



# English: To speak or not to speak, that is the question

Our country has recently been debating again over adopting English as the language of instruction in Mathematics and Science. Many are in favour of mastering English, understanding the need for proficiency in the universal business language, while others are fearful that there will be no level playing field and that it would be unfair to penalise students, especially in rural areas, by forcing them to pass in English.

Language that is universally spoken evolves over time. French was the language that diplomats, rulers and leaders once spoke in Europe from the 17th century until its recent replacement by English. This is why we see United Nations dually written as Nations Unies in French.

In the 20th century, after the World War II, German and Japanese were much favoured as “second languages” since Germany and Japan were the two emerging economic powerhouses at the time. Now, we see Mandarin as an important second language because of China’s ascendance as an economic power.

According to *Ethnologue*, a widely cited source for languages around the world, the five most spoken languages in 2009 are:

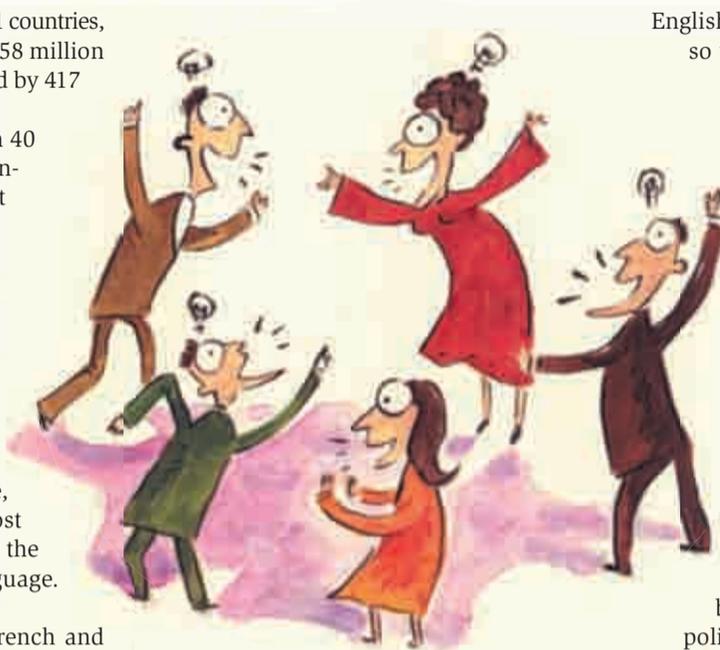
- Chinese: Most widely spoken language with 1.15 billion people using it as their first language and 1.34 billion as their second language. Chinese is the official language in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Taiwan.
- Hindi: Spoken by 366 million people as their first language.
- English: The official language in 83 countries/regions, and spoken in 105 countries with 341 million as their first language and 508 million as a second language.

- Spanish: The official language in 21 countries, and spoken in 44 countries by 358 million people as their first language and by 417 million as a second language.

- French: The official language in 40 countries, and spoken in 54 countries with 77 million as their first language and by 128 million as a second language.

So, why is English so important? Because from the statistics, English is undeniably the most widely used “second” and “learning” language in the world, used for international communication in various fields like aviation, business, Internet, science and technology, medicine, finance, and so on. It is spoken in the most number of countries, and also holds the record number as the official language. I, for one, can attest to this.

I’m fluent in English, Malay, French and Spanish, having studied the latter two at university, and am a qualified English teacher with a Cambridge certificate (CELTA or Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults). In Barcelona, an advertising agency hired me as it felt my added value lay in being able to write marketing reports in Spanish and English. In Paris, my added value for L’Oréal was my fluency in English and French, meaning that I could write press releases and develop communication tools in English, coordinate with the subsidiaries around the world in English, French or Spanish, while at the same time handle meetings and communicate daily with my colleagues in French. What I am trying to highlight is this: the need to be proficient in English makes you a strong candidate in any foreign country.



For those who don’t speak English, it’s a disability. I know some people who can’t converse in English and feel terribly disadvantaged. I see their frustration in not being able to communicate or join in conversations. I once witnessed a director based in Paris who couldn’t speak French and had difficulty writing grammatically correct English, and that, in the end, damaged her credibility amongst her peers and staff.

Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil are what make our beautiful, diverse society. But we are also fortunate to have had the British teach us English, as we are one of the few countries able to welcome foreigners so easily into our countries. But being able to speak basic

English and being proficient is not the same so we must not be deluded in this.

If we look at the Swedes, their level of English and their ability to master a third language is impressive. They understand that few speak Swedish, so they learn to speak flawless English and most likely German or French fluently too.

The reality is that we cannot do away with English. Companies, even if they are based in a non-English speaking country, all require a good level of English. This is what I experienced in France and Spain. This is the effect of globalisation. The world is so integrated economically, it would be an error to implement protectionist policies. Stepping back should not be a policy. We must drive forward instead and face the challenges.

English is the universal medium of communication today. Many are fearful that we are not ready to teach in English. But as Eleanor Roosevelt once said: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the things which you think you cannot do.”

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## businesslife | BY BRIAN AMBLE |

# Integrity: The missing ingredient

It isn’t enough for CEOs to demonstrate the ability to do the job. If they are going to win the trust of those working for them and break down the growing cynicism felt towards those in positions of authority, they need to demonstrate real personal integrity too.

If we needed any more evidence that those in positions of authority face an uphill struggle to win popular trust, new research by the UK-based Institute of Leadership and Management reveals that almost a third (31%) of employees in the UK have little or no trust in their senior management teams.

Based on a survey of over 5,600 employees, the Index of Leadership Trust found that on a scale of 0 to 100, CEOs scored an average of 59. CEOs of large public sector organizations scored 57 on the index, while the bosses of private sector companies rated a marginally higher 61.

If anything, the surprise is that the ILM’s figures are as high as they are. In a 2007 survey by consultancy

Watson Wyatt Worldwide, fewer than half (49%) of the 12,000 full-time workers surveyed said they had trust and confidence in their senior management, while other workplace research has found levels of trust in CEOs to be as low as 40%.

But line managers fared rather better than their bosses in the ILM survey, earning an overall index figure of 69.

Senior managers in national/local government and the media emerged as the least trusted, while those in the charity and retail sectors enjoyed higher levels of trust than all other sectors. And surprisingly, trust within the financial sector was high despite recent economic turmoil.

The research also underlines that it takes time to earn trust. The longer CEOs and line managers have held their positions, the more trust employees have in them — and this is unlikely to be achieved in less than five years. So the lower trust scores of CEOs in large organisations are partly a reflection of their shorter periods at

the helm. But more revealing than the headline statistics is the importance respondents placed on the six factors that are fundamental to trust, namely ability, understanding, fairness, openness, integrity and consistency. As far as CEOs are concerned, the two critical factors are ability and integrity. Meanwhile, although line managers are more trusted, employees expect a more diverse range of qualities and characteristics from them. Besides ability (top of the list) and integrity, line managers are required to demonstrate understanding, fairness and consistency.

ILM’s chief executive, Penny de Valk, said: “Trust is crucial to the performance of an organisation, and a cornerstone of good leadership. Teams are more effective in a trusting environment, and people work better and harder if they trust their leaders.

“But for leaders, being good at their job is simply not enough anymore. They have to be aware of their ‘signal value’ and how this is

perceived by employees as a sign of integrity. The more senior you are, the more the gap between what you say and what you do — or that you don’t say or do — is amplified. In recessionary times, employees are anxious and this spotlight will be yet further intensified.”

In his study “Trust and Power”, German sociologist Niklas Luhman sheds light on why the erosion of trust in political and business leaders as well as institutions has given rise to such pervasive uncertainty.

“Trust reduces the feeling of uncertainty. Trust makes a person feel more secure with regard to his or her acting or not acting. With trust, the person has the feeling of knowing what will happen in the future.”

So the message for CEOs is that if they want to play their part in rebuilding this trust, both in themselves and their organisations, integrity and authenticity — not window-dressing and spin — need to move to the top of their agendas. — *Management Issues*

## quotable

“If I had that to do over again, I’d furnish it in Ikea.”

— John Thain, the former CEO of Merrill Lynch in a speech on Sept 17 in Philadelphia on overspending on office renovation as the investment bank teetered. The furniture included a commode worth US\$35,000 and an antique mahogany pedestal table valued at US\$25,000.

