

A guide for developing a request for proposal for language training services



As a world leader in distance English training solutions, goFLUENT is involved in many requests for proposal (RFPs).

In order to bring value to our target customers' provider selection process, we have decided to analyze all the recent RFPs we have received, taken the best aspects of each of them, and attempted the difficult exercise of creating a template that any company planning to do an RFP in this industry can use.

In this document you will find:

- ▶ A brief analysis of the current market situation for English training solutions
- ▶ A suggested strategy for the preparation of an RFP
- ▶ A recommended template for an RFP document
- ▶ A recommended template for an RFP questionnaire

A brief analysis of the market situation for English training solutions

In the field of corporate English language training, much reflection has been done on the impact of globalization on the workforce: how it has intensified the need for fast and effective communication among employees and offices worldwide, and how it has consequently increased the pressure on workers to improve their English language skills.

The resulting diversity of English training programs available to companies, as well as the sheer variety of English language needs in business, underlines the importance of a clear strategy for companies as they select the most suitable language training provider for their purposes. How can companies choose and implement a successful English language training program -- one that delivers powerful, long-term results at both the corporate and individual levels?

Meeting the needs of today's English language learners

Current employees of global companies have already received some formal instruction in English. For many of them, this instruction occurred in the distant past, through traditional methods of teaching: face-to-face lectures, grammar drills, and vocabulary memorization activities. Most employees thus possess a working knowledge of English, but lack the full command of the language that is necessary for effective communication in today's global marketplace, where they need to perform very specific business communication tasks. Does the learner need to learn management vocabulary? Is he responsible for handling customer complaints? Does the learner often travel for presentations and meetings? Each of these learners will require a particular selection of learning materials and an individualized course design. It is this specificity in employees' learning needs that companies must address through their selected language training solution.

The rise of blended learning

In the past, face-to-face classes were deemed the most efficient way to meet the language learning needs of corporate learners. However, because of the pressure on employees to acquire the relevant language skills at a fast pace, and because of the

high cost of face-to-face classes and other traditional teaching methods, companies have found it necessary to explore new modes of training. As a result, English language training providers have begun to offer more innovative approaches to language learning – approaches that are more responsive to learners' priorities, work schedules, and lifestyles, as well as more attuned to companies' financial and logistical considerations.

It is in this context that the blended learning approach has emerged as a viable, long-term alternative for the language training needs of businesses worldwide. Blended learning - combining live lessons (by telephone or face to face), eLearning/online study, and mobile learning – has enjoyed strong market reception for over five years. Of the blended learning options that exist in the market today, the combination of live telephone lessons and eLearning is growing the fastest. This is due to several important reasons:

- It increases engagement because it offers the flexibility in scheduling needed by corporate learners.
- It allows the learner to have regular, live interaction with a native speaker of the target language without having to leave his or her workplace.
- It exposes learners to the widest collection of training content possible because training does not end with the live lesson, where the amount of material that can be covered is limited.
- It is far more empowering to learners -- the learner's goals and choices are at the heart of his or her learning program.
- It offers high value to clients. Learners receive large amounts of language input and are given multiple practice opportunities, at a fraction of the cost of traditional face-to-face learning.

The emergence of global language training providers and distance training solutions

As language training providers sought to meet the growing demand for blended learning, and as technology made further innovations possible, the variety of solutions in the market expanded. Eventually, the globalization that led to the increased need

for English language training also led to the need for the centralization of this training. Over the past five years, a very strong trend has emerged in the market: more and more, global companies are selecting a single provider for their training needs, worldwide. The selection of a single provider has an extensive business impact. It offers savings through the centralized administration of training, allows companies to benefit from volume discounts for training packages, and provides statistical data for measuring the effectiveness of the program – a crucial need that often remains unmet in training.

A number of very mature, solid providers of distance English training solutions have proven themselves capable of responding to this trend. These global players have built their products around the needs of large, global companies who are seeking to implement a single training program in all their offices across the world. These requirements are outlined below.

Global and local account management

Language training providers must offer client companies strong account management and organizational support to accommodate as many learners as required, from as many office locations as needed. From clear-cut registration processes, timely training and orientation sessions, scheduling assistance, technical help, and learner satisfaction monitoring, clients need a seamless experience at every phase of the program. Given the inherent challenges of foreign language learning, support in the learners' first language is also invaluable and must be provided.

HR portal: access to and availability of information

Key to the effective evaluation of any language training project is the availability of information to HR and training managers. Learner management systems need to provide complete information on learner usage and participation, from log-in and log-out times, topics covered, quiz results, and all other learner interactions with the assigned trainers and the learning environment. This gives HR and training managers a complete picture of learner usage and engagement, and provides the basis for measuring the benefits of training.

ROI: learner participation and business impact

Companies that invest in training need to determine their ROI. This process has always been known to be quite difficult for global organizations spanning several countries, but in recent years, it has been made clear that implementing a consistent training program across all offices gives them a reliable starting point for ROI measurement. It facilitates the collection of extensive, comparable data and the setting up of KPIs at both the individual and company levels, as listed below:

Individual-level data:

- learner participation and usage
- learner satisfaction
- learner perceptions of applicability and usefulness of training

Company-level data:

- aggregate skills attained
- total costs of training

A suggested strategy for the preparation of an RFP

In our experience, clients who have had the most successful RFP process and who have been the most satisfied with the implementation of their selected training program were those who had a clear, well-thought out strategy from the beginning. In the formulation of such a strategy, it is essential for you to:

- involve senior executives
- analyze the business needs driving the RFP
- formulate the criteria for evaluating providers

Involve senior executives

The involvement of senior executives is key to the success of any language training program. First, they have a long-term view of the overall direction of your company as well as the workforce skills that are necessary for its growth. They decide how developing these capabilities should be prioritized in order to meet targets. Input from these key people in your company thus ensures that your investment in language training is strategically placed – whether it's in particular types of job roles, in certain kinds of departments, or towards the development of specific Business English skills. Their involvement leads to the clarity of perspective that is crucial to setting down the requirements in an RFP and evaluating the language training providers who respond.

Second, the participation of senior executives secures support for the training program after the provider is selected. Communication about the program and the provider will be active and thorough, and because employees will know that the program is supported by the company leadership, they will most likely be engaged throughout the different stages of the project.

Analyze the business needs driving the RFP

In order to be effective, an RFP must be based on clearly stated business needs. This rationale statement drives the selection process, which would otherwise be determined

solely by price or technology comparisons.

What is your company trying to achieve and what business needs are you trying to address with a language training project of this particular scale, at this specific point in time? Is it preparation for an expansion in your business scope, or an anticipated increase in the demand for your products or services? Is it the need to centralize the cost of language training, based on previous experiences of high administrative expenses? Or is it the desire to quantify the ROI of training over the long term instead of simply cutting training costs in the short-term?

It could be any one, or a combination of these, but what is important is that the decision-makers are in agreement, and that the statement of needs is included in the RFP itself. The statement of business needs, in effect, leads to the strategy for the entire language training program:

- the languages required¹
- the targeted learners (roles and functions where language training is to be prioritized)
- the type of learning content needed (e.g., authentic content in the target language, practice exams for standardized tests, grammar-focused or vocabulary-focused resources, etc.)
- the training delivery method (e.g., telephone lessons, classroom training, eLearning, blended learning, mobile learning, etc.)
- LMS integration

Formulate the criteria for evaluating providers

After senior executives have given their input and the driving factors for language

¹ English training or training in multiple languages?

While English remains the top need of companies seeking language training solutions (with around 90% of the language training budget usually allocated to English training), RFPs also sometimes include training in other languages. However, what should the focus of the RFP be? In answering this question, it is important to keep in mind your company's business needs, as well as the costs of deployment and change management. Because English training is a global need, deployment will be done on a wider scale and will most likely use a consistent strategy across different locations. Change management will be necessary. For other languages (e.g., in cases of employee expatriation), implementation will be customized based on location and individual employee circumstances.

training have been clarified, you then need to formulate your criteria for evaluating the submitted proposals.

Traditionally, these would include the provider's lesson delivery methods, quality of content, availability of testing tools, technological innovation, and pricing models. However, the increasing globalization of companies has added a new dimension to corporate language training demands. Learners need to learn at a faster pace than ever before, but with much flexibility in terms of scheduling of lessons and training paths. In addition, they need highly specialized content that is relevant to their industry and job roles. At the company-level, on the other hand, lies another challenge: a growing need for the seamless administration of training across offices in various locations worldwide.

Because of these changes, the following additional criteria for evaluating language training providers will undoubtedly grow in importance:

- ability to administer training programs globally
- experience in training corporate learners, whose learning needs are strongly business-oriented and whose learning goals may shift dynamically according to the demands of their job
- technological infrastructure for supporting the pedagogical and administrative aspects of the training program in an integrated way, from registration, lesson delivery, progress monitoring, to evaluation

A recommended template for an RFP document

Building on the strategy discussed in the previous section, what follows is a suggested template for an RFP to be sent to targeted providers. It includes an introduction of your company, the goals and scope of the language training program you are seeking, your instructions for the respondents to the RFP, and your pedagogical, administrative, and technical requirements.

I. Introduction

A. Company background

Provide a brief company overview to help familiarize providers with your business: your company history, size, locations, as well as products and services.

B. Project goals

State the business needs you want the language training program to address and describe how you expect the project to meet those needs. Provide an overall picture of the kind of supplier and range of services you are looking for. Finally, briefly state the number of users you expect to register, the training delivery methods you prefer, the level of customization you require, and if you are seeking only one or several suppliers.

C. Project timetable

Describe your planned schedule for the project. Break down the project into the major phases, such as pilot test, launch, evaluation and review, as well as possible extensions of the project scope (e.g., adding more users, adding more offices in different locations).

D. Profile of users

Provide a profile of the users of the language training program: the number of employees, their office locations, job roles, training needs, and general level of proficiency (if known). Just as important, describe any possible changes to job roles that might occur based on the employees' performance in the training program, and in

connection with the company's strategy.

II. Instructions to providers

A. Timetable

Outline the schedule for the provider selection process. An example is given below:

Distribution of RFP to potential providers	1 September
Deadline for questions from potential providers (to clarify points in the RFP, if necessary)	9 September
Transmittal of responses to questions	14 September
Deadline for proposals from providers	18 September
Invitation to shortlisted providers for live presentations or demos	20 October
Live presentations or demos	25 – 30 October
Selection of provider/s	8 November

B. Contact information

Provide the name and contact details of the person in charge of RFP compilation and management.

C. Format

State your preferred format for supplier proposals (Word doc, PDF, file size limit, etc.). It is useful to remember that restrictions on file size and number of pages give providers a good idea of the length of answers you expect, and shorter proposals make review and analysis easier on your side.

D. Other guidelines

State other guidelines that might apply to the selection process, such as confidentiality or the binding nature of the supplier's responses.

III. Requirements

Outline your pedagogical, administrative, and technical requirements. In this section, it is important for you to state your expectations for each of these requirements. This will help potential providers know whether or not they can meet your needs, and to write their response in a way that makes their capabilities clear to you. The less ambiguity in your requirements, the less ambiguity there will be in the responses you will receive, facilitating your selection process.

In cases where not all of your expectations may be met by a single supplier, your list of requirements is important in bringing about eventual changes in the market. As language training providers become more aware of what potential clients need, they will be led more and more to develop the right products and services to meet them.

Some examples of the abovementioned requirements are listed below.

A. Pedagogical requirements

1. Types of learning solutions (blended learning, virtual classrooms, telephone lessons, classroom training, eLearning, mobile learning)

Given your company's long-term strategy, the types of learners in your company, and your budget for language training, which types of learning solutions do you require? If you are considering blended learning, what combination of live lessons with the trainer and independent study by the learner would you consider to be ideal for your needs?

2. Training approaches and methods

What training approaches and methods best suit your company and your learners? Do you require fixed training paths or flexibility in the courses? Do your learners need training in specific sets of language skills (such as business writing, telephoning, etc.)? If you are selecting blended learning, what are your expectations for the skills to be taught from the live lessons and the skills to be learned through eLearning?

3. Content related to specific fields of business

Do your employees need training in general business English, or in English for your specific industry? Will you be requiring updated, authentic content from your industry? State your needs in terms of quantity of resources and frequency of updates.

4. Pre- and post-testing

How often do you want your learners to be tested? What will the test scores be used for (for employee evaluation, promotion, further training, etc.)?

5. Learner progress

What are your expectations for learner progress? What level of commitment can the potential provider expect from your employees, so that the provider and your learners can work toward a certain rate of progress?

6. Comparability of levels to recognized proficiency tests and frameworks

Do you prefer a specific language proficiency test or framework for comparing and interpreting the levels of your employees?

It is important, for this point, to be familiar with the tests or frameworks that will best suit to your needs. If you select a standardized test for level comparisons, you will need to know what the scores mean in terms of the learner's actual job functions. For example, does a TOEIC score of 450 mean that the learner can write effective emails? Conduct meetings? Make presentations? If you choose a proficiency framework, you will need to know how the provider's levels are linked to the proficiency descriptors of that framework.

Familiarity with these principles will help make sure that your expectations for your learners' progress are achievable and aligned with the communicative competence they need for their jobs.

7. English training or training in multiple languages

What is the focus of your RFP? Will it cover only English or multiple languages? Describe your needs.

8. Required language skills to be achieved

Do you require a certain level of proficiency in specific language skills, such as business writing, presentations, negotiations, etc? Explain them in this section, and if possible, describe your employees' current levels of proficiency in these skills.

B. Administrative requirements

1. Account management

Describe your company's internal organization for the administration of the language training program and state the related requirements for account management on both

global and regional/local levels.

2. HR reporting

Explain your needs for reporting: preferred formats, frequency, delivery methods, and scope.

3. Pricing

Describe how you would like the pricing schemes to be presented in the RFP and how you intend to evaluate them.

C. Technical requirements

1. Access to learning environment

State your preferences for your employees' access to their learning environment: what devices will be used for access, any security issues, privacy concerns, etc.

2. Learner portal customization

Describe any type of customization you might require. Customization could include displaying the company logo in the learning environment, or including your internal content to push corporate messages through the platform.

3. Integration with an LMS

If you have an existing LMS in place in your company and wish to integrate the provider's LMS into yours, state what information you want to integrate:

- User management (registration/provisioning)
- Single sign-on (SSO)
- Tracking and reporting

4. Availability of technical support

List your anticipated requirements for technical support, such as hours of availability and languages supported.

A recommended template for an RFP questionnaire

Because of the variety of products and services available, it is helpful for suppliers to respond to your RFP requirements in free form and through their own company brochures and materials. However, in order for respondents to understand your scoring system, and for you to be able to make equivalent comparisons across criteria, we also suggest that you ask them to answer specific questions in a table format.

Following is an example of an RFP questionnaire.

Category	Question	Answer	Additional Comments
Company overview	Company description Provide a brief description of your company, including the location/s of your offices.		
	Employees How many employees do you have? Indicate the number of employees per function (training, customer support, IT, content development, etc.).		
	Products Summarize your language training solutions.		
	Value-added services Apart from language training solutions, describe the value-added services you offer to clients.		
	Awards and recognition List any awards your company has received.		
	Future developments What do you consider the most important market trends for the next five years? What product improvements are you developing as a result of these?		

Contact details	Client references Provide the contact details of three client references.		
	Contact person Provide the contact details of your company's assigned contact person for this RFP.		
Pedagogical requirements: Overview	Types of solutions Describe each of your learning solutions for live learning, eLearning, blended learning, and mobile learning (indicate the supported devices).		
Pedagogical requirements: Teaching methods and approaches	Methodology Explain the language learning method/ approach underlying your learning solutions.		
	Specific solutions Describe specific solutions for targeting any of the four primary language skills that a learner may need to prioritize (speaking, listening, reading, or writing).		
Pedagogical requirements: Learning environment	Training path Describe the available training paths that learners may choose from. How is a training path chosen for a learner?		
	Job-specific customization Can your training programs be customized for learners to achieve specific language skills needed for their jobs? Give examples.		
	Field-specific customization Can your training programs be designed to focus on (client's specific field of business)? Describe how you do this.		

Pedagogical requirements: Learner's needs	Individualization Are learners able to select the most appropriate content for their goals? Are training paths flexible, to accommodate changes in learner needs?		
	Ease of use Explain how you make sure that learners have a user-friendly training experience, regardless of their first language or technical know-how. Do you have a search tool for content? How is content organized?		
	Motivation Describe your strategies for sustaining learner motivation (e.g., follow-up calls, progress charts, personalized notifications).		
Pedagogical requirements: Content	Creation of content Is your content original? Explain your process for content development. If your content is created externally, indicate your partners for content development and describe your working arrangements with them.		
	Types Describe the types of content you use for training (e.g., authentic content, videos, articles, etc.) Provide a breakdown of the total number per content type.		
	Availability Is the content available online 24/7?		
	Updates What is the frequency of your content updates?		
Pedagogical requirements: Proficiency measurement	Tools What tools or instruments do you use to measure English language proficiency? Do you administer a pre-test and a post-test to measure progress?		
	Level comparability Do you provide equivalences of levels to language proficiency frameworks such as the CEFR? Specify the tests and frameworks that your levels may be compared with.		

Pedagogical requirements: Trainers	Qualifications Describe the qualifications of your trainers. Describe the training they undergo after hiring.		
	Bilingual trainers Do you have bilingual trainers for low level learners? If so, what languages do you support?		
	Employment status Specify the employment status of your trainers (e.g., full-time, part-time, etc.).		
Administrative requirements	Account management Describe your account management process. Do you have a global account manager? Do you have local account managers to support the project in different locations?		
	Learner support Is a support team available for learners outside of their training time, to respond to inquiries or concerns?		
	Scheduling Specify your trainers' hours of availability. What is the process for scheduling live lessons?		
	HR reporting Describe the reporting process used for clients. Describe the tools available to monitor learners' usage, satisfaction and progress. Provide an example of a report.		
	Data protection What measures are in place to keep users' data private and confidential?		
	Transfer of eLearning licenses Do you allow the transfer of unused licenses between employees? Describe the conditions for such a transfer to be implemented.		

Technical requirements	Access to training environment Describe the technical requirements for learners to access their training environment.		
	Integration with face-to-face training If you provide a learning portal for distance learning, explain how it can be used by face-to-face trainers to guarantee seamlessness and continuity in blended learning.		
	Portal customization Describe the possibilities for the customization of the learning portal. Give examples of previous cases when this was done.		
	Additional hardware, peripheral devices, and plug-ins Specify any additional hardware, peripheral devices, or plug-ins that may be needed for any of your solutions.		
	Availability of support Do you provide technical support 24/7? In what languages is your technical support available?		

Conclusion

Through this document, we have tried to provide you with a tool to make the process for your RFP for language training services as effective as possible.

We encourage you to go through the necessary process of clarifying your company's vision and strategy for language training, obtaining the input and support of the key people in your organization, and accurately stating your requirements for language training solutions. It is your vision and your needs, clearly and comprehensively stated, that will push providers to develop the best possible products and services for language learners in corporations across the world.



About goFLUENT

goFLUENT offers distance Business English training combining eLearning, telephone lessons and written practice solutions. Each year, goFLUENT assists more than 100,000 employees in over 2,000 companies across the world to enable them to perform better in their international relations. goFLUENT is present in ten countries and has 560 employees, of whom 400 are trainers. NTT Communications (NTT Group) holds 30% of shares in the company. For more information, visit goFLUENT online at www.gofluent.com.

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