



How to build an effective language training component into your assignment policy

The complexity, and time it takes to learn languages, often feels overstated – as does its importance for a successful assignment. At a time when language apps offer linguistic mastery in just a few hours, it can seem old fashioned that other providers recommend more time.

So why should a company invest in a robust relocation policy for language training? What returns could that policy bring to the organization and its workforce? What does a “good” language policy look like? And why does learning a language take so long?

How the world works better

Mechanics of language learning

At the very heart of every language is the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation that we think of when we consider language study. However, even when a student only wishes to be fairly comfortable speaking and not writing or reading, there are complex subskills that need to be mastered. This will ensure comprehension and ease of speaking.

Intricacies of speaking

For example, in a spoken, stress-timed language such as English or German, a student must consider either syllable or sentence stress (the expected rhythm of what they are saying) to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. “History” rather than “HiSTory,” and the different meaning given to “I will walk to work TOMORROW” vs. “I will WALK to work tomorrow.” In Mandarin, the correct tone conveys the meaning. When reading pinyin, and not characters, the word “ma” can mean horse, mother, hemp or scold – the tone being the only differentiator.

People talk back

Depending on the language of study, a beginner may learn language in prepared “chunks” and rely on these to communicate. However, they will also need to learn expected responses from the person they are speaking to.

Therefore, a beginner who can confidently ask to buy a bottle of water will also need to understand basic numbers, currencies, typical phrases of assent or dissent, and even potential follow up questions, such as “still or sparkling?”.

All of this is in addition to knowing the vocabulary and question structure of their request, and having re-phrasing or repair skills should they make an error or are misunderstood.

Context is key

Unfortunately for students, there is also the need to consider contextual appropriacy. Beginner French vocabulary teaches that “chaud” means hot. However, the English speaker that wants to discuss the weather will need to know that the direct translation of “I am hot” – “je suis chaude” – will elicit a very different response than using the correct (and far more PG rated) “j’ai chaud.”

For those relocating, to be able to use the language of the host location takes time, focus and patience. Even if the curriculum focus is on communicative outcomes rather than reading and/or learning the writing system.

Returns for your organization and workforce

Investing in an employee to learn the language of the host country gives a number of advantages – both directly and indirectly.

Meeting business objectives

Language training can have a direct impact on not just assignment but also corporate business outcomes. The more a workforce can integrate, complement each other or share insights, the more likely corporate aims can be met, appropriate products or services developed, and clients engaged.

Furthermore, evidence points to the cognitive benefits of learning a language in developing problem solving skills, memory, and critical thinking – all highly valued in the business world.



Building relationships and opportunities

Being able to understand and join in jokes, references or conversational asides is a powerful tool when it comes to building relationships with local co-workers and clients alike. When a company's official language is not that of the host country, language lessons can be considered unnecessary. This can leave relocating employees at a disadvantage.

By being able to speak the local language, an employee is more quickly able to understand the flow of their new work environment. It ensures people are interpreting what they see rather than bringing preconceptions, and helps employees avoid cultural mistakes early in the assignment. It allows informal conversations before a meeting starts, offering to make a round of tea in the U.K. or the exchange of correct titles and greetings to show respect.

In many countries, relationships of mutual respect and trust are vital before business objectives can be considered. Even in very transactional business environments, it is easier to achieve your goals when there is a shared understanding.

Breaking down cultural barriers

By learning what phrases and sayings mean, not only are employees more able to navigate daily life, but learners gain insight into the host country culture. This will help to establish a greater understanding of the behaviors that they will see and experience.

Linguistic knowledge allows understanding of how "In sha'Allah" (God willing) in Egypt might lead to meetings starting one hour later than planned. Or why someone in Malaysia might ask you "Dah makan?" (Have you eaten?) when they greet you.

Language allows us another viewpoint of that culture and increases our empathy for different cultural norms and respect for local traditions.

Better assignment experience

Being able to communicate confidently in the host country language increases the likelihood that an employee, and their family, will have a smoother transition. This will create a quicker adjustment and a greater sense of positivity towards the host country. They are much more likely to want to stay and that increases the success of an assignment.

Building diversity

Diversity in business is increasingly being recognized as encouraging of innovation and creativity. As well as diversity in age, culture, gender and physical ability, linguistic diversity is a huge asset within a workforce. Learning another language creates new pathways in the brain, new ways of thinking and ideas of expression within the learner.

Greater innovative thinking in a company's employees can lead to increased opportunities for diverse avenues of client engagement and appeal – both locally and globally.

The impact of language policy on assignment success

Why is it important?

A set and measured policy points to a company's implicit (or even explicit) expectation that language and assignment adjustment go hand in hand with assignment and business success. During the tenure of the assignment and beyond.

Clear, tangible objectives

A policy should also have a clear objective as to why language training is in scope to maximize ROI. What is the aim of providing this benefit?

If the corporate aim is for a “survival” level of language for an employee and family to get started on assignment, 50 hours of individual lessons is a starting point.

Offering 100 hours allows for more tangible expectations and goals, such as reaching a recognizable language level. This can in turn be tied to personal development goals and KPIs. All of which create visible outcomes of your company's spend.



Tied to corporate goals

Setting a clear objective of language learning can even tie into a corporate focus. For companies looking to access new markets, offshore support functions or outsource to a global supply chain, having a linguistically skilled and diverse workforce will pay dividends.

Hours not budget

A good language policy offers consistency by allocating hours of study and not a budget. This gives employees the same potential to learn and develop, and means that those moving to high-cost locations are not penalized on how many lessons they can utilize. An hourly policy sets a benchmark and can also set expectations on the learning level to achieve.

Enough to measure and motivate

A language allowance needs to be enough to allow learners time to achieve measurable and noticeable learning developments – to feel the satisfaction in their own progress.

Policies with low hourly allowances can often be demotivating, with students concerned about what they can really achieve in a short space of time – and whether it is even worth starting at all.

Accompanied by a teacher

To be able to learn enough to communicate with a variety of people and everyday situations, a student needs to invest a lot of time and a great deal of energy.

Most people, particularly those with busy lives, new jobs and new cultures and contexts to manage, struggle with the intrinsic motivation required to methodically work through self-access materials.

Very few achieve real progress and most stop shortly after starting. A tailored curriculum (that acknowledges personal goals, learning preferences and motivational triggers) and regular lessons with an experienced teacher ensures a higher level of focus, commitment and interest. As a result, more language is learned.

Differentiated

Within a policy, there should be an understanding of the learning outcomes for each participant, depending on business requirements.

A participant who needs to make sales presentations will need more time than someone who is networking and building social connections.

Flexible

A language policy should give choice to its participants. Allowing flexibility to, for example, choose between a virtual instructor led or entirely human solution, ensures lowering of learning barriers before lessons even start. This is why a customized and tailored program is the most effective in achieving learning outcomes.

Learning a foreign language can be tough. It's often compared to running a marathon rather than a sprint, in terms of the endurance and mental discipline involved. But in my experience there are enormous benefits both for individuals and businesses at large with putting in the time and effort. Expat executives will find that they are more accepted by their teams, and that their ideas have greater buy-in from colleagues, if they make some effort to speak the local language. While their spouses and children are more able to integrate, access the local job market and social circles – as a result they will be happier and more independent. This is good not only for their well-being but it also allows employees to focus more fully on their work and their businesses to prosper. In the end everyone benefits!

Inigo Lopez, CEO,
BiCortex Languages
(preferred Crown provider)



At Learnship, we believe that motivation in language learning stems from a clear sense of purpose and of the utility of investing the time in this way. We know that business learners face a complex series of communicative competence challenges as they go about their international work. Our carefully-structured trainer led programs are built to develop spontaneity and confidence by providing the critical scaffolding that learners need to perform well on complex communicative tasks. We can best move the needle at the point of work if learners are honest with themselves about their strengths and weaknesses, the time they are able to invest and are able to integrate their trainer's feedback in an improvement cycle.

Robert Szabó, Vice President,
Learning Sciences at Learnship Networks
(preferred Crown provider)

This article was authored by Heather Tracey, Regional Manager (EMEA), Global Skills, to share insight on what makes a good language component in international assignment policy, and how best to utilize the skills. If you have any questions about this article, please contact:



Heather Tracey

Regional Manager (EMEA),
Global Skills
htracey@crownew.com



Jo Danehl

Global Director,
Global Skills
jdanehl@crownew.com

Alternatively, [contact us here](#) for more information on other services.

Discover Crown

A complete range of services to help you and your business
crownew.com