

## **The Impact of Global Language on Technical Writing**

*Typhaine BERTEZ, Céleste WICKER*

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*Technical writing is a profession which evolves and spreads very quickly. From its beginning to today, it has increasingly been recognized as a necessary profession, and as it continues to spread around the world, new questions about its evolution appear every day.*

*One of these questions is related to the language used for technical communication. Now that globalization is at the heart of many companies, English is increasingly used as an international language, to the point that some companies publish technical documentation in English, even though they are not English or based in an English-speaking country.*

*This evolution obviously has consequences for the writers and the companies, who either adapt or do not. When you start writing in a language that is not your mother tongue, you have to adapt your vocabulary and use a language that everybody can understand. Also, the way you write your documentation must change, as formatting rules differ from one country to another.*

*These changes may not be that complicated if the writer is very familiar with the target language and if the company works mainly in an English-speaker market. But what if a French company, for example, which operates in France and in foreign countries writes all of its documentation in English? Would the budget for translation change? Would training for future writers change too?*

*But, in the case of a national company that cannot adapt very quickly to a world that speaks and trades in English, how is it possible to evolve? And what are the consequences? Are there that many differences between an English-based company and a national company?*

**Keywords: globalization, technical writing, English, global language, companies, plain language, terminology, French, native, non-native**

*We would like to thank our colleagues from the CDMM Master for the time they took to answer our questionnaire. Thank you to every person who helped us to write this article. Thank you to those who gave their time to answer our questions and who helped us by providing insight and expertise.*

*Thank you to our professors who helped us find our subject, gave us perspective, and showed us possible ways to approach the subject.*

## Introduction

As we were talking about our professional experiences and comparing our translating methods in the companies where we do our internships, we found that we had completely different views of English. And we started to imagine what it would be like for an entire business world to have to adopt a global language.

For this study, the language we chose was English because it is the “international language”. And, as we expected when we made it, the questionnaire we used for our research showed that the vast majority of people write and communicate in English in their company. This proved that this was not our imagination, a legend, or a trend: English is spreading all over the world, throughout the business world and the world of technical communication. From one idea to another, we questioned ourselves about the impact of this global language on the world of technical writing.

In order to understand a bit more how it has evolved and how it works, we conducted a survey of technical writers from different companies.

Throughout this article, we will discuss the applied methodology for this research, then we will summarize the results we received in the questionnaires we sent and in various interviews with different technical writing professionals.

The rules for good writing and being a good writer are universal. Good writing is clear, consistent, and engages the reader. Writing for people who speak English is no different. But how can written English be better adapted for universal understanding? How can you be sure that your message can be translated and understood all over the world? This is where the writing style known as “global English” proves to be a useful tool.

Global English is a style of writing that makes written English easier to understand for non-native speakers. Global English shows its efficiency by being precise, logical and literal. It is known for being the language of manual and technical writers who want their writing to be extremely clear to anyone who reads it.

What’s more, because of its transparency, global English is the preferred style of translators. The rules and guidelines of global English make it ideal for translation by either machine technology or humans.

This does not mean that global English is only important for technical writers or translators to know about. Any individual or any company that seeks to speak to a global audience should know what it means to write globally.

## Methods

It is our first time working in a company for most of us, and the first time working as technical writers for all of us. Thus, when we exchanged experiences or simply talked about what our jobs included, we could not help but notice that each company had a different procedure for managing its technical documentation.

Indeed, this procedure may change depending on which language is used as the official language in the company.

Both of us did our internships in French companies, but for one, the documentation was written in French and, for the other, in English. We realized through our discussion that the organization was quite different. As our work was different, comparing our experiences was very interesting.

First, we talked about translation: as one company writes in French and the other in English, we curiously observed that it was rare for the English company to translate the documentation into French internally. The French company has the advantage of getting the source content in French but the English one has the advantage of being directly in the international business language. From this idea, we started questioning ourselves: How about a global language in technical writing? What is the impact?

We first started to study the procedures in our work, to understand why a company would choose one option rather than the other. But this raised more questions than it answered, and two examples were not enough to study the impact. Especially given that the Documentation teams were not the same size and, thus, did not have the same evolution.

Therefore, we shared a questionnaire with every technical writer contact we had to figure out how it works in other places. In this questionnaire, we asked questions about the native language of the respondent, the language they used at work, whether they translated the documentation themselves and whether they translated at all. We wanted to know their opinion about the use of English in their company and the importance they attributed to translation.

We also interviewed four technical writers from different companies and of different ages. All this information allowed us to approach the subject on a wider scale and to obtain answers to our questions.

## **Global language: International business impacts**

As time passes and technology and trading evolve, more and more companies are choosing the “international language,” English. But why this language? First, because it is the first language in about 60 nations all around the world. Then, because companies trade with the entire world, English quickly became the language of communication. English is easy to understand because a “business English” exists to allow interactions between countries where different languages are spoken.

Translation costs are lower because English is the most common language. The cost per word is cheaper for companies who want to translate their documentation into English. In fact, English offers many advantages for companies.

“Businesses are organised globally, not regionally, these days” says Kim Beddard-Fontaine, Group Vice-President of Employee and Change Communication at Sodexo, a French food service company (<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170317-the-international-companies-using-only-english>). “We want to become more efficient by collaborating across geographies. English is an enabler of that.”

Because English is not everybody’s preferred language, companies that want to progressively change their language offer courses to their employees. This is the case for Nissan, a famous Japanese car manufacturer. They understood that the transition needed to be smooth so that employees had the chance to adapt to a language that was totally out of their skillset. Car manufacturer Honda has employed the same strategy. They aim to switch to English as their new official corporate language by 2020 in order to increase their efficiency within the automotive sector and so on.

This move can be frightening for companies that do not even share the same alphabet. Honda, just a few years before transitioning, did not want to switch from Japanese into English because they thought it was “stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan.” (Takanobu Ito, Honda CEO).

A common language policy is more than just a practical measure; it is an important response to the realities of the business world. To illustrate this idea, we found that Honda's global sales were especially concentrated in English-speaking countries such as the United States. To respond to their clients' needs, Honda had to adapt and establish an international workforce that matched the reality of their market.

Honda hires thousands of new workers in North America every year, but only several hundred in Japan. Even if Honda is, and remains, a Japanese firm with Japanese-speaking employees, they have expanded so much at an international level that the firm is mainly composed of English-speaking employees. And having English as a common language for business and communication is almost mandatory.

According to the Harvard Business Review (<https://hbr.org/2012/05/global-business-speaks-english>), 1.75 billion people master English at a useful level. Adopting a global language is an important part of many companies' business strategy. As clients can spread all over the world, adopting English as a "Lingua Franca" (language adopted as a common language between speakers who don't share the same language), a global communication tool, can help to make companies more competitive.

The bigger the company, the more important it is to have a language strategy.

The disadvantages of adapting the entire language strategy of the firm are minor but have to be taken into account.

First, it is a long process to implement a new language in a country that does not speak this language at all. It can be very expensive to implement a brand new language because training can be necessary and documents may have to be updated and adapted.

However, although documentation and localization are very expensive, the idea is that companies can ultimately reduce costs while being more productive and efficient. From the technical writing point of view, it has been proven that centralizing and adapting the language helps documentation to be consistent and credible in the eyes of the clients. Using a ruled and structured terminology and investing in tools that encourage reuse, such as XML-based content management system (CMS) are also a guarantee of quality and consistency. There is also one final element which can be even more important than the rest: hiring native-speakers to do technical writing and to help the current writers to improve their level of English and to avoid errors related to their mother tongue.

Second, it can cost a lot for the employees to learn a language such as English, especially for asian or arabic-speaking countries which do not share the same alphabet and the same phonetic system. It is a real challenge to ask employees to adapt to a brand new language which they are not used to.

That was the case for the car manufacturer Honda, and even a large company Rakuten, both of which are Japanese companies. According to the Harvard Business Review, there are different types of reactions to this change.

First, the “inspired” reaction which includes all the employees who are motivated and excited about that change and that are optimistic about their ability to learn a new language.

Second, there are also more negative responses such as the “frustrated” reaction, which concerns employees who do not feel capable of making such a big change. To them, learning a brand new language seems almost insurmountable.

Then, there is an “indifferent” reaction to this change, which includes those who think they can learn a language, but they do not see any advantage of it either for them or their company.

And finally, there is the “oppressed” reaction for those who have a really pessimistic point of view of the concept. They believe they won’t be able to learn anything, and they don’t see the point of making such a change for the company.

## Four Types of Employee Response



Reactions and responses differ according to employees’ states of mind. And this factor plays a capital role for the “globalization” of the company.

The need for a business communication language in a company is strong, but for this to happen employers must convince their people. Employers have to implement every strategy that they can to help their employees (offering courses, encouraging them, adopting positive attitudes).

### Plain English and technical writing

The purpose of technical writing is to deliver clear and concise information to the audience. For that, the language used must be simple and being native is not mandatory.

In this article we speak of “global English” as it is the predominant language, but every language has a version that is called “Plain language”.

Professor Robert Eagleson, former Associate Professor of Modern English Language at the University of Sydney (<https://clickhelp.com/clickhelp-technical-writing-blog/basics-of-plain-language-in-technical-documentation/>), defines plain language as a language that “is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as necessary”. Thus, its purpose is not to simplify the language, but to have the audience in mind and make them concentrate on the message rather than the words. This way, writers make sure the message is easy to understand. It does look like one purpose of technical documentation, which is to facilitate the access to information.

From this, we can guess why a plain language is so important in global business.

However, it is not only important for businesses, but also for the employees. Globalization also means more people work in a country that is not their own, and they may have issues adapting to a new language. These issues can make it difficult to feel included in the team, and every worker knows how important feeling great in their job is. This applies to the language in general, but then the employee also has to adapt to the company jargon, which, for many, includes English words.

One big part of a technical writer's work is to meet experts to gather necessary information or to verify that they have understood the information they've gathered. If, in a French company in France, the language used in every field is English, the technical writer must be fluent in English as he or she will have to be able to understand what the expert is saying and then write a document that the audience can understand.

In addition, the chosen language for almost all scientific fields is English, so it would not be unnatural to see all technical communication written in that language.

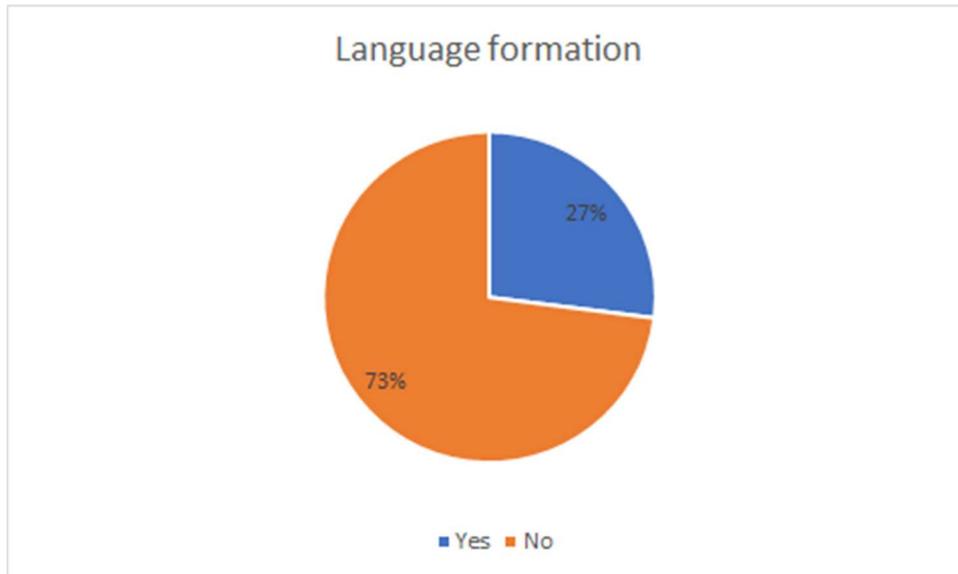
The result of globalization was one of the most important of our questionnaire. Almost all the companies (when they are not local) are based in the United States, and they represent the biggest part of the market. To compete with them, foreign companies use their vocabulary and their language as it is the one everybody will understand. However, the local market must not be forgotten, and writing technical texts in a foreign language is not that easy.

For that reason, we wanted to know the impact of globalization not only in terms of business, but also in terms of linguistics, all from the point of view of the technical writer.

## Results

### Training

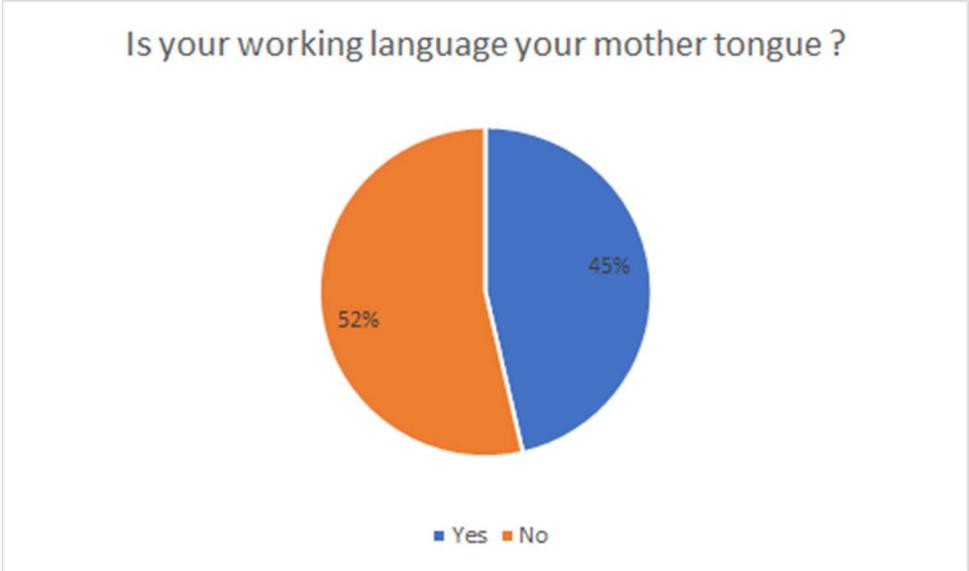
For this survey, analyzed the answers of thirty participants, most of them technical writers from different companies.



The majority of technical writers who answered the questionnaire had never received any language-related training, which means that it is expected that they have a high level from the beginning, thus having no need of training. However, universities do not offer advanced courses in English (or other languages).

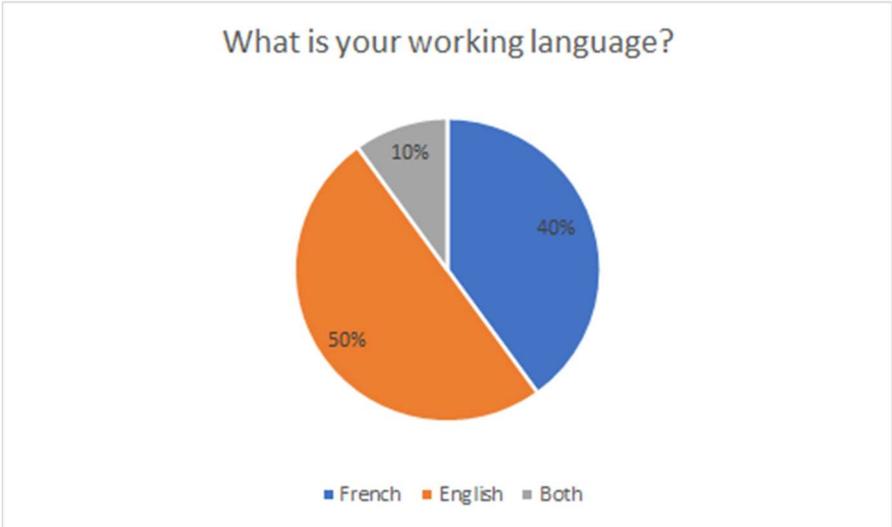
In France, few universities or schools offer a track specifically for technical writers. For that reason, companies try to hire recent graduates from these schools as they have the best training. But, if we look more closely at the programs, there are not a lot of English classes, either in writing or communication. Almost all classes are given in French, and students do not really practice English in a technical context.

Thus, we could expect that training in English technical writing is needed, either for the employee to be familiar with the company’s vocabulary or to improve their level of English. Yet, the results of the forms refute this idea, showing that training is not always needed.



We can see in the graphic below that many companies still write their documentation in their native language, French (we only sent the questionnaire to companies in France), while the majority use English.

These responses show that using English as language for technical writing is no exception, rather it is a reality that is becoming more and more prevalent everyday. Therefore, we should not underestimate its importance and its consequences.



This result is directly connected to the previous one. However, it is even more evident that English is the first choice as working language. But still, as respondents were French people mainly working in French companies, we only have the French side. Nevertheless, we can see that even if we only ask French people working in companies based in France, English remains the first choice.

We can also observe in the following graph that 75% of those who answered the form do not have any translation teams in their company. This means that the company counts on writers' English skills to translate the necessary documentation or that they call on providers to translate the content they need. In this way, the technical writer can have a double role: writer and translator.



But the result of the Translator team graphic does not match the following graphic about the providers. We could suppose that writing all documentation and publishing only in English would eliminate the need to send documentation to be translated. However, we can see that 50% of respondents still send their documentation to be translated.

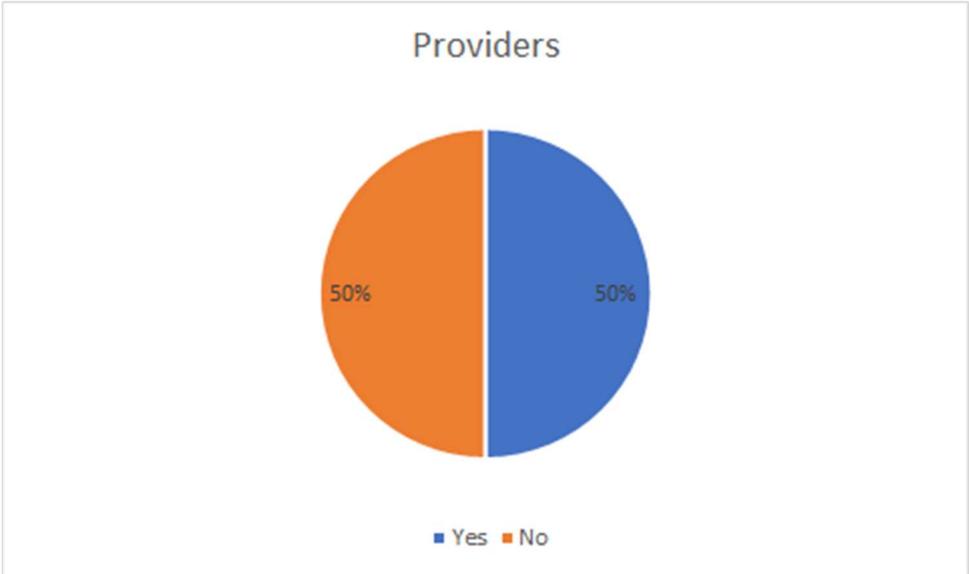
In France, the main explanation for this is the Toubon Law, which maintains that “any document that contains obligations for the employee or provisions whose knowledge is necessary for the performance of one's work must be written in French.” Clearly, then, there is also a desire from countries to protect their linguistic heritage. So changing to another language is not that easy and perhaps not that wanted by everyone.

Indeed, if a company sells products only in foreign countries or for experts who speak English, everybody should agree with the advantages that come with using this language. But if the products are meant to be used by anyone, then we have to make sure that the audience is catered for. Although English is omnipresent in our lives, not everybody has access to the same education, and while learning basic English is one thing, becoming proficient is quite another.

Another factor which is no less important is budget. If companies use service providers to translate their documentation, and if there are many target languages, it will take up a significant part of their budget. This is the case for most companies that sell their products to foreign countries. In fact, writing documentation in English does not reduce the money spent on translation for companies based in France as it is compulsory to offer documentation in French.

However, if there is a team that writes its documentation in both English and French, significant savings can be made. Especially if they sell to countries that do not have a law like Toubon Law that requires using the country's official language.

But, to be sure a technical writer is capable of doing this bilingual work, training and additional studies are needed to complement the prior one. In this case, they can be funded by savings from translation.



And, as the graphic of the left below shows, whether it is a French company or not, changing language takes time. Whether the working language was English or French, most employees have not changed working language during their career in one company. This could be because administration takes time, but also because, as we have explained throughout this paper, starting to use English has many consequences that must be taken into account.



On the other hand, most companies have already had an international outlook for a while. Thus, even though the shift to English is gradual, it naturally accompanies the globalization of the company. Indeed, small local companies may not feel the need to adopt English as a working language since using French is largely sufficient for their market. This is not the case for big companies, whose main markets are in English speaking countries and whose competitors are, for the most, American companies.

As we said earlier, we also interviewed four people in addition to making the questionnaire. These interviews were much more personal, as we wanted to get records of personal experiences.

The first writer we interviewed works at a French branch of a German company. They write all their documentation in French and then translate it English or, sometimes, German. For complicated languages, they give the documentation to a translation agency, but otherwise they do almost all of the translations themselves. This requires mental agility, as one team has to write, translate and review all the documentation.

The writers we interviewed said that, luckily for them, there are writers who are native speakers of various languages, so each person writes in their mother tongue. This methodology does not apply to the entire company, as a branch in another country writes the documentation in one language and then has it translated to the languages they need. However, in both branches, the language used to communicate at an internal level is English.

According to this survey, the use of English is a brilliant tool but the means to use it correctly are neither settled nor encouraged. Because of this, everybody speaks and writes at their own level and using different vocabulary, which can lead to a decline in the level of written English.

The second writer we interviewed wanted to give us her point of view of writing in a foreign language as she is Italian and has been living in France for a few years. For her, writing technical texts in a foreign language is not that complicated, as there are not nuances like there are in translation. For her, the technical writing is a sub-language that is easy to use, especially if there are glossaries and guides.

According to this interview, a technical writer who writes in a language that is not his native one will not experience more difficulties because technical writing is a simple and concise language with precise rules.

The next writer interviewed had had very different experiences and contributed important information to our study. He had first worked in a Franco-American company where documentation was written both in French and in English. Either the documents were written simultaneously or one document was written first and translated into the other language. But in any case the writers were the ones who did all the translation. Indeed, to work in that company, writers had to pass English tests and get a certificate to become a technical expert of the company. Once the writers had that certificate, they were able to write all documentation. In addition, there was a style guide for how the documentation should be written. For that reason, writing in a non-native language was no different from writing in French.

The last writer we interviewed was a German speaker who moved to France to work in an English speaking company. As she works with other providers and colleagues around the globe, English is the most important skill to have. However, she noticed that the documents she needs from her colleagues were not necessarily adapted in English (style guide was not respected, there were punctuation issues, etc.) even if the company adapted its communication strategy. From an internal point of view, some important things still need to be improved. Companies lose time manually adapting documents because the style guide is not completely respected by the other foreign partners.

She thinks English is a good strategy to adopt to extend the market but according to her, it takes a long time to get employees to master and respect the language when it is not their native language. In terms of technical writing, the DITA solution has recently been implemented to fix the style guide issues when it comes to sending off documentation for translation. But in other aspects of the company, there is still work to do. Because she is fluent in several different languages (English, German, and French), she thought she could adapt to every language, but she feels more comfortable with English for communication.

As a complementary resource, we decided to analyze the answers to the open questions we asked in our questionnaire as they are instructive to conduct our analysis. We first asked about potential consequences of a language change from a market and trade perspective. All our respondents agreed on the positive aspect of appealing to an international market. But this depends on the goal of the company. If it is a matter of a takeover, the impact will be different and maybe less positive than if a company is simply adapting to the international market. Changing the language structure of a company involves completely mastering the new language. If the language is not mastered, the company image will deteriorate because projects involving the language won't be accomplished. English has become indispensable in the international market, and migrating to it involves working with international standards and expanding to an international level. We can see a positive impact in the majority of the answers.

## Discussion

Through this research, we found that the theories we had initially were not far from the truth. We wanted to push our search further to really explore all the sides of the matter. And as a conclusion, we can say that English as a working language is becoming an international communication tool. More and more companies are migrating from their native language to this “global English”, or “Lingua Franca” in order to expand their business and gain power in the market. Despite the costs and internal risks such as employees adapting to the market language, English is the reference language of the international market and, indirectly, technical communication and technical writing.

In terms of technical writing, migrating to a global English involves good language skills and a strategy to remain profitable and consistent as these changes are expensive. We observed that switching from one language to another was not as much of an obstacle as we thought. Most of technical writers whose mother tongue is not English are always working to improve their skills and to improve the tools they need to perfect changing documentation.

Despite the lack of English in different programs, this language remains at the heart of technical communication and remains one of the main selection criteria in the work world.

Through this study we aimed to show that though switching to English seems to be the future and the most efficient way for companies to evolve, it’s important to first think about its impact and the consequences it will have on a company’s audience, employees, and customers. For some, this change is difficult to make or not in their future, but for others, the shift to English was made long ago in order to keep up with the rest of the business world. Even if companies continue to use their original language, English is still used as a second working language which is becoming more important every day.

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## About the authors



Typhaine Bertez is a French technical writer who obtained her Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages with a specialization in international trade at Mont-Saint-Aignan (2014-2017). She has started a Master's degree in Paris in Creating Multilingual and Multimedia typed Documents (CDMM) and works as an apprentice at L-Acoustics, a French manufacturer of enclosures, amplified controllers and signal processing devices.



Céleste Wicker is a French technical writer who grew up in Spain and came to France to do a double Bachelor's degree in Literature, Language and Civilization with a specialization in translation at Paris Sorbonne University (2014-2017). She then started a Master's degree in Paris in Language Industry and Specialized Translation and changed to the Creating Multilingual and Multimedia typed Documents' master (CDMM) for the second year. During this master, she has done an apprenticeship at Air Liquide Medical Systems, a French manufacturer of medical ventilation devices and medical gases.