



**English Corporate Language training –
no longer a choice, but a necessity for innovation, growth and success
by Mario Nonkovikj**

It was just one word in one email, but it caused huge financial losses for a global company working abroad. The email was sent by a native speaker of English to a colleague who was not a native speaker. Not understanding the word, the receiver of the email found two meanings in his dictionary that were the opposite of each other. He chose the wrong one. The project failed. Senior management investigated why the project had failed and cost the company millions of yen. They discovered all the trouble linked back to this email exchange, and because both companies were thinking the opposite. This is one of the many examples of the risks of miscommunication that companies are experiencing.

Around the world, companies and industries are recognising the need for a lingua franca, or a common language. As of now, 1.75 billion people speak English at a useful level, and many studies have shown that countries and companies with a higher English proficiency tend to be more innovative and have stronger growth. After all, the bigger the ocean, the bigger the rivals become, and the stronger a company needs to be to compete. One could argue that Rakuten's move into the bigger ocean and the ripples it created, certainly brought the attention of some very big fish – Amazon and Alibaba.

When the CEO of Rakuten, Mr. Hiroshi Mikitani, spoke about Englishnization, many of the companies inside Japan reacted with fascination and disdain. The former Honda's CEO, Takanobu Ito, publicly asserted, "It's stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is mainly Japanese." However, Mikitani was confident that it was the right move, and the policy is bearing fruit. From a domestic company focussed only on domestic customers, the English mandate has created a framework that has allowed Mikitani to re-build Rakuten into a remarkably diverse and powerful organization with some of the best talent from around Japan and the globe.

Current situation

Many companies around the world have realised that adopting an English corporate language strategy will help them enter and thrive in global markets and recruit and create effective global teams. But how far are we from a fully functioning English-speaking business world? The answer is: still very far.

According to recent surveys, notably the Harvard Business Review survey conducted this year, it was revealed that there are wide skill gaps between industries. Certain industries where English-language communication seems critical, including the logistics industry and the aviation industry, show low levels of English proficiency. Only two industries surveyed — consulting, professional services and engineering — had consistently strong English skills.

How far are Japanese companies from communicating in English at a useful level?

According to the most recent research, the Japanese Workforce English Proficiency has been placed in the moderate category, along with countries including: China, Ukraine and Taiwan. Just as countries have been revealed to have a great disparity in English skill, so too, has the Workforce English Proficiency by Industry in Japan shown similar inconsistency:

High Level of Effective English

Consulting, professional services

Moderate level of Effective English

Engineering, IT, trading, banking, finance, pharmaceuticals, media, entertainment

Low level of Effective English

Automotive, Manufacturing, Telecommunications, Aviation

Very Low level of Effective English

Defence, security, education, public sector, logistics

It is particularly concerning that defence, automotive, aviation and security were found to have a very poor level of communicative ability at the global level, as miscommunications in these relationships can result not only in financial losses, but also the loss of lives. But this article's focus is the business field, and finishes by examining the causes of the inconsistencies shown above.

Companies are rarely killed by their competitors; they prefer to commit suicide.

As a lecturer and as a consultant with over 14 years experience in the education industry, I have had opportunities to visit and work with companies – both in Japan and abroad - from many business sectors: manufacturing, IT, trading, engineering, automotive and aerospace, and meeting business persons from junior members to CEOs from small, middle and large corporations. What makes them the same is their approach to English education and training of their workers which can be summarised in two points: myopia and complacency. Myopia is the failure of the management and workers to recognize the need for English training until it is too late. Complacency is the belief that the company's corporate strategy and its English corporate language strategy are currently effective and so, they are lulled into a false sense of security. One must stop and consider, if they believe their strategies are effective, then how come the majority of Japanese companies have not made any remarkable progress after the burst of the bubble? One can even argue that the bubble bursting may have been averted if Japanese companies have had a more aggressive approach in fitting themselves with the right communication tools and the acquisition of more global human resources. Many of the companies would find excuses and scapegoats for their performance and are more likely to assign a greater role to external forces, blaming such factors as poor choice of available education services or educators, a low education budget due to recession, cost cutting, and an industry-wide belief that a need for language training does not exist. To exemplify the aforementioned, I will share with you one story that I have had with one General Manager in the automotive industry regarding language education. During our conversation he said to me: "What's

going to happen if we train our staff and they decide to leave the company? That's going to be a waste of time and money for our company." My answer to his comment was: "With all due respect, sir, what's going to happen to your company if you don't train them and they decide to stay?"

Communication is mission critical for any project success, because at the end of the day, you are not wasting your money investing it into education, on the contrary, you are investing in your workers and creating assets for your organization."

By fully recognizing the peril of incompetence and error in every aspect of work, winners generally look to their own actions and assumptions when things go wrong. They guard particularly against complacency and myopia. In this particular case, the General Manager was concerned about wasting money and not feeling the necessity for change in order to have a more knowledgeable workforce that will set the stage for further growth and prosperity.

The greatest threats in acquiring Effective English are internal, not external

The greatest threat to acquiring effective language education comes from within the organization i.e. the companies' mission statements, strategies and goals, and these are in many cases not congruent with the corporate language strategy. I have discovered that the majority of these companies still haven't fully incorporated a language strategy—that focuses on planning for and realising the skills required to conduct business in an effective way that maximises potential and minimizes risk. The decisive factors in choosing the right language education varies from corporation to corporation, but the following are found to be common determining factors, which can be separated in two factors, Strategic and Organizational factors:

Strategic factors

1. Lack of innovation in creating a need for constant improvement.
2. Disparity between the company's goals and fitting the workers with the right communication tools.
3. Criterion for selecting an educational service company.
4. Lack of vision and necessity for diversification from the senior management.
5. Copying the best language training programs from the competitors.
6. Cutting costs at crucial places within the organization, e.g., education, or choosing the lowest bidder to conduct training just to portray that the company is in line with its CSR policies.

Many of the companies invest heavily in automation and technology by streamlining processes and create-development schedules. However, what most companies sometimes overlook or neglect is the role of communication and its effect on the schedule in any of their projects. Thus, in many cases, what we have repeatedly seen on a global scale is that when miscommunication occurs it thwarts advancement. In the case of technology tie-ups and joint partnerships, this is particularly frustrating and paradoxical. A look back at Nissan's partnership with Ford in the late 1980's appears on the surface to be a case where loyalties shifted and mutual satisfaction waned, but it would not be a stretch to say that an inability to effectively communicate with one another played a part in the

break-up. A company can have an excellent product or service, but without the efficiency of its workers' communication skills, they won't be able to fully reap the benefits of their products and services, nor benefit mutually in the case of business tie-ups. On one hand, a company can have excellent automation by gathering data or making a car in less than 17 hours while on the other hand, having a worker with limited communication skills who takes 30 minutes to compose a simple Email in English.

Organization factors

1. Incompatibility of teams that run the English training programs due to constant re-positioning inside the company leading to poor decision making and management.
2. The Pareto principle (80-20) is alive and well even in training programs where a small proportion of people are expected to do most of the valuable work such as working and liaising with clients from abroad.
3. Not promoting and assigning enough importance to language training programs, nor allowing enough time in the schedules of employees to allow them to take full advantage.
4. Not taking an active interest in each employee's progress, giving them support and motivation, or giving praise when it is most needed.
5. Not ensuring that the right people receive the right language training, i.e. not working closely with employees to establish the very different and unique needs of each department and customizing language training programs to meet these needs.
6. Not leading by example. In a largely seniority based business culture where individuals look upwards for direction and motivation, those at the top must set the tone of language training, being positive, pro-active and forward looking not just about the corporate goal, but in their attitude towards the corporate language strategy.

Language is not science; it is art – and only in the state of imbalance (discovery) and desire for change does real learning seem to be possible. The way to intensify or accelerate people's language learning and experience is to purposefully immerse them in an unfamiliar environment with the right set of realistic and relevant goals, and with professional facilitators i.e. trainers with the right knowledge and expertise. Only that way the minds of the people will re-model themselves. Within such an environment, emotional engagement will occur and create the best language learning experience which will ultimately result in not only an increase the motivation and productivity of the workers, but also the propelling of Japanese companies to new levels of innovation, growth and success.