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Making English work as the company lingua franca

Editorial

Different levels of fluency in English may not lead to conflict in a team, but they can and do cause a lot of frustration, generate feelings of inadequacy and generally hamper team communication. In fact, some researchers list [trouble with accents and fluency as one of the 4 main challenges that multicultural teams have to meet](#), the other 3 being direct versus indirect communication, differing attitudes toward hierarchy and conflicting norms for decision-making.

Certainly, here in continental Europe, we have found that a high percentage of participants in cross-cultural seminars rate "Communicating in English" as one of the top 3 subjects they want the course to address.

Some months ago, I was helping a French team prepare for a kick-off meeting with American colleagues. When I pointed out that the slides were far too content-heavy, they replied that having full sentences on the screen was reassuring for them. Essentially, the French team was about to condemn the Americans to a full week of listening to people read their slides!

So is there any way to make communicating in the corporate language easier for everyone? Let's hear what Victoria Orange-Sibra has to say on the subject.



Róisín Saunier
Associate Partner

By Victoria Orange-Sibra

Cross-cultural consultant & language trainer

Have you ever found yourself not daring to ask a question in a business meeting as you're not sure of the right way to phrase it? Have you ever accepted a decision when you don't really agree for want of knowing how to voice your disagreement? This is the reality of all too many non-native speakers of English as that language continues to hold its place as the lingua franca of the business world.

In theory, having one language to communicate in can facilitate employee exchanges, allow everyone to understand the mission, vision and strategy of a company and reduce operating costs. In practice, however, there are all too often language breakdowns which prove costly in terms of wasted time and people underperforming.

I was recently asked to coach Florence, a French packaging manager in a multinational pet food company, who had found herself participating in monthly meetings held in English. The first meeting was a shock; she had trouble understanding most of what was said and what she managed to understand came from what was written on the presentation slides. She didn't dare ask any questions, or ask the English presenters to slow down or repeat, and was left consulting with other equally confused colleagues after the meeting to try and understand what had happened. She's now worried that she's going to miss important information, make a bad impression on her new boss and have to endure this situation every month.

We started the coaching sessions by trying to analyse the situation. Florence, as a newcomer to the team and a non-native speaker, felt unable to broach a language problem with her English colleagues especially when one of them was her boss! It also seemed that the non-native speakers were happy to get together after meetings to help each other fill in the gaps, rather than addressing the communication issues openly during meetings.

Actually, in my experience, non-native speakers tend to feel more comfortable using English if no native speakers are present. Also, lingua franca speakers appear to be mutually supportive of each other and keen not to highlight an individual's lack of comprehension. Hence, in this case, the after-meeting support.

What solutions did I develop with Florence for this situation? First of all, I suggested she ask for the agenda in advance and, if possible, the PowerPoint presentation so that we could anticipate the content of the meeting as much as possible and work on vocabulary. We prepared any questions she might wish to ask and to improve her listening skills, I suggested she listen to programmes on different websites for at least five minutes a day. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I suggested that in the future, she send a follow-up e-mail to presenters to confirm her understanding of what had been said or agreed on.

Making English work as the company lingua franca (contd)

We felt this was a non-threatening way to let Florence's English colleagues know that she was encountering communication difficulties.

Native speakers are losing out too

What about native speakers, you might be thinking? The fact that English is the common language of international business should be good news to them, shouldn't it? This is not always the case for as Carté and Fox point out in "Bridging the Culture Gap", one of Italy's top companies recently refused to have British or American consultants running their training courses, preferring Swiss or Dutch people who can speak English in a way that will be understood by all their staff.

And in cases like the one Florence described, native speakers are definitely missing out on the valuable contributions their non-native colleagues would have made to meetings if the conditions had been conducive to doing so. But if nobody tells Anglophones what they need to change, how can they be expected to know?

Languages classes aren't enough

The default response of most organizations who want to impose a single corporate language is to offer language classes to people who do not speak that language fluently. While this is certainly a good thing, further measures could be taken to bring about permanent change in how employees engage with each other in the course of a working day.

First, the company culture should foster an environment in which people are encouraged to speak openly about communication challenges and to share their ideas on how to overcome them. Many successful teams have already found clever strategies to overcome language hurdles that could be lifesavers for newly formed teams.

Second, especially following a merger or acquisition, it could be extremely productive to develop an internal guide to meetings or code of conduct for meetings that would address the communication practices that should be adopted and raise awareness on possible communication problems. (Send slides out one week before; appoint someone to summarize at regular intervals; plan meetings for early in the day when people are less tired and find it easier to concentrate.)

Third, a short training programme on communicating across cultures would benefit everyone. On the one hand, native speakers need to be made aware of the challenges their non-native colleagues face and to learn what they can do to avoid misunderstandings and failed communications. Exercises could be designed around:

- Replacing idiomatic expressions such as *in a nutshell* by simpler turns of phrase like *in a word*
- Avoiding metaphors and cultural references (e.g. vocabulary specific to a national sport) and abbreviations
- Controlling their tempo
- Rephrasing and summarizing to give audiences a chance to hear a point again that they may have missed first time round

Non-native speakers, on the other hand, would learn how effective communication depends in part on their knowing how and when to share their concerns with colleagues. Simply getting together to talk about the topic would be a catalyst for change after the training.

It's clear that to save time and money in business both native speakers and non-native speakers have to develop strategies for using English to communicate, as this is a trend that is not set to wane. As a member of the British Council so aptly put it, "In the 21st century, English seems set to play an ever more important role in world communications, international business, and social and cultural affairs."

Mini bio: Victoria Orange-Sibra



Victoria has been putting her skills to work as a consultant and trainer in intercultural interaction and international mobility for the past 10 years. After obtaining an MA specialising in interpreting and translating, Victoria decided to travel extensively to develop her language and cultural skills. British-born and residing in France today, she has also lived and worked in the USA, Russia and Spain. Victoria's passion for intercultural communication led to her PhD research on the topic. Her first-hand experience as an interpreter and trainer of interpreters in Russia further contributed to her deep understanding of the psychological and practical difficulties people encounter when communicating across languages.