



The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

English at Work

Anthony Fitzpatrick & Robert O'Dowd

The lower half of the cover features an abstract design of overlapping squares in various shades of blue, purple, and pink. The text 'An Overview for Employers and Training Providers' is centered within a large, dark blue square.

An Overview for
Employers and
Training Providers

Summary

Employers whose workers need English training, and the language professionals who provide such programs will benefit from a new report, published by The International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF). Written by Anthony Fitzpatrick and Robert O'Dowd, the report is intended for anyone planning or delivering language training solutions in the workplace. It will also be useful for CEOs, human resource directors, and other decision makers, in both the private and public sectors, who are considering such training.

The authors look at the role English plays in the 21st-century workplace and how learners and workers around the world are being prepared to use English effectively. The study presents findings from academic research in this area, incorporating the results of twenty specially commissioned case reports of language training projects from around the world.

The key findings of the report include:

- the importance of workers being able to use English effectively in informal situations;
- the need to address cultural issues when designing courses and materials;
- the benefits of integrating online activities and resources into teaching materials;
- the advantages of personalizing language courses and the importance of employers taking a long-term view of the benefits of such courses.

The report also contains a preliminary checklist that employers can use to help them set up or evaluate language courses in the workplace.



This brief summary sets out the key findings of the report.

You can read the full report, available online at www.tirfonline.org

English in the 21st-Century Workplace

English is the language of international business. It plays an integral role in the globalized economy, not only in countries where English is the majority language but also where it is a foreign language used as a lingua franca by the local workforce. Workers around the world are increasingly required to apply the skills of collaboration, problem solving, e-literacy, etc., in English. They must use this language to work and collaborate with clients, colleagues, and supervisors who may come from many different cultural backgrounds. Workers are also using English to communicate in online contexts (e.g., email communication, webcam-based conference meetings, etc.).

The English language is often seen by non-English speaking companies as the key to gaining access to global markets. Many employers need their employees to be proficient in English, whether it is to do business in English-speaking countries or to operate in other markets where English can be used as the lingua franca.

Employees in multinational companies are increasingly expected to use English not only with their international clients but also for internal communication with their own colleagues from other language backgrounds. At the same time, companies operating in English-speaking countries are employing an immigrant workforce. Some of these immigrants may not be able to communicate efficiently in English. More and more companies are becoming aware of the need to provide in-house English language training for their immigrant workers in order to improve efficiency.

English is no longer seen as something to be taught separately from other subjects and skills. Rather, it is a tool to help people utilize a range of skills in their daily practice. Thus, English language training for current employees or for those preparing to join the workforce should reflect and be combined with the development of other skills needed in the 21st-century workplace. These 21st-century skills complement the specific job-related expertise that graduates and workers bring to the workforce in their own disciplines. 21st-century skills include those that enable workers to communicate and collaborate with others, organize and analyze information, make informed decisions, and then take decisive action.

The expanding area of information-based employment in the 21st-century means that those entering the workforce need far more knowledge than



simply to be informed about their area of expertise. New graduates must enter the workforce with a repertoire of applied skills, including the ability to solve problems, to communicate effectively with others (from the same culture and also from other cultures), to work in teams, to use online technologies effectively, and to engage in critical analysis.



Language Training for the 21st-Century Workplace


Courses which have traditionally been called “business English” and “English for specific purposes (ESP)” have mainly emphasized developing future workers’ skills in the classic business tasks of formal presentations, letter and email writing, formal negotiations, etc.

However, recent studies highlight the importance of English for informal interaction and socializing in workforce contexts. In meetings, the ability to take part in discussions is often considered much more important than actually carrying out formal presentations. Participation in teamwork is vital for job success. Increased awareness of cultural differences in both oral and written forms of communication is essential in the contemporary workplace, where personnel are of different ages and represent a range of linguistic, ethnic, and social backgrounds.

It is becoming more and more common to find English as a foreign language programs being refocused to enable learners to develop not only their English language proficiency, but also to learn how to master and integrate other competences, such as digital competence and cultural awareness.

In recent years, closer integration among language and business and cultural content has emerged. This connection has led to a curricular approach called content-based instruction (CBI). In CBI, students learn some content (e.g., business, nursing, ecology, etc.) through the target language while they also develop their language proficiency. In Europe, this approach is known as content and language integrated learning (CLIL).

Many universities in non-English speaking countries are now offering content courses in English in order to better prepare their own students to use the



language as a lingua franca in their future careers. Such course offerings also make these programs more attractive and accessible for international students. This practice reflects the growing belief in foreign language education circles that individuals learn more effectively and more naturally when they are using language to accomplish tasks related to a specific content area. In such contexts, learners engage in genuine communication, rather than learning a language for its own sake.

Trends in Language Training for the Workplace

The twenty case reports developed for this study also identify a number of specific trends:

Specialization and personalization of English language training

Educators are moving away from a one-size-fits-all model of business English or ESP courses, and are striving to develop courses that clearly reflect the particular aims and needs of their clients. The different areas of professional and vocational English training are so diverse that effective courses need to focus on the special needs of those working in particular fields.

Consolidation of online technologies as tools for learning and teaching

Online activities are no longer seen as add-on activities. Rather they play an integral part in English language training for the workforce. This trend is emerging largely because many clients of English language training providers use online technologies themselves on a daily basis for their work and need to learn how to use English in this context.

Cultural aspects of language and communication gain recognition

The development of intercultural communicative competence and global competence has become one of the key aims in training English language learners to operate in organizations characterized by international travel, immigration, and multicultural workforces.

The use of project-based learning and authentic materials

Classroom procedures adopted to prepare 21st-century workers for their English-language encounters involve the integration of project-based learning with role plays and simulations that reflect the immediate and future needs of learners in their workplaces. There are also examples of fully authentic or real world projects or tasks being used in English language courses, in which learners use English with members of the world outside the course itself.

The importance of autonomy and developing learner independence

Considerable research has been done in the area of learner independence in foreign language education. This research has culminated in the development of tools for developing learning strategies and learner independence, such as learners' diaries and portfolios. The concept that learners need to develop language learning skills and awareness, which they can then apply to different learning contexts and situations outside of the classroom, is well established in foreign language education.

Interdisciplinarity and teaching qualifications

In some of the commissioned case reports, there is a clear movement towards teamwork between language specialists and subject-matter specialists. Thus English language trainers must be prepared to teach life skills and professional uses of language essential to integration into the workforce and for society as a whole.

Organizational support of English programs seen as vital

In-company training is considered most successful when it is integrated into the employing organization's basic philosophy, and when it receives adequate support and recognition from management and other sectors of the company.




Online Teaching and Learning

Online technologies in educational contexts are important tools for facilitating project-based approaches to English language learning in professional contexts. By integrating such technologies, educators have greater opportunities to connect their classrooms with the real world of business and their students' future professions.

The emergence of mobile learning has meant that educators and learners can use their phones, laptops, and tablets to access information and participate in online courses, no matter where they may be working or studying. The internet also allows learners to carry out projects which involve communicating and collaborating with fellow learners or with members of the learners' target profession who are located in other regions.

Recommendations for Employers and Training Providers

- **Workers need to be able to use English effectively in informal situations in the workplace.** In order to establish relationships and maintain rapport with their co-workers, superiors, and clients, English learners need to be sensitized to communication strategies. Being able to participate in small talk can sometimes be even more important for workers' promotion chances than carrying out daily work tasks in English.
 - **Training providers and materials developers must address the themes of intercultural communicative competence and cultural sensitivity in courses and materials.** Non-native speakers who are being prepared to work in English-speaking workplaces need to be prepared for these culturally specific aspects of English interaction norms. Of course, the influence of cultural norms and perspectives on work is not limited to face-to-face communication.
 - **Employers should take a long-term view when deciding whether or not to undertake the extra cost of personalized courses that are tailored to the specific English language needs of individuals or groups of workers.** While this type of course may be more costly than a general off-the-shelf course in the short term, personalized courses may be both more motivating and more useful and efficient for workers in the long run.
 - **Trainers need to ensure that online activities and resources are fully integrated into language courses,** rather than simply representing an occasional add-on activity.
 - **Decision makers should remember that in-company training is most successful when it is given adequate support from management.** Staff members need to feel that English language training is valued by their company and that their efforts to improve their language skills will be a great asset to their long-term careers.
 - **Employers and learners who wish to improve English language skills should refer to the checklist published as Appendix A of the report. It will help them to determine whether an English course deals with their own particular requirements.** It is important that, when making contact with the person or organization offering a specific course, learners are able to articulate what their needs are and what they expect to find in their course.
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About TIRF

TIRF, The International Research Foundation for English Language Education, is a non-profit organization whose mission includes generating new knowledge about English language teaching and learning. TIRF applies research findings to practical language problems by working collaboratively with companies, teachers, researchers, authors, publishers, philanthropic foundations, and government agencies. Visit www.tirfonline.org for more information.

About the Authors

Anthony Fitzpatrick is the former Director of The International Language Network (ICC). From 1975 to the present, he has served as a language expert and advisor for the Council of Europe.

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English at Work was produced with support from National Geographic Learning.

Summary produced by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations.

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