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Business English Speakers Can Still Be Divided by a Common Language

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This is the VOA Special English Economics Report.

Business is the most popular subject for international students in the United States. At last count, twenty-one percent of foreign students at American colleges and universities were studying business and management.

The Institute of International Education in New York says engineering is the second most popular field, in case you were wondering.



Thomas Cossé is a professor of marketing and business at the University of Richmond in Virginia. He says international students who want to study business need to have good English skills -- and not just to study at his school.

English is a common language for business, but communication is not just about language

THOMAS COSSÉ: "At least among business schools, more and more worldwide are requiring that their students take English, and they are teaching more in English."

But the world has more non-native speakers of English than native speakers. As a result, Americans working with foreign companies may need to learn some new English skills themselves.

At the University of Richmond, teams of graduate students work with companies seeking to enter the American market. The students learn about writing market entry studies. The reports are written in English. But Professor Cossé tells his students to consider who will read them.

THOMAS COSSÉ: "My students have to write the report in such a way that it can be understood by someone who is an English speaker but not a native English speaker."

For example, he tells his students to avoid jargon and other specialized terms that people might not know in their own language. This can be good advice even when writing for other native speakers.

But effective communication involves more than just words. Kay Westerfield is director of the international business communication program at the University of Oregon.

KAY WESTERFIELD: "If you just have the language awareness or the skills without culture, you can easily be a fluent fool."

Cultural intelligence means the need to consider local behaviors in everything from simple handshakes to speaking to large groups.

Still, Kay Westerfield says the ability of local workers to speak English is becoming more important to companies looking to move operations to other countries. Or, as she puts it, to "off-source."

KAY WESTERFIELD: "While cost remains a major factor in decisions about where to off-source, the quality of the labor pool is gaining importance, and this includes English language skills."

Also, she says English skills often provide a competitive edge for business students when they seek jobs.

KAY WESTERFIELD: "As one business student in West Africa put it, 'English is a lifeline.'"

And that's the VOA Special English Economics Report, written by Mario Ritter. You can read and listen to our programs and find activities for English learners at voaspecialenglish.com. We're also on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube at VOA Learning English. I'm June Simms.