



The 7 Myths of Language Learning

**Challenging common beliefs
of language acquisition for
use in business**

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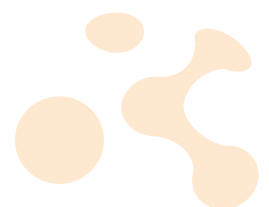
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There's a good chance you believe at least one thing about language learning that is based on a long-held myth, unsupported by empirical evidence. And as good communication becomes even more critical to global business success, clearing up these myths becomes more important than ever.

Since English is widely acknowledged as the *de facto* language of business, organizations are hurrying to determine the most efficient and effective way to build a workforce that can use English proficiently in the workplace on a day-to-day basis. The goal of this paper is to challenge seven common myths about developing English language communication skills for use in business.





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MYTH 1:

Adults should learn like children

This myth is perpetuated by two assumptions. The first is that if adults learn their second language the same way children learn their first language, they will be successful at doing so. The second is that young children are better at learning languages than adults, and language teachers should therefore use methods that have worked with children.

Both of these assertions are false. The first rests on the premise that learning a second language is just like learning a first. The second rests on the premise that when it comes to language learning, younger is better.

But learning a second language is not like learning a first. Researchers first investigated the idea in the 1970s and widely dismissed it, reporting that they could no longer support the assumption that there were similarities between first and second language acquisition—for either children or adults learning a second language. Young children learning a second language are by nature older than first language learners and are therefore further advanced in terms of their cognitive development, and have already had the experience of acquiring their first language. These factors change the cognitive structures in the brain and make the processes of learning a second language fundamentally different than acquiring a first (Dulay and Burt, 1974, Pinker, 1994). The argument has arisen periodically ever since, and with every revisiting, the evidence against the proposition gets stronger.

The assertion that adults should learn a foreign language using the same methods that have worked with children learning their first (which is advocates call the natural approach) is a difficult approach to sustain. Children acquire their first language in a deeply immersive environment in which they are bombarded with the language for upwards of ten hours a day. Language and its acquisition are a natural part of the environment. For adults learning a foreign language, the context and situation are very different. Adults have work and family commitments, and may only have limited time (an hour or two a week at best) to study the language.

Despite this research, some corporations still provide their employees with programs that rely on the natural approach. Unfortunately, employees are unable to acquire adequate Business English communication skills with these programs because the content is frequently not relevant to the business context in which their skills need to be applied. These adults are further restricted by having limited time to study, and are therefore not able to benefit from the immersion approach as children might.

MYTH 2:

Traditional instruction is the key to success.

“Traditional instruction” refers to two types of instruction:

1) teacher-directed classroom instruction, rather than Internet instruction; and 2) intensive, lengthy lessons held relatively infrequently, rather than shorter, self-paced sessions held frequently.

1) Teacher-directed classroom instruction

When online learning programs first appeared, there was considerable scepticism in the educational marketplace.

“How can you learn a language through the Internet?” I was frequently asked. “It’s ridiculous!” More than a decade later, that’s no longer the case. There are aspects of language pedagogy that can be taught more successfully using soundly constructed Internet-based programs than through face-to-face instruction.

Mastering grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as the receptive skills of listening and reading, requires considerable time and effort and a great deal of repetitive practice, which is simply not feasible in the classroom.

Different learners also require different amounts of practice. The computer is a very patient tutor, and with online language instruction, each learner can devote as much or as little time as he or she needs to develop his or her skills.

Another advantage of web technology is that it can provide instant feedback. As soon as the learner completes an activity or exercise, he or she can receive immediate, and sometimes quite detailed, diagnostic feedback on how well he or she has done. Educational psychologists have told us for years that the closer the feedback is given to the performance, the more effective it will be. Providing immediate, detailed, and individualized feedback in face-to-face classroom environments is simply not possible.

Technology also enables “just-in-time learning.” This is particularly relevant for employees as they are able to work on particular communication skills at the precise point in time when those skills are needed. Picture a non-native English-speaking employee who doesn’t understand a sentence in an email. With language web tools, he can directly input the words or phrase into an online translation tool to get a translation and definition—classroom environments can’t address such on-the-job needs.

2) Intensive, lengthy, infrequent lessons

Research shows that material that is delivered in relatively small chunks over an extended period of time (distributed learning) is more effectively learned than large chunks of material delivered at one time (massed learning). Thus, employees participating in four 30-minute lessons over a week will learn more than they would in a two-hour lesson completed on a single occasion.

Unfortunately many companies continue to neglect this research and either invest in the delivery of costly and infrequent language classes, or impose unrealistic expectations on their employees regarding how long they need to study.

Companies should provide language tools and programs that employees can access at their convenience (when their schedules allow for them to study) rather than take them away from their work to attend scheduled classes that are out of context and disturb workflow.

Sometimes this requires a fair amount of change management as many global employees are still accustomed to traditional learning methods. Furthermore, it’s the training manager’s responsibility to set realistic expectations for how much study an employee is required to complete in order to both improve their language skills and complete their work tasks in English more efficiently.

MYTH 3:

Developing business communication skills in English is the same as studying ESL (English as a second language) and acquiring general English skills.

Some believe that acquiring general English skills that allow you to communicate in everyday situations will also enable you to communicate in business or academic situations—but there is no supportive research to prop up this belief.

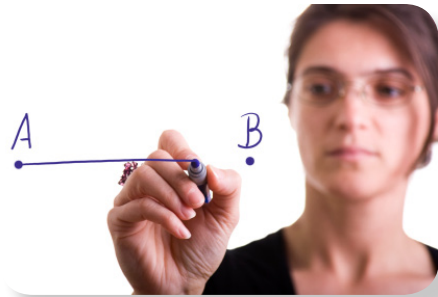
In fact, studies by language experts such as Jim Cummins have identified key differences between basic interpersonal communication skills [BICS] (the language needed in social situations) and the cognitive and academic skills [CALPS] needed to succeed in more formal academic and professional contexts.

The research showing that the English language skills needed for professional contexts are different from everyday English skills, gave rise to the field of English for Specific Purposes. The study and teaching of Business English is a part of this field, and looks at the language of law, trade, commerce, and so on, as well as the communication skills needed to succeed in the world of business, such as taking part in meetings (face-to-face and virtual), giving presentations, and writing emails. This is an important distinction and corporate universities that are typically responsible for delivering English training to employees should be aware of it. Business English also often incorporates the teaching of cross-cultural awareness, which can bolster the success of international businesses..



Providing general English language skill training does not facilitate communication across teams, nor does it advance business performance—describing personal attributes and preferences in English may be suitable for business socializing, but is applicable to little else in business.

A related myth is that standardized language tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC are predictive of business performance. This is incorrect. While there is a “general language factor” underlying all language use, we can’t assume that someone who scores at a certain level on these tests will be able to perform a wide variety of business tasks that require English, such as writing an audit report or giving a sales presentation. This is particularly true since standardized language tests often don’t test speaking skills. This means that someone can receive a nearly perfect score in reading, writing, and grammar but be unable to hold a conversation. Developing all language skills is essential; it is only with proficiency across all modes of communication that employees can effectively communicate and collaborate in a business environment. Imagine a customer service representative who can answer issues by email but cannot provide telephone support; not only is this restrictive and burdensome, but it is also an inefficient use of an organization’s talent.



MYTH 4:

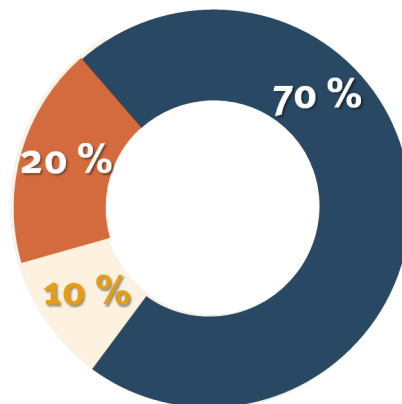
You can't learn while you work.

While corporate educators may know differently, this myth speaks to concerns employees might have: that they don't have time to do anything but their assigned tasks at work (learning is not a priority), or that they are too distracted to apply themselves to structured learning.

Research has shown that one of the most effective ways of learning any skill (and language is indeed a skill), is to learn on the job. Consider the 70/20/10 learning principle developed by Morgan McCall, Robert W. Eichinger, and Michael M. Lombardo at the Center for Creative Leadership.

This principle is most effective when programs offered to employees associate learning with common work tasks and business situations. That way, learners can immediately practice and apply the skill in real contexts.

Research has also shown that "if you don't use it, you lose it." Therefore, one of the great strengths of on-demand learning is that it shortens the distance between the world of learning and the world of work, a closeness that learners using face-to-face programs do not enjoy.



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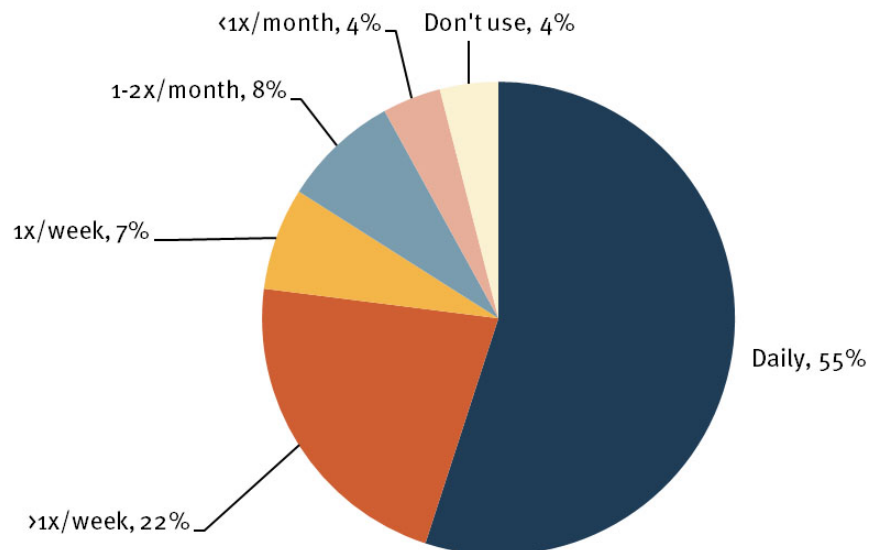
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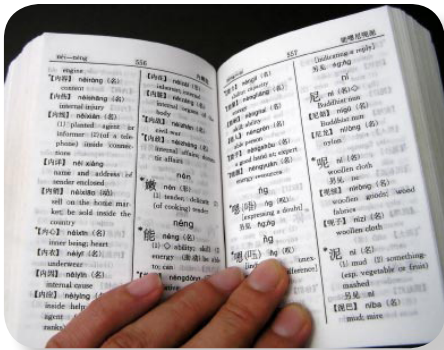
Only managers need to be competent in English.

This myth may once have been true. But with increasing numbers of global corporations adopting English as their official language of business, it is no longer sufficient for corporations to train only managers in English. Because today's employees communicate directly with team members, customers, and vendors around the world, everyone across a company needs Business English skills. In fact, a recent 2010 study conducted by GlobalEnglish called "The Globalization of English Report" found that

92% of 26,000 global employees surveyed struggle with English, and only 7% feel their current English skills are good enough to do their job.

Furthermore, 55% say they used English every day in 2010, up from 49% in 2007 and 44% in 2003.





MYTH 6:

Translation tools are good enough to help me get by.

This It's easy to see how this myth has become so widespread, as tools like Google Translate become more reliable.

While translation tools can help to immediately increase productivity, they do not provide opportunities to practice and develop the interactive and dialogic skills that are at the heart of effective business communication, nor do they build English language competency in the medium-to-long term.

Rather, they provide low-level, formulaic language that may suffice in basic, everyday communication but is inadequate for effective ongoing business communication. In other words, they can supplement but not replace programs that are specifically designed to increase proficiency in Business English.

Rhetorical skills such as negotiating, giving opinions, and persuading are fundamental in any business setting and are the underpinning of successful business communication. These critical communication skills are well beyond the reach of translation tools. Even if accurate, translations may not be appropriate for emails or conference calls, and will almost certainly not be appropriate for oral presentations. Consider an employee in a live conference setting. When the presenter says the words “accrued income,” the employee could use the translation tool on his computer or mobile device to look up its meaning, but without knowledge of grammar constructs, the employee would be unable to assemble a complex question that would deepen his understanding of the presentation’s context.



MYTH 7:

I understand English — that's good enough.

This myth refers to the assumption that understanding basic English is all you need to “get by.”

It's important to debunk this myth as understanding language and producing it involve two very different mental processes. This was demonstrated as long ago as 1985 by the Canadian linguist Merrill Swain, who showed that we can comprehend a great deal of language, even though we don't understand much of the grammar, as long as we understand the situation. However, we can't produce anything but very basic ideas if we don't have grammar. For example, you can order off a menu with knowledge of vocabulary terms only. This is ineffective when it comes to business communication. The most effective communication is two-way.

In business meetings, potentially valuable contributions may not be made if individuals do not feel confident enough to speak up.

This point is more relevant than ever today, as more and more business is conducted virtually and companies try to “do more with less” while accelerating innovation (accelerating innovation was identified as one of the top three business priorities by executives for 2011 according to Bersin & Associates Corporate TrendWatch® Research). Each of these corporate goals is advanced when employees are equipped with Business English communication skills: Virtual communication and collaboration is optimized and productivity and efficiency are increased when employees understand their assignments and can ask for clarification or confirmation from their managers. Companies can take full advantage of their workforce when employees can speak up and share innovative ideas.

CONCLUSION

This short piece has set out to debunk some common and persistent myths about language learning and use, with particular emphasis on using English for business. In addition to pointing out the logical flaws in these assertions, I have pointed to research that indicates their questionable nature and outlined the arguments to support them.

Below, I have summarized these 7 myths and their counterpropositions, each of which has empirical support.

This paper should make companies that are serious about advancing their workforce's English language skills take a hard look at the training they are prescribing their employees to see if they address reality or myths.

Myth	Reality
Adults should learn a second language in the same way as children learn a first language	First and second language acquisition are fundamentally different processes
Traditional instruction is best	Internet-based instruction, which is self-paced and distributed, should be considered as a supplement to or replacement for traditional instruction
Developing business communication skills in English is the same as learning general ESL	While there is some overlap, Business English is not the same as general English
You can't learn while you work	An integration of learning and application in the workplace provides an optimal environment for effective language learning
Only managers need competence in English	Competence in English is required at all levels of an organization
Translation tools are good enough	Translation tools are inadequate for effective business communication
I understand English—that's good enough	Understanding (comprehension) is necessary but not sufficient for effective business communication



About the Author

Dr. David Nunan is a world-renowned linguist, the world's leading textbook author, and former president of International TESOL, the world's largest English Language Teaching association. He is also director and chair of applied linguistics at the University of Hong Kong, and director of the Anaheim University David Nunan Institute for Language Education. The Institute was established in 1998 in honor of Dr. Nunan's countless contributions to the fields of TESOL and linguistics, and offers online and on-campus English teacher training programs for teachers of adults and children as well as English learning programs for non-native speakers. Dr. Nunan has published more than 100 books and articles in the areas of curriculum and materials development, classroom-based research, and discourse analysis. His recent publications include *The Self-Directed Teacher* and *Voices from the Language Classroom* (Cambridge University Press), as well as *Atlas*, *Listen In*, and *Go for it!* series of textbooks (Heinle & Heinle). Dr. Nunan has served as GlobalEnglish's Senior Academic Advisor since 1998. Dr. Nunan earned his Ph.D. in applied linguistics from Flinders University in Australia.

About GlobalEnglish

GlobalEnglish offers solutions for Enterprise Fluency™: the communication, collaboration, and operational proficiency companies must have to compete in today's global economy. Enterprise Fluency is the measure of a company's ability to apply their company-wide gains in Business English skills to improve the ease with which their global teams can communicate and collaborate with each other and the effectiveness with which the company can operate across country borders.

We have more than 500 enterprises partnering with us globally, including BNP Paribas, Capgemini, Cisco, Deloitte, GlaxoSmithKline, Hewlett-Packard, Hilton, John Deere, Procter & Gamble, and Unisys. Our comprehensive, on-demand software solution is available in 15 languages for instant, on-the-job support for business tasks in English—such as writing emails—and programs for building lasting Business English proficiency. Headquartered in Brisbane, California, we have global reach to support multinational companies in any country worldwide.

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