

LANGUAGE SKILLS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN MULTICULTURAL & MULTILINGUAL GLOBAL BUSINESSES: IT'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR FRESH GRADUATE JOB SEEKERS

Susan Joseph

Research Scholar-English, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal

Abstract

Language is intended to be the enabler to relationships which leads to communication in every field – education, home, sports and business.

Yet language in an organization can be confounding enough to become a barrier in its day -to-day functioning and successful running. So, does one become constrained in hiring /applying for a job or does one choose a candidate/job based on the best available skills /opportunities hoping to find a way around the challenges of communication? Confronted by unfamiliar accents, cultures, habits, dialects, or even body language and gestures even among colleagues who speak English which is the Business Lingua Franca of most Corporates, an individual is often challenged and slowed down in his workplace. An Indian new to Chinese English or an American expatriate trying to understand Indian English, (varied in accents and usage in different parts of the country), all working on the same project, often misunderstand communication mailed to each other or end up conveying what was not intended.

Corporates have been working towards helping, improve communication between employees and much more can be done to create awareness about 'world englishes' (Braj Kachru) as we may call the variety of 'Englishes' of the native and non-native speakers which we shall look at in this paper. Anyone who has used MSWord is aware of the English options, American, British Chinese and so on....It is effective communication, not rigid lexico-grammatical structures that organizations need and it is such skills that will be found desirable in our job-seeking graduates.

Keywords: World English, Business Lingua Franca, Indian English, Multicultural Corporates.

Introduction

Globalisation started with the discovery of land and sea routes. What we are witnessing today is the acceleration post liberalization, its momentum gathering force in the internet age. With the rapid increase in business process outsourcing including global call centers, retail supply chains, and virtual project teams, cultural diversity impacts almost everyone. The result is a population of managers, executives and associates who have no choice. They must learn to work effectively with people from dramatically different cultures and backgrounds, often without leaving their desks. Where once they might have been expected to collaborate with nationals from one or two foreign territories, today they are part of global networks connecting nationals scattered around the world

Where do Indian jobseekers find themselves in the light of the above challenge?

This is what *Hyderabad India Online* reported on Hyderabad.

“It's not unemployment but employability”

Lack of employability skills or employable talent among Indian graduates is the current problem in the Indian job market. The reasons cited are lack of **language skills**, obsolete syllabi, poor academic delivery, lack of work culture exposure and emphasis on just scoring marks instead of gaining and the application of knowledge.

Where do the experts position Language Skills?

According to **NASSCOM's report** (The Times of India, Apr2011) of the 3.7 million graduates coming out every year **only 25% are employable in the IT and ITES (BPO) sector**. When it comes to tech graduates only 35-

40% are readily employable. Further, while the industry is updating itself very fast with the global market requirements our education system is still lagging behind.

The ‘Metro Man of India’ E-Sreedharan was also upset by the deteriorating standards of technical education in India.

He quotes a survey according to which only 12% of the current engineering graduates are employable, 56% can be made useful through further training and the remaining were not even trainable.

Mr. Mohit Chandra, partner in KPMG, one of the leading professional services firms in his article – ‘An Open Letter to India’s Graduating Classes’ published in **The New York Times on May 2012** expressed his concern about the India’s graduating class. He finds shortage of skills in graduates, which employers typically look for, among them are... **‘lack of English communication skills – both oral and written .**

To quote from a letter which is pretty hard hitting....

“You speak and write English fluently: We know this is rarely the case. Even graduates from better-known institutions can be hard to understand.

Exhibit No. 1: Below is an actual excerpt from a résumé we received from a “highly qualified and educated” person. This is the applicant’s “objective statement:”

“To be a part of an organization wherein I could cherish my erudite dexterity to learn the nitigrities of consulting”

Huh? Anyone know what that means? We certainly don’t.

And in spoken English, the outcomes are no better. Whether it is a strong mother tongue influence, or a belief (mistakenly) that the faster one speaks the more mastery one has, there is much room for improvement. Well over half of the pre-screened résumés lack the English ability to effectively communicate in business.

So the onus, dear reader, is on you – to develop comprehensive English skills, both written and oral.”

The NASSCOM Response

Industry and academia request the implementation of an industry standard assessment that qualifies and quantifies employment skills, benchmarking the same across a national landscape. NASSCOM Assessment of Competence–Technology (NAC-Tech) is for engineering students. This industry standard highlights the skills to be bridged, applied in conjunction with training program to ensure the transformation of a "trainable" workforce into an "employable workforce", for the benefit of the individual and the country at large.

The Indian IT industry is growing at a tremendous pace. India’s biggest competitive advantage is the educated English-speaking talent pool, and hence it is also imperative that we have sustainable workforce development initiatives in place for the longer term. The industry, under the aegis of NASSCOM, is looking at ways and means to ensure that the future of this industry is even brighter. Proactive workforce development is becoming a major requirement for the Indian Engineering sector, specifically the IT.

NASSCOM is following a multi-pronged approach to facilitate manpower development for the short and long term. It is aiming to build a base of IT manpower by targeting various apex bodies and campuses across the country, which will be certified, in tune with the needs of the industry and geared up for the future requirements of the sector.

In this initiative, NASSCOM is looking at creating an Assessment and Certification program which becomes an industry standard and ensures the transformation of a "trainable" workforce into an "employable workforce. This program will be offered to all students who aspire to get into the Technology / Engineering industry. **As a part of**

its focus on evolving such a certification program, is to provide a credible assessment solution, which is integrated into the existing Engineering program framework NAC-Tech test matrix .

NAC-Tech Test Matrix NAC-Tech Part A (this must be attempted by all candidates)

Skill	Competencies Checked	Duration (in mins.)
Communication Ability	To assess candidate's verbal building blocks by evaluating skills like grammar, spellings, punctuations and vocabulary. To assess English usage by evaluating skills like structure, arguments and verbal reasoning.	11
Reading Comprehension	To assess candidate's comprehension of English passages and ability to make inferences from a large amount of information. Be able to connect the dots and make an assessment based on information and ideas spread across the passage.	10
Analytical Ability and Logical Reasoning	To assess problem solving skills through questions on quantitative reasoning. To assess candidate's logical skills by evaluating skills like Deduction, Induction and Visualization.	20
Attention to Detail	To assess candidates eye for detail.	5
Ability to manage work and safety	To assess candidate's awareness of and ability to work in an organisational context through questions around organisational policy, procedures, team structure, time management and health and safety issues.	14
-	<i>Total duration</i>	60 mins.

NAC-Tech Part B will be launched in few months.

The above test not only validates the significance of language skills but also attempts to tackle this area of weakness and thereby the problem of 'employability'.

What does the Business Processing Outsourcing industry want in terms of English language skills?

This article by JANE LOCKWOOD – Hong Kong Institute of Education reports on a consultancy project carried out in a large third-party call centre in Manila in 2004. The project aimed to improve English language communications assessment and training for the call centre representatives on the telephone to the United States, the United Kingdom and Australian customers.

“In many countries, most notably India and The Philippines, the Business Processing Outsourcing(BPO) industry is rapidly expanding. In these cheaper (low cost) destinations, back offices, call centers, shared services centers and professional services(such as legal, financial, medical and human resource development (HRD functions) are rapidly being outsourced and operated offshore from the US, the UK, Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

It is estimated that by 2015, 15 million jobs will be generated offshore in this industry, and this represents only 10% of possible jobs (NASSCOM-McKinsey Report 2005; Tuchman 2004). While the savings are significant (Friginal 2004; MagellanAlliance 2005), these cheaper (low cost) destinations employ staff who speak English as a second language, not as a first language. The consequences of employing non-native speaker

(NNS) staff as customer service representatives (CSRs) are significant in terms of language and acculturation. There is currently great concern regarding the quality of the communication with the customers. Poor recruitment rates ranging from 1–5% of the number of applicants are reported by HR departments in India and The Philippines. Another major problem is that the customer satisfaction (CSAT) scores, which are carried out by independent parties overseas and which form the basis of the service level agreements between the United States companies and the local call centres, are often negative about the quality of communication. A range of communication problems with customers has already been identified in the research (Forey and Lockwood 2007), ranging from an inability to explain products and services clearly, lack of lexico-grammatical choices in the soft skills and a lack of intercultural understanding of what the customer really means.

The issues related to English communications, intercultural awareness and English language assessment have been brought into sharp focus over the past ten years in India and The Philippines .

Language Diversity in a Company

This depends on the company's global network of clients, employees, customers suppliers/sourcing options and joint ventures.

Global giants like Microsoft manage about 80+ languages. Most global companies would manage with some East European languages, Chinese , Arabic, Malay Urdu Hindi and Bengali. English as the lingua franca becomes just as significant as the language of global interaction in multilingual organizations

Language Sophistication

Complexity, refinement and language skills would vary from position to position. **A receptionist** would be expected to have **speaking level proficiency and skills to guide enquiries correctly.**

A logistics manager needs a **greater English language capability** including reading and writing skills within the benefit of a limited vocabulary.

An **engineer** working as part of an international design team will be **required to evolve concepts and resolve design problems in written, spoken and visual forms.**

An **international manager** will need excellent language proficiency which includes **rhetorical skills such as persuasion negotiation, motivation , humour and a high proficiency in “relationship skills”.**

Cultural Competence

Global businesses call for **cultivation of cultural sensitivity along with language skills.**

Roger Axtell in Dos and Taboos Around the World says “ One country's good manners Can be another's grand faux pas” he warns that one cannot afford to arrive in another country with one's foot in one's mouth!

Famous gaffes are recounted. One where the executive spent his flight time to Singapore memorizing surnames of as many VIPs as he could only to have a note passed to him that remarked ‘too friendly too soon’. He realized how casual he sounded referring to the VIPs as Mr Charlie or Mr Ed. He had forgotten that Chinese surnames come first!

Food or what-you- wear can be tricky too.

Food delicacies of one country may come as a shock to a foreigner.

Some corporations like AT&T take this as seriously as enrolling the entire family of an executive on mores and manners before a foreign trip

Global Businesses and Language Barriers

Exploring the topic of language in international business, Anne-Wil Harzing and her colleagues conclude that differences in languages is one of the first and ultimate barriers that companies face on the way to internationalization. Naturally, communication between headquarters and globally dispersed business locations is

a pre-requisite for success, and modern technologies that allow for global intranets, video-conferencing and workflow technologies contribute to effective management of geographical distance. However, even these advanced communication tools flounder when it gets to language barriers. Of course, multinational companies may choose a language strategy to overcome these barriers. For example, companies may use a single working language, which in the majority of cases is English. Another option is to implement functional multilingualism, namely to rely on a mix of languages, pidgins and gestures to communicate. But, as Feely and Harzing (2003) note, both strategies have the same shortfalls of misinterpretations, getting some information lost in translation, being less able to express the thoughts and ideas to their fullest and simply not understanding messages correctly. As a result, the researchers conclude that language barriers trigger a whole range of consequences for multinationals and their subsidiaries. To name a few, the researchers argue that language barriers breed uncertainty and suspicion, promote group divides, undermine trust, and lead to polarization of perspectives, perceptions and opinion”.

Working in a Cross-cultural Environment: Where to Look for Cultural Gaps?

Sebastian Reiche in his blog . ‘Expatriatus’ writes ,“Question marks in Multicultural, multinational, and multilingual teams are part and parcel of global organizations of today. This highlights the importance of **cultural competencies, cross-cultural cooperation**, and leadership of multinational teams. Indeed, the main question for many is how to do business and effectively manage in such a culturally diverse environment?”

Cultural competence: too broad to grasp?

Well known work of **David Livermore** implies that the key to managing in this increasingly global and diverse business environment is the competence of cultural intelligence (CQ). In brief, CQ means being interested of culturally diverse settings and motivated to effectively function in them, knowing how cultures are similar and different, being aware of the moments when CQ is needed and strategizing the cross-cultural encounter, and finally being able to adapt one’s behavior to specific situations. Naturally, if you are curious and motivated to manage in culturally diverse teams, the first step towards cultural competence would be acquiring the knowledge about one’s own and other cultures. Otherwise how could one identify and act upon culturally challenging situations, if there is a lack of understanding of what exactly is different, misunderstood or falsely perceived by the other party? So, it is important to know about cultures. But what is exactly the knowledge we are looking for? For example, a famous series of **‘DO’s and TABOOS around the world’** by **Roger Axtell** provides a **wealth of information on customs, etiquette, hand gestures, and differences in body language across cultures**. Apart from differences in such overt behaviors, there are also differences in cultural beliefs and values. For instance, there are large-scale value surveys conducted across culturally different populations by Shalom Schwartz and by Inglehart and Baker.

A most recent version of work-related cultural differences is proposed by **Erin Meyer** from **INSEAD**. Bringing together already existing research and frameworks, as well as adding research of her own, Erin Meyer presents a tool called culture map, which provides a good overview for understanding business-relevant cultural differences. **Meyer proposes that cultural gaps are most common in the following eight management behaviors: communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing and scheduling.**

For example, when communicating with a foreign colleague, are your messages understood at face value (low-context communication) or is your colleague looking for deeper meaning and interpretations (high-context communication)?

Conclusion

Having examined the significance of linguistic competence in a global economy and seen the challenges faced by culturally diverse corporations, job seekers would remain under-equipped as long as technical skills are not supplemented by the kind of language skills discussed here. **language skills** go hand in hand with **cultural competence and cultural sensitivity** now the keyword in the success of any Multinational-Multilingual-Multicultural business as we see in the case of the growth of global businesses in our country . Some of these have set up work locations in cities and many have ventured deeper into smaller towns and even rural areas. Therefore the need to grow our language and cultural competencies will not only be restricted to our graduates in larger cities but to a much larger population across our vast and diverse country.

References

1. Axtell, R.E., & Parker Pen company.(1993).Do's and Taboos around the world. New York: Wiley
2. Forey,G ,& Lockwood, J (2007) an initial investigation of English needs in the Business Process Outsourcing(BPO) industry. *English for Specific Purposes*
3. Harzing, A.(1995).*Managing the Multinationals*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Cheltenham.
4. Meyer, E.(2014).The culture map: breaking through the invincible boundaries of global business. Public Affairs
5. Reiche, Sebastian. Expatriates: Global Mobility: Facing the Ultimate Challenges.web.12 Aug 2014
6. Spinks, N. & Wells, B.(1997).Intercultural Communication : A key element in global strategies. Career Development International
7. Choudhari, Abhishek. Only 25% graduates employable; Nasscom. The Times of India Nagpur, Apr2010.web.May 2014
8. Lack of Employable Talent in Today's Indian Graduates. Hyderabad Online. Web. 1Apr 2014