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Speaking the lingo

When it comes to business people speaking a second language, New Zealand lags behind other countries. But as Lyndsey Swan discovers, even a little learning goes a long way in sending the right messages.

PARLEZ VOUS FRANCAIS? SPRECHEN SIE Deutsch? Ni hui shuo zhongwen ma? Chances are if you're a Kiwi you don't—or at least not much. And certainly not enough to negotiate that all-important deal the company is depending on.

New Zealand is at the bottom of all surveyed nations when it comes to businesses with the ability to negotiate in more than one language, according to chartered accountants and business advisers Grant Thornton. Their *International Business Owners Survey* for 2004, which surveyed medium-sized businesses in 26 countries, found just 24 percent of businesses could negotiate in a second language, compared to a global average of nearly 60 percent.

So why do Kiwis fare so badly? Kenneth Leong, the director of Auckland's European Language Academy, says New Zealand is one of the most monolingual countries in the world. "You come across people who say, 'Oh yes, I can speak a little bit of French, or a bit of German or Chinese,' but that little bit is just 'Bonjour,'" he says. "That's about it and that's quite unfortunate really."

Trading partners

Leong puts this down, in part, to our geographical isolation. In the past, he says, our main trading partners were Australia, the UK and the US. "They all speak English, so a lot of New Zealanders have grown up with the view that everyone speaks English. That's starting to change with the emergence of China and South America as trading partners. Going forward, they will be the growth countries for New Zealand trade, and more and more people will pick up these languages."

But things do appear to be changing. At

Leong's language academy, which runs classes in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese (and other European languages on request), there's been a significant growth in numbers learning a second language—especially Spanish which is now their top rating language.

"It's an interesting trend," he says. "French and German are stagnating a little and Spanish is becoming more popular. Overall, we're seeing a high level of interest which seems partly due to the realisation that there is a need for us to learn some of these other languages."

Certainly this trend appears to be backed up by a recent US study. Figures from a survey of nearly 1500 executives, conducted by TheLadders.com (a popular US jobs web site for six-figure and executive jobs), found 61 percent felt Spanish was the most useful foreign language for today's business people. Their second choice was Chinese, with 16 percent of the responses, followed by French (eight percent), German (seven percent) and Japanese (six percent).

In today's global economy, it's not unusual for Kiwi business people to deal with suppliers or customers in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and South America. And although English is accepted as the international language of business—with half the world's population expected to be speaking or learning it by 2015—New Zealand's moves into new markets mean learning languages like Spanish, Mandarin Chinese or Arabic is becoming increasingly important for business people on the move.

Leong believes we can be quite naïve in thinking that everyone speaks English. "We want to export to China or to South America. We've got all these strategies that we've

developed as a country, and companies have all these huge fancy business plans, yet they forget that these people come from radically different cultures," he says.

"Why would they want to do business with you when you haven't even made any effort to learn their language for starters? Even if you've got a great product, we all know that it comes down to relationships—and how are you going to develop a relationship with someone you can't even speak with? We've got all these dreams of capturing 10 percent of the Chinese market and yet we can't speak Chinese and we don't understand how they think."

Leong is positively evangelical in his desire to encourage New Zealanders to attempt to learn a second language. But he's not suggesting we all need to become fluent in German, Spanish or Mandarin. It seems many of the business people who come along to the Academy's classes report great benefits from being able to say even a few things.

"You don't necessarily need to be able to converse fluently," he says. "If you learn the basics then at least you can show you're making an effort to build rapport. For the people we're dealing with, English is a second language, yet they've made an effort to learn it. Conversely, if we are to show them a level of respect, we should make an effort to learn at least a little in their language. They really do appreciate it."

Tailored to fit

Many language schools work closely with businesses these days and will tailor lessons to suit individual and corporate needs. As language and culture specialists, the European Language Academy not only runs

language classes and cultural preparation courses, it also runs programmes for managers working with migrants to New Zealand, helping them understand how people are different and how to approach the culture gap.

Just recently, the Academy has been running on-site Spanish classes for a non-profit organisation whose staff deal extensively with colleagues in its offices throughout Latin America. And before they headed to Spain for the current racing season, America's Cup contenders BMW Oracle Racing attended Spanish classes to prepare themselves for life in Valencia.

Another who recently undertook an intensive Spanish programme, with both language classes and cultural preparation,

is Sergio Amodeo, the newly appointed finance director for Groupe Danone in Spain. Italian-born Amodeo was previously CFO at Griffins—a Groupe Danone company—in New Zealand. In his new role he's working entirely in Spanish, putting into practice what he and his wife learned in New Zealand.

"Without the Spanish lessons I wouldn't have been able to make it," he says. "I can definitely say, we learned Spanish very quickly and everybody here says we speak correctly—not only the people reporting to me."

Leong believes that from a corporate perspective, putting people through language training is about more than simply learning a second language. "It's a profes-

sional development exercise in terms of getting people to learn something that's radically different," he says. "You get people thinking outside the box. Learning a language opens new pathways within the brain that you've not looked at or used before and that allows you to think in a more creative manner. It opens up angles to look at things from a different perspective."

He suggests putting people through a language programme is also a great retention tool. "Allowing people to engage with other cultures, to think outside the square, to interact with people who are not necessarily born and bred in New Zealand opens their eyes to a whole new way of seeing things, and that will bring a lot of benefits on board," he says. **et**



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