



# TALKING THE TALK

Language proficiency has always been a hot topic in Hong Kong's business world, even more so now that more firms are expanding into China. Christine Choi looks at ways accountants can improve their language skills.

**Y**ou walk the walk of the business and in most respects you're an exemplary accounting professional. A nagging question remains, though: Can you talk the talk?

English is one of the main languages of business around the globe and Hong Kong accountants need to be proficient in it. For high-level executives a working knowledge of English is critical and lower-level staff often find that developing a stronger command of business English is one of the main development points on their reviews.

With the strength of the Chinese economy and the growing number of mainland Chinese companies on the Hong Kong exchange, Mandarin skills are becoming more important, especially for firms that work with Chinese companies.

There has been an explosion of training centres and courses offered in Hong Kong for both business English and Mandarin. Some firms offer language

training as part of their professional development programmes, and options abound for individuals who want to take the initiative and raise their proficiency.

Alison Ridley, a lecturer and assistant programme director at the Centre for Professional and Business English at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, comments on some common problems students face with business English. "We find that the Hong Kong professionals who come to our centre generally have much stronger receptive (reading and listening) skills than productive (writing and speaking) skills." Speaking skills are by far the weakest area for professionals, simply because individuals do not have enough opportunity to use the language, she notes.

Time and commitment are key considerations when it comes to language learning. The best thing professionals can do is to be honest with themselves about how much time they are willing to

dedicate. Language trainers say specific and realistic goals are rewarding and more motivating than the best professional trainer. For example, students who are not sure they have the time for a full 60- or 90-hour course can aim for shorter courses or workshops that focus on targeted skills development. For accountants, these might include courses such as presentation skills or business writing.

David Gardner, senior academic advisor at the Jockey Club Centre for the Advancement of English for Professionals at Hong Kong Baptist University, believes these types of courses can help you learn most quickly because they force you into being an active learner by contributing regularly in class and doing systematic self-study.

Another beneficial initial learning strategy is to master a number of appropriate standard phrases that can be used in specific work-related written communication, he suggests. When

constructing a reply letter or email, for example, the writer may need to include a range of functional language, including: acknowledging receipt of correspondence, apologizing, explaining reasons, empathizing, promising action, offering assistance, making a request and ending the letter or email.

“A copy of a list of categorized standard phrases is a useful reference to have at your disposal, either as a hard copy pinned up above your work desk, or as a soft copy that is easily accessible,” Gardner says. “Through regular application in work-related correspondence and documentation, you will master an increasingly wide range of standard phrases and be able to use them accurately and appropriately.”

Professionals need to manage their own expectations, however. Ridley notes that there is a difference between proficiency and competency. She says it is possible to make a measurable jump in

language proficiency, but research shows that it simply cannot be done in a 24- to 30-hour course. “Students can improve their competencies, but not their overall proficiency.” Proficiency is defined as an individual’s overall language level, encompassing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

For learning both Mandarin and English, professionals need a base level of proficiency before they can focus on business language. Accordingly, almost all business Mandarin courses offered in Hong Kong expect students to have had previous study of the language. As for regularly offered courses that focus specifically on the accounting profession, the Centre for Professional and Business English does offer some courses for accountants, in conjunction with the Hong Kong Institute of CPAs. The courses use materials in which the settings, contexts and examples relate directly to the accounting profession.

## HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SPEAKING SKILLS

No time for a course? Alison Ridley at the Centre for Professional and Business English at Hong Kong Polytechnic University offers the following exercise for improving speaking skills on your own:

1. Take a topic or aspect of your work and give yourself a limited time to think about it.
2. Speak for two to three minutes and record it.
3. Transcribe it word for word.
4. Edit it as a piece of writing.
5. Look at the weaknesses – do I always use the same structure? Do I only use present tense?

The exercise should only take about an hour, but if done once a week, can yield surprising results. “The key is in the transcribing. Write down exactly what you said, not what you think you said. I’ve seen big improvements in students who do it regularly.”

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## USEFUL LINKS

### **Berlitz**

([www.berlitz.com.hk](http://www.berlitz.com.hk))

### **British Council**

([www.britishcouncil.org.hk](http://www.britishcouncil.org.hk))

### **Centre for Professional and Business English, Hong Kong Polytechnic University**

([www.cpbe.polyu.hk.edu](http://www.cpbe.polyu.hk.edu))

### **Chinese University of Hong Kong School of Continuing and Professional Studies**

([www.scs.cuhk.edu.hk](http://www.scs.cuhk.edu.hk))

### **Executive Mandarin**

([www.execmandarin.com](http://www.execmandarin.com))

### **Hong Kong Institute of Continuing Education**

([www.hkice.edu.hk](http://www.hkice.edu.hk))

### **Hong Kong**

### **Management Association**

([www.hkma.org.hk](http://www.hkma.org.hk))

### **Hong Kong Putonghua Vocational School**

([www.putonghua.com](http://www.putonghua.com))

### **Hong Kong University School of Professional and Continuing Education**

([www.hku.edu.hk/space](http://www.hku.edu.hk/space))

### **Hong Kong University of Science and Technology College of Lifelong Learning**

([www.cl3.ust.hk/index.html](http://www.cl3.ust.hk/index.html))

### **Jockey Club Centre for Advancement of English for Professionals, Hong Kong Baptist University**

([www.hkbu.edu.hk/~caep](http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~caep))

### **New Concept Mandarin**

([www.newconceptmandarin.com](http://www.newconceptmandarin.com))