CORPORATE LEARNING

POWERED BY efekta



Workplace misunderstandings: Lost in translation or lost in interpretation?

How language and cultural environment shape workplace miscommunication



Table of contents

Foreword 4

When communication breaks down, what is really to blame? 5

Methodology 6

Part 1: The language and culture overlap. 8

Experience vs. perception: The misdiagnosis problem 10

What about when communication goes well? 11

Part 2: Different environments, different diagnoses. 12

Country of work 13

English proficiency 15

Two cultures separated by a common language 16

Conclusion 19

What global leaders can do 20

Foreword

When communication breaks down, what is really to blame?

Miscommunication is expensive. Horribly so. In 2014, researchers at Cardiff Business School estimated that poor language skills and cultural awareness cost the UK up to £48 billion a year, or 3.5% of national income, based on 2006 figures.

The cost is not just financial, although that is bad enough. When a global company made English its working language, employees who did not speak English as a first language lost status, however good their English was. Those who rated their own English as 'medium' were the most anxious. The impacts of miscommunication go beyond the bottom line to talent mobility and mental health.

If these were the effects of something physical – aging and failing infrastructure, say – we would expect government action. But miscommunication is too often a silent drag on individuals and organizations alike. From the outside, it can be difficult to tell whether one person in a conversation has understood what the other meant. For the people in the middle of the conversation, it is almost impossible.

Miscommunication is not like a bridge collapse. It is not binary. We convey what we think we mean. The other person interprets it. Both can be sure they are right, and both can be wrong. When communication breaks down, we usually blame the other person. It is hard to recognize when we ourselves have failed to convey the message we intended.

The growth in online communication, fueled by the pandemic, has made the problem worse. Online meetings lose much of the nuance of body language. Emails struggle to convey tone. Texts and messages rely on a shared understanding of words that may not be there. I recently replied to a colleague's message with "Cool." I meant it positively. They replied asking if I was okay. The period had – apparently – conveyed abrupt irritation . If a single punctuation mark can cause communication to break down, what other pitfalls await us in written communication?

This research looks closely at the causes of these breakdowns. It explores them through language and culture, both organizational and geographical. It accepts that these factors are interwoven, and does an excellent job of unpicking them to show what our differences are and suggests where they come from. That puts us at the start of a journey to correcting miscommunication: by identifying it and accepting that we ourselves might be at fault.

I no longer put a period at the end of my messages. It costs me a disproportionate effort to remind myself to do this small thing, but it is worth it if it improves communication. How else might we improve the way we share ideas and information? Reading this paper is a great place to start.



Donald H Taylor

Researcher and Chairperson at Emerge Education and Learning Technologies Conference

With a career spanning nearly 40 years, I have chaired influential platforms such as the Learning Technologies Conference, fostering innovation and knowledge sharing in organizational learning and technology. My mission is now to advance the L&D profession by supporting the next generation of leaders and enabling growth within the industry – by creating and sharing research into what's happening in our field.

Methodology

This new research from EF Corporate Learning in collaboration with Donald H Taylor was conducted to answer two interrelated questions:

- What influences miscommunication in the workplace?
- How do perceptions of language and culture compare to the lived experience of miscommunication?

To answer these questions, we surveyed 500 managers from multinational businesses across eight countries. We placed respondents in common workplace scenarios and asked what factors they believed contributed to the outcome – whether positive or negative.

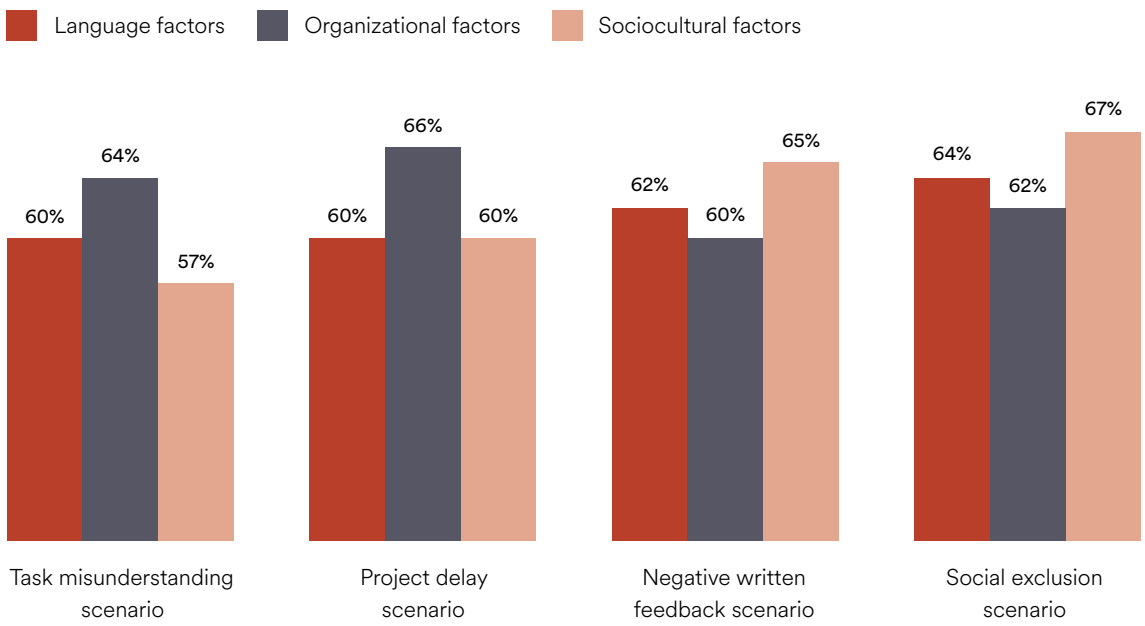
For each scenario, respondents were asked to assess the likelihood of a variety of factors influencing the outcome of the miscommunication. In this report, these potential influences are grouped into three categories: sociocultural (e.g. different approaches to conflict), language (e.g. misaligned message interpretation), and organizational culture (e.g. unclear decision pathways).

By offering respondents relatable situations rather than underlying causes, this paper is able to comment on the experience of communication compared to the conscious perception of the same, looking at what may be behind those perceptions.

Figure 1

What is most likely to have impacted each scenario?

Percentages show weighted averages of respondents finding these factors a likely influence



Part 01

The language and culture overlap

From a solutions perspective, language and culture are often treated as separate sources of workplace friction. Language development focuses on vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension; cultural training may address differences in behavior, hierarchy, or collaboration.

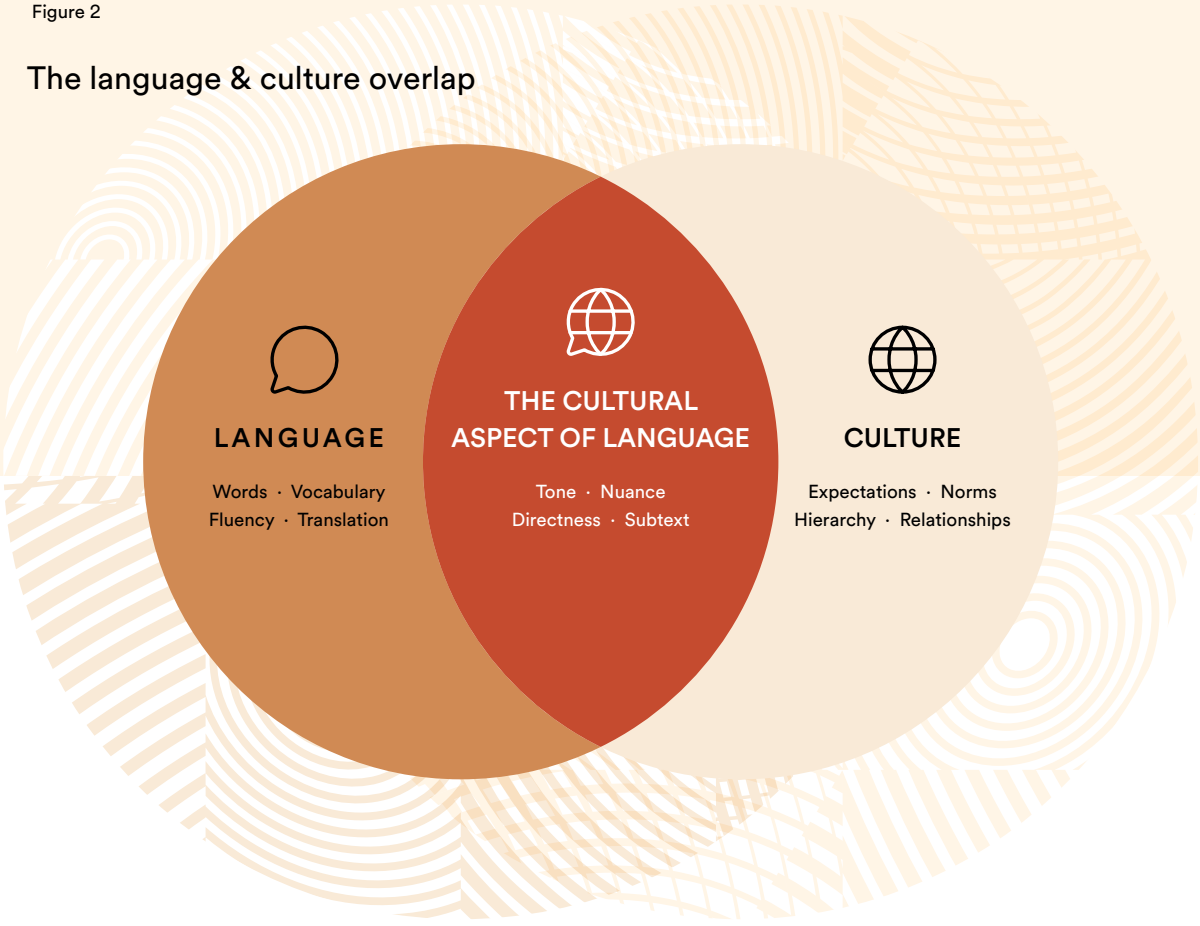


The research, however, shows evidence of a far more nuanced picture in most circumstances. In the scenarios presented to participants in the survey, the overall impact of each factor (see Fig. 1) fluctuates; project delay is placed at the feet of organizational culture; social exclusion is attributed more strongly to sociocultural elements, and so on. But in all cases, the results are close on average.

Oftentimes, language provides the vehicle for the communication, but culture and context help determine how that vehicle is understood. This explains why respondents point to both influences.

Figure 2

The language & culture overlap



Experience vs. perception: The misdiagnosis problem

Despite reporting a relatively equal experience of language, sociocultural, and organizational factors, 71% of respondents – when asked directly – singled out just one of the three categories as being the dominant influencer, with only 24% selecting 'a combination'.

This creates what might be called an attribution gap: the distance between what contributes to an interaction going wrong and what people subsequently believe was responsible.

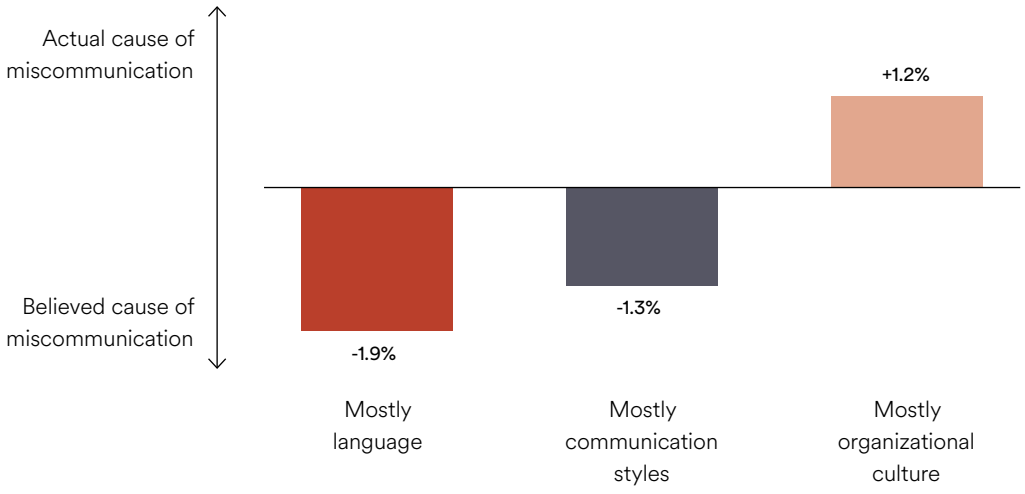
Those that asserted that organizational culture had the most impact on misunderstandings were broadly the most aligned in their lived experience. The sociocultural group demonstrated some modest alignment that gently confirms their opinion, except in the case of task misunderstandings – here their experience leaned much more towards other influences.

But by far the most interesting finding of this comparison is that the language group has the weakest alignment between perception and experience, meaning they actually found non-language factors more likely in those scenarios despite believing language is the main issue.

Figure 3

What causes miscommunication in your view?

The "attribution gap": the distance between what contributes to an interaction going wrong and what people subsequently believe was responsible



This may be due to the fact that language is far more visible and seemingly easier to interpret than culture. Indeed, overall, 24% of respondents believe that language is most often the culprit of miscommunication, even though their experience tells a more mixed story.

Individuals, and organizations at large, may then underestimate the effects of multiculturalism in their workplace; while, clearly, language skills must be developed to ensure efficiency, culture – both the personal and organizational – must be factored into training and development strategies.

Individuals, and organizations at large, may underestimate the effects of multiculturalism in their workplace

What about when communication goes well?

Blame is a universal human tendency. When difficulties arise, employees across cultures point the finger, and language is an obvious target in a complicated interaction.

However, the same is not true outside of conflict.

When assessing a scenario with positive outcomes, the results across the three categories remain remarkably flat: all categories score between 75-77% in likelihood, suggesting that when communication works well, respondents don't distinguish much between language, organizational, or sociocultural factors. Everything matters roughly equally.

This could mean that the twin influences of language and culture, when teams are not under the pressure of conflict, are exceptionally balanced.



Part 02

Different environments, different diagnoses

So far, we have seen the difficulty in distinguishing between the influences of language and culture on communication, and that often, the cause is misattributed. Now the question becomes; if culture and language are behind these misunderstandings, how are experience and perception altered by the respondents' own cultural-linguistic lens?.

To do this, we will focus on the working location of respondents – which we can understand as associated with cultural environment – and linguistic background, including English proficiency and working language.

Country of work

A person's country of work does not define their individual cultural identity. It does, however, provide a context in which particular expectations about communication, hierarchy, relationships, and collaboration may be familiar.

Immediately, cultural patterns start to form. Japan rates every influence far lower than other countries. The UK sees a high likelihood of all three influences equally. Mexico seems to rank organizational culture far above the other influences.

And there is likely a cultural explanation behind each of these findings, for which there is an abundant academic precedent.

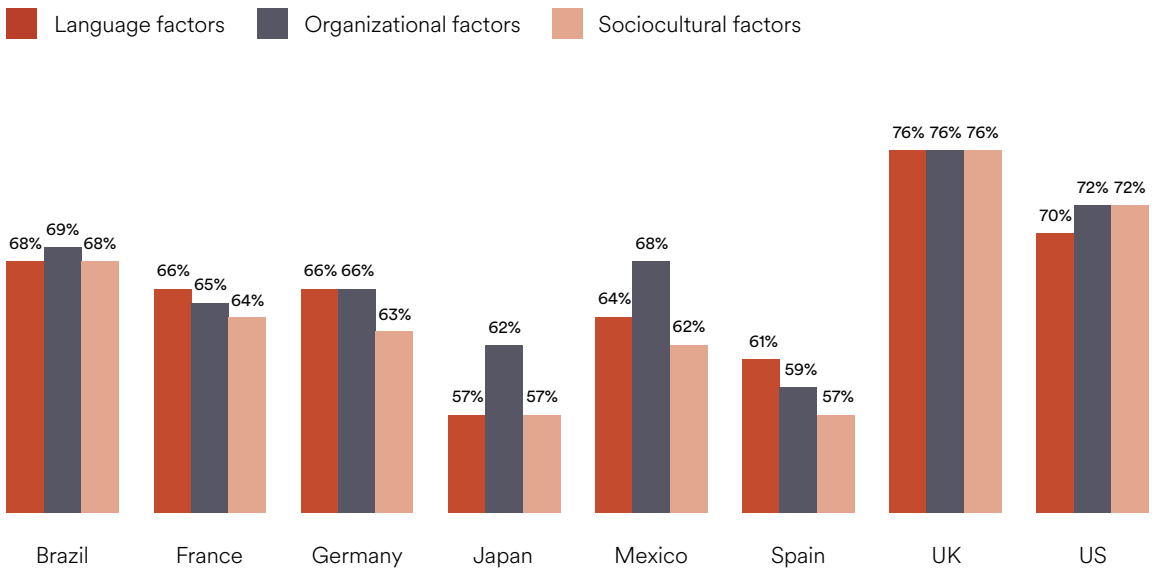
Looking at Japan, for example, with Geert Hofstede's 6-D model of national culture, Japan's high 'uncertainty avoidance' (capacity to deal with ambiguity) may explain their restrained answers: Japanese respondents may be less inclined to attribute blame to any single factor, preferring more measured, less definitive responses. Meanwhile, in Erin Meyer's Culture Map framework, Japan sits at the extreme 'high context' end, meaning communication is so embedded in context that isolating individual causes may feel artificial to Japanese respondents.

In another question, when asked about strategies for improving communication, Japan ranked low on 'encouraging people to ask questions' (20%, against

Figure 4

Country profiles: language vs organizational vs sociocultural factors

Mean number of respondents believing these factors likely affect communication across all scenarios



a global average of 40%), which could be due to their tendency towards hierarchy and confrontation avoidance (Meyer). Instead, 55% preferred 'clear roles and processes' to improve communication, demonstrating their careful planning culture in contrast with 33% responding the same in Mexico, a more 'flexible' working culture.

Elsewhere, UK respondents were most likely to put 'individual personalities' as the top factor influencing communication difficulties, the only nation to choose neither language nor communication as their main concern. Hofstede places the UK on the high end of the 'individualist' scale, and this response strongly confirms this categorization. To the same question, Spain respondents cited 'trust'. In Meyer's framework, Spain is a relationship-first culture where trust is built through personal connection rather than process. This could also explain why organizational culture scores so low (Fig. 4): for Spanish respondents, formal processes are less central to how work actually gets done, so they're less likely to see process gaps as a root cause.

Brazil-based respondents repeatedly prioritize relationships in the survey, in keeping with academic consensus on their culture; they are 37% more likely to 'organize informal team-building' than Japan respondents (63% vs 26%); likewise, 43% of Brazil respondents consider informal relationships a significant part of workplace culture, against 14% answering the same in Japan (and 32% globally). Each country in the study thus establishes a unique profile that reflects their culture.

In other words, the experience and perspectives of respondents are consistent with their cultural environment.

It also means that there are multiple cultural voices in any interaction at a global company; the cultural reality of the people and place, and the cultural perceptions that each individual brings to the table.

This could have an enormous impact on HR strategy, suggesting that deep cultural awareness, and indeed self-awareness, may be key to managing communications.

"Often, cultural differences alter the perception of a given subject, potentially leading to misunderstandings or delays."

– L&D manager, Brazil, manufacturing industry with 10-50k employees



English proficiency

For many global organizations, English provides the shared language through which international teams operate. But speaking English is not binary; people vary enormously in fluency, confidence, and familiarity with the language of business.

As proficiency increases, so does awareness of linguistic and cultural influences; across the survey's five scenarios, those with basic English proficiency identified a lower likelihood of all contributors than high proficiency or fluent speakers, who responded almost entirely with above-average likelihood across the board.

Despite this, low-proficiency English speakers are far more likely (30%) to perceive language as the main cause of miscommunications than those with bilingual proficiency (14%). Most (37%) fluent speakers instead suggest that it's caused by a combination of factors. It appears that proficient English speakers are therefore dealing with more cultural nuance in their work due to a higher level of refinement in their language understanding. They view both influences on balance since their personal risk of either is low. Those lacking those communication skills conversely seem much more likely to recognize that gap as the problem.

Confidence in live interactions (as opposed to written ones) can be a problem for low proficiency workers. This is confirmed by the differing experiences of low and high proficiency workers in face-to-face interactions; few (8%) fluent English speakers have trouble being understood face-to-face, unlike those with the lowest proficiency, of whom over one fifth find it to be the primary location of misunderstandings.

Yet, even though employees with low English proficiency struggle with in-person communication the most, every tier of proficiency cited a lack of live conversation practice as the number one barrier to building better communication in working relationships.

Ultimately, proficiency adds another interpretative lens to communication, altering employees' experience of failed interactions and their perceived causes.



"Usually, English is the common language but is not the first language of either party; hence making the situation difficult."

– Procurement manager, France, energy & utilities sector





Two cultures separated by a common language

UK vs. US: A case study

As two countries that largely speak English at a native or bilingual level, the UK and the US can offer a case study on the impact of cultural environment, as opposed to purely language differences.

For example, when asked which factors cause miscommunication most often, UK respondents cited interpersonal and sociocultural factors. US respondents, on the other hand, attribute communication problems to information clarity and processes, with clear concerns related to language. Indeed, there is not even any cross over in their top four concerns.

Organizations may underestimate the miscommunication potential of two native speakers of the same language, and such misunderstandings may cause more frustration since surface-level communication appears frictionless.

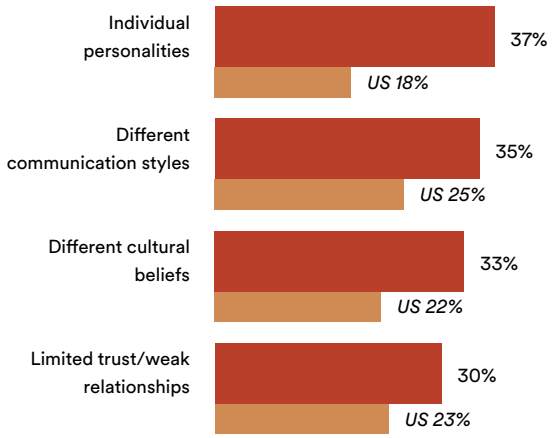
Understanding the cultural divide may provide a useful counterpoint to the assumption that language is the primary obstacle in global communication.

> *"A colleague interpreted a short written message differently than intended because of language differences, which caused confusion about the task and delayed the work."*
>
> – US-based C-suite executive, construction industry

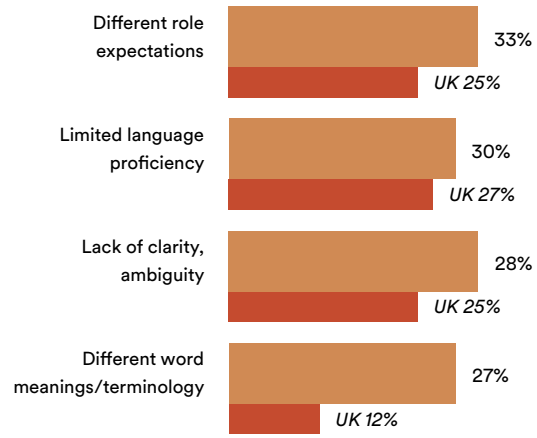
> *"Once a remote team member understood a deadline as a loose suggestion due to cultural differences. This delayed our project because we expected strict on time delivery."*
>
> – UK-based VP, global professional services company

What causes miscommunications? (top responses)

UK Pattern: Interpersonal & cultural factors



US Pattern: Process & language factors





While language skills must be developed to ensure efficiency, culture *– both the personal and organizational – must be factored into training and development strategies.*



Conclusions

What global leaders can do

The findings point towards a complex conclusion for HR and L&D leaders: improving global communication capability cannot be achieved by treating language and culture as independent competencies.

Just as importantly, the research suggests that our interpretation of communication problems may itself be influenced by our linguistic and cultural environment. This attribution gap may be the most impactful since the explanation we choose determines the solution we pursue.

In this context, we need organizations where people can recognize when meaning is being lost, question their own assumptions about why, and build the capability to bridge the gap.

Here's what the data, and the respondents themselves, offer as action points for leaders:

#1

Diagnose before prescribing

Build diagnostic questions into team reviews and manager development to remove assumptions about cross-border misunderstandings and set-up processes for solving the underlying cultural or language issues.

"[Improve communication by exploring] in depth, explaining the variables, understanding each other, and talking strategies."

– CFO, US-based manufacturing company

#2

Make important information explicit

Confirm who owns an action, what has been agreed, and when something is expected, particularly when working across regions.

"Provide clear, simple communication guidelines and encourage colleagues to ask questions and clarify misunderstanding without hesitation."

– CMO, UK-based healthcare business

#3

Develop cultural awareness alongside language capability

Language learning can provide the foundation for communication, but employees also need to understand how meaning can change according to context. Integrate practical cultural scenarios into language development, rather than treating language and cultural learning as separate activities.

"Cultural training to understand each other's traditions and norms with the intent of closing the communication barriers as well as gaining camaraderie and trust within the organization."

– HR manager, US public sector organization

#4

Increase and improve participation opportunities

Employees at all levels want more face-to-face interactions with colleagues. Enable those with low language proficiency to participate with the right tools, training, and company culture.

"Create an atmosphere where people can speak without fear of making mistakes, and provide opportunities to understand each other's cultural backgrounds."

– Procurement VP, Japan, professional services firm with 50k+ employees

#5

Build an intentional organizational culture

Organizational culture may be in more immediate access to leaders than many socio-linguistic factors. Use this to your advantage and create transparent communication, robust channel usage, and inclusive policies to reduce misunderstandings caused by pure company processes and norms.

CORPORATE LEARNING

POWERED BY efekta

EF Corporate Learning is the world's first and largest corporate language training provider. Delivering language training for organizations since 1965 and with 20+ million learners trained online since 1996, our legacy and global scale are unmatched. Many of the 3,000+ multinational organizations we serve have partnered with us for over 15 years, reporting 3x higher engagement and learning progress than other providers.



© EF Corporate Learning 2026