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Mastering English Language Skills for Effective Business Communication

KEYWORDS: English language, business areas, language competencies, language skills

ABSTRACT - Mastering the English language has become one of the key competencies in modern business communication. Nowadays, globalization and internationalization of business as well as a successful business career are closely related to English language skills and knowledge of international business trends. This paper deals with the impact of English language proficiency on the status of employees, the development of certain language skills that contribute to the success of the individual and also the company, but also how ignorance negatively affects business. Thus, the aim of this paper is to use the meta-analytic approach to draw on the findings of previous research in the field of business and language learning, and to raise awareness of the importance of good language skills for effective language communication in business. Based on the findings of the meta-analysis, it was concluded that English language proficiency has a positive effect on an individual's development and increases both personal income and that of the company.

KLJUČNE REČI: engleski jezik, poslovna područja, jezičke kompetencije, jezičke veštine

POVZETEK - Poznavanje engleskog jezika je jedna od ključnih kompetencija u savremenoj poslovnoj komunikaciji. Danas su poslovna globalizacija i internacionalizacija, kao i uspešna poslovna karijera usko povezani sa znanjem engleskog jezika i poznavanjem međunarodnih poslovnih trendova. Ovaj rad se bavi uticajem poznavanja engleskog jezika na status zaposlenih, razvojem određenih jezičkih veština koje doprinose uspehu pojedinca i kompanije, ali takođe razmatra kako neznanje negativno utiče na poslovanje. Dakle, cilj ovog rada je da koristi meta-analitički pristup nalazima prethodnih istraživanja u oblasti poslovanja i učenja jezika i podigne svest o značaju dobrog poznavanja jezičkih veština za efikasnu jezičku poslovnu komunikaciju. Zaključak je izveden na osnovu nalaza meta-analize da znanje engleskog jezika pozitivno utiče na napredovanje pojedinca, a povećava i prihod njegovog preduzeća.

1 Introduction

The crucial importance of knowing foreign languages for business success is a well known fact nowadays. Experts claim that countries lose in earnings every year due to a linguistic misunderstanding between representatives of different companies. It is obvious, therefore, that successful communication with international clients is necessary for successful international business (Arnold, 2000). Business leaders agree that business would improve significantly if company employees improved their knowledge of foreign languages. It is also emphasized that English is undoubtedly of key importance for today's global markets. Therefore, learning foreign languages, especially English in business environment is crucial for success in today's international markets, and this trend will be even more pronounced in the future.

2 English language knowledge and business advantage

There is a significant mismatch between the growing importance of the English language at business market and tools and strategies needed to meet this challenge. Company management often lacks information about the level of English language proficiency of its employees and job candidates. This paper aims to explore this matter and investigate the relationship between English language knowledge and business advantage. The aim is to explore the key areas of business in which English language proficiency is essential for business success and try to state the impact of poor English proficiency on business profits.

The key point is to consider the additional benefits of a high level of English proficiency of employees and to assess how much impact it would have on business results in case the employees are unable to communicate in English. It was noticed that mastering English language does not represent only a basic requirement for employment, but also an essential tool that may affect business results to a significant extent. The greatest interdependence between business success and the quality of English knowledge is in the following areas of business:

- business information
- supplier costs
- international projects and tenders
- international investments and sales
- brand value and customer satisfaction
- internal communication and cooperation within the team

2.1 *Business information*

Poor knowledge of English can prevent managers from following industry trends and participate in international seminars, trade fairs and other promotional events. This means that the company misses new market opportunities, damages its own reputation or fails to adapt to changing market trends. In order to avoid this it should be ensured that employees at all levels of the company have the appropriate knowledge of English.

English language skills are important not only for employees who are in direct contact with customers, but also for those who are in managerial and technical positions. Adequate knowledge of the English language skills of employees at higher levels means that they can follow trends in the industry as well as exchange this type of knowledge internally.

2.2 *Supplier costs*

Sources of supply directly affect company's profit as well as its ability to define competitive prices. Restricting the company exclusively to domestic suppliers can lead to higher procurement costs. A large number of the company strives to relocate its production to countries with lower costs, as well as to procure raw materials in bulk from sellers who offer the lowest prices. The importance of knowing English in these cases is not exclusively related with sales, but also with costs.

Therefore, the employees' English language skills should be tested and developed if necessary, in order to maintain satisfactory level of English language competence. Regardless of the size of the company or the need for assessment, it is crucial to use tests based on reliable academic research. Tests should have comparative results that are thoroughly verified. Using unreliable tests that provide inaccurate insights into the employees' English language skills can lead to great loss and inefficiency. Although the retail prices of these tests are lower, their actual long-term costs can be far higher.

3 International projects and tenders

International projects and tenders offer significant growth opportunities in a large number of industries, but the development of competitive bids often depend on the knowledge of the English language. People who have a good knowledge of the English language are necessary for bidding, negotiating and managing large international projects. If a company cannot formulate its offer well, its chances of being shortlisted will be significantly reduced. In addition, a clear and confident presentation in English is crucial for shortlisted offers. Offers are also based on continuous relationship building, which in turn requires clear and confident speaking and listening skills.

The previous research has clearly shown the influences on the example of the construction industry in Italy (ELAN, 2005). With these companies, about 80 percent of the project revenue depends on English since English is the working language of the markets in which they operate - only 20 percent of the work is done in Italian. The ability to retain these huge sources of income would be compromised if the company's employees have insufficient level of English language skills.

Different positions require different levels of individual skills. Accountants and IT assistants who interact indirectly with clients may need listening and writing skills more than speaking skills. The opposite is often the case with employees who are in direct contact with customers. Using a test that shows the level of knowledge of each of these skills individually, instead of the general level of knowledge, will give the precise information needed to make a decision.

4 Investments and sales at the international level

Expansion beyond local markets requires that marketing and sales departments are able to communicate effectively with foreign clients, and a high level of English proficiency is essential. According to the representatives of a large number of companies that participated in the previous research in The UK Employer skills survey (2017), their presence in different markets was the best way to withstand crises in the domestic market. They highlighted international expansion as a key component in this regard as it allows their companies to continue to do well despite declining business in the local market. Knowledge of English has been identified as a key tool in this process.

Representatives of travel agencies in Russia (The Economist, 2013) stated that without the English language, they would not be able to negotiate with foreign partners and would eventually be pushed out of the market, with a loss of income of as much as 90%. In the tourism industry in Italy (The Economist, 2013), English is necessary for companies to be able to expand into new markets. The companies offering cruises are especially focused on China and other parts of Asia (Mann et al., 2011), which requires knowledge of the English language. The Asian cruise market is projected to grow in double digits over the next ten years. In one company that participated in our survey, the demand for cruises from Asia and Australia increased by 18% in 2013 alone (The Economist, 2013).

For Italian banks, trading in international markets is an important driver of growth and helps diversify risk; companies buy and sell foreign currency for both domestic and foreign clients. In total, about 30-40% of the funds managed are of international origin, which means that the English language contributes to revenues in the amount of 30-40% through this channel (Bel, 2011).

Therefore, English language skills of the employees should be mapped and investigated in relation to the international standard. When employees are in contact with foreign clients it is

crucial that the level of knowledge of their English meet international standards. Test that provides precise and accurate information on each language ability, i.e. speaking, writing, reading, listening, should be applied. In addition, it should be mapped according to the Common European Framework of Reference for International Standards for the Assessment of Language Abilities in order to provide relevant research results.

5 Brand value and customer satisfaction

Previous research has confirmed that insufficient knowledge of English can greatly affect the way foreign customers perceive a company's brand. A good brand image on the international scene increases the experience of quality and industry leadership, which is essential for gaining customers. In order for customers to return, a customer relationship team should be appointed in order to facilitate the employees develop and improve English language skills.

As an example of how the experience of quality enables higher prices, one of the respondents, a Russian consulting and IT company, estimated that the prices of the company's products would have to be five times lower if its employees did not have adequate knowledge of English, as this would damage their image (The Economist, 2013). The influence of the English language on the brand image is also significant for large hotel chains that face a lot of competition and have to maintain a high level of service in order to retain clients. In the hotel sector in Germany, it is estimated that over 60% of guests would not return if the hotel employees did not speak English at an adequate level. In city centers or popular tourist areas, over 70% of income depends on a high level of English language proficiency among employees (Mann et al., 2011).

Therefore, language learning and testing employees before the training itself helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of employees in terms of specific language skills, which allows for organizing groups for customized training aimed at improving language skills (Kalinovskaya & Ivanschenko, 2007). Placement tests accurately point out language skills deficiencies to best design and evaluate training programs. It is necessary in order to optimize the time and money spend on training by targeting only those skills that need to be worked on the most. Post-training testing provides a clear picture of improvement and areas where the best results have been achieved. In addition, the results show whether the course has achieved the desired improvements in language proficiency and indicate areas where further training is needed (Đolić, 2016).

6 Internal communication and cooperation within the team

Due to the multinational character of a large number of projects involving teams in different countries, uninterrupted teamwork also depends on the quality of English language skills. The consequences of a simple misunderstanding can cost a lot and lead to inefficiencies, higher direct costs, and even accidents.

In the IT and consulting services sector in Russia, developers from different countries regularly collaborate on projects (Bialystok et al., 2004). In international companies in this sector, a total of 65 percent of internal communication takes place in English. A representative of one IT company said that "although developers can work without the knowledge of the English language, it is important to know the language to understand customer requirements and cooperate with colleagues from other offices who are working on the same project." (The Economist, 2013). In large Italian industrial companies, English is not only a significant part of external communication (80%), but it is also crucial for internal communication (40%). In the German car industry, over 50% of internal communication takes place in English (Mann et al.,

2011). This is especially important at the management level in order to facilitate communication between branches and company headquarters.

7 Conclusion

During the selection phase potential new employee should be tested. In addition to business and technical skills, during the recruitment process the candidate's knowledge of English should be assessed. For jobs that require English language skills, it is essential to be sure to hire someone who possesses the level of English language skills necessary to perform tasks effectively. Failing to do so at the beginning of the work process, it could have serious consequences for business performance in the future. It can cause a regular loss of business opportunities, and post-employment training for employees can be quite expensive if their English language proficiency proves to be low.

If relying on a brief conversation in English the consequences can be serious. The overriding risk associated with this method is to assess only the candidate's ability to converse, thus omitting his / her writing and reading skills from testing, and this assessment is performed at an extremely basic and unreliable level. This could lead to a situation to hire someone who speaks English but lacks appropriate writing skills. This decision could affect the company in a variety of ways, from poor communication with customers to costly manufacturing errors or accidents.

In addition, using non-research-based tests may result in serious failure which means that there is a risk that the results will be biased, incomplete and unreliable. Test verification is essential for its accuracy and reliability to ensure that the questions are of an appropriate level of difficulty and will lead to trustworthy results. Testing can take several days, and they should assess all four language skills - speaking, writing, reading and listening.

Furthermore, testing employees through basic online tests can gain a quick insight into the candidate's English language skills, but it is too general and does not include speaking or writing skills. The result is that such tests fail to provide an accurate and comprehensive picture of one's abilities. The test should provide reliable assessment which determines whether a candidate possesses specific English language skills, e.g. fluent writing, intermediate-level conversation, which may jeopardize certain areas of business.

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