English as a Foreign Language Teaching and Productivity in Global Hypercompetition

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ABSTRACT

The global marketplace is characterized by various changes occurring in economic, social, natural, and technological areas. As such, experts in numerous fields are still working to revise various systems and infrastructures to operate in a robust manner within the new realities of today. This article focuses on part of that massive effort by examining the methods used in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in non-English speaking countries and its potential impact on long-term economic sustainability and productivity since English remains the global business language. The article commences with an introduction to the realities of contemporary globalism that underscore the very purpose for this work, and the subsequent sections present and then synthesize all material to create a paradigm shift in thinking required for teaching EFL in non-English speaking nations.

KEYWORDS

EFL, Human Resource Management, Hypercompetition, Global Skills Gap, Globalization, Productivity

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning in the non-English speaking world can potentially affect long-term national economic sustainability since English remains the primary language of business and scientific/technological development around the world (Camerota, 2014; Şen, 2012). We shall investigate this situation within the context of a growing global skills gap that affects productivity in an era of global hypercompetition (Chand & Tung, 2014; Glen, Suciu, & Baughn, 2014; Wang, 2014; McKinsey Global Institute, 2012; ASTD, 2009).

In an era of the “Knowledge Worker” and the “Global Labor Pool” (Drucker, 2002), a common language is necessary to communicate effectively across cultures abroad and even within national borders. Additionally, the changing nature of many job positions worldwide is requiring qualities beyond traditional skillsets such as computer literacy, business presentations, or quantitative analysis to also include cultural adaptability, initiative and leadership, objectivity and integrity, critical thinking and judgment, teamwork, and information integration (US State Department, 2015). These skillsets are especially important with regards to innovation which drives economic growth (Carvalho, 2015; Godart et al., 2015). Educational systems must reflect these realities with a paradigm shift in thinking to create new programs or upgrade current ones, especially with regards to EFL training, which develop these qualities and skillsets so workers can compete effectively with the global labor force. This evidently holds true for all nations (The World Bank, 2012).
It is worthy to note here that the first half of the 21st century will be the first time in 200 years when emerging-market nations such as Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, and Turkey (also known as the CIVETS economic bloc) will contribute more to global growth than the developed countries (McKinsey Quarterly, 2010). John Bowler, the Director of the Country Risk Service at the Economist Intelligence Unit in London, England, believes the population and/or wealth of natural resources of some of these countries could make them economic powerhouses after 2020.

The author has been teaching EFL courses from the Beginner to Professional levels at universities and private schools for a total of 12 years since 1982 in China, Costa Rica, Japan, Russia, Turkey, and the USA. Therefore, he has witnessed the massive changes and practices in the EFL industry over a period of three decades. Additionally, he has been a practicing businessperson in 40 countries primarily within the information technology field, and began teaching university-level and MBA business courses in 2003 that often included students from non-English speaking nations. This background has provided him with the experience to discuss the issues below from a unique perspective not common among EFL instructors.

**GENERAL BACKGROUND**

Cultural origins can permit the prediction of individual behavior in an organizational environment under various situations (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2010; Hofstede, 2001; Hall, 1976). Therefore, as organizations are confronted with the need to engage with stakeholders from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, the need to understand the ways in which cultural imperatives play into individual and collective productivity becomes increasingly paramount. This need ultimately provides the ability for organizations to sustain a competitive advantage and to remain profitable over time (Campbell et al., 2012; Barney, 1991).

Achieving these goals demands top management to appreciate and understand the four global forces affecting business today (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015): urbanization, accelerating technological change, an aging world, and greater global connections. The IBM Corporation (2008) in the USA suggests it is also important to consider other effects of accelerating globalization such as rising environmental concerns, threats to social stability and order, the expanding impact of technology, and the imperative to increase productivity especially in the advanced economies. Anderson & Wong (2013) state that competitive advantage in the digital economy of the 21st century focuses on intangible factors including firm strategy and positioning, radical innovation and first mover advantages, intangible resources and competencies, organizational ambidexterity, network effects and externalities, transaction cost efficiency, and relational optimality.

All of these factors will make destabilizing cycles of volatility more likely than ever before (McKinsey Quarterly, 2010). Associated effects include global inflation, drastically altered business and product life cycles, and the need for corporations to increase liquidity buffers for unexpected changes in global markets (PryMarke LLC, 2015). The key point here is that such volatility will require far more flexibility and creativity in business and education than was common in the past. However, many educational institutions have not yet advanced creative (and critical) thinking capabilities sufficiently for business use after graduation (Sen, 2011; Kresin, 2012; Livingston, 2010).

It is necessary to highlight here that a nation’s economic health is based largely on the composition of its current and future workforce, which in turn impacts the persistent major determinant of long-term national growth (especially today): **productivity** (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015; Drucker, 2002). There is ample theoretical and empirical research on productivity across nations, and one of the major components regarding this matter is a common language to connect the different players
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