

ACCULTURATION IN THE UNITED STATES

If you have visited another Country or have lived in another Country as an expat, you probably can empathize with how difficult it is to learn language and customs. Belonging or fitting in is a conscious daily exercise.

The challenges become more predominant for Foreign Born professionals who work and interact daily with their American counterparts.

The challenges range from writing proper American English grammar that shows up in emails or professional documents, to verbal communication that shows up in business presentations, problem-solving or sharing of expertise.

According to Pew Research Center tabulations of 1980-2000 decennial censuses and 2010, 2013–2015 American Community Surveys (IPUMS), the share of immigrants who are proficient in English has declined since 1980, though it has increased slightly in recent years. This decline has been driven entirely by those who speak only English at home, which fell from 30% of immigrants ages 5 and older in 1980 to 16% in 2015. This might be due to a dramatic shift in the region of origin among the immigrant population residing in the U.S. In 1960, 84% of immigrants living in the U.S. were born in Europe or Canada. By 2015, European and Canadian immigrants made up only a small share of the foreign-born population (13.5%), while Mexicans accounted for 26.8%, Asians 26.9%, other Latin Americans 24.2%, and the rest 8.6% of immigrants were born in other regions.

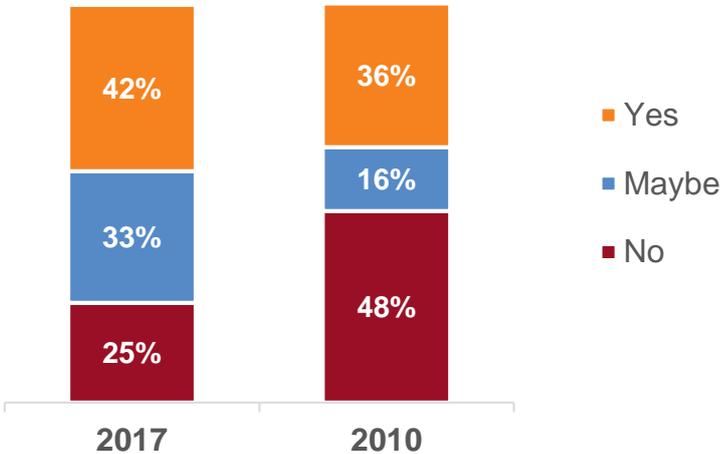
Over spring/summer of 2017, Success through Learning in association with Marketing Researcher Bharati Khanduja surveyed 64 professionals currently living and working in the United States who were born and raised in another country and culture. The goal was to explore and understand what communications and American business culture related areas they find most challenging.

A similar study was conducted in 2010, among foreign-born professionals. By comparing the results of the 2010 survey with our current survey, we are able to get some indication of changes in beliefs and level of difficulty faced by foreign-born professionals since then.

ADAPTING TO THE US CULTURE

An overwhelming 42% of the foreign-born professionals we surveyed believe that U.S. business culture or language related areas have impacted promotional success at their job in the United States. Interestingly, not much has changed over the years. In the 2010 survey, 36% of foreign-born professionals had stated that US business culture and language-related areas had impacted their success at their job, while 48% had stated a firm no. In this year’s survey, only 25% have said a firm no and a larger percentage (33%) are unsure.

Q: Do you feel the U.S. business culture or language-related areas has impacted your success at your job in the United States? (%)



Hence, it is not surprising that over half (53%) of them found it extremely or somewhat difficult to adapt to the US business culture.

Q: How difficult was it for you, to adapt to US business culture? (%)



So, what is it that these foreign-born professionals find most challenging?

OBSTACLE 1: ENGLISH LANGUAGE RELATED CHALLENGES

For most foreign-born professionals, English is not a new language. Most would have studied English during school or university and used it in their work before coming to the United States. The challenge does not lie in reading or writing English, but rather in speaking and understanding spoken English or to be more accurate American English.

Foreign-born professionals also struggle with speaking English in a way that they are understood — using the right tone, speed, and accent.

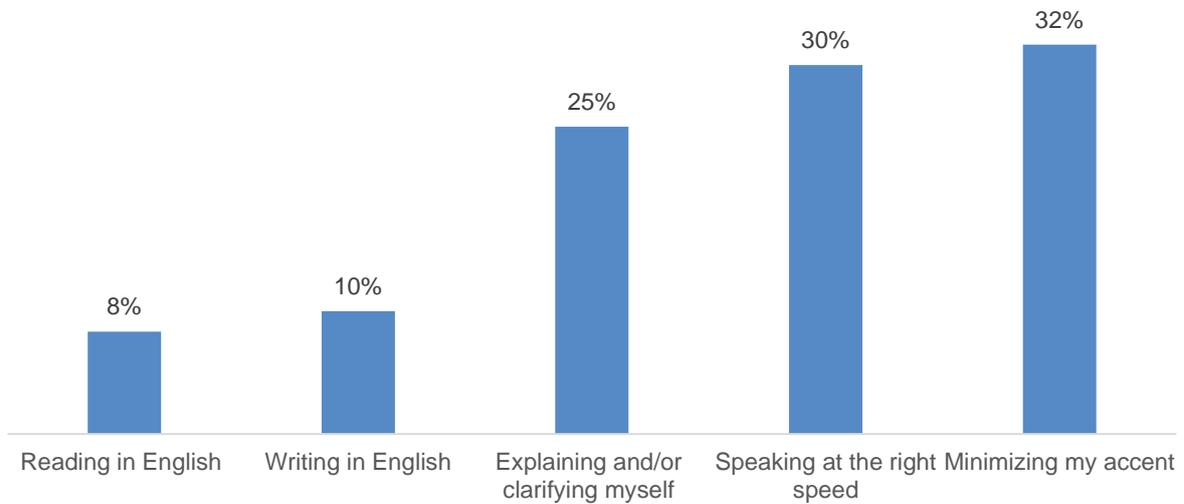
Growing up in the Philippines, most of the books we read were from England. When coming to the United States, there were times when I would utter a word that many would have thought was incorrect. I once used the word “thrice” to connote the occurrence of an incident three times. My manager looked at me and laughed. She responded, there is no such word as ‘thrice’. I was embarrassed but cautious. So, I looked it up in the dictionary.

Yes, there is a word as ‘thrice’. Being from an Asian culture where you don’t challenge your manager. I kept this to myself.

It was, however, useful for me to know that there are differences in the English I learned and the one taught in the United States.

I am not the first to have this experience. Chinese from Hong Kong have in the past also learned English influenced from England. They too have been perceived as ‘using the wrong word.’

Q: Please indicate how challenging each of the following language-related areas is for you in an American business setting?
(% Extremely/Somewhat Difficult)



In their own words — the biggest challenges in adapting to the U.S. business culture ...

“Learning the correct levels of politeness, how to write an email, the right words for business concepts, learning to interpret questions and comments.”

“Language — my first is French.”

OBSTACLE 2: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

It’s easy to undermine the effect of idioms we use in our everyday conversation.

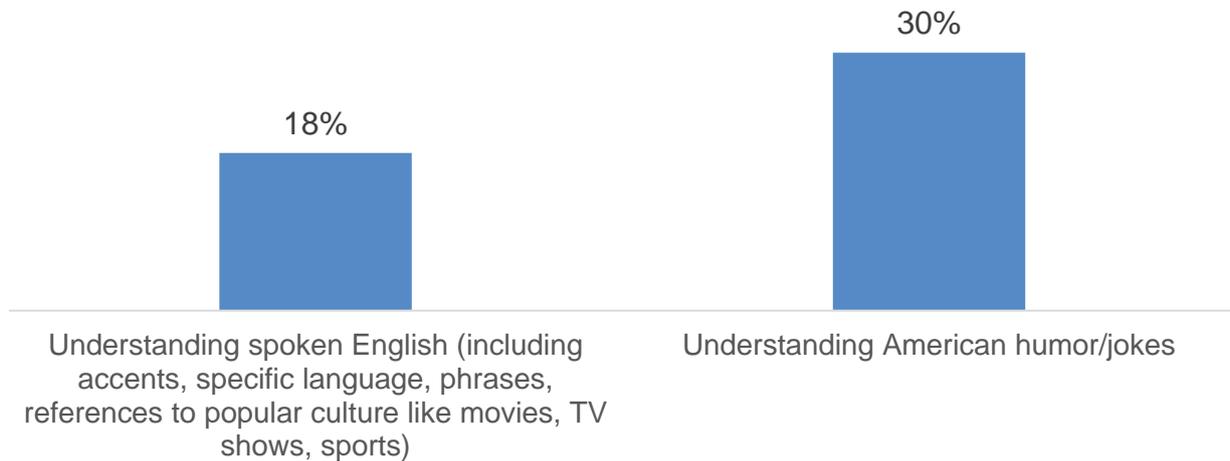
Chatting to an Uber driver from Brazil, he shared how he was working on learning his English. I asked him what the hardest part of learning English was. His replied “sayings.” He later elaborated on times he felt lost in the conversation when someone would use a saying like “hit the books,” “twist someone’s arm,” etc.

He continued by saying “I can learn grammar rules and apply them. But there are no rules for these sayings. He also followed with “I am embarrassed to ask — What does that mean? — ‘cause it might not be cool.”

Many times, understanding English language is not just limited to the meaning of words or accents. Foreign-born professionals struggle with understanding the cultural context of what is spoken. This is not something one normally learns in an English language class.

During meetings and presentations, it is common to hear phrases like ‘you really hit it out of the park,’ ‘don’t preach to the choir,’ ‘back to the drawing board,’ ‘get the ball rolling,’ ‘go the extra mile’ and so on. One of the big difficulties foreign-born professionals face is understanding American humor or jokes — which reference all aspects of American culture, be it popular movies, TV shows, celebrities, political figures and or things that Americans deal with in their day to day lives like insurance, traffic, student loans and so on.

**Q: Please indicate how challenging each of the following language-related areas is for you in an American business setting?
(% Extremely/Somewhat Difficult)**



In their own words — the biggest challenges in adapting to the U.S. business culture ...

“Interpreting American jargon, idiosyncrasies, at times, sense of humor, male sports talk...”

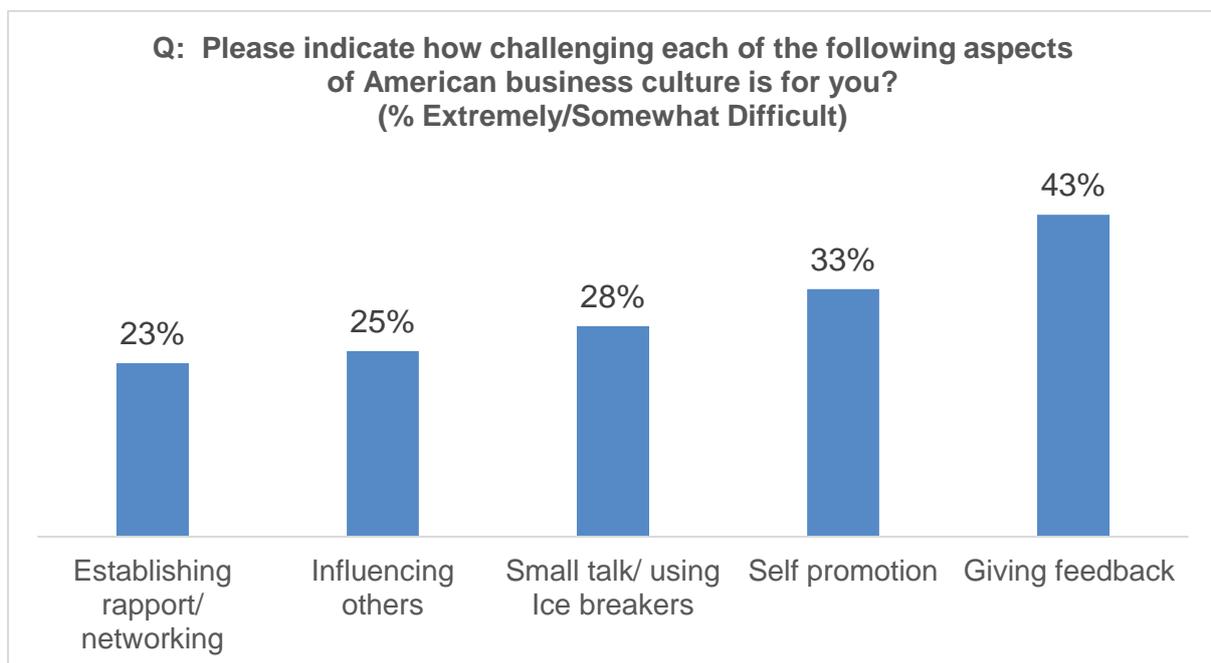
“To understand the implicit communication and culture. Some slang words where locals think they are typical might not be easy for people outside.”

OBSTACLE 3: AMERICAN BUSINESS CULTURE RELATED CHALLENGES

For many foreign-born professionals understanding the American business culture can be far more challenging than getting comfortable with communicating in American English. American business culture is characterized by an emphasis on individual initiative and achievement, at the same time forming and maintaining great inter-personal relationships in the workspace.

“You come across too strong or too direct.” A foreign-born manager from Russia was shocked to hear those words from her director. Alina is known to be a high-performing manager capable of leading her team to reach goals. However, being liked was not one of those values that her employees could claim. We assessed Alina’s influence style and found out her communication style was getting in her way. Although she had all the good intentions, Alina was accustomed to leading the way she did in Russia. Being direct and clear was considered over-controlling and not at all collaborative. Her employees did not feel she regarded their opinions.

It is always a surprise when foreign-born professionals get this kind of feedback. Working with Alina, we provided some tools to provide a more collaborative communication style that was inclusive.



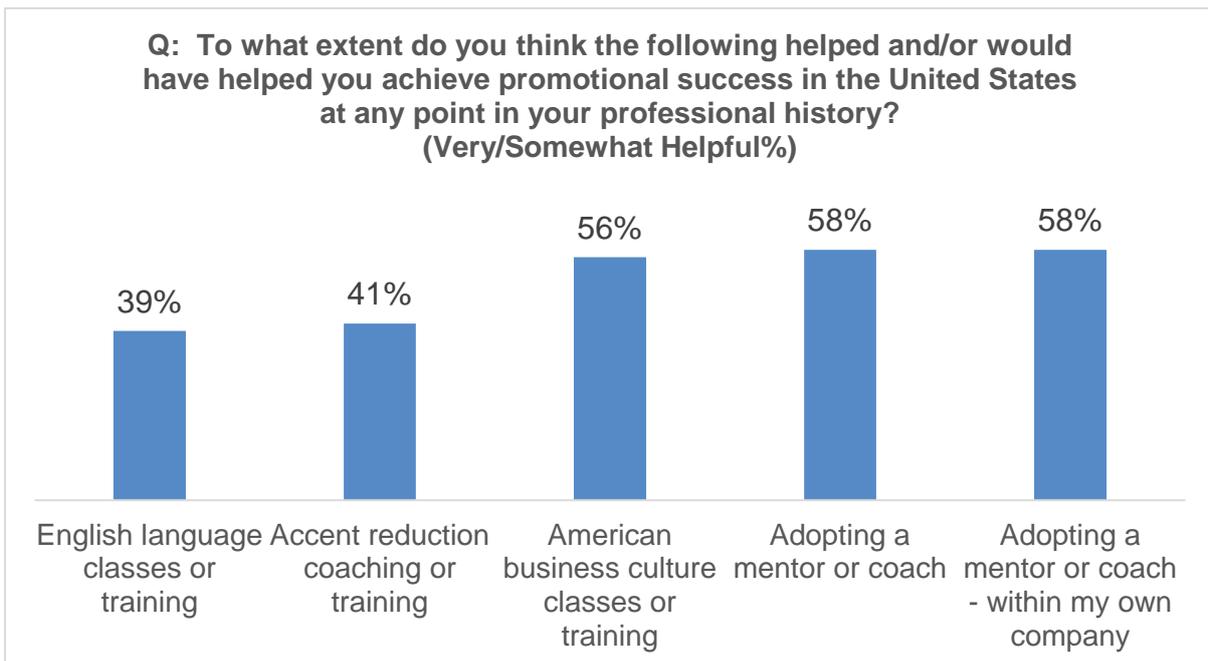
In their own words — the biggest challenges in adapting to the U.S. business culture ...

“To promote and market myself as a professional.”

“To learn how to ask/negotiate for things I wanted at my work.”

OBSTACLE 4: LACK OF TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

We got much clearer picture of the need that exists among foreign-born professionals when they were asked the extent to which training/workshop or help from a mentor/coach would have helped them achieve promotional success in the United States. More than half of these professionals believe that training on American business culture, as well as working with a mentor or coach would be helpful.



OBSTACLE 5: DEVELOPING CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

As organizations become more culturally diverse, the need for Bias and Cultural Intelligence training has started to come to light. Some companies have even utilized an application called “Globe Smart” to help their employees prepare for a meeting or visit a foreign country.

Some Foreign-born professionals and their families sometimes are provided American culture training upon their arrival to the U.S. Companies such as IOR Global provide this kind of training.

However, with all these efforts, it seems that there is still a challenge acculturating in the American Workplace.

Employees who work with foreign-born professionals also underestimate the importance of understanding cultural nuances that somehow surface in business interactions. The assumption is, if they speak English, somehow, they will acculturate naturally.

Acculturation is an on-going process and not a one-time training shot. There is responsibility on both sides. Foreign-born professionals, as well as the American workforce, need to constantly have their “Cultural Intelligence” antennae up!

This plays an important role in how we collaborate, influence and resolve conflict in the workplace. It is especially crucial when giving and receiving feedback.

Leaders and employees when diagnosing a situation should ask themselves “How does ‘culture’ come into play?”

Foreign-born professionals continue to face the challenge of understanding idioms — examples given within an ‘American context’ which might not resonate with a foreign-born.

Small talk is not a norm in many countries, yet it is seen as part of the American business culture of ‘warming up’ and building relationship. Sometimes small talk is sports-focused.

A client from Thailand expressed how she felt out of place when they had staff meetings. First, she was the only woman. Second, they usually chatted about the football game the night before — leaving her out of the conversation. “I had to start watching Football just so I could fit in or at least chime in when they were conversing.”

THE WAY FORWARD...

As more and more foreign-born professional move to the United States, especially the Silicon Valley, in search of new and interesting opportunities, helping them adapt to the US business culture and language is an area that needs to be addressed.

In my work with foreign-born professionals, we are sensitive about not minimizing their own language or heritage. We don’t see our job as integration, but rather adapting to the American business culture. Adaptation is for making sure we are understood as well as we understand. We build on the value that difference is good and yet learning another’s culture and language bridges the gap.

We see each person as individuals with unique needs and cultural experiences, so we consciously build coaching goals based on the individual’s challenges.

If you have further questions about the study or would be interested in collaborating on a follow-on study, please contact:

Angel Rampy, angel.rampy@coachangel.com or

Bharati Khanduja gbharati@gmail.com / www.linkedin.com/in/bharatikhanduja

Success through Learning - Tel: 408-354-4748 - www.coachangel.com