



# Leading second language English speakers to improve their performance

**SURVEY RESULTS - MARCH 2011**



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*Partners for Performance*

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

The UK is becoming more linguistically diverse. Increasing globalisation means that many organisations, both large and small, are employing people from mixed cultural and linguistic backgrounds and English, even in other countries, is often the language used for communication in these multilingual environments.

As Wilson (2005) stated:

**“The new technologies, business, tourism and entertainment and its global dominance encourages many speakers of other languages to gain at least a working use of the language (English) in many fields”**

For organisations where English is their native language and who employ non-native English speakers, ensuring their employees are proficient enough to perform their roles effectively and safely is an important goal.

Organisational communications, processes and procedures designed for native English speakers are not always appropriate for second language speakers even if they are deemed to be proficient. Conversational proficiency is different from the language of business, sometimes referred to as ‘workplace literacy’ because in a similar way to academia, business language has its own vocabulary and is used to analyse, summarise, evaluate and interpret both verbal and written communications.

The need for English language proficiency will depend upon the nature of the organisation and individual's role. Some second language speakers may only need a basic level of comprehension in order to carry out their daily tasks whilst others will require advanced proficiency to perform well and meet their targets.

In a study of 25 Malaysian human resource (HR) professionals working for two US companies in Malaysia; Kaur & Clarke (2009) found that respondents felt they needed to improve their English language skills to do their jobs and daily tasks well. In particular, they thought chairing meetings, writing reports and editing written materials were important skills which required a high level of proficiency.

They found a discrepancy between the views of the individuals and their line managers, because although the majority of respondents reported they were satisfied with their English language skills, their managers rated them as only intermediate and reported that their ability did not match what was required in the role. Some particular difficulties faced were:

- ◆ Understanding native speakers as they spoke too fast.
- ◆ Interpreting written information
- ◆ Lack of understanding of terms
- ◆ Increasingly complex technological processes

Training English second language speakers (ESL) presents a particular challenge because of their potential linguistic and cultural differences. Xu and Ball (2010) found that even advanced students studying in the UK had difficulties constructing accurate English for their reports and coursework and argued they would benefit from raised awareness of their English language proficiency and targeted support to help with their language acquisition.

We conducted our short survey of employers of second language English speakers to get a better idea of needs of this cohort of employees and the support they are being offered. This is not an academic report but one that aims to give some high level insights to interested parties.

## Our Study

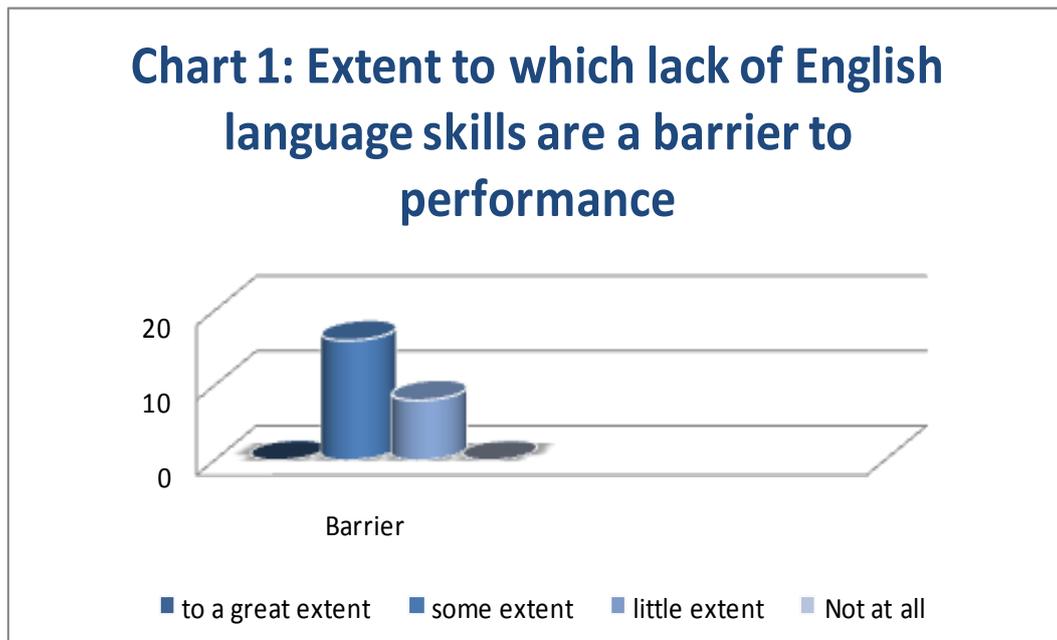
We prepared a short survey (see appendix A) on Survey Monkey and advertised it on our website, through our monthly e-newsletter, LinkedIn and Twitter as well as asking our existing client base to take part if applicable.

We had 28 responses of which 24 were completed fully. All of the respondents had offices based in the UK or US and some respondents were based in Ghana and Argentina.

## Results

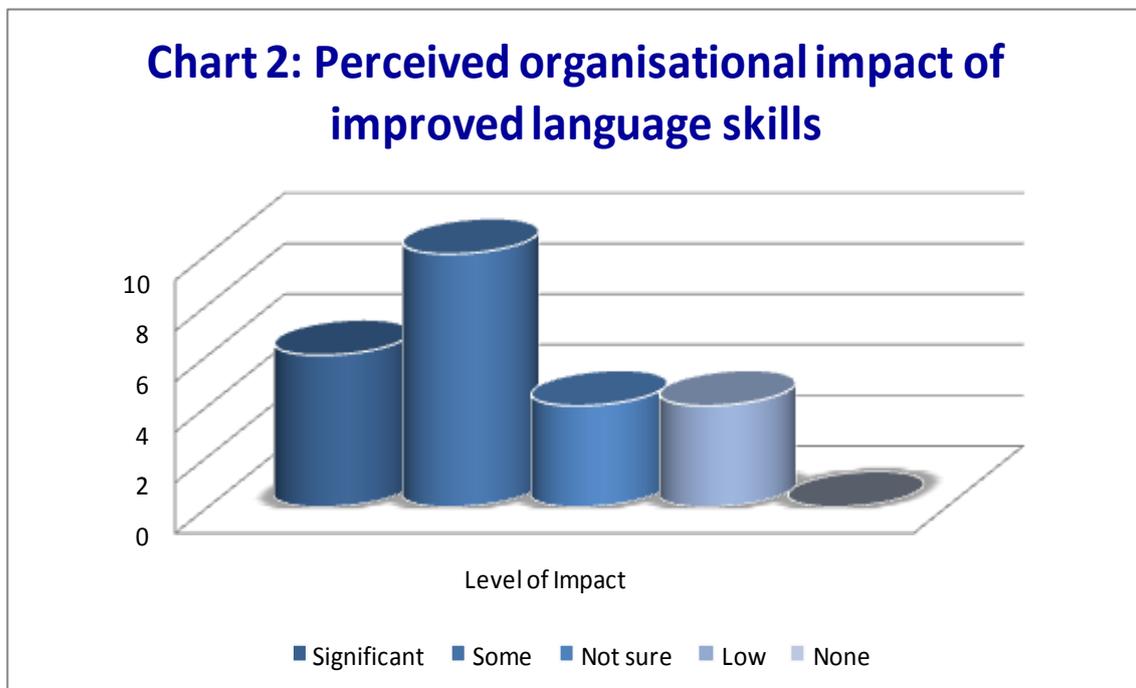
We asked participants *“To what extent do you see English language skills as a barrier to getting the best performance from second language speakers in your organisation?”*

67% reported it to be to some extent and 33% reported it as to a little extent. One of the participants commented that the quality of written work instructions could be a barrier to performance.

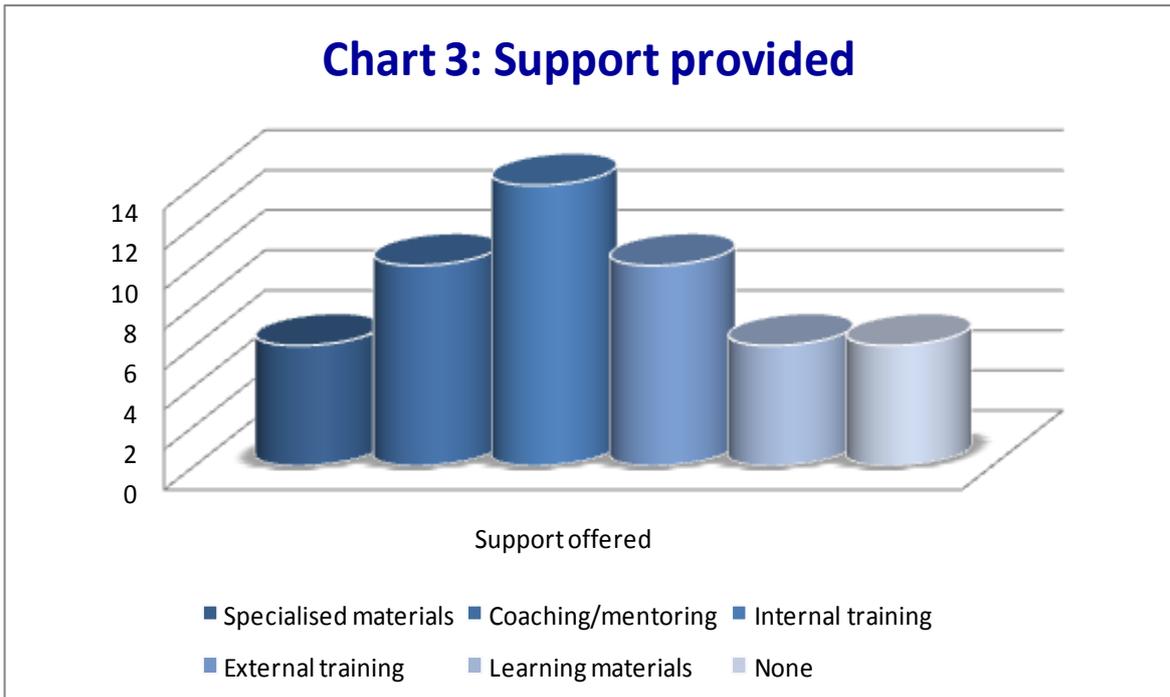


Next we asked “*If levels of English were improved what impact do you believe it would have on your organisation?*”

All participants felt it would have some impact with 67% of respondents believing improving English language skills would have significant or some impact on their organisation, 16.5% were not sure and another 16.5% thought it would be low impact. No participants reported it as having no impact at all and one commented that they thought it would improve morale and another noted it would lower costs.



We also explored what type of specialised support was being offered to second language English speakers by asking: “*Which of the following is offered to the second language speakers in your organisation?*” Over half (58%) offered internal training, just under half (42%) offered external training and coaching or mentoring, a quarter (25%) provided specialised materials such as health and safety instructions and access to learning materials and another quarter (25%) offered no specialised support.



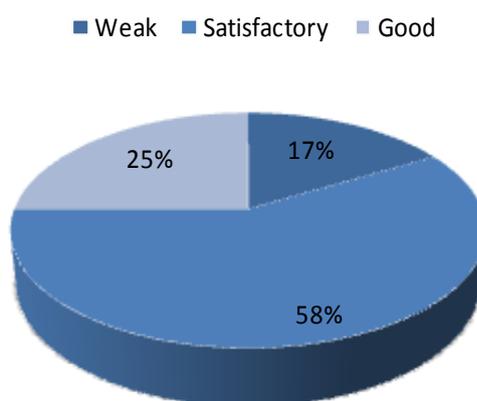
One respondent also added that they were providing teaching with assessment for their second language English speakers.

In terms of proficiency we looked at three areas, written communication, verbal communication and language comprehension by asking “Overall how would you rate the second language speakers in the following areas?”



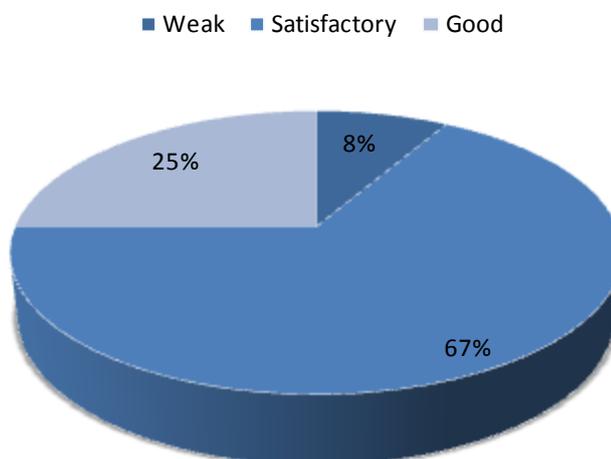
Forty-two percent of respondents cited their English second language speakers' written communication as satisfactory, 33% as weak and only a quarter (25%) reported it to be good.

**Chart 5: Understanding of policies and procedures**



Over half of the participants (58%) reported their second language speakers as having a satisfactory understanding of organisational policies and procedures; a quarter (25%) reported it as good and 17% felt it was weak.

**Chart 6: Proficiency verbal communication**



Verbal communication was reported as satisfactory by 67% of the respondents, 25% reported it as good and only 8% reported it to be weak.

Next we asked “*What are the top priorities for developing English language skills in your organisation in the coming 12 months?*” We gave the participants up to three responses and a summary of the topics are presented in the following table:

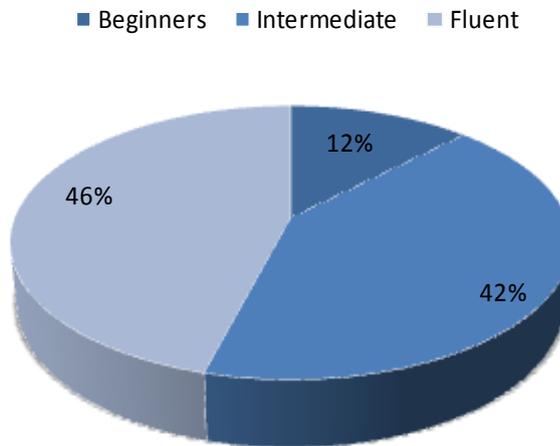
**Table 1: Priorities for the next 12 months**

Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
External classroom training	Providing feedback	Skills practice
Providing learning materials	Providing courses	Providing information on external subsidised courses
Discussing work in English	Test skills through recruitment	
Telephone communication		
Improve report writing		
Formal policies		
None		

To get an idea of the overall proficiency we asked “*What percentage of the second language speakers in your organisation would you rate as beginners, intermediate and fluent?*”

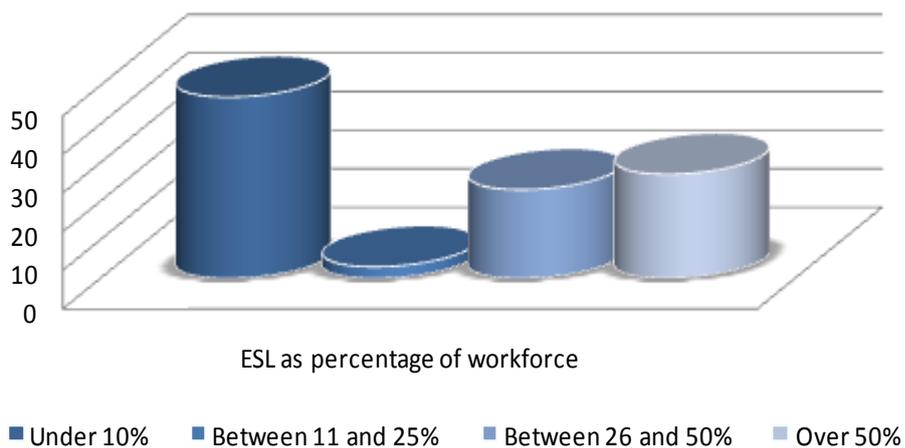
Fluent was the top result with 46%, followed by intermediate at 42% with only 12% reported as beginners.

**Chart 7: Overall English language proficiency**



We explored this theme further by asking, “*What percentage of your workforce are second language speakers of English?*”

**Chart 8: Percentage of second language English speakers in workforce**



For just under half (47%) of the respondents’ second language English speakers accounted for less than 10% of their overall workforce and for 50% it was over 25%.

Finally, we asked “*Will your organisation be employing more or fewer second language speakers in the next two years?*” All respondents who answered this question (58%) reported they would be recruiting more.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The results from our survey reflected those found in the literature review in that although respondents viewed 88% of their second language English speakers as either fluent (46%), or intermediate (42%), all of them reported English language skills as a barrier to getting the best performance from their second language speakers.

Written communication was seen as an area for development with 33% of participants reporting it as ‘weak’, whereas comprehension of policies and procedures and verbal communication fared much better with only 17% and 8% seen as weak.

The responses showed that there was a feeling that improving English language skills would provide a benefit to the organisation and this was also reflected in the amount of support to improve English language skills being offered including internal /external training and assessment as well as providing learning materials and specialised communications such as health and safety instructions.

The main priority areas for the next 12 months were offering training and learning materials as well as providing opportunities to discuss work in English. Telephone communication, formal policies and report writing were seen as priority areas.

Other topics mentioned were testing English language skills as part of the recruitment process and providing opportunities for skills practice and feedback. Feedback can be particularly useful and raising an individual’s awareness of their English language ability was deemed by Xu and Ball (2010) to be a critical area in language acquisition.

Over half of the participants (58%) said they would be looking to recruit more second language speakers over the next two years so the importance of language acquisition looks set to continue.

Because of the small sample size it is not possible to say these findings are representative but we hope they provide some insights and 'food for thought' that can help inform those looking to improve learning and development for second language English speakers in their own organisation.

## References

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## Appendix A – survey questions

To what extent do you see English language skills as a barrier to getting the best performance from second language speakers in your organisation?

- ◆ To a great extent
- ◆ To some extent
- ◆ Not sure
- ◆ To a little extent
- ◆ Not at all

If levels of English were improved what impact do you believe it would have on your organisation?

- ◆ Significant impact
- ◆ Some impact
- ◆ Not sure
- ◆ Low impact
- ◆ None

Which of the following is offered to the second language speakers in your organisation?

- ◆ specialised materials eg health & safety visuals
- ◆ coaching/mentoring
- ◆ internal training
- ◆ external training
- ◆ access to learning materials
- ◆ none

Overall how would you rate the second language speakers in the following areas? (Choice of weak, satisfactory, good)

- ◆ Written communication
- ◆ Understanding of policies & procedures, for example, health & safety
- ◆ Spoken communication

What are the top priorities for developing English language skills in your organisation in the coming 12 months?

What percentage of the second language speakers in your organisation would you rate as:

- ◆ *Beginners*, only a basic understanding of English
- ◆ *Intermediate*, can communicate in most areas but struggle with some aspects eg writing emails/reports
- ◆ *Fluent*, can communicate effectively verbally and in writing

What percentage of your workforce are second language speakers of English?

- ◆ Under 10%
- ◆ Between 11 and 25%
- ◆ Between 26 and 50%
- ◆ Over 50%

Will your organisation be employing more or fewer second language speakers in the next two years?

- ◆ More
- ◆ Fewer