

# Business English proficiency is not a soft skill

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Business is fast. And it's getting faster. In the Information Age human beings are required to process voluminous amounts of information in an instant. In the globalised, Fourth Industrial Revolution epoch, business is also diverse with multicultural teams across continents needing to collaborate and deliver shareholder and customer value. Cohesive, coherent and succinct communication is a key factor for business success.

In the May 2012 issue of Harvard Business Review, Tsedal Neeley an associate professor at Harvard Business School and the founder of the consulting firm Global Matters, stated: "Ready or not, English is now the global language of business. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language – Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few." While the thought of learning Mandarin is gaining traction, given the size and power of the Chinese economy, it is considered unlikely that it will become the global language of business due to the head start that English had – the juggernaut that was the British Empire – and the difficulty of learning Mandarin, a language that requires a minimum knowledge of approximately 2 000 characters to achieve basic literacy.<sup>[1]</sup>

Although South Africa has eleven official languages (with South African Sign Language soon potentially the twelfth), English is our business language. For various complex reasons embedded in our country's history, many South Africans have never had the opportunity to either learn English or perfect their English skills. Yet, we are expected to communicate effectively in a pressured, diverse workplace.

Proficiency in any language requires reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Many South Africans engage in "passing" language use and selective mutism to survive in a professional or academic environment. This means copying and pasting chunks of information without understanding which results in incoherent business reports, proposals, email communication and presentations causing frustration and lost business time. Sadly, many professionals also choose not to contribute in English-speaking environments such as team, client and board meetings because they fear ridicule, lack appropriate vocabulary and are unable to express nuance – all requirements of high-level professional engagement. Thus the country and the economy forfeits the knowledge and experience so many South African professionals have to offer. This "fake it 'til you make it" approach is something we can ill afford.

Proficient, advanced language use requires a multiplicity of skills woven together with critical thinking. Empowering and professionalising South Africa's workforce for a local and global market requires realistic understanding of the commitment required to develop professional English language skills. For 22 years, Wits Language School has built a reputation for providing high quality language services and programmes. As a leader in the industry, the school provides language solutions that facilitate productivity and efficiency within organisations through its Business English courses: Business Writing, Presentation Skills, Report Writing for Executives and English for Critical Thinking in Business Contexts.

<sup>[1]</sup> "Why English, not Mandarin, is the Language of Innovation" by Bill Fisher, *Harvard Business Review*, 12 January 2015

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