

English Means Business

“There has always been a dominant language and there always will be,” says Daniël Mantione, of Stichting Taalverdediging, an organization that supports the Dutch language and culture. “In the past it was Latin. Right now it’s English.”

In this global economy, if one wants to survive and achieve economic success, English language proficiency is key. And many countries are investing copious amounts of time and money into providing their workforces with English language education.

“At university and other higher education institutions, English is increasingly becoming the language of the teachers; it has become the language that research and courses are conducted in and the language in which these are written,” says Paul van Grembergen, chairman of the *Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond*, which contributes to the Dutch Language Union. English as a second language is also being required of children throughout primary and secondary education. Some school systems are even beginning to teach English to children as young as two or three. Education First, a private education company founded in 1965 that specializes in language training, cultural exchange, and educational travel, wanted to come up with a way to measure and provide insight into the success of such implementations. This dream came to fruition in the form of their English Proficiency Index (EPI) released in early 2011. According to the Education First, the EPI is a “standardized measurement of adult English proficiency, between countries and over time,” providing countries with a benchmark to measure “the average English proficiency of the working population.”

Between 2007 and 2009, more than 2 million people from 44 different countries where English is not the native language participated in a free online test. The outcome was incorporated in the EPI 2011 Report. The top three ranking countries were Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark, respectively.

Anyone who has ever spent any amount of time conversing with the Dutch will most certainly not be surprised to see the Netherlands take its place among the top three. After all, a large majority of the Dutch population speaks excellent English. This is particularly true of Amsterdam, where 80 percent of the workforce speaks English, earning it the distinction of being the

largest Anglophone city in continental Europe. There are many theories as to why this is, and the answer seems to lie in a variety of factors: the influence of English technology; popular music, film and television; the globalization of the economy; the influx of expats and knowledge migrants; and the shortage of Dutch-speaking regions outside of the Netherlands.

“It is very important for candidates for high-level positions in the Netherlands to have some level of proficiency in the English language,” according to a senior researcher at a top executive search firm in the Netherlands. “A must even, because most of the companies we work for are multinationals.” (Due to privacy issues, neither the researcher nor the firm can be named.) Of the job searches this firm is hired to perform, roughly 95% require candidates who speak English fluently. This high percentage can be attributed to the fact that it is an international firm – still, the senior researcher stresses that English proficiency is a good thing to have on your resume no matter whom you plan to work for, stating that even local offices that do not have a lot of international exposure still need employees who can communicate with their foreign colleagues. “Most of the correspondence in these companies is in English and if you don’t have any notion of the language I think it will be very hard to grow within the company.”

However, those who are not well-versed in English need not panic. “I once turned down an Italian and a French candidate because of their poor English skills,” the researcher admits, “but that doesn’t happen often. It depends on the level and the setting of the position. If you want to apply for a job in an international setting, then – if your English is not up to standard – this may be a problem, but if you work in a store and only have to deal with a tourist once in a while, your English skills are a non-issue.”

The Dutch affinity for English is not strictly business, it turns out; “Personally, I find learning a new language extremely fun and interesting,” says Joost Mulder, representative for Het Ampzing Genootschap, an organization of Dutch language purists who spread their message through light-hearted cartoons and music. “Besides English, I’m pretty good at German and speak a little French and Spanish. Turkish and Arabic are on my wish list.”

This attitude seems to be shared by much of the Dutch population, which may prove handy further down the road. “Eventually English will be replaced by another language,” Mantione predicts. “Perhaps Chinese.” This is when the Dutch eagerness to learn new languages will definitely come in handy.