The Silent Cost of Language Anxiety at Work

How unplanned conversations expose the performance gap



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Foreword

I've spent much of my career thinking about what makes people effective at work. One thing is clear to me: as AI absorbs more of the routine, human skills are what differentiate. **Communication sits at the top of that list. The ability to think on your feet, articulate an insight clearly and persuade is becoming a real source of competitive advantage,** and doing it in a second language is hard, even if you've aced every certification.

The talent companies need is rarely in one place. **Hiring across borders raises the stakes for communication: people are collaborating on video calls, presenting to customers, negotiating with partners and making decisions across cultures and time zones.** They are expected to do all of that quickly, confidently, and usually without the benefit of being in the same room.

Most of that work happens in unscripted conversation, **the moment you need to challenge a colleague, explain something complicated simply, or correct a client without damaging the relationship.** Business runs on trust and rapport. **And someone can write an excellent email and deliver a polished presentation, yet go quiet when they have to think on their feet in a second language.** The expertise is there. Access to it, under pressure, is not.

That has a cost, and it isn't a soft one. When someone stays silent because they're worried about getting the words wrong, an idea is lost. When an employee doesn't challenge an assumption, a decision gets made on worse information. **Multiply those moments across a global organisation and it stops being a language problem and becomes a performance one.**

Which is why I think we need to change what workplace language training is designed to achieve. **The question Learning and Development teams ask has to move from "What level of English does this person have?" to "What does this person need to be able to do to be effective in their role?"**

What our learners told us is that the hardest moments are not the prepared ones. They are the conversations nobody saw coming. **That is where the gap lives, and that is what this report sets out to measure.**

Karine Allouche
General Manager, Language Learning Worldwide and Skills GTM Europe, Busuu



Executive Summary

In 2026, learning a language has never been more accessible. Digital technology puts lessons, practice and translation tools at our fingertips. **So why is there still such a big gap between learning a language and using it confidently at work?**

High stakes moments like important meetings, cross-market collaboration or impromptu interactions can create anxiety and erode confidence. Unfortunately, **traditional language training doesn't always translate into performance under pressure,** leaving a performance gap at exactly the wrong time. At an organisational level, this creates a cumulative hit to productivity, decision-making, and business performance.

The business case for better communication skills is already clear. In a globalised economy, where **teams are built across borders, language skills are essential.** One study found that business leaders attributed a **15% decline in productivity to poor communication, with 38% saying it increased costs and 19% saying they had lost deals because of it.**

What Busuu's report brings to the surface is the **critical difference between "knowing" a second language and being able to use it confidently,** spontaneously, and effectively – especially when the pressure is on.



KEY INSIGHTS

01

The hidden business cost of language anxiety

Linguistic proficiency isn't always enough. When employees are under pressure, the language they know can suddenly become much harder to access. Our research, based on a survey of more than 1,000 Busuu workplace learners across 64 countries, finds that:

55% **of employees simplify what they want to say** when feeling anxious about using a second language at work.

Employees struggle to communicate confidently with customers, suppliers and senior leaders, contribute fully in meetings, and explain technical issues to international colleagues.

Employees may have the vocabulary, expertise and technical understanding their role requires – **but struggle to access and communicate that knowledge when it counts.**

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KEY INSIGHTS

02

Communication breaks down right when clear expression matters most

Our research found that **unpredictable, high-pressure workplace situations** are particularly difficult for second-language speakers.

Meetings are a major pressure point, especially when employees are expected to speak with clients, senior leaders or international colleagues.

49%

of respondents say **unexpected or unplanned conversations create the most second-language anxiety** during a typical working week.



The question is
How to prepare for conversations that don’t stick to the script?

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KEY INSIGHTS

03

Preparation that’s not fit for purpose

Employees clearly understand the importance of preparing for important workplace conversations. The problem is that most aren’t using the right approach or the right tools to achieve their goals.

90% **said they actively prepare** before important workplace conversations.

How employees prepare

45% write **scripts.**

43% use **translation apps.**

41% **review** key vocabulary.

38% **rehearse** aloud.

24% only use a **language learning platform.**

When that preparation doesn't hold up in the moment, the cost isn't just a stumble: it's the relationship that never quite forms, the idea that doesn't land, the perspective that goes unheard, or the quick call that turns into a three-email thread.

KEY INSIGHTS

04

The role of L&D teams in improving business performance



Connect learning to the workplace

Tie language development to the real situations employees face, not generic proficiency scores.



Create safe pressure before real pressure

Give employees a private space to rehearse high-stakes conversations before they count.



Keep humans at the centre

Some skills, like reading the room and building trust, still need human interaction, not just AI practice.

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Methodology

Busuu surveyed more than 1,000 of its active workplace learners across 64 countries to understand the impact of language anxiety on communication, confidence and performance at work.

Mexico, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Thailand, Colombia, the USA, China, and Austria made up the top ten countries by number of respondents.

Our survey was distributed in April and May 2026 using the Braze customer engagement platform. We targeted active B2B users learning English and using one of the following interface languages: English, Spanish, German, French, Italian.

Users were shown a pop-up message asking them to complete a survey: once they clicked to give their assent, they were redirected to a survey embedded in the Busuu platform.



Understanding your hidden performance gap

Traditionally, language learning has been seen as a long but simple journey: learn the vocabulary, get to grips with the grammar, build your proficiency. But **professional communication requires a different type of fluency.** Conversations often happen informally, without notice, and give speakers very little time to think or reflect.

THE GAP BETWEEN KNOWING AND DOING

55% **of respondents simplify what they want to say** when feeling anxious about using a second language at work.

25% **stay silent** despite having something valuable to contribute.

25% **allow a colleague to speak** on their behalf.

For companies, the difference between knowing and doing matters.

Every time communication halts, something is lost: a stronger relationship, a better idea, a different perspective, or time.

Five things businesses lose when communication breaks down

For organisations with global teams, expertise and understanding travel mainly through conversation.

When people struggle to communicate in a second language, this is what's at stake.

1. **Stronger relationships:** Communication difficulties can make it harder to build relationships with clients, senior leaders and international teams.
2. **Better ideas:** When people simplify what they want to say, more complex or nuanced ideas may never get across.
3. **Different perspectives:** Staying silent means valuable viewpoints don't make it into the discussion.
4. **Visibility and influence:** Relying on colleagues to speak on someone's behalf can mean some people have less opportunity to be heard.
5. **Speed:** Avoiding a live conversation in favour of email or written channels can turn a two-minute call into a three-email thread, slowing decisions down.

The numbers already prove the cost

Second-language anxiety is often dismissed as a soft skills issue. It's more than that. Empirical evidence already shows that **communication problems have a real impact on business performance.**

WHAT BUSINESS LEADERS REPORT



15%

decline in productivity* attributed to poor communication.



38%

say it **increases costs.**



19%

say they've **lost deals because of it.**

Insufficient language skills have been found to lead to reduced comprehension, greater workload and complexity, and lower procedural efficiency.**

*Source: Grammarly, State of Business Communication Report, 2023.
**Source: Science Direct, The language barrier as a springboard towards (team) creativity: An exploratory study of foreign language use in teams.

Where does communication break down?

The hardest workplace conversations are often the everyday ones nobody sees coming. These are moments when employees need to think quickly, formulate complex ideas and communicate them clearly, often with no time to prepare. Not only do these situations present a challenge to second-language speakers. They are often the moments that matter most in business.

WHEN DOES THE PRESSURE PEAK?

49% of respondents say **unexpected or unplanned conversations** create the most second-language anxiety during a typical working week.

26% of respondents identify **regular international team calls** as the most common recurring scheduled trigger.

Meetings are the most frequently mentioned source of second-language anxiety, particularly when employees speak with clients, senior leaders, or international colleagues.

Second-language pressure points can take many forms, but the common thread is that there's no script.

A test score can tell you someone's proficient. It can't tell you whether they'll find the words when a client pushes back, a meeting goes off-topic, or a colleague asks a question they didn't prepare for.

How is AI changing communication?

As AI takes on more routine tasks, **the work left for people increasingly depends on collaboration:** exchanging ideas, solving problems together, and responding quickly to one another.

TALENT IS GOING GLOBAL

Companies are struggling to find the specialist skills they need at home. The OECD's 2025 analysis of firm-level labour shortages found that around 80% of employers reported recruitment difficulties, particularly in ICT, professional services and other knowledge-intensive sectors.

So companies are looking further afield. A 2025 global survey by Remote found that 73% of HR and business leaders expected more than half of their new hires to be international by 2026.

As talent goes global, so does the need for a shared language.

ETS's 2026 Global English Skills Report found:

- **90%** say it is critical to organisational success.
- **92%** of employers believe English proficiency is more important today than it was five years ago.
- **81%** say that integrating AI tools is increasing the need for workplace English proficiency.

Communication is how global expertise is transmitted

When expertise is spread across countries, communication is what moves it around: **it's how decisions get made and problems get solved.**

When it breaks down, the business itself stops functioning properly. Ideas go unshared, questions go unasked, and opportunities go unpursued.



The question is:
How do companies fix it?

How can companies improve second-language communication?

The good news: nine in ten employees **(90%) already prepare for high-stakes conversations.** The less encouraging news: they're piecing that preparation together themselves, without language learning technology built for the job.

HOW EMPLOYEES PREPARE

45% write **scripts.**

43% use **translation apps.**

41% **review** key vocabulary.

38% **rehearse** aloud.

24% only use a **language learning platform.**

Most language learning platforms weren't built for this.

They're designed to build proficiency over months, not to help someone prepare for a conversation happening tomorrow, or in the next hour.

What do workplace language learners need?

If the goal is better performance at work, employees need technology that helps them:



01

Practise the language that matters to their role and industry.



02

Prepare for the workplace situations they're likely to face.



03

Build the skills they need to respond in real time.



04

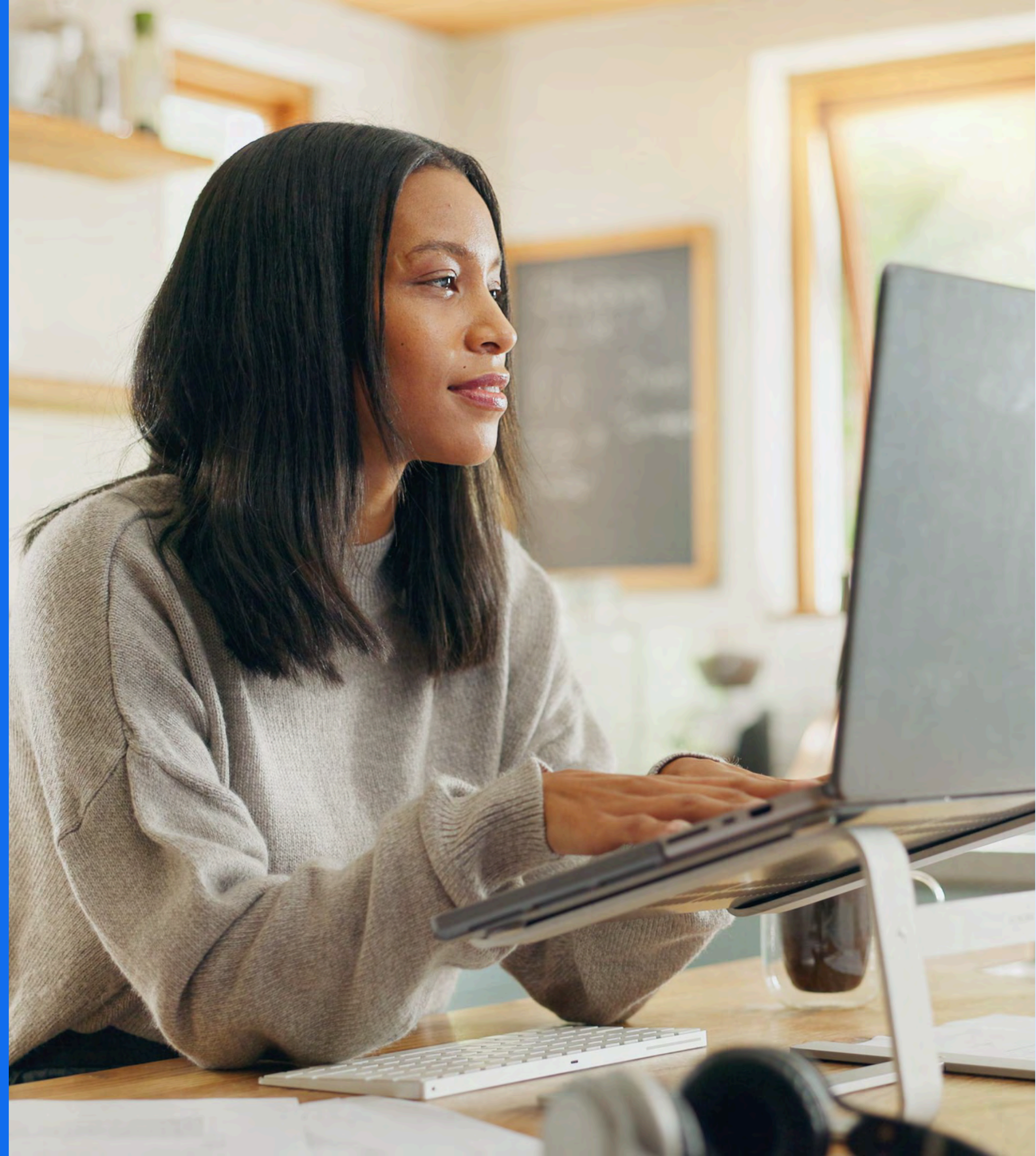
Develop confidence before the conversations that matter most.

From language learning to language performance

The disconnect is specific. **Employees need to perform in unscripted, high-pressure moments, and most tools aren't built for that.**

Closing that gap means bringing three things together: language development, role-specific communication skills, and realistic workplace scenarios, treated as one connected experience rather than three separate needs.

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That’s the thinking behind Busuu’s new platform

It combines language and professional skills in a single integrated experience, building on programmes already trusted by Fortune 500 employers.

FASTER DECISIONS. BETTER COLLABORATION. MORE VALUE FROM THE TALENT YOU ALREADY HAVE.

Meets employees where they are, then tailors learning to what their role demands.

Gives a private space to rehearse with an AI partner available 24/7, because employees shouldn't have to face a tough negotiation, client meeting or interview unsupported.

Offers peer practice and live tutoring, then builds confidence through real-life conversation, not just app-based repetition.

Includes workplace skills content, presentation, negotiation, client communication and leadership

The three things L&D teams need to prioritise

To turn second-language communication into business results, L&D teams should focus on these three priorities:

01

Connect learning to the workplace

Proficiency scores measure knowledge, not capability. Tie learning to the real situations employees are likely to face, so new skills transfer straight into practice.

02

Create safe pressure before real pressure

Some conversations are too important to test your language skills for the first time live. AI-driven language tools give employees a private, repeatable space to rehearse, respond under pressure, and make mistakes with no social or business cost.

03

Keep humans at the centre

Technology makes practice more accessible, but cultural awareness, reading the room, navigating ambiguity, and building trust remain human skills, still built through human interaction.

About Busuu

Busuu is a performance platform that **helps people communicate with confidence and professional impact in another language.**

It combines language courses with workplace skills content — presentation, negotiation, client communication and leadership — delivered through adaptive AI, expert human coaching and real-world practice, so learners build both the language and the communication skills they need to perform in the moments that matter most.



About Chegg

Chegg is a learning platform **helping businesses bring new skills to their workforce and giving lifelong learners and students the skills and confidence to succeed.**

Focused on the skilling market, which is $40 billion and growing, Chegg offers innovative tools for workplace readiness, professional upskilling, and language learning. Chegg also continues to offer students artificial intelligence (AI)-driven, personalised support.

Chegg remains committed to its mission of improving learning outcomes and career opportunities for millions around the world. Chegg is a publicly held company and trades on the NYSE under the symbol CHGG. For more information, visit www.chegg.com.



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