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The Language Problem

A new report card gives Brazil below-average grades for business English

BY DENNIS BARKER



Brazil has received a below-average score in a new report card that grades English-language competency around the world. According to the Business English Index, Brazil earns a 3.84 for its command of the language, whereas the average score across the 152 countries studied is 4.46 (with 10 being “sounds like a native English speaker”).



Note that the BEI measures language skills within the context of work — “real-life business situations” such as talking on the phone, reading e-mail, listening to presentations, participating in discussions, and dealing

with complexity and rapid change.

“The bad news is the index is quite low in Brazil,” says José Ricardo Noronha, sales director and Brazil team leader for **GlobalEnglish Corp.**, which compiled the BEI and has been tracking worldwide English skills since 2005. “Much of Brazil tends to be closed in terms of U.S. culture, which makes it more difficult to learn the language. The challenge for Brazilian companies that want to compete and thrive on a global basis is to enhance their English capabilities.”

(That’s part of GlobalEnglish’s business: helping companies attain “enterprise fluency.” “Basically what we offer is a solution in fifteen languages... providing instant and on-the-job support for English,” Ricardo says. “If someone is about to write an e-mail to a client, we have tools available to help improve that communication. We also have course work for people to learn at home or the office. We are software-as-a-service in some ways.”)

Based on GlobalEnglish’s competency scale, a person with a 3.84 level of business English would be able to “understand correspondence on familiar topics,” and possibly “communicate and understand basic business information in discussions and on the phone.” Understanding presentations, being able to convey problems and solutions, taking an active role in business discussions, those would all require a skill level of 6 to 7.

Only “a handful” of companies scored above 7, GlobalEnglish says. The report mentions one global professional services company “whose very success is based on building relationships and value for its clients. In its business, effective communication across borders, cultures, and industries is a prerequisite for profitability and growth.” That company scored a BEI of 6.99. *Building relationships and value for its clients.... Effective communication across borders...* Those objectives probably sound familiar, right?

How does the rest of Latin America compare to the global average of 4.46? Peru (4.41) is in the ballpark, and Argentina (4.81) slightly better, and Honduras takes the cake (5.46!). Chile scored the lowest in the region, which reaffirms something that **we’ve heard before**.

The rest of the world isn’t exactly mastering the language either, GlobalEnglish says. Most countries scored below 5.0.

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Brazil vs Latin America	
Brazil	3.84
Argentina	4.81
Chile	3.53
Colombia	4.33
Costa Rica	4.03
Ecuador	4.03
Honduras	4.56
Mexico	4.07
Peru	4.41
World	4.47

Source: GlobalEnglish Business English Index

“This translates into a workforce that can understand basic information on the telephone or in person, but cannot understand most business presentations, take a leadership role in business discussions, or perform relatively complex tasks.”

GlobalEnglish also processes its data across different industries, and the good news for people in IT outsourcing is that the technology sector does pretty well, scoring an average 5.20 — slightly below professional services and slightly above pharma/healthcare.

Skills Sharper at the Top of the Chain

So, what does this mean for IT outsourcing customers? Will your contacts have a hard time understanding nuances and language complexities? Probably depends on whom you’re talking to. As the Latin America manager of an Indian IT services company who spends about half his time in Brazil said: “When you are talking to the chief executive or the CIO, he may speak English very well, but at the working level, the staff doing the actual work, most people do not speak English effectively for business communication of any consequence.”

That has definitely been my own experience talking with Brazilian executives and managers who are “the face” of their company. Also, team leaders of software crews seem to have a good grasp of conversational English. (This is all very good because my Portuguese is abysmal, as several Brazilians can attest.)

When I mentioned that nearly every Brazilian I’ve ever spoken with had solid command of English, an acquaintance who works for a Brazilian organization told me that I’ve been speaking with “the exceptions.” English is indeed “a problem in Brazil,” she said.

This problem, this gap in business English skills, could get bigger as Brazil takes on more IT work and exports more IT services. According to projections from **Brasscom** (the Brazilian Association of Information Technology and Communication Companies), the country will need 750,000 new IT professionals between now and 2020. Three-hundred thousand of them will be required to serve the technology export market — and those 300K will have to know English.

GlobalEnglish works with “a bunch of Brazilian IT and BPO companies,” Ricardo says. He cites **CPM Braxis Capgemini** as one key example. Indian companies like **TCS** that are expanding operations in Brazil also “realize that business English capacity is quite low.... and a key item on their agenda is to make sure they have enough people with those language skills.”

“IT companies need to invest in their employees to get them ready for global challenges,” Ricardo says. The Brazil government could help by funding or improving English training programs, he says, but so far there has not been much support in that area. “For the time being, the lack of business English fluency is a problem for Brazilian companies that want to grow internationally or want to serve multinational clients. They face the issue of not having the required number of employees who are able to speak business English.”

“English is still the language of business all over the world,” Ricardo adds, “and there is a connection between English and financial success.”

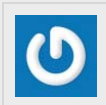
By the way, Intel came up with **one solution** for the language gap in Brazil. The chipmaker says it is going to hire Brazilian programmers to write local-language software.

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For general inquiries:

- Contact chief editor Dennis Barker:
dennis@nextcoastmedia.com | barker_skype
- Contact Brazil editor Filipe Pacheco:
filipe@nextcoastmedia.com