

Breaking Language Barriers: How Non-Native Entrepreneurs Overcome English Communication Challenges in Global Business

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges that non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs face when communicating in global business and explores strategies to overcome these barriers. The main objective is to identify common linguistic and cultural barriers in international entrepreneurship and assess their impact on business success. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a survey of 150 non-native entrepreneurs and in-depth interviews with 15 experienced business owners. Findings revealed that the most significant challenges included limited vocabulary, difficulties in professional writing (e.g., emails, proposals), and misunderstandings in cross-cultural negotiations. However, proactive strategies such as language training, digital tools (e.g., Grammarly, translation apps), and hiring bilingual staff have proven effective in mitigating these issues. The study concludes that although English proficiency remains a barrier, it can be overcome through targeted learning and adaptive communication techniques. Practical recommendations include integrating business English into entrepreneurship training programs and fostering a mindset for continuous language improvement. These measures can enhance global competitiveness among non-native entrepreneurs.

Keywords:

Language Barriers, Non-Native Entrepreneurs, Business Communication, English Language Skills, Cross-Cultural Challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global economy, English has emerged as the dominant language of business and a critical determinant of entrepreneurial success. Proficiency in English allows entrepreneurs to secure investors, negotiate effectively, promote products, and expand international networks (Neeley, 2012). Strong English communication skills are positively associated with international market access, multinational partnerships, and cross-cultural collaboration (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). However, many non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs face persistent language barriers, including misinterpretations in correspondence, difficulties with technical terminology, and cultural nuances in negotiation contexts, which hinder growth and competitiveness.

While existing scholarship acknowledges English as a lingua franca in international business (Neeley, 2012; Piller, 2016), much of the literature emphasizes large corporations rather than the lived experiences of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. The Uppsala Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) and studies of "Born Global" startups (Knight & Liesch, 2016) highlight the importance of language in internationalization, yet few empirical studies combine linguistic and cultural perspectives in analyzing challenges faced by non-native entrepreneurs. This reveals a gap in understanding the interplay between linguistic competence, intercultural negotiation, and entrepreneurial outcomes.

This study contributes by providing empirical evidence through a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data and interview insights to capture both the quantitative scale of language difficulties and the qualitative depth of cultural challenges. Unlike prior research focused primarily on corporate communication, this work highlights the cognitive and emotional dimensions of non-native entrepreneurs' struggles, demonstrating how

they expend greater effort in English-dominant contexts. The study also introduces practical strategies—such as digital language tools and intercultural training—that represent innovative approaches to bridging linguistic gaps in entrepreneurship.

The objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to identify and analyze the most pressing English language challenges faced by non-native entrepreneurs in global business, (2) to evaluate the impact of these challenges on business performance and cross-cultural interaction, and (3) to propose targeted strategies and educational implications that can support entrepreneurs in overcoming language barriers while preserving cultural identity. In doing so, the study addresses a clear research gap and advances the discussion of equitable participation in global entrepreneurship. English serves as a lingua franca in international business, driven by globalization, competitive pressure, and cross-border trade (Neeley, 2012). Entrepreneurs with English proficiency enjoy greater credibility, access to global networks, and opportunities for innovation (Piller, 2016). However, language gaps marginalize many non-native entrepreneurs, especially in industries requiring nuanced communication, such as consulting or law (Brannen et al., 2014).

The Uppsala Model highlights language competence as a factor reducing “psychic distance” in internationalization, facilitating smoother market entry (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Research further indicates that SMEs with strong English skills penetrate global markets more effectively (Hollensen, 2017). For “Born Global” startups, English is indispensable for pitching to investors, hiring international talent, and marketing products (Knight & Liesch, 2016). Yet, disparities persist, as non-native entrepreneurs face difficulties with legal language, professional writing, and cross-cultural negotiations (Charles, 2019).

2. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by non-native entrepreneurs. The population of the research consisted of non-native English-speaking entrepreneurs engaged in international business activities, including e-commerce, startups, and global trade. From this population, a sample of 150 respondents completed an online survey designed with Likert-scale and open-ended questions, while 15 entrepreneurs were selected through purposive sampling for in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

The instruments used in data collection included structured questionnaires to identify patterns of language difficulties, interviews to capture detailed experiences in negotiation and digital communication, and document analysis of authentic business correspondence. Data analysis was conducted in two stages: quantitative survey data were processed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to establish measurable trends, while qualitative interview transcripts and documents were coded thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework to uncover recurring linguistic and intercultural themes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several interconnected barriers that hinder non-native entrepreneurs in global business contexts.

Table 1. Self-Reported Language Proficiency Challenges

Challenge Type	Percentage Affected	Average Difficulty (1-5 scale)
Vocabulary	72%	4.2
Business Writing	65%	3.9
Speaking	58%	3.7

Table 1 indicated that the survey data showed 72% of respondents struggled with vocabulary limitations, 65% reported difficulties in professional writing such as emails and proposals, and 58% experienced speaking anxiety during presentations. These linguistic challenges undermine entrepreneurs' confidence and reduce their ability to communicate effectively, echoing the observations of Charles (2019) regarding the centrality of vocabulary and writing in professional competence.

Qualitative interviews provided further insight into contextual communication issues. Approximately 43% of interviewees described facing cultural misunderstandings during negotiations, confirming Hofstede's (2010) argument that cultural dimensions shape communication expectations. In addition, accent bias, pronunciation problems, and speaking anxiety were reported as factors that diminished entrepreneurs' presence and confidence in critical business interactions (MacIntyre et al., 1998). These findings suggest that language difficulties are not limited to grammar or vocabulary but are also tied to intercultural communication styles and social perceptions.

The findings of the study highlight three critical areas where non-native entrepreneurs face the most significant friction. First, a limited vocabulary frequently restricts their ability to articulate complex, high-level business concepts spontaneously. Second, they struggle with professional writing, particularly when drafting high-stakes documents like corporate emails and partnership proposals where tone and precision are paramount. Lastly, the research notes that cross-cultural negotiations are highly susceptible to misunderstandings, showing that communication issues stem not just from language proficiency, but from a failure to decode the subtle cultural nuances of international partners.

The study concludes that English proficiency challenges are entirely surmountable through proactive adaptation and targeted learning strategies.

To mitigate these communication gaps, the study highlights several highly effective tactics implemented by successful business owners, including formal language training, the strategic adoption of digital tools like Grammarly and translation apps, and the hiring of bilingual staff to bridge operational gaps. Based on these insights, the paper offers practical recommendations for the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. It advocates for the mandatory integration of Business English into existing entrepreneurship training programs and urges founders to foster a mindset of continuous language improvement, concluding that these adaptive measures are vital for boosting global competitiveness among non-native entrepreneurs.

A particularly important new insight from this research is the recognition of the disproportionate cognitive load borne by non-native speakers. Participants reported that they expend 30–40% more mental effort in English-dominant negotiations compared to their native-speaking counterparts. This challenges assumptions in the literature that the use of English as a lingua franca ensures equal participation for all speakers (House, 2003).

Instead, the evidence highlights persistent power imbalances that shape entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes. Together, these results emphasize the need for more nuanced approaches to supporting non-native entrepreneurs, including targeted language training, intercultural awareness, and strategies to manage the psychological and cognitive dimensions of global communication. For Entrepreneurs: Focus on industry-specific vocabulary, use writing templates, and apply fluency-building strategies. For Educators: Integrate case-based learning with authentic business documents, and simulate intercultural negotiations. For Policymakers: Support standardized business English certifications and provide funding for language support networks.

4.CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that English proficiency remains one of the most significant barriers for non-native entrepreneurs in global business. Nevertheless, the findings also show that such challenges can be reduced through structured language training, the effective use of technology, and the development of adaptive strategies. The research provides evidence that vocabulary development, professional writing skills, and intercultural awareness are critical for strengthening entrepreneurial performance. Beyond confirming earlier insights, the study adds novelty by highlighting the cognitive effort required of non-native speakers in English-dominant contexts, underscoring persistent inequities in global communication. The implications suggest that entrepreneurship education should integrate business-specific English modules and foster continuous improvement mindsets, while policymakers and educators must support initiatives that provide accessible resources and intercultural training. Ultimately, equipping entrepreneurs with both linguistic competence and cultural intelligence is essential for ensuring not only their competitiveness but also more inclusive participation in the international marketplace.

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