

The Confidence Gap for Non-native English Speakers

In many companies, valued non-native English speaking employees at all levels of responsibility struggle with their confidence due to the challenge of communicating clearly in English. This adds another layer of stress for the non-native speaker—and for everyone working around that person, and has consequences for the company:

- ◆ Heavy accent and awkward speech patterns can lead frustrated colleagues to ignore the expertise of non-native speakers.
- ◆ Lack of confidence for the non-native speaker can lead to isolated work patterns, avoidance of critical communication and holding back of valuable contributions.
- ◆ Difficulty with written English can slow production of reports and other documents as colleagues waste precious time on basic editing or clarifying the intended message.

Expectations of Training

Companies that provide training for more advanced level non-native English speakers benefit in several tangible ways:

- ◆ These valued employees contribute closer to their full potential as confidence increases when using English. They engage sooner and more effectively in meetings or on conference calls – even though they still make mistakes. Their speech is more understandable, information is conveyed more succinctly and presentations are more coherent.
- ◆ Professional relationships become more productive as non-native English speakers learn expressions and linguistic strategies to practice culturally appropriate behaviors, including interrupting for clarification, making direct or indirect statements of intention, and making small talk.
- ◆ Time is saved when non-native English speakers learn how to organize their thinking for writing research notes or other documents. They write shorter sentences, leading to fewer grammar errors. In e-mail, writers learn how to express concern about a problem without offending the reader.

Good language training programs in corporate settings use role play and simulation to allow non-native speakers to get feedback on the language that they struggle with every day at work. In the process, these employees start to see language learning in the broader context of improving communication. They move past the sole focus on grammar or pronunciation and towards confident, spontaneous expression in characterizing the work world around them.

Best Practices for Everyday Support

Companies that do not provide training for non-native English speakers can still support their employees for whom English is not a first language. Managers or colleagues can:

- ◆ Ask non-native English speakers to summarize issues, projects or activities. The manager can provide 'guidelines' for how to do so. *'Could you summarize [this issue] and talk about solutions you are considering?'*
- ◆ Identify language that is confusing in spoken remarks or written communication. A manager might say, *'I think I understood what you were (saying / writing here), but this sentence was confusing because...'*
- ◆ Give the employee a choice of what the listener heard. *'Did you say 'shared components' or 'sheer components?'* Most non-native speakers really appreciate specific feedback.
- ◆ Ask the employee to 'rehearse' with the manager or a colleague what he or she might talk about at a meeting. *'Yoshi, what are you going to say about the 'x' bug at the team meeting today?'* Then, give feedback.

Working as a professional in a second or third language is challenging. Companies who want to support their non-native English speaking employees can help, first by acknowledging the challenge and then by providing language and communication training that incorporates the situations employees deal with every day. The return on the investment will be well worth it.



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Program participants report increased confidence and competence with English and, consequently, are more productive — results that easily pay for the cost of training.

This article was written by **David Kertzner**, who founded ProActive English in 1997.

For more information on **ProActive English** and our menu of services, please contact David Kertzner at:

dkertzner@proactive-english.com

or by phone at:
+1.503.231.2906

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