



Six ways English skills affect business results

How to make sure your employees have
the right level of English





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OVERVIEW





BACKGROUND

A core part of the British Council's cultural relations mission is to improve and promote standards of English for companies, governments and educational institutions. With **80 years' experience** providing English teaching and assessment, each year we administer **3 million exams** and train **over 300,000 people across 100 countries** worldwide.

In Poland we are a leader in English teaching at our reputable **language centres** and partner schools in Warsaw, Cracow and Wroclaw. We cooperate with a national network of partnership libraries and **exam centres**, which offer British language and professional exams throughout the country. Our cultural, educational and social projects aim at sharing the achievements of the United Kingdom. Working effectively with diversity and promoting equality of opportunity is an essential part of our work.

From our ongoing conversation with partners and clients we observed a gap between the increasing **importance of English in the marketplace** and the strategies and tools required to meet this challenge. Often businesses do not have sufficient knowledge of the English skills of their workforce and job applicants. We wanted to examine this issue and use our expertise to help companies **turn language skills from an area of risk into a business asset**.

THE RESEARCH


To better develop our understanding of this topic, we have commissioned two types of research: Euromonitor International and English Impact to research two primary objectives:

- to explore the key business areas where **English skills are critical to success** and to check how poor English skills **impact on profit**
- to **measure the actual English skills** of students and young professionals entering the Polish labour market.

The respondents to the **Euromonitor International research** were human resources managers and business leaders from large international companies across diverse industries – from construction and automotive to travel and banking. They were asked to consider the added benefits of having high-level English-speaking employees and estimate the impact on their business results if they could not communicate well in English.

The second piece of research called **English Impact** was carried out with the aim of understanding English language proficiency levels and the language learning motivations of Polish students and young professionals. The methodology used involved primary data collection via two channels: a four-skills English language proficiency test and a background questionnaire. 243 Polish students and 228 professionals took part in this study.





The following six business areas showed the strongest correlation between business success and quality of employees' English:

- Business intelligence
- Supplier costs
- International projects and tenders
- International investment and sales
- Brand value and customer satisfaction
- Internal communication and team co-operation

In this report, you will find a summary of our findings and advice on how you can ensure your workforce is equipped with the specific English skills needed for the job.

Keep reading to:

- better understand the impact of English on key business areas and revenue
- get our expert advice on improving the language strategy of your company with tips you can easily put into practice.



SIX BUSINESS AREAS AFFECTED BY ENGLISH

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

How English impacts this area

Poor English can prevent managers from keeping up with industry trends and participating in international seminars, trade conventions and other promotional events. It may mean your company misses out on new market opportunities, harms its reputation or fails to adapt to changing market trends.

The growing opportunities for professionals, and service and sales workers, are viewed as sectors that will have a demand for multilingual employees. In research and development, according to the European Commission, professional activities and relevant documents and outputs will be in English and require a high level of proficiency.

English is a conference language that is essential for every employee in the science sector. Moreover, the sales and services sector is an area in which employers and employees have reported a high need for foreign language skills, with English viewed as the most useful across all sectors.

Examples:

- In Poland, 72 per cent of respondents of the English Impact research suggested they agreed or strongly agreed that learning English had increased their international outlook.
- If traders in large German banks do not keep their business knowledge of international markets up to date, 75 per cent of revenue generated by their investment banking divisions could be at risk.
- In the automobile sector in Germany, the product development process is heavily dependent on employees across the world being able to communicate in one language. One company in our survey said: 'We could not develop new technologies suitable for all markets if the input is not communicated in a common language.'

OUR TIP

Ensure that employees across all levels of your company have the right English skills.

English skills are critical not only for staff who deal directly with customers but also for those with managerial or technical roles. Ensuring these higher-level employees have the right English skills means they can keep up with industry trends as well as communicate this knowledge internally.

SUPPLIER COSTS

How English impacts this area

Supply sourcing directly affects a company's profit as well as its ability to price competitively. Limiting the company to domestic suppliers only can lead to higher supply costs. Most companies look to site production in low-cost countries and source raw materials in bulk from the lowest priced seller. The importance of English in these cases is not only linked to sales, but also to costs.

Research by the European Commission has shown that English is a highly demanded skill by employers in the EU, where prospective employees are often asked to have high or medium level foreign language proficiencies, including those in English, and particularly in productive skills (speaking and writing). Future demand for English language skills will grow, as there will be more job opportunities for professionals in high level occupations: in science, engineering, healthcare, business and teaching. This relates both to the Polish and EU market.

Examples:

- In Poland, one of the sectors in which there is the greatest demand for English is IT. About 70 per cent of offers for experts in the area of software development and systems administration require a knowledge of English. The situation is similar in the field of technology, engineering, office administration and finance. Candidates often find employment in the centres of outsourcing and shared services centres, which requires continuous contact with partners, clients and stakeholders abroad.
- German fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies indicated that English allows buyers to negotiate more effectively. Our research estimated that a national chain dealing with international suppliers could lose 20–30 per cent of profit by not communicating skilfully enough to negotiate better pricing deals.
- In the manufacturing industry in Italy, English was estimated to reduce costs by 50 per cent by enabling firms to choose the lowest cost suppliers and buy directly.

OUR TIP

Don't be fooled by false economies. Use reliable testing with specific benchmarks, backed by thorough trials and academic research.

Regardless of the size of your business or your assessment needs, it is crucial you use tests supported by reliable academic research. Using unreliable tests that provide an inaccurate and misleading snapshot of the English skills of your workforce can result in significant losses or inefficiencies. Though retail prices of these tests are often lower, their real, long-term costs can be far higher.

Does your business have
the English skills needed
to compete in the
global marketplace?

**Take the Aptis English
test and find out.**



INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS AND TENDERS

How English impacts this area

International projects and tenders offer significant opportunities for growth in many industries, but developing competitive bids often depends on English. People with good English language skills are needed when bidding, negotiating and managing large international projects. If a company cannot articulate their bid well in writing, this will significantly damage their chances of being shortlisted.

Furthermore, for bids that are shortlisted, a clear and confident presentation in English is essential. Bids are also ultimately underpinned by ongoing relationship building, which again requires clear and confident speaking and listening skills.

As a result, a good knowledge of English can be a critical factor in foreign trade as it can maximise a company's chances of winning a lucrative contract, improve their position during negotiations and reduce their bidding costs.

Examples:

- According to the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS), the latest results for Polish exports are impressive, with domestic companies earning more and more from foreign trade. The Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) data shows that entrepreneurs have intensified cooperation with Western European countries and are finding more and more new markets. As a result, in 2015 Poland recorded a positive balance of foreign trade turnover of nearly 9 billion PLN. **We already have more than 60 companies that operate globally.** Here we are not only talking about giants such as KGHM and PKN Orlen, but also smaller companies, for example. LPP, Inglot, Solaris, or Pesa. The international expansion of Polish companies is one of the drivers for **companies to invest in their employees' English skills.**
- Our research clearly showed the effects of this in the **construction industry in Italy.** For these companies, around **80 per cent of project revenue is dependent on English** as it is the working language of the markets in which they operate – only 20 per cent of business is done in Italy. The ability to retain these vast sources of revenue would be put at risk if a company did not have sufficient English.

OUR TIP

When recruiting, choose English language tests that can give you a full profile of the candidates' skills – speaking, writing, reading and listening.

Different positions require different levels of individual skills. An accountant or IT assistant who does not interact with clients face-to-face may need writing and listening skills more than speaking skills. The opposite is often true for customer services staff. Using a test that shows the level of each of these skills, instead of only an overall level, will give you the precise information you need for informed decision-making.

INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT AND SALES

How English impacts this area

Expanding beyond local markets requires marketing and sales departments that can communicate effectively with international clients – and a high level of English is essential.

According to many of the companies that took part in our research, diversifying their market presence was the best way to withstand domestic market crises. They highlighted international expansion as a key component of this because it allows their businesses to remain healthy even with a decline in the local market. English was identified as an essential tool in this process.

Poland is now the sixth most populous nation in the European Union, characterised by a high percentage of young people and strong economic growth over the past few decades. Commentators suggest that Poland is the only EU country that has avoided entering a national recession, something experienced by many other EU countries, and caused by the world economic crisis.

Economic forecasts for real Polish GDP growth suggest that it will remain around 3.5 per cent until 2018, when it will begin to slow to around 3 per cent in 2018 itself, reaching 2.7 per cent by 2020. This forecast remains above the 2014 EU average, estimated by the World Bank at 1.4 per cent.

Examples:

- In Poland, nearly 40 per cent of those companies which decided to undertake foreign expansion declare that their profits from foreign operations in the last year have significantly increased.
- Travel agents in Russia stated that without English they could not negotiate with foreign partners and would eventually be forced out of the market, with the loss of revenue reaching 90 per cent.
- In the Italian tourism industry, English is needed to allow companies to expand into new markets. Cruise companies in particular are focused on China and other parts of Asia, which require English language skills. Double-digit growth is predicted for the Asian cruise market over the next ten years. For one company we surveyed, cruise sourcing from Asia and Australia rose by 18 per cent in 2013 alone.
- For Italian banks, trading on international markets is an important driver of growth and also helps to diversify risk; companies buy and sell foreign funds for domestic as well as international clients. In total, around 30–40 per cent of managed funds is international meaning that English contributes 30–40 per cent of revenue through this channel.

OUR TIP

Map your employees' English skills to an international standard.

When employees deal with international clients, it is essential their English isn't just 'good' but can be shown to meet international standards. Choose a test that gives precise and accurate information on each of the language skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference – the international standard for describing language abilities.

English is an essential tool
for international expansion.

**Make sure your company
is prepared with the Aptis
English test.**



BRAND VALUE AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

How English impacts this area

Our research confirmed that poor English can deeply affect how international customers perceive a company's brand. A good international brand image increases the perception of quality and industry leadership which is critical to winning clients. To keep clients coming back, it is essential to have a customer service team who can serve them well in English.

For employees, learning new skills in the area of English is still a feature that cannot be underestimated. From the professional development point of view, employees learn how to handle and manage relations with international customers, how to communicate in an effective and diplomatic way and how to build positive customer experience & satisfaction, resulting in high conversion rates for their business.

Examples:

- In Poland, a waiter who communicates well in English with diners earns four times higher a salary than their colleague who does not speak English. Employers are well aware that English is crucial for international client satisfaction and 66 per cent of them require English as an essential criterion during recruitment.
- As an example of how the perception of quality allows for higher prices, one Russian consulting and IT industry respondent estimated that the company's prices would need to be five times lower if its employees did not have proper English skills, as this would damage their image in overseas markets.
- The impact of English on brand image is also significant for large hotel chains that face substantial competition and must maintain high levels of service to keep their clientele. In the German hotel sector, it was estimated that over 60 per cent of guests would not return if hotel staff did not speak adequate English. In urban centres or popular tourist areas, revenue is over 70 per cent dependent on high levels of English amongst employees.

OUR TIP

Choose tests that show precise language skill gaps to best design and assess training programmes.

Testing staff before training helps identify employees' strengths and weaknesses in specific English skills allowing you to group them for tailored training that focuses on improving those skills. In this way, you are optimising time and money spent on training by targeting only those skills that need the most work. Testing after the course gives you a clear picture of improvement and the areas that saw the best results. In addition, the results indicate whether the course achieved the desired improvements in language, and where more work is needed.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND TEAM CO-OPERATION

How English impacts this area

Due to the multinational nature of many projects involving teams in different countries, seamless teamwork also depends on quality English. The consequences of a simple misunderstanding can be costly, leading to inefficiency, higher direct costs and even accidents.

According to HAYS the ideal candidate in an international environment is a proactive, open and adaptable person, someone ready to face various changes in the course of their work. Knowledge of English as the 'modern Latin' is a must, mainly because this is the language connecting people from the same organisation working in disperse teams around the world.

Examples:

- In the **IT and consulting sector in Russia**, developers from different countries regularly work together on projects. In total, **65 per cent of internal communication is in English** for international companies in this sector. One IT company said that ‘although software developers can work without English, it is important to know the language to understand client requirements and cooperate with colleagues from other offices working on the same project.’
- In large **Italian manufacturing companies**, English is not only a significant part of **external communication** (80 per cent), it is also critical for **internal communications** (40 per cent).
- In the **German automobile industry** over **50 per cent of internal communication is in English**. It is particularly critical at management level in order to facilitate communication between subsidiaries and head office.

OUR TIP

The best time to test a potential staff member is during the recruitment phase.

Alongside business and technical abilities, you should establish candidates’ English skills when recruiting. For posts that require English, it is crucial to be certain you are employing someone with the level of English required to perform effectively. Failing to do so early on can have a significant impact on future business performance. It can not only cause growth opportunities to be regularly missed but training employees once they are hired can prove costly if there are large language skill gaps.

Does your business have the English skills to serve your international customers?

Make sure your front-line staff are at the right level with the Aptis English test.





CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE TESTING

From our nearly 80 years' experience providing training and assessment we have observed three ways companies currently assess the English skills of their employees. All of them provide some evaluation of the level of English knowledge. However, there are substantial risks and drawbacks.



RELYING ON A BRIEF CONVERSATION IN ENGLISH

The primary risk associated with this method is that it evaluates only the conversational ability of the candidate, leaving their writing and reading skills untested, and it does so on a very basic and unreliable basis.

This could create a situation where you hire an employee who speaks English but has poor writing skills. Your company could be affected by this decision in a number of ways, from miscommunication with customers to costly production mistakes or accidents.

USING TESTS THAT ARE NOT BACKED BY RESEARCH

Many companies use English tests designed locally or in-house. These tests are often not backed by research meaning they haven't been carefully trialled and therefore risk producing biased, incomplete and unreliable results.

Test trialling is essential to an accurate test to ensure that the questions are at the appropriate level of difficulty and produce reliable results. Trialling can last several months and is rarely included in test preparation by local or in-house English experts.

In addition, these tests do not give you the full picture as they are usually not designed to assess all four language skills – speaking, writing, reading and listening.





TESTING EMPLOYEES WITH BASIC ONLINE TESTS

Using very basic online tests can produce a snapshot of a candidate's English skills that is too broad and does not include speaking or writing skills. As a result, they don't give a precise and comprehensive picture of one's ability.

Relying on these types of tests can make it difficult to know whether a candidate has the specific English skills (e.g. writing at fluent level, speaking at an intermediate level) which can put many aspects of your business at risk.

OUR TIPS FOR TESTING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS OF YOUR STAFF

- **Ensure that employees across all levels of your company have the right English skills.**
- **Don't be fooled by false economies. Use reliable testing with specific benchmarks, backed by thorough trials and academic research.**
- **When recruiting, choose English language tests that can give you a full profile of the candidates' skills – speaking, writing, reading and listening.**
- **Map your employees' English skills to an international standard.**
- **Choose tests that show precise language skills gaps to best design and assess training programmes.**
- **The best time to test a potential staff member is during the recruitment phase.**

Although these tips are not industry-specific, they can give you a starting point for establishing your company's English language strategy. For a tailored solution, we are happy to talk to you, analyse your company's language needs and advise you on the best approach. Contact us for a free consultation.

OUR SOLUTION:
THE BRITISH COUNCIL'S
APTIS TEST





Aptis

Forward thinking
English testing

To address the opportunities and challenges associated with English skills in the workforce, the British Council created the Aptis English language test. It is our modern assessment solution that is both reliable and flexible.

We have designed Aptis to suit your precise needs and budget. With Aptis you have complete control over the time, place and language skills that are tested. As an assessment tool, Aptis allows you to make better-informed decisions about your recruitment, workforce development and English language strategy.

- Aptis provides **reliable, accurate results** on the English language skills in your organisation.
- It is flexible and accessible so you can **assess people quickly and affordably**.
- It allows you to test the skills that are most relevant to your needs and **get results fast**.

If you'd like to find out more about Aptis and what we can do to help your organisation, contact us.

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