

For Companies in Taiwan, Is Good English Good Enough?

Business leaders need to act now — to avoid getting left behind

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By Mike McClory / Smart English Online

To compete in today's global economy, companies in Taiwan need more than quality products, a shrewd marketing strategy, and an aggressive sales force. Companies that want to grow their business need English. More specifically, they need to develop a workforce that is proficient in English. Not good in English — proficient in English.

It is common knowledge that in our increasingly interconnected world, English has become a form of international currency. As a result, universities in Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands are now offering more than 3,000 undergraduate and graduate programs taught entirely in English.

These are not just English classes. They are complete courses of study in subjects ranging from business to biology to engineering. It is not surprising that these countries, along with Singapore — which decided back in the 1960s to focus on English as the primary language of its education system — received top rankings in a recent survey of English proficiency.

Fluency in English gives business professionals from these and other countries a competitive advantage. This is particularly true now that the coronavirus pandemic is causing many Western companies to begin cutting ties with mainland China. As they look for more trustworthy trading partners, these companies will naturally be attracted to organizations whose workforce is proficient in English.

Of course, most people in Taiwan are aware of the movement to make English an official language of the government. A recent statement from the Ministry of Education expressed the current administration's strong support for bilingualism: "English is an international language and we hope we can use the 'bilingual country' policy to let Taiwan acquire more international competitiveness."

In Japan, some business leaders have decided not to wait for their government to do something about the problem. Several prominent companies (Rakuten, Honda, Shiseido, Fast Retailing) are already implementing an "English-only" policy in the workplace. English is becoming the official language for meetings, reports, email messages, and everyday conversations.

Rakuten CEO Hiroshi “Mickey” Mikitani has explained that at his company, English is no longer considered a foreign language: “The only way to compete in this interconnected internet age is to speak the language of the market — and that language is English ... English is the language of global business.”

To take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new global challenges, businesses in Taiwan need to begin instituting intensive, company-wide training programs that focus on professional English. Think of professional English as the ability to speak and write English with clarity and confidence, regardless of the situation — especially when working with people from different cultures. Professional English requires a level of fluency that is several steps up the ladder from the English taught in GEPT or TOEIC courses.

Even if the Taiwanese government’s bilingual effort is successful, estimates are that implementing the new language policy will take a decade or more. Can business leaders in Taiwan wait around until 2030 to see what happens? Or should they begin establishing training in professional English now — to avoid getting left behind.

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