

Is It Time for Us All to Learn English?

Matt Halsdorff and **Christian Saunders** see the commercial sense in global English training

An awakening is happening in the business world in terms of language training. Companies are beginning to invest in training which helps the monolingual English speakers adapt their language while communicating with colleagues who speak English as a second language. An increasing number of “native English speakers” (a problematic term, but in this article, we’ll use it to mean monolingual English speakers) are acknowledging that they are equally responsible for clear communication and are beginning to do something about it. This actually isn’t all that surprising. Up to two billion people are estimated to speak some level of English in the world, which leaves the native speakers in the clear minority. In conversations where English is being used as a lingua franca, the native English speakers tend to present a high number of barriers to clear international communication. Our workshop for native speakers, entitled The Travel Adapter, introduces the concept by suggesting that “communication is not a one-way street, it is a dance between two or more people, and it can only work if both sides participate equally.”

The International Meeting

An oft-cited scenario that describes the modern-day reality looks like this: a group of German and Chinese colleagues are speaking together via Zoom, using English as their common language. The conversation is peppered with idiosyncratic grammar, but despite the sometimes nonstandard constructions, everyone is able to communicate clearly. All is moving along smoothly until two American teammates join the call and speak up. The virtual room falls silent. The microphones are slowly muted and the two



native English speakers begin to dominate the call. Some of the German and Chinese colleagues have difficulty following along.

The native English speakers unknowingly create a series of obstacles the nonnative speakers have difficulty getting around: complex vocabulary, idioms, cultural references, acronyms, phrasal verbs... the list of obstacles is long. As the confusion grows, so does the stress, and the international participants begin to feel excluded from the conversation. This is the problem that native speakers and their managers are slowly waking up to. And the fastest way to solve this problem is to do a little training with the native English speakers in addition to the standard language training program offered to the nonnative speakers. It's an approach that tackles the problem from both sides.

Here are five reasons more companies are deciding to include monolingual English speakers in their language programs:

1. It has a stronger ROI than training the second language speakers

Billions of dollars are spent annually in the English language training (ELT) industry. It's an enormous investment of resources. This number often doesn't include the hidden costs of language training for organizations. Do the employees do the training during their work hours? Are they paid their normal salary while participating?

Let's approach this from a business mindset. How many hours would it take an adult learner to reach an English level that the company considers acceptable? This number could easily reach into the hundreds. For reference: Cambridge English estimates that it would take about 600 hours of guided learning for a beginner to reach an upper-intermediate level (CEFR: B2). That's eleven years of taking a one-hour English class per week! Now most adults do not begin their corporate language training from zero, but there is no denying that learning a language is something that requires time.

The best way to speed things up, from a financial point of view, is to invite the monolingual English speakers into small workshops created specifically for them. With just a few tweaks, adaptations, and a heavy dose of language awareness, the native speakers will be able to more easily meet their colleagues in the middle of the fluency

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gap. A two-hour workshop is enough to get the ball rolling.

A practical example: there are thousands of idioms in the English language. (We just saw one in the previous paragraph: to get the ball rolling.) How many of these do we expect our second language learners to memorize? How much time does that take?

If the native speakers on the team become more aware of the language they use, they can then avoid complex expressions, rephrase them, or remember to check for understanding. The pressure on the English learner to learn all those unique idioms is suddenly removed, which means that time and energy can be spent elsewhere. After all, it is much faster to teach a native speaker adaptation strategies than to expect a learner to understand every cultural reference and idiomatic expression used in the English-speaking world.

2. It improves efficiency and helps avoid miscommunication

Poor communication leads to inefficiency. According to the *Economist*, poor communication can cost companies hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. When a second language speaker has difficulty understanding their native-speaking colleague, they are more likely to avoid things like answering phone calls, asking questions in presentations, or speaking up in meetings.

This leads to delays, mistakes, and missed opportunities, which cost money. Far too many meetings end with the international colleagues guessing about the details of what native speakers said. Those small miscommunications can come back to haunt the group when it is later discovered something was misinterpreted or misunderstood.

This is also true in written communication. Receiving easy-to-understand emails encourages a quicker response. Nobody wants to sift through a long paragraph of text searching for the message in their first language, let alone

in a second language. People often set these emails aside for when they have time to sit down and process the complex English, which can create drastic delays.

3. It helps build stronger teams

Numerous studies have shown that empathy is a force for productivity, life-work integration, and positive work experiences. Listening to one's speaking partner and adapting one's English respectfully is a strong demonstration of empathy, which draws teams together. When the native speaker unintentionally makes the nonnative speakers feel excluded, confused, or ashamed, small cracks begin to form in the relationship.

Communication may quickly move to email as people avoid virtual calls, driving the wedge between team members even deeper. Let's not forget that everyone is dealing with internal pressures from their company that create stress—language difficulties just exacerbate these issues.

4. It generates more ideas

A survey (Business Spotlight, 2009) asking German businesspeople about their problems with native speakers highlights an interesting point: 41% of the respondents in the survey said they “found it difficult to interrupt discussions to give an opinion.” How many ideas are we missing by not hearing those opinions?

When communication is difficult, the second language learner tends to blame themselves. This often leads to lower self-confidence in that language as well



as the possible fear of ridicule, both of which motivate people to be quiet. Clever solutions to important problems are unintentionally silenced. When the native speakers meet their colleagues in the middle by serving up easily digestible pieces of English, the doors are suddenly opened. The fear of language mistakes or the risk of not understanding is diminished, and ideas follow in their place.

5. It empowers employees (and supports diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) objectives)

Inclusion does not only have to do with skin color, sexual orientation, or gender issues. It also has to do with language, which is often used as a supposedly acceptable proxy for other types of unacceptable discrimination. Microaggressions around language and accent are reduced when the monolingual speakers learn to put themselves in the shoes of their nonnative-speaking colleagues. Through learning about how to adapt their language, the native speakers

often develop a deeper understanding of why it is the fair thing to do.

The Beginnings of a New Industry?

Given the benefits that this type of training offers to corporate customers, one might wonder why it isn't already a staple part of company training in the same way as occupational safety or diversity, equity, and inclusion. Why were classes not organized in combination with English lessons for the second language speakers? The answer to this is rather clear. Most organizers (and employees) simply assumed that native speakers were doing a good job already. Those times are changing. The combination of research, the growth of English around the world, and the push for inclusion are spurring this trend forward. Progressive organizations, health care providers, and universities are already booking workshops for their native English speakers and are showing measurable results. We are in the exciting early days of this training, but it seems that the monolingual English speakers of the world are finally acknowledging they have a part to play in clear communication.

References

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