

Globalization and the English Skills Gap

BY DEEPAK DESAI

Business English proficiency is critical for success in the global economy — but most employees in global corporations say their employees' English skills are inadequate. Successful learning leaders are using technology to break down the language barrier.

DATA POINT

There are as many ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers in Asia as there are people in the United States.

Business has changed, and globalization is the most important trend in today's business environment. The physical location of a company's headquarters and employees is less relevant than ever in today's market. The new economy is driven by consumers, and they are everywhere — a worldwide democracy of people voting with money.

As business goes global, so do projects and employees: Labor is mobile, and companies are sourcing highly skilled workers from every nation in a worldwide race for talent. Seventy percent of U.S. companies rate access to qualified personnel as an important or very important strategic driver of offshoring — the work goes "where it logically belongs."

The flat-world economy means employees at all levels juggle time-zone issues and cultural differences daily. Advanced technologies are connecting workers and enabling interaction like never before, but the convergence of cultures and languages presents incredible complexities for multinational corporations that need to think and act as one.

The Language of Business

Seamless communication and shared understanding are fundamental strategic imperatives for success in the new economy, and English has overwhelmingly been adopted as the common language of business. Twenty-five percent of the world's population speaks English, and it's the official language of more than 50 countries. At multinational corporations, even ones in which native English speakers are becoming the minority, non-native speakers from around the world rely on English to speak with one another.

It could be said, in fact, that ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers now "own" the English

language — there are as many fluent ESL speakers (400 million) as there are native English speakers, and today 1 billion people worldwide are studying English as a second or other language.

In GlobalEnglish Corp.'s "Globalization of English" research, 91 percent of employees of global corporations said that English is "required" or "important" in their jobs, and studies show that the need is increasing dramatically with each passing quarter. Seventy-six percent of employees use English on the job at least once a week, and nearly half use it daily.

Employees with an urgent need for English represent a broad array of job roles at every level of today's organizations, with slightly greater numbers among consulting, administrative, technology and accounting/finance positions. Work-related tasks requiring English communication skills span a wide spectrum of activities, including conducting phone calls, participating in meetings, writing e-mails, producing documents and preparing presentations. Employees cite managers, executives and co-workers as the people with whom they most frequently need to communicate in English, underscoring the importance of corporate alignment and its critical role in enabling companies to capitalize on the opportunities that globalization provides.

English language skills are necessary for employees, not only in the performance of their job duties, but also for their continued career development. Eighty-nine percent of employees said they are more likely to climb the corporate ladder if they can communicate in English, and only 2 percent said English skills are not important at all in getting a promotion. Immigrants in England, for example, who are fluent in English, are 20 percent more likely to get jobs and earn 20 percent more than those who are not fluent.

A Costly Skill Gap

Clearly, business English proficiency has become increasingly critical to the success of the global enterprise. Yet, only 9 percent of global employees said their current English skills are sufficient to do their jobs. Seventy-eight percent expect they will need to improve their proficiency within the next year, and 36 percent believe they will need to study for at least a year before they are able to communicate effectively.

Moreover, mastery of vocabulary and grammar alone is not enough. Employees preparing for international interactions must become familiar with the societal characteristics and professional etiquette of the countries in which they do business in order to be effective. Rhetorical devices such as sarcasm are difficult for non-native speakers to detect, and colloquial pronunciations that can be vital in establishing camaraderie with locals add another layer of complexity.

This is a massive and expensive skills gap, and global companies are at an inflection point. The need for English-language training has never been greater, and if the problem is addressed effectively, companies stand to save millions by virtue of gained productivity.

The Democratization of Learning

By 2016, it's estimated that 33 percent of the world's population will be trying to learn English. Even now, the following trends are in play:

- One hundred eighty million Chinese students are learning English as part of their formal education.
- There are more people studying English in China than there are people in the United Kingdom.
- There are as many ESL speakers in Asia as there are people in the United States.
- Half a million ESL learners in England spend an average of 300 pounds out of pocket each year on language training.
- Twenty percent of Japanese 5-year-olds attend English conversation classes.
- Mexico has added English to its primary-school curriculum.

Yet, while the average university graduate who is a native English speaker knows 20,000 word families, the average adult ESL speaker knows only 5,000, even after several years of study.

Forward-thinking business executives, human resources professionals and learning leaders recognize both the challenge and opportunity of developing business English competence and are seeking fast and effective ways to address this critical training need. For many companies, e-learning is an ideal solution. Online training is more accessible, scalable and affordable than traditional classroom training,

and participants benefit from its unique effectiveness, engagement opportunities and ease of use. Self-directed learning keeps content relevant and motivation high, and the flexible approach supports the continued development and focused practice required for advanced learners.

A Healthy Investment

According to a December 2007 report from Novations Group, soft-skills training is expected to increase in 2008. English communication skills should be counted as an essential soft skill for global business. Presentation, negotiation, empathy, problem solving — all depend on language and cultural proficiency. There is no doubt that global corporations will benefit from a healthy investment in English language training. Chief learning officers should ask themselves these key questions:

- How frequently, for what purpose and in what language will your employees communicate with one another, suppliers and customers?
- What teams and divisions will work across borders and for what purpose? What benefits will that provide?
- If employees can't communicate effectively with global customers, suppliers, partners or other employees, how will that impact operational effectiveness?
- Does your next generation of leaders have the business communication skills it needs to successfully manage your organization?
- How will you address the language barriers in your organization? What are the costs if you don't?

A global workforce-development plan that builds upon the answers to these questions will produce tangible, bottom-line benefits to company performance and position the organization for success in the global economy. **CLO**

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