

Challenges of Using English for Non-Native Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges that non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs encounter when using English for business communication, particularly in international settings. As English remained the dominant language in global business, these entrepreneurs had to deal with various barriers, including linguistic, cultural, and psychological obstacles that affected their performance. Through a qualitative method involving interviews and literature review, the research identified common issues such as limited vocabulary, fear of miscommunication, and low confidence during negotiations. The results showed that, although English was crucial for entering international markets, the difficulties were considerable and required effective solutions. The study also highlighted the importance of addressing these challenges by offering better language education, access to supportive technology, and policy changes. These recommendations aimed to help non-native entrepreneurs improve their communication skills and succeed in global business environments.

Keywords:

English Language, Non-Native Speakers, Entrepreneurship, Business Communication, Internationalization

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of globalization and digital transformation, the English language has emerged as a critical asset for entrepreneurial success. It functions not only as a communication tool but also as a bridge connecting diverse markets and cultures. Recognized as the global language of business, diplomacy, and innovation, English is essential for entrepreneurs aiming to operate in international markets. According to Neeley (2012), many multinational companies adopt English as their corporate language to streamline communication across geographical and functional boundaries.

Effective communication is central to all business operations, including negotiations, marketing, investor relations, and pitching business ideas. In many of these activities, English is the primary medium. Entrepreneurs who lack English fluency may struggle to communicate their visions clearly, which can hinder their ability to compete on the global stage. Forbes Business Council (2024) emphasizes that language proficiency offers strategic advantages in understanding foreign markets and customer behavior, making it a key driver in international business negotiations.

Moreover, English proficiency involves more than understanding grammar and vocabulary; it includes familiarity with idioms, industry jargon, and culturally appropriate communication. Entrepreneurs, even those with formal education in English, may encounter difficulties in expressing complex ideas fluently in real-time situations. These linguistic barriers can result in misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and weakened professional credibility. As highlighted by Kuningan University researchers, English functions as a lingua

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franca in international business communication, and deficiencies in language use can significantly impact business operations and economic exchanges (Fatkhurrohan, 2023).

English also facilitates access to global knowledge networks, entrepreneurial communities, and educational resources. Many influential business journals, platforms, and international conferences operate predominantly in English. McCollege (n.d.) stresses that investing in English language proficiency is essential for engaging with global economic and technological developments, particularly as many digital tools and platforms are designed with English as the default language.

Therefore, mastering English is not just a communication skill—it is a strategic necessity for global engagement, competitiveness, and sustainable growth for non-native entrepreneurs. Understanding the challenges non-native speakers face in applying English in business contexts is crucial. This understanding can help educators, trainers, and policymakers design effective interventions to support entrepreneurs in developing the linguistic competencies required in the global marketplace.

a. The Impact of English Proficiency on SME Internationalization

A recent study conducted by Ouahlee (2023), titled "Effect on Non-Native English Speakers of Utilizing English for Business," offers valuable insights into the critical role that English language proficiency plays in the success of entrepreneurs who are non-native speakers. The research explores how varying levels of English competence impact key business activities such as negotiation, product marketing, and the establishment of strategic partnerships in international contexts. Ouahlee's findings highlight a clear correlation between higher English proficiency and increased entrepreneurial confidence, particularly in high-stakes situations like pitching to investors or negotiating contracts with overseas clients. This enhanced confidence often translates into more effective communication, reducing misunderstandings and fostering trust, both of which are essential for closing deals and building long-term business relationships.

The significance of these findings is especially pronounced for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which typically face greater resource constraints and may lack access to professional translators or language support services. For these businesses, English proficiency is not merely an optional skill but a strategic imperative that can open doors to wider international markets. As English continues to dominate global commerce and serve as the primary language of business communication, entrepreneurs who can articulate their value propositions clearly and persuasively in English gain a competitive advantage. Ouahlee

(2023) thus reinforces the argument that language mastery is a fundamental component of entrepreneurial capability in the global economy.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the nuanced challenges non-native speakers encounter beyond basic vocabulary or grammar. It emphasizes the importance of mastering business-specific language, including idiomatic expressions, industry jargon, and cultural communication styles that vary across regions. Entrepreneurs who develop such linguistic and intercultural competence are better positioned to navigate complex negotiations and adapt their messaging to diverse audiences. Therefore, the ability to communicate complex and innovative ideas clearly in English is often what distinguishes successful ventures seeking global expansion from those that struggle to maintain relevance beyond their local markets. These insights align closely with the central theme of this article, underscoring that English proficiency should be considered a critical entrepreneurial asset rather than a supplementary skill to be acquired when convenient.

b. Language Barriers Among Immigrant Entrepreneurs

The report by New American Economy (2020), titled "Assessing Language Barriers for Immigrant Entrepreneurs", provides a comprehensive overview of how English language limitations hinder immigrant entrepreneurs in the United States. The report highlights that nearly a quarter of immigrant business owners face challenges due to insufficient English proficiency. These barriers not only limit their ability to apply for loans and government assistance programs but also restrict their access to critical business networks and mentorship opportunities. This limitation often results in missed growth opportunities and decreased competitiveness.

The report's insights align closely with the current article's focus, as both emphasize the practical implications of language deficiencies on business sustainability and growth. Importantly, the report underscores that language barriers are intertwined with socio-economic challenges, affecting immigrant entrepreneurs' ability to integrate into the broader business ecosystem. Thus, improving English skills is a vital intervention point for supporting the success of non-native entrepreneurs in global markets.

c. Strategies to Overcome Language Barriers in Business

Zhang et al. (2022) explore innovative solutions to language barriers in their research, "Facilitating Global Team Meetings Between Language-Based Subgroups: When and How Can Machine Translation Help?". Their study focuses on the role of machine translation

technology in improving communication among multinational teams, particularly in virtual environments.

The research found that while machine translation tools cannot fully replace human language proficiency, they serve as effective aids in enhancing mutual understanding and reducing communication breakdowns. For entrepreneurs who are non-native English speakers, the findings suggest that integrating technology such as translation apps, subtitled video calls, and AI-driven communication tools can help mitigate some challenges associated with language gaps. This aligns with the current article's discussion on adaptive strategies for overcoming English language limitations. However, Zhang et al. also caution that reliance on technology must be balanced with ongoing language learning efforts to ensure nuanced and culturally sensitive communication, which is crucial for building lasting business relationships.

d. Language Capacity as a Key Factor in Global Expansion

The study by Sui, Baum, and Sinkovics (2024), titled "Language Operative Capacity in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises", provides an in-depth examination of how language skills impact the international growth of SMEs. The authors argue that language proficiency is not simply an individual competency but an organizational capability that shapes a company's global outreach. Their research shows that SMEs with limited internal language resources face challenges in market research, customer service, and regulatory compliance when entering foreign markets. This often results in slower internationalization processes and lost business opportunities.

Their findings reinforce the argument of the present article by positioning language proficiency as a structural enabler or barrier to global entrepreneurship. For non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs, developing language operative capacity is critical not only to communicate externally but also to manage internal processes that support international business operations. The study encourages SMEs to invest in language training and cultural competence development as part of their growth strategy.

e. The Role of Language in Building Business Trust

Raza and Shabir's (2022) article, "Building Trust in Virtual International Entrepreneurship: Role of Language Clarity and Credibility", examines how language use influences trust in virtual business environments. Their research highlights that clear, credible communication in English fosters stronger trust relationships between entrepreneurs and international partners or investors. Trust is identified as a key determinant of successful collaborations, particularly when interactions occur remotely or across cultures.

The key question of this research are what challenges do non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs face in using English for international business communication? and how do these challenges affect non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs' activities and business outcomes?. This research aims to explore the challenges non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs face in business communication, focusing on linguistic, cultural, and psychological difficulties. It examines how these challenges impact their effectiveness in global markets and highlights the benefits of English proficiency, such as greater market access, stronger investor relations, and improved brand positioning. By drawing on real-world experiences, the study offers insights into how language can both support and hinder entrepreneurship, providing practical recommendations for educators, language trainers, and policymakers to develop more effective support and training programs

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex and subjective experiences, such as the linguistic and communicative challenges faced by non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs. Rather than emphasizing numerical data, the research focused on the depth of individual experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to the use of English in entrepreneurial contexts. The primary instrument used was semi-structured interviews, allowing for guided yet flexible questioning to uncover participants' personal experiences in business settings such as negotiations, presentations, and written communication. The sample consisted of six Indonesian entrepreneurs selected through purposive sampling, based on their experience engaging with foreign clients, partners, or investors in English. Data were collected through online interviews conducted via Zoom and Google Meet, each lasting between 30 to 45 minutes and carried out in English to reflect real-world communicative situations. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, relevant written materials such as email correspondences or pitch decks were gathered when available to provide further insight into practical language use. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within the data. Transcripts were manually coded and categorized into key themes, including linguistic challenges, issues of confidence and fluency, cultural communication barriers, and coping strategies, offering a systematic yet flexible understanding of how language shapes the entrepreneurial experiences of non-native speakers.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Result

The interviews with six non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs from Indonesia revealed several recurring themes related to the challenges of using English in international business contexts. These themes are categorized into four major areas: linguistic limitations, confidence and fluency issues, cultural misunderstandings, and coping strategies.

1. Linguistic Limitations

All six participants reported challenges with vocabulary, particularly in understanding business-specific terms and industry jargon. While general conversational English was manageable, more formal business writing, legal contract reading, or negotiation discussions were often difficult. One participant noted:

“I can talk casually in English, but when it comes to explaining technical terms or financial details to investors, I feel stuck.”

This limitation sometimes resulted in slower communication, reliance on Google Translate or external consultants, and, in some cases, missed opportunities due to misunderstood terms.

2. Confidence and Fluency Issues

Five out of six participants expressed a lack of confidence when speaking English in high-stakes situations such as business pitches, networking events, or product demonstrations. Pronunciation concerns, fear of making grammatical mistakes, and limited fluency affected their ability to convey ideas.

“Even if I know what to say in Indonesian, translating it into English on the spot feels stressful and makes me nervous,” said one entrepreneur.

This fear of negative judgment often led to reduced participation in international forums or hesitation in approaching foreign clients directly.

3. Cultural Communication Barriers

Participants also highlighted the difficulty in adapting to direct communication styles expected in English-speaking business environments. Being from a high-context culture, Indonesian entrepreneurs often struggled with assertiveness, using indirect expressions instead of clear requests or refusals.

“Sometimes I say things politely, and they don’t get the message. I feel they expect me to be more direct, but that’s not how I usually communicate.”

This mismatch sometimes causes confusion, delays in decision-making, or even a perceived lack of professionalism.

4. Coping Strategies

To overcome these challenges, entrepreneurs developed a variety of strategies:

Taking short-term business English courses

Using AI tools or apps (e.g., Grammarly, DeepL)

Hiring interpreters or bilingual staff for meetings

Practicing presentations with peers or mentors

These coping methods were often informal and self-driven, indicating a strong willingness to improve despite the absence of structured support systems.

b. Discussion

The findings of this study strongly corroborate the literature reviewed in introduction, demonstrating that the role of English in global entrepreneurship remains both indispensable and challenging. As highlighted by Nickerson (2005) and Neeley (2012), proficiency in English is a critical asset for entrepreneurs operating in international markets, yet it also constitutes a significant barrier for non-native speakers, shaping not only communication but also access to opportunities and professional networks.

The specific challenges identified in this study, particularly those related to vocabulary limitations, nuances in phrasing, and self-confidence in speaking, resonate with the observations of Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2007), who emphasized the persistent struggles of non-native professionals when engaging in high-stakes global business contexts. Beyond linguistic hurdles, the findings reveal that cultural factors exacerbate these difficulties. For instance, the indirect communication style typical of Indonesian entrepreneurs often clashes with the expectations of direct and explicit communication in English-speaking business cultures, aligning with Hall's (1976) high-context versus low-context communication framework. Such mismatches not only create misunderstandings but may also lead to subtle disadvantages in negotiations and collaborative decision-making.

Interestingly, participants reported employing proactive strategies to bridge these gaps, including the use of artificial intelligence tools for language support, peer-based practice sessions, and deliberate exposure to English business materials. This trend reflects a contemporary, technology-driven approach to language acquisition that previous studies did not extensively address, suggesting that modern entrepreneurs are increasingly leveraging digital resources to mitigate linguistic barriers. Despite these adaptive strategies, participants still experienced emotional stress and professional limitations, confirming Marschan-Piekkari

et al.'s (1999) claim that language deficiencies can perpetuate power imbalances, hinder participation, and affect equity in international business interactions. Collectively, these findings underscore the intertwined nature of language proficiency, cultural understanding, and technology use in shaping the effectiveness and confidence of non-native entrepreneurs in global contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges faced by non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs, specifically from Indonesia, in using English for international business purposes. The findings revealed four key issues: limited business vocabulary, lack of confidence and fluency in high-pressure communication settings, cultural communication mismatches, and the ongoing need to develop coping strategies. These challenges often created barriers to effective communication, hindered business opportunities, and affected the entrepreneurs' self-confidence when interacting in global markets. Despite these difficulties, the study also highlighted the proactive efforts made by the entrepreneurs to overcome language-related obstacles. These included the use of translation tools, business English training, and seeking support from bilingual team members. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by the participants underline the importance of language competence as a key entrepreneurial asset in the global economy.

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