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# Addressing Language Barriers

**Objective**

The purpose of this activity is to help participants better understand the difficulties of learning a second language and to provide them with tips for improving communication with people speaking limited English.

**Time**

45-60 minutes

**Materials**

- Sample Lecture, "Learning a Second Language"
- Overhead projector
- Overhead transparencies (OHTs) 24.1-24.3
- A copy for each participant of OHT 24.3 distributed as a handout

**Procedure**

1. Use the accompanying lecture, or develop your own, to explain some of the problems people encounter when attempting to learn English.

2. Display OHT 24.1 to illustrate the time sensitivity to the skill acquisition.

3. Display OHT 24.2 to illustrate the large number of factors that affect how non-native speakers learn English.

4. Ask participants to form small groups to discuss how language barriers impact the organization and develop a list of possible ways of reducing these barriers.

5. Ask each small group to report their list of barriers and suggestions to the larger group. Display OHT 24.1.

**Conclusion**

Participants discuss the impact on their organizations of following the tips outlined in their handout.

# Learning a Second Language

The acquisition of a first language is a natural part of the growth process during which the learner has about two years to listen without the pressure of having to reproduce the language orally, then about three more years to listen and speak without being pressured to read and write.  Learning a second language, however, is more often accompanied by the urgency of acquiring all four skills at once.

Language skills are divided into four categories: listening, speaking, reading and writing.  Each skill is made up of four elements: sounds, words, meaning, and grammar.  These components are structured differently from one language to another.  The Germanic and Romance language have many more similarities to English than do the Chinese and Malay Polynesian languages, for example.  Similarities between languages usually assist in the learning process, while the differences often confuse the learner and delay or discourage the acquisition of a second language.

False cognates—words that appear similar in written form but bear different meanings—have created countless numbers of international **faux pas**.  For example, **embarazar** may look like "to be embarrassed" in English but means "to become pregnant" in Spanish.  And if the Chevy manufacturers had known that **Nova** is translated as "does not run," they would have understood why that automobile did not sell too well in Latin-American countries.

In many Southeast Asian languages, verbs have only one conjugational form, regardless of tense, agreement with the subject, or use of the infinitive; also, there may be no plural forms, articles, or prepositions.  Therefore, it is common to hear Asian speakers say, "I go work yesterday," or, "I have two brother and sister."

The order of words in a sentence may differ greatly as well.  **The little white house**, when translated into Spanish, becomes "the house white little." The sentence **I would like about a problem speak to you** is easily recognized as having a German word order.  The question **Where is your house?**  is rearranged in Thai as "House your where is?"

In addition, certain English sounds create a great barrier to communication because no equivalent sounds exist in the speaker's native tongue.  There is a common joke told by a colleague about a person who said, "I went to Kinney Juice and couldn't juice between the juice." The speaker obviously had difficulty producing the sound of **sh** in **shoes** and also confused it with the **ch** in **choose**.  Many Asians cannot distinguish between **r's** and **l's** in words such as **pirate** and **pilot**.  The sounds **ch** does not exist in many Asian languages, and the sounds of **p, t,** and **k** at the ends of words are generally not pronounced.

These language differences are only a few examples of the complications that interfere with the process of learning English as a second language. Experts consider English one of the most difficult languages to master because of its nonphonetic nature and because there are so many exceptions to the rules.

The chart on English-language acquisition (OHT 25.1) illustrates the rate of progress in the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) of someone learning English in a natural setting. In other words, the English learner has not studied English extensively in his/her home country but has picked it up informally in the United States while attending a few English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. As the chart shows, the rate of progress varies for each language skill. It is important to note that just because an individual cannot speak English, we must not assume that he/she does not understand it.

For someone who had taken intensive courses in English in his/her own country prior to arriving in the United States, the chart would show a reversed picture. In other words, that person would be able to read and write better than speak. In that case, a supervisor might rely on written instructions to get the meaning across.

There are many factors that affect the acquisition of a second language (OHT 25.2). The learner's success depends on and is influenced by age, cultural background, level of education, first-language characteristics, socioeconomic level, and other variables. Individuals who are well educated and fluent in their own language can be expected to have fewer difficulties in learning a second language. On the other hand, uneducated or poorly educated persons with few skills in the first language will naturally encounter many problems.

Generally speaking, older persons have a greater problem with an accent. It seems that after reaching a certain age, they are unable physically to pronounce certain sounds that do not exist in their native language.

Home environment also plays a role in language progress. In a self-contained ethnic community where survival needs can be met without using English, the urgency for acquiring it diminishes.

Finally, the mere fact of speaking a language that is not one's own and that is not familiar, increases one's anxiety and lowers the comfort level to a point where in some cases it is much simpler not even to try.

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS ACQUISITION

(Generalized)
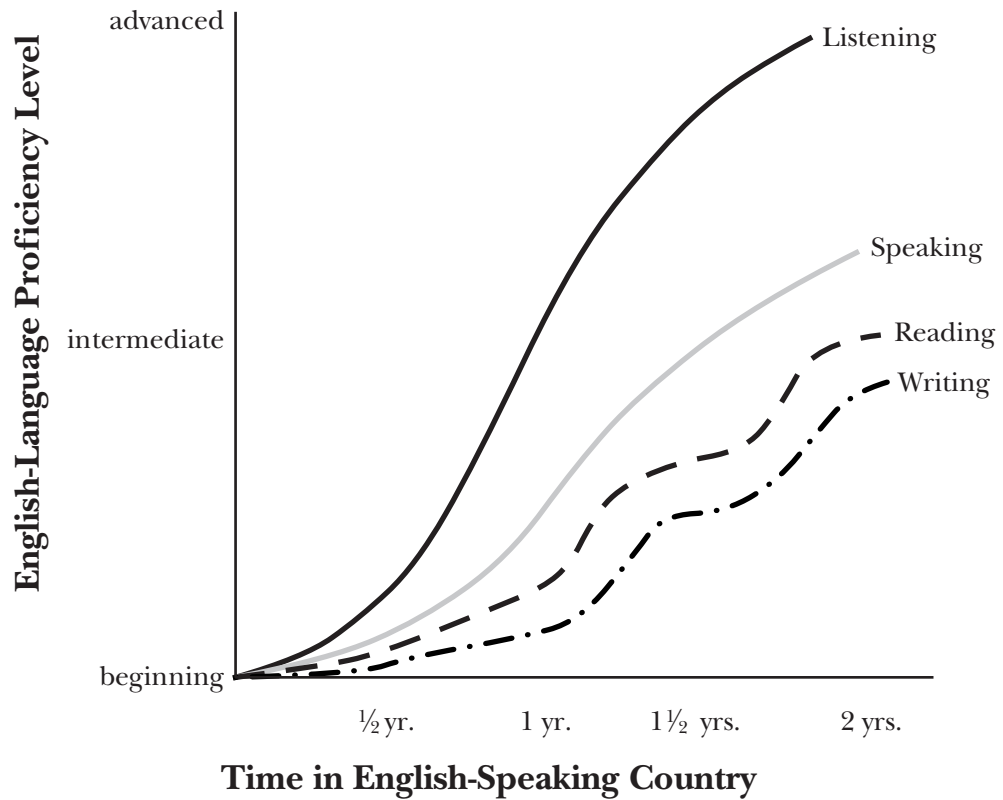


Time in English-Speaking Country

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# Factors Affecting Second-Language Acquisition

1. Language attitudes

2. Self-concept

3. First-language similarities

4. Need for second language

5. First-language competence

6. Motivation

7. Personality

8. Social contact with others

9. Capacity for analogy, intellectualization

10. Cultural knowledge

11. Age

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# Tips for Communicating Effectively with Employees Speaking Limited English

1. Decide on the *main* point to communicate.

2. Determine the proper sequence of an explanation.

3. Demonstrate through visuals, charts, or perhaps brief, written explanations.

4. Simplify the explanation:  use "simple" words, but *not* "broken English."

5. Be aware of information overload.

6. Pay attention to employees' nonverbal cues signaling a lack of understanding.

7. Use consistent terminology.

8. Speak clearly.

9. *Emphasize* the key words.

10. Avoid slang.

11. Limit the use of "yes/no" questions or "Do you undertand…?"

12. Be patient.

13. Don't get frustrated; stay cool.

14. Other:  _____
    _____
    _____

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