and is present in 28 countries. The concept was created in Italy with the main advantage of having only native English teachers. In France, ES has more than 50 centers and 35 million euros turnover. Two of its non franchised centers, that we named, for the sake of simplicity, French Unit 1 (FU1) and French Unit 2 (FU2), are located in the south of France. FU1 was the subject of our study, because of its particularity within the ES network in France: it is the most successful business unit in France in terms of the sales realized by a single consultant and the quality of the provided service; it is the only center in France to have a manager-consultant, *i.e.* a manager who is at the same time the only salesperson of the unit.

The study of IC is justified by the cultural diversity of FU1's customer and employees. The customer (N=290, data from September 2018) comes from different professional and cultural backgrounds, is over 16 years old and about 60% female. The employees (N=12), are mostly binational, aged between 21 and 59 and about 70% female. Data was collected over a 10-month period (February to November 2017) through:

1. semi-structured interviews (N=23, 16 in French, 7 in English)
Primary data was obtained from employees (13 interviews) and customers (10 interviews) of PEA (Professional Employability Agreement, the equivalent of *Contrat de Sécurisation Professionnelle* in France), B to C and B to B groups (Appendixes 1 and 2). The selection of customers was made from the FU1 manager database according to four criteria: category (PEA, B to B, B to C), beginning of the training (minimum 3 months before interview), age (20 to 60), sex (F/M). The questions (and sub-questions) asked to interviewees are the result of a declination of the topics related to services, identified in the literature, such as: specificities of services; competences necessary for a quality service delivery (contact with customers); importance of the team consistency; specificities of intercultural encounters. Two interview guides were created, for employees and for customers, to understand, respectively, what competences they consider the most important in a service encounter and how these competences are perceived and appreciated by customers (see Appendix 3);
2. non-participant observation of the functioning of the FU1 (53 hours) and of two encounters (1 h 35 minutes) between the manager-consultant and the potential customers (Appendix 4);
3. participant observation (30 hours) during service promotions: we were asked to participate and promote the offer of the month from 2 to 28 June 2017 (Appendix 4);
4. secondary data (internal and external documentation, such as customer brochures, working protocols, sales certificates, press reviews, ES website, etc.).

The coding (Miles and Huberman, 2003) was done in NVivo 11 software from the "sources" listed above. The interviews were classified in two categories (in English and in French, as we did not want to translate from English to French the interviews with teachers to keep the subtle meaning of interviewees' discourse) that correspond to three interviewed groups ("service providers",



“clients”, “teachers”). By summarizing the data by immersion, to obtain a sense of the whole, and in relation to the questions from interview guides, we managed to create categories: “service delivery competences”, “culture of FU1”, “cultural competence”, “competences of Language Assistants”, “competences of the manager-consultant”. By the means of a thematic analysis (having a sentence as the unit of analysis), we were able to identify recurring themes or shared ideas of the interviewees (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) on these themes and create sub-categories: “interpersonal competence”, “personal experience”, “professional experience”, “language competences”, “openness to Other”, “motivation and enthusiasm”. The lexical analysis allowed us to identify the most used vocabulary by the respondents (“listening”, “empathy”, etc.) and link them to these categories. Coding and description accuracy were ensured through triangulation of our primary and secondary data.

Results

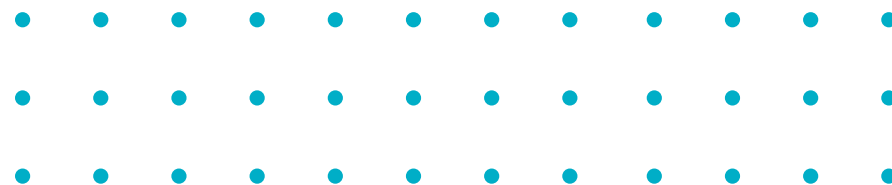
Service Encounters: Application of Service Providers’ Competences

As a service provider, FU1 owes its success to the competences deployed by its employees. The latter intervene in different phases of the service delivered at FU1, the first being the sales encounter between a potential client and the manager-consultant of FU1. This first contact is an extended service encounter lasting 30 to 60 minutes, whose positive outcome would be the registration after the presentation of services. We took interest in the specificities of the interactions during this encounter in terms of the competences deployed by the service provider. The analyses that follow are twofold as we first present the service providers’ point of view (manager-consultant’s, completed with non-participant observations, and employees’ point of view), and then the point of view of the interviewed customers (*i.e.* of those whose service encounter had a positive outcome and who could evaluate the consistency between presented and offered service) about the competences deployed during this encounter.

Service Providers’ IC and a Relationship-Building Interaction Through Commitment

First, we were interested in manager-consultant’s personal and professional background, which brought out several elements of his multicultural profile: multicultural origin (Spanish-Italian, was born and lived in Morocco for 7 years

(childhood) and has lived in France for 45 years); languages (he studied languages, specialized in interpreting, he masters and regularly uses French, Italian, Spanish and English); international work experience (he worked in London, in sales department of the L’Oréal group). These elements helped us to understand which competences he deploys to satisfy the client during the first (sales) encounter. We present hereafter some excerpts of the interviews conducted with the manager-consultant: (1) “What helps me the most is to have learned languages, to know [...] what diligence one must have to learn a language. I love languages and I grew up using them, my parents spoke several languages at home, and I’ve since always really loved to teach.”; (2) “[When I feel a blockage settles during encounters with certain cultures with which I have points in common], I take my example [and] say: “My dad was Spanish, my mom is Italian [...] and I was born in Morocco.” And from the moment I introduce this sentence with people from [these] cultures, their faces light up, relax, and they start trusting in me”; (3) “I love this job, [as] at every encounter, you do not know what you are going to face humanely [...] I am confronted with many, many different profiles.”; (4) “You must have the enthusiasm and love what you do, [...] love to meet people from different cultures.”; “I believe that selling is empathy, humility and listening to the need, and providing a solution. Some people are suffering, they feel down, [...] they are jobless [...]. I really try to [...] tell them that we’re here, by their side.” The personality traits and competences that the consultant has been developing and reinforcing thanks to these components are, respectively: linguistic competence, open-mindedness and patience, curiosity and motivation, respect and listening. In fact, his multilingualism allows him to have a greater number of interlocutors with whom he will exchange in their mother tongue, which easily creates an open relationship. For instance, he explained to us that he conducts the encounter in Italian if he sees that Italian customers “do not really understand the meaning in French”. He emphasizes his love for this varied job, because each new encounter is a new challenge, as well as his desire to establish a trust relationship where the customer feels listened to, reassured, guided. A quantitative analysis through NVivo 11’s option “word frequency” shed light on the importance of different skills and qualities he deems necessary for the *métier*, “listening” being the first (Appendix 5). The employees also put forward his love for the job and the desire to learn, that he transmits to service requestors: “I listen to his selling a lots of times and what he says is from personal experience, so I think students grasp onto that, it’s



transmitted to the student, so all they wanna do is come and study here, [...] he is giving them that desire” (Service manager). They also emphasized that “the fact that the school is so small, he is so present” and that it “has a positive effect on not only students but also staff” (Service manager).

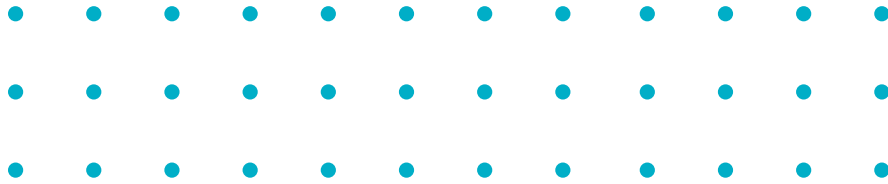
The observations of two service encounters (B to C and PEA) allowed us to analyze manager-consultant’s practices during the first encounter with a potential client: he records all the information on a sheet, while actively listening to the customer’s explanations, then presents the training that would correspond to the customer, while checking in parallel if he/she assimilated the provided information. The focus is on the effort to: (1) show to customer in what way the training he asks would be beneficial for him. For instance, the encounter with a B to C customer enrolled in an aesthetic-cosmetic degree, started with: “Ah, you would have liked the lesson “Beauty with Tiffany” that we organized yesterday! It is one of our students who prepared the lesson with the teacher. We solicit our students a lot.”; (2) reassure the customer and make familiar the atmosphere of FU1 to him, by taking examples of other customers and their relationship with the team. With a PEA customer that needed a training course in English to find a new job, he insisted on the regular contact that he has with his students: “We’re here [for you], we’re listening”. Although he considers that “you need a lot of humility” to be an efficient service provider, he also refers to his position as the one of the “master”: “When it comes to the method [and] my sales, regardless of the profile that I have in front of me, I am the master. I am the professional, it is I who am here every day, who have a lot of students around me so I can see the evolution of each one, and [...] I remain very firm on my positions.” He explained that he is “intransigent” when it comes to the method, that it is “very clear” (he used the French expression *clair et net*) from the very beginning how the student should progress, and that, “after all”, they like to be directed in this way.

The second level of analysis concerned the employees’ point of view of what represents a quality service encounter. Accordingly, they were asked the same question about the competences they deem necessary in a service delivery. Two excerpts are representative of the competences that teachers (1) and language assistants/reception (2) must possess, alongside the core technical skills of their position (teaching, planning, etc.): (1) “I think it’s helpful to be interested in foreign languages yourself [...] because you understand the process and the

needs of the student who is learning a new language. [...] You need to be a good listener, [...] intuitive, patient, adaptable, flexible, [...] you have to be able to put yourself in the shoes of the person in front of you. It’s not a necessity to speak the person’s language, although if you know where they are coming from, it can help you explain things in the way that makes sense.” (Teacher 5); (2) We need language skills because we only speak English here at school, and [...] patience because [...] there are people who [...] ask us to meet their expectations all the time. [But] when you’ve learned languages [and] understood the struggle to learn a language, [...] you are more open and more patient with the student. Because we must not forget that when they come here it is to learn a language, they are not necessarily comfortable with that, [...] so they can be under stress when arriving. So, you must have a good contact with the person, [and] be talkative too, because if we make them talk, they will feel more comfortable. And [you need to be] smiling, too, it’s important.” (Language Assistant 2). In conclusion, the employees consider that “interpersonal competences” (Service manager), “open-mindedness, communication competences” (Administrative officer), “knowing who your audience is” (in terms of culture, to be able to adapt to them by using relevant references) (Teacher 6) are the most important competences and personality traits a service provider has to possess.

Customers’ Expectations and Perceptions of Service Encounters

For a deeper insight about the mechanisms of the first encounter, we also asked customers to describe it. We wanted to understand their perception of the service and if their expectations were met. Put differently, it was interesting to analyze how the competences listed (above) by the manager-consultant and employees were interpreted by customers. Following are some excerpts about consultant’s competences that customers appreciated at the first encounter with him: “It was concise, it was clear. He immediately understood my current level of English and what level I could reach, and he knew how to answer my need” (Customer 7); “He was very clear, very directive. I need to have [a kind of] a diagram to move forward, and he [knew how to do that] perfectly” (Customer 3); “I explained to him what I expected from the training and he tried to find me the most suitable training for what I wanted” (Customer 8). The analyses of these interviews allowed for a conclusion that competences and qualities that they appreciated are: ability to respond adequately to customer’s desires and needs; listening



and communication competences; ability to adapt to customers profile (in terms of personality traits, professional and personal background); interest in (the project of) the customer; motivation to reach the goal by finding the best solution for the customer. The manager-consultant is perceived as a professional who knows his job by providing relevant information and by adapting to the client.

The promises that the consultant gives to the customer during the first encounter correspond to the services provided by all the staff (service delivery). Thus, one of our questions was about the consistency between “the given promises”, and the service received, knowing that the training consists of learning a language (English), *i.e.* acquiring a competence that takes time (the average is 6 months). More interestingly, they could observe other students’ interactions with FU1’s service providers and provide us with insightful information. The interviewed customers affirmed the consistency between the two and they even stressed: “More than expected. I thought it would be a lot more anonymous, whereas here the service is really personalized. I really feel each interlocutor and every member of the team, I have the feeling of being recognized” (Customer 9). In fact, customers value the quality of the received service, in the first place, through the quality of the interactions at FU1, as Customer 3 explained: “The contact is great. In the school, there are people who are both 18 and 60 years old and the contact is the same with everyone... there are men, women, young people, old people, all social levels, all types of request [travel, work, live abroad, studies]. The relationship is really the most impressive. The method is the same in any center, but really, the quality of the contact that I saw there, I have rarely seen elsewhere.” Similarly, Customer 5 said: “The employees are smiling, always in a good mood, very open, patient, which is not always the case everywhere. There is reactivity, they try to find a solution, even to make an exception [...] to arrange the person. It is even touching because it gives a feeling of being privileged. [...] You have a goal and you see that others follow it and help you to reach it.” These are important elements as customers’ goal is to learn English. Customer 6 stressed the importance of “not having any French teacher” and thus being obliged to “understand English” and “think in English”, and Customer 10 the sociable personality of service providers because “someone who is pretty reserved will not force the students to speak English”. The manager-consultant pointed out that he has “a great team” and that he knows that “whatever the demand and the need of a new customer or a student is, they will have the answer they expect”.

The quality of the provided service could also be analyzed from a quantitative perspective (see Appendix 6 for a comparison with a few other centers in France). Finally, it is interesting to note that FU1 is the center that twice a year, during service promotions, has the highest number of renewed contracts (by consultant) in France.

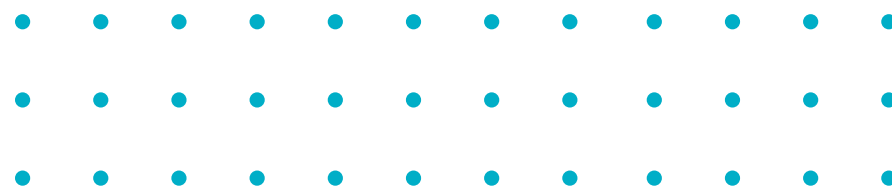
IC: Contextually Limited Competence

IC in service encounters allows building a relationship with customers through adaptability. Nevertheless, some interviews with employees and customers of FU1 also allowed us to understand the following:

1. IC is a language competence. Services provided in an intercultural context are highly dependent on the service provider’s language competences which can deprive, notably the manager-consultant, of a contact with interlocutors not speaking the same language: “I’m not disturbed or feeling uncomfortable in the contact I have. However, during encounters with some Russian or Ukrainian customers who spoke only Russian or Ukrainian, I found that this is the most difficult profile for me. I cannot express my enthusiasm. These are customers who do not speak English, or French, or only a few words. It is therefore a difficult encounter to manage and makes me feel uncomfortable. In the end, these people often leave, I think, dissatisfied”;
2. IC is not infallible and is therefore limited, even if interlocutors share the same language. Some of the interviews with customers uncovered the non-universal, *i.e.* interlocutor-dependent characteristic of IC, which does not always help to meet customers’ expectations: “The manager-consultant is very dynamic, and he explains a lot of things, [...] but you do not grasp on everything because you do not understand everything” (Customer 5). Similarly, Customer 8 was expecting to get all the explanations related to the contract from the manager-consultant, but she received this information (about the exams she will have to pass) from employees.

Discussion

Studies have shown that the IC and its components, such as language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012) and culture (Zhang *et al.*, 2008; Hopkins *et al.*, 2009), have an important role in the creation of emotional bonds in a service provider-customer relationship. A blend of qualitative and quantitative methods that we relied upon



to study the IC in the ICSE taking place in a French business unit providing language services allowed us to identify these two components and link them to two boundary spanners: manager-consultant and language assistants. As a matter of fact, service providers of FU1, in the sense of Barner-Rasmussen *et al.* (2014), demonstrate, at varying degrees, a boundary spanning ability. The authors stressed that the most versatile boundary spanners are characterized by intersectionality (combination of skills), power distribution (intensity of skills) and dispersion across different organizational levels. In the case of the manager-consultant of FU1 we could identify the intersectionality of his cultural and language skills that attributes him high effectiveness in terms of power distribution, and the dispersion insofar as he occupies a double function within FU1. He explained languages represent a facilitating element in ICSE. In line with his double function, it is interesting to notice a high level of internalization of culture-specific skills and a high culture-general skills, due to the accumulation of experience, faster than in other ES centers, as the manager-consultant of FU1 is the only possible customer's interlocutor. A different level of analysis could also have been used, for instance the combination of his cultural and language skills with his generic interpersonal skills, such as openness to others (Hurley, 1998), listening and empathy (Price *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, the manager consultant represents a rare boundary spanner, difficult to imitate (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014), which can also be understood through quantitative data (turnover and number of renewed contracts). As for the language assistants (reception), they intervene after a successful first encounter between the customer and the manager-consultant. They have a follow-up role as the main interlocutors for customers, thus assuming the role of facilitators (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014) insofar as they form a channel through which the messages of manager-consultant are transmitted to the customer (example of Customer 8). As for the teachers, they form a group of two bicultural and four monocultural expatriates that does not have perfect bilinguals (English-French, the French being the "relevant language"). Therefore, the boundary spanning is greatly limited, as the intersectionality of cultural and language skills is not achieved. In line with this, it is interesting to consider the specificity of the language in the context of our study, as it represents a bond between the service provider and the customer as the main "tool" of service providers, on the one hand, and also an objective that the customer wants to reach in terms of language proficiency, on the other hand. Therefore, interviewers explained that Language Assistants need to be open to exchange (Hurley,

1998) and available for customers so they can "practice" their English (outside of the class), but they also must know how to reassure them (in relevant language) in their "anxiety" to speak a foreign language. This sheds a different light to the extent of teachers' boundary spanning, as customers appreciate that teachers do not speak French so they can fully benefit from their (cultural and language) competences (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The importance of exchanging with natives in a culturally different context is perceived as an advantage to be immersed in an English-speaking environment, which also accredits them as effective "co-producers" of the service.

The position of the actors in a service encounter at FU1 can be discussed with reference to d'Iribarne (2009). The quality of the encounter consists, for employees, of the commitment to their role of the "master", of someone who needs "to listen" to the customer and be able to reassure him. The employees stressed that mastering different languages helps them to understand the process the customer is going through, which confers them the role of the one who knows his/her job (d'Iribarne and Henry, 2015). That corresponds to customers' perception of the quality during the first encounter as they explained that manager-consultant is "very clear" and "directive" in finding a solution for customer's problem. After the first encounter, *i.e.* in a service delivery, service providers' role is perceived rather as "a submission", as customers stressed it is "touching" to see how patient they are, eager to help, and even make exceptions so that students reach their language goals.

With reference to actors' expectations in interactions, it is the service provider who must be able to effectively balance between meeting his/her own needs and the needs of the customer (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Observed from a critical paradigm perspective, in the first encounter culture is "reduced" to a discursive construction thus leaving room to domination of the service provider "under the cover of 'culture'" (Romani *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, in the sense of Usunier (2003, 2018), the ideology-oriented French culture relies on the persuasive strength of words, aesthetically ordered as to convince by creating a potential reality. This "manipulative" aspect of service delivery goes hand in hand with the role of service providers "masters" of their domain, who must solve a problem to defend their professional honour (d'Iribarne, 1989). It leads us to consider the IC as a context-specific (Beamer, 1992) service provider's resource or as the expected behaviour (Spencer-Oatey, 2005) that corresponds to the image of service provider's *métier* (d'Iribarne and Henry, 2015). IC in language services is therefore a



culture-specific intercultural competence, as it is interlocutor-dependent. These contextual elements include the language of the interaction, which in the studied case is primarily French, and “uncover” the non-universality of the IC.

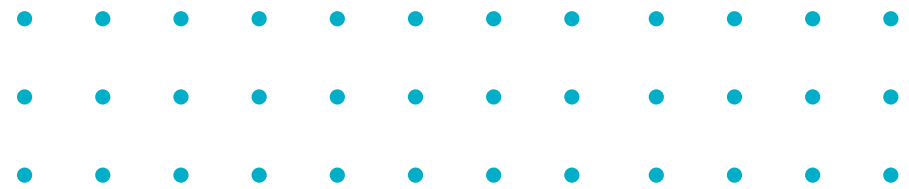
Conclusion

The first results obtained indicate that the IC is a required competence in ICSE at FU1, on two levels: as a sales competence (Bush *et al.*, 2001) in the first encounter between the manager-consultant and the customer, and as a relational/interpersonal competence in the service delivery (encounters with employees and teachers). Therefore, in the sense of Barner-Rasmussen *et al.* (2014) and d'Iribarne (2009), the IC is perceived, respectively, as the means of commitment of the service provider to his/her role, and as the means of submission to the whims of the customer through high-level empathy and interest he has in customer's needs and desires. Our contribution with reference to this literature is the analysis of the provider-customer relationship, which answers Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*'s (2014) recommendation for the research on boundary spanners on another level than only between employees. The facilitating function of boundary spanning is attributed to employees' IC vis-à-vis customers, as they need to interpret to them manager-consultant's discourse that was not clear enough to them. At a broader level, this “interpretation” testifies to the coherence of service-related discourses of all the departments of FU1 (sales, reception, teachers). In addition, the employees are attentive to customers' “anxiety” of speaking a foreign language, but also to their desire to exchange with service providers to improve their English. This relational competence of service providers corresponds to their service-oriented culture (Webber *et al.*, 2012) and their personality traits (Johnson *et al.*, 2006), as well as to the service-oriented culture (Gremier *et al.*, 1994) of FU1. Another interesting point identified is the motivation of service providers to communicate, as the core quality of the IC (Arasaratnam and Banerjee, 2011), which is not necessarily the case with all the service providers (in terms of boundary spanners) (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). In regards to the operational and relational components of IC and to the characteristics of services identified in the literature (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Gummeson, 2007), we propose in the Appendix 7 a figure representing the competences and personality traits required in ICSE. The figure is representative of the service exchange as seen by Vargo et Lusch (2008), *i.e.* as the application of service

provider's competences to the customer. As the characteristics defining services are intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability, and simultaneity, service providers must deploy competences to address these characteristics. Relying on our case study, we could understand that adaptability, ability to establish a trust relationship, personalization and responsiveness are the key competences in a language service delivery. Furthermore, from a perspective of actors' expectations, the figure illustrates the context-specific, French IC, insofar as the expectations of service providers result from their beliefs about the prescribed, expected behavior (Spencer-Oatey, 2005) vis-à-vis their *métier* (d'Iribarne and Henry, 2015). The interactional goals in services are therefore more relationship-oriented (Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Usunier, 2018), which is also due to the duration of the service delivery. Another contribution of our study consists of enriching the literature on ICSE (Barker and Härtel, 2004; Sharma *et al.*, 2009), on the IC in ICSE (Sharma *et al.*, 2012) and in SMEs as it is mostly studied in multinationals (Caligiuri and Tarique, 2012). In view of this point, it should be recalled that SMEs benefit from a close relationship with their customers (Torrès, 2003) and that some components of the IC, such as the desire to interact with others, are emphasized by SMEs' size.

Our research highlighted the importance of the IC as part of the ICSE that contributes to providing a “more than expected” service, rarely experienced elsewhere by customers. Thus, at a broader level, managers of service companies should center the recruitment process on analyzing individual's personality traits in depth and namely the domain-specific ones that cannot be reduced to the interest in languages. In that way, the “difficult to imitate” ones can be identified. In accordance with the double position of the manager-consultant of our case, service companies should also consider the attribution of “double” roles to their employees, as they could benefit from a broader perspective of the customers' needs.

The main limitations of this study are threefold. Firstly, an in-depth analysis of other ES units (notably FU2) could have been useful for a better comparison. Secondly, it would have been interesting to analyze the negative service encounter outcomes, for more information on the mechanisms of the ICSE, customers' expectations in language services and broader conclusions. Furthermore, the choice of an emic approach, based on meanings about one theme, in one situation, and a single case study greatly limit comparative purposes.



Methodologically, using two paradigms enriched our understanding of the studied phenomenon in its context (Romani *et al.*, 2018). The importance given to the observation in the present study, that has substantially completed the interviews we conducted, leads us to encourage similar methodology practice to further the understanding of services.

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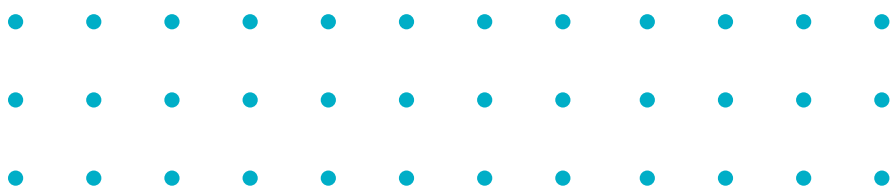
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APPENDIX 1

Interviews with employees of FU1

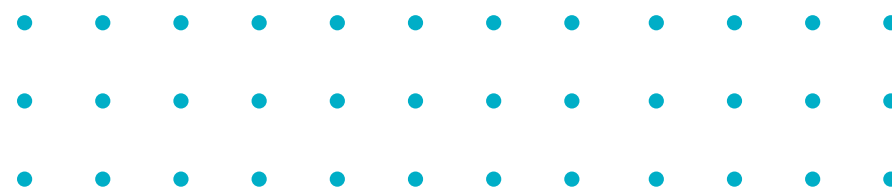
Job function (employment start date) Nationality, age	Date of the semi-structured interview (duration)
Manager-consultant of FU1 (2010) Spanish-Italian, 51	07/02/2017 (50 min) 26/10/2017 (50 min) ¹
Administrative officer (2010 ²) French, 59	07/03/2017 (50 min)
Service manager (2016 ³) English, 34	10/05/2017 (50 min)
Head Language Assistant (2015) French-English, 33	25/03/2017 (50 min)
Language assistant/receptionist 1 (2016) French, 21	15/03/2017 (45 min)
Language assistant/receptionist 2 (2013) French, 21	31/10/2017 (45 min)
Teacher 1 (2017 ⁴) Chinese-English, 37	02/08/2017 (1 h)
Teacher 2 (2014) South African, 31	03/03/2017 (50 min)
Teacher 3 (2016) Scottish, 26	04/03/2017 (1 h)
Teacher 4 (2016) English, 36	25/02/2017 (1 h)
Teacher 5 (2010) Philippine-American, 40	03/04/2017 (1 h 30)
Teacher 6 (2015) American, 30	10/05/2017 (45 min)
Total	12 h 15 (181 transcribed pages)

1. Interviews with FU1 employees and customers having highlighted the role of the manager within the unit, we conducted a second interview, in order to analyse in depth his practices.

2. ES employee for 17 years.

3. ES employee for 5 years

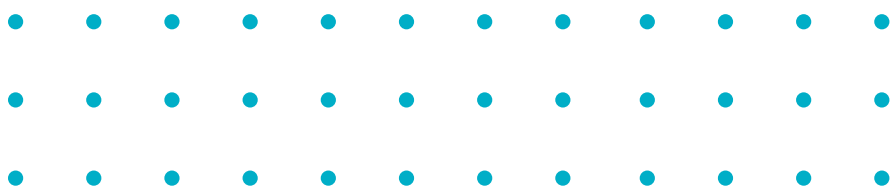
4. ES employee for 4 years



APPENDIX 2

Interviews with customers of FU1

Customer (sex), category Profession, age	Beginning of the training at FU1	Interview date (duration)
Customer 1 (F), PEA Manager in an American firm, 42	March 2017	20/06/2017 (1 h)
Customer 2 (M), PEA Operating manager in a shipping company, 58	September 2016	26/06/2017 (1 h 30)
Customer 3 (M), B to B Entrepreneur in real estate, 31	May 2016	26/06/2017 (45 min)
Customer 4 (F), PEA Architect, 34	April 2017	04/07/2017 (40 min)
Customer 5 (F), B to C Psychologist, 46	July 2016	06/07/2017 (1 h)
Customer 6 (F), B to B Recruitment assistant, 22	March 2017	06/07/2017 (30 min)
Customer 7 (M), B to C Dentist, 67	February 2017	20/07/2017 (30 min)
Customer 8 (F), PEA Accountant, 52	May 2017	03/08/2017 (45 min)
Customer 9 (F), B to C Nurse, 60	January 2017	03/08/2017 (1 h)
Customer 10 (F), B to C Receptionist, 24	January 2014	25/08/2017 (50 min)
		Total: 8 h 30 (125 transcribed pages)



APPENDIX 3

Interview guides

Interview guide for the employees of FU1

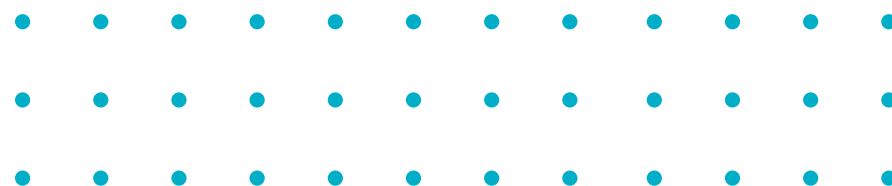
The questions correspond to the following themes: interviewee's position at FU1; type (direct or indirect) of daily contact with clients; competences (language and relational) needed in a service delivery; managerial culture at FU1; cultural specificities in service delivery.

1. What is your position within the company?
2. When did you join the company?
3. What does your typical day at work look like?
4. What competences are needed for your job function? Can you describe situations where these competences are emphasized?
5. In which situations, on a regular basis, does the company need your skills?
6. How would you define the (managerial) culture at FU1?
7. What language(s) do you use most in your work? In which situations?
8. What type of contact do you have with clients? Is it direct or indirect? Can you describe it and give some examples?
9. What nationalities are the most present among your clients? How does this affect (or not) your service?
10. Have you had any particular/out of ordinary situation with a client?

Interview guide for the customers of FU1

The questions correspond to the following themes: understand what motivated customers' decision to study at FU1 (by asking them to describe the first encounter with the manager-consultant); first impression about the personnel and FU1 in general; type and specificities of the contact (direct or indirect) they have with the personnel; consistency between the presented service (first encounter) and received/delivered service; competences of the FU1's personnel they appreciate and deem necessary in a service delivery.

1. How long have you been taking classes at FU1?
2. Why did you decide to take English lessons?
3. Why did you choose FU1?
4. What type of class are you taking? How much time do you spend in school per day?
5. Can you describe how the first encounter with the manager-consultant went?
6. What was your first impression of the service provided, the school, the staff?
7. What was your impression after the first lesson (with teachers)?
8. Does the service provided correspond to the service presented at the first encounter?
9. What type of contact do you have with the employees?
10. What competences does the staff of FU1 need to satisfy its customers?
11. What do you think of the follow-up of your training by FU1's staff?
12. How would you define the (company) culture of FU1?



APPENDIX 4

Participant and non-participant observation in FU1

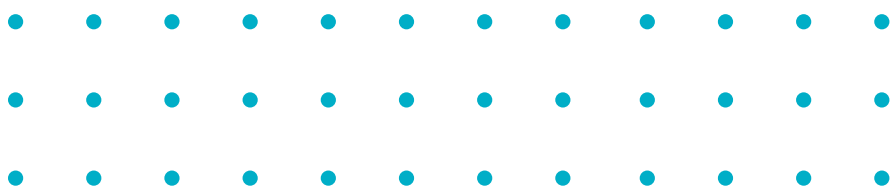
Observed job function/encounter	Type of observation*	Duration
Global observation of FU1 functioning	NPO	10 h
Manager-consultant of FU1	NPO	9 h
Administrative officer	NPO	3 h
Service manager	NPO	5 h
Language assistants and Head Language Assistant	NPO	14 h
	PO	30 h
Teachers	NPO	12 h
B to B encounter	NPO	40 min
B to C encounter	NPO	55 min
	Total NPO	54 h 35 min
	Total PO	30 h

*Non-Participant Observation (NPO), Participant Observation (PO)

APPENDIX 5

Word frequency (Manager-consultant's answer to the question: "What competences are needed for your job function?")

Word	Percentage (%)	Representative excerpts
listening	3,64	"Empathy and listening because [...] there are people who are suffering, they are in difficult professional situations, they feel down."
people	3,03	
need	1,82	
contact	1,82	"It's listening, feeling the need of the person to be able to answer it more easily."
empathy	1,82	"I would have never seen myself as a researcher, [alone] in an office, without the contact [with people], it is not possible."
like	1,82	
competence	1,21	"The quality you need to have is enthusiasm and love for what you do. If you don't like what you do in our <i>métier</i> , you can't be successful, I am convinced of that. If you do not like what you do, if you do not like giving to others... I do not say that it is not good, I say that in our <i>métier</i> , if you are not able to have these two skills, you must focus on something else."
give	1,21	
métier	1,21	
suffering	1,21	
love	0,61	



APPENDIX 6

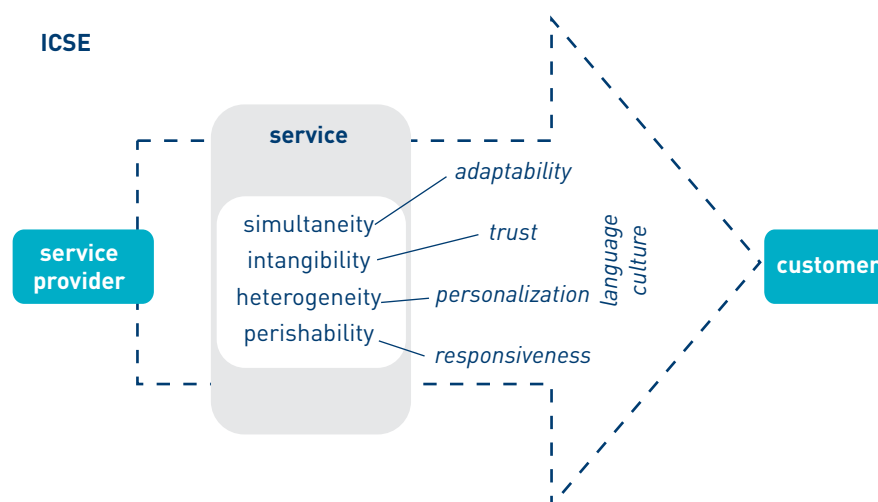
Sales of FU1 consultant compared to the sales of some other French units

Center	Year of establishment	Workforce	Number of enrolled students (Sept 2018)	Number of consultants	Turnover Sept 2016-Aug 2017
FU1	2010	12	290*	1	1 080 000**
FU2	2000	8	90	2	850 700
Orléans	1980s-1990s	18	421	2	661 000
Lyon	Beginning of 2000s	17	302	3	850 000
Paris (several centers)	1980s-1990s	20-30	300-1100	6-10	3 005 000-3 200 000

*Headquarters estimated that FU1, after its opening in 2010, would have 120 students enrolled after 6 years. **Total turnover September 2010-February 2018: 5 596 046 euros

APPENDIX 7

IC in ICSE in the language sector



Elements in *italic*: Components of IC in ICSE