

PAE Newsletter

The Confidence Gap

David Kertzner, Managing Director, ProActive English
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In most global companies where English is the primary language, advanced level non-native English speakers contribute productively at all levels. Still, many of these valued employees struggle with a lack of confidence because they can't communicate clearly and precisely in English. The feeling is often magnified for those with an advanced education, highly technical knowledge and a history of professional success. All this despite the fact that when given a test in English, these employees often score off the charts.

The negative impact on the company can be significant.

- Heavy accent and awkward speech patterns can lead frustrated colleagues to ignore the expertise of non-native speakers.
- Lack of confidence can lead to isolated work patterns, avoidance of critical communication and holding back of valuable contributions.
- Difficulty with written English can slow production of reports and other documents as colleagues waste precious time on basic editing or clarifying the intended message.

Companies that provide training for more advanced level non-native English speakers benefit in several tangible ways:

- These valued employees contribute closer to their full potential as their confidence increases when using English. They engage sooner and more effectively in meetings or on conference calls – even though they still make mistakes. Their speech is more understandable, information is conveyed more succinctly and presentations are more coherent.
- Professional relationships become more productive as non-native English speakers learn expressions and linguistic strategies to practice culturally appropriate behaviors, including interrupting for clarification, making direct or indirect statements of intention, and making small talk. Learning might also include expectations for format, content and delivery of a western-style presentation.
- Time is saved when non-native English speakers learn how to organize their thinking for writing research notes or other documents. They write shorter sentences, leading to fewer grammar errors. In e-mail, writers learn how to express concern about a problem without offending the reader.

Good language training programs in corporate settings present contexts that allow non-native speakers to generate and get feedback on the language that they struggle with every day at work. In the process, these employees start to see language learning in the broader context of communication. They move past the focus on grammar and the rules of language – and towards confident, spontaneous expression as they characterize the world around them.

Companies that do not provide training for non-native English speakers can still support their employees for whom English is not a first language. Managers or colleagues can:

- Ask the non-native English speaker to summarize issues, projects or activities – and provide ‘guidelines’ for how to do so. *‘Could you summarize [this issue] and then talk about the solutions you are considering?’*
- Identify language that was confusing in spoken remarks or written communication. Don’t paraphrase. Say, *‘I think I understood what you were trying to (say / write here), but this sentence was confusing because...’*
- Give the employee a choice of what you think you heard. *‘Did you say ‘shared components’ or ‘sheer components?’* Most non-native speakers really appreciate such specific feedback.
- Ask the employee to ‘rehearse’ with you or a colleague remarks that he or she might make at a meeting. *‘Yoshi, what are you going to say about the ‘x’ bug at the team meeting today?’*

Employees for whom English is a second or third language should be commended for their willingness to face such a challenge without any expectation other than to do their job well. Companies who want to support their non-native English speaking employees can help by first acknowledging the challenge and then by providing language and communication training. The return on the investment will be worth it.

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