

The Impact of English and Plurilingualism in Global Corporations



The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

Introduction

The International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF) is developing a series of reports that addresses key, unanswered questions regarding policies and practices in English language education worldwide. Specifically, TIRF, while promoting individual and community language rights, is interested in better understanding how the language proficiency of individuals who are non-native speakers, or second-language speakers of English influences their ability to access and participate in the global economy. Describing and assessing the current and evolving roles of English are the primary objectives of this research.

The first of these reports addresses the ways in which global corporations define and assess their language requirements—including, but not limited to, the ability to communicate in English—and how these corporations both support and evaluate the development of the language capabilities of their employees. The questions that motivated the research were

- What language requirements do global corporations have?
- What are the economic purposes and benefits of these requirements?
- How do global corporations assess whether workers meet their language requirements?
- What have global corporations done to address the language challenges they face?
- What is the impact of employees' language abilities on individuals, firms, and economies?

TIRF offers some answers to these questions in *The Impact of English and Plurilingualism in Global Corporations*. The report is based on a formal review of the literature surrounding the role of English and plurilingualism (or multilingualism) in global business, and findings from surveys and interviews involving a small but purposive sample of global corporations, or their relevant language assessment and service providers. The research activities aimed at capturing the role of English and plurilingualism in the hiring, training, job advancement, and other human resources and talent development practices of global corporations.

TIRF is interested in better understanding how the language proficiency of individuals influences their ability to access and participate in the global economy.

The participants in the study were identified in discussions between the research team and the TIRF Board of Trustees. The respective professional networks of these individuals were then used to identify access points, make contact, administer a survey, and/or conduct electronic, telephone, or in-person follow-up interviews as needed. The industries represented by these corporations include: energy, publishing, professional services, advanced manufacturing, information technology, finance, entertainment, telecommunications, and biomanufacturing.



Study Conclusions

The findings in this initial TIRF report empirically confirm a commonly held belief:

Plurilingualism, and proficiency in English as a second or foreign language in particular, matter greatly in the global economy, and they matter to employers as well as to individuals. Indeed, it is possible to estimate the effect of language on business performance.

Effective communication across global corporations requires employees with skills in multiple languages. Surprisingly, however, no significant efforts to date have been made to quantify this effect through formal experimentation and research, even though the results would undoubtedly hold tremendous importance for both firms and individuals, as well as for both local and global economies.

The economic impact of language proficiency

The literature and the data from the corporations we surveyed strongly suggest that there are measurable economic returns on English and plurilingual skills for individuals, corporations, and economies. TIRF's findings also suggest that there is a considerable price to be paid if corporate global and local communications fail, or are ineffective due to poor language proficiency of employees. It is clear that this entire subject, i.e. the economic return on English and plurilingual skills as well as on corporate language strategies, begs further research and study.

The language requirements of global corporations

A number of different sets of English language proficiency requirements and assessment tools are used by global corporations, many of which are general, and not correlated specifically to relevant job functions. In the meantime, the language needs of corporate employees are increasing. The fact that major corporations are engaged in such vast efforts to define and assess their language needs clearly indicates that these groups recognize the importance of language proficiency for their performance. It is also a credible sign that corporations are actively trying to find solutions to their language challenges.

There are measurable economic returns on English and plurilingual skills for individuals, corporations, and economies.

Without global sets of standards that reflect not only general language proficiency, but also proficiency in specific job functions, efforts to define and assess language proficiency will continue to carry a substantial economic cost. This cost includes not only a financial impact on the bottom line of corporations, but also the opportunity cost associated with the identification, training, and measurement of employees. The development of more function-specific, globally-recognized standards and tools that reflect the diversity of these language needs warrants further research, and TIRF strongly encourages additional study in these areas.

Language development strategies of global corporations

Despite the current availability of tools to identify, develop, and measure language needs and abilities, there appears to be neither a global consensus on the most effective strategies for realizing these goals, nor enough research data at this time to determine what these strategies should be.



Language proficiency directly impacts knowledge transfer—and business performance.

Corporations seeking to implement a successful language strategy are left to sort through an array of methods, tools, and providers. Given that the economic benefits of language proficiency cannot be realized without successful strategies, this critical area offers a key opportunity for research by corporations and other interested parties. There is a growing foundation for such study, but much work needs to be done. Questions of delivery mode, scope, level, duration, and use of technology all beg further investigation.


Implications of the study

This paper represents an early step, though by no means the first, toward a comprehensive, research-based approach to the subject of plurilingualism in the 21st century global environment. It is clear that substantial further research and study is needed across this entire subject.

As a next step, TIRF would like to encourage research and study on the following specific questions:

- What is the relative penetration of various corporate lingua franca (e.g., English, Spanish) and what are the growth expectations for the position of these languages in global labor markets?
- What level of proficiency in English or other lingua franca is required for different levels and types of jobs in specific global firms?
- What are the best tools for corporations to assess language proficiency?
- What are the best approaches for corporations to implement language proficiency development?
- What are the potential contributions of technology tools to language proficiency development?
- What are the best ways to assess the economic returns of language proficiency to individuals and corporations?

There is a need for research to determine the most effective language strategies for corporations and individuals.



For more information

To read or download the full version of *The Impact of English and Plurilingualism in Global Corporations*, or for more information on TIRF's commitment to research on these and other questions about English language learning and teaching, visit: <http://www.tirfonline.org/>.



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About TIRF

Formed in June 1998, the International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF) is committed to developing knowledge about English language learning and teaching in various settings through a coherent program of research, dissemination, and networking. TIRF's Board of Trustees, which serves on a voluntary basis, is drawn from academia, publishing, business, and government. TIRF raises funds entirely from charitable donations. To date, TIRF has awarded monies to fund 30 research projects involving 50 researchers from around the world.



Download the full version of the TIRF report
*The Impact of English and Plurilingualism in
Global Corporations* at:

www.tirfonline.org