

THE ESSENTIALS OF “INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH”

Even among native speakers of a language, assurance that the intended meaning of a word or phrase has been understood can sometimes be elusive. Winston Churchill, a noted historian and linguist in his own right, wryly commented that Britain and the United States were “two great countries separated by a common language.” Several years ago it was reported in the press that the late Indira Gandhi of India recalled her ambassador to the United Nations after listening to him deliver a speech (in English) and not being able to understand anything he had said! Americans often need lessons in “Australian” when encountering their distant cousins for the first time.

Such problems among English-speaking people are legion, but thanks to our common roots, they are rarely, if ever, insurmountable. How much more difficult then, is dealing with our non-native English-speaking colleagues, who have no such shared heritage?

It is a popular misconception that “everybody speaks English.” While a few European countries are known for their widespread understanding of English, many are not. And particularly in Asia, overall English comprehension is quite low, despite years of studying English as a foreign language. A representative résumé of a Korean or Japanese businessperson’s linguistic background, for example, might be something like the following. A college-educated Asian businessperson would start studying English in elementary school, continuing all the way through university. Those 10-plus years of formal education have enabled him or her to analyze the parts of speech in a Shakespearean play, or translate obtuse sentences from a Dickens novel. The system of foreign language *oral* study in those places has not, however, enabled him to

understand a simple conversation, let alone carry on one. To try to overcome these handicaps and to enhance business careers, many will try to study English a couple of times a week, after hours, and often at their own expense. As a result of these substantial efforts, the native English-speaking businessperson has the benefit of usually not having to learn a foreign language when doing business overseas.

However, there is a big difference between speaking (or writing) English as a second language, and knowing it as a native speaker. The problem is that a significant number of native English speakers doing business internationally assume that "he speaks English" means that "he speaks English, so I don't have to adjust the way I communicate at all." This erroneous assumption means that instead of aiding the communication process, they are actually making it worse because they are not helping the local person understand as much of the English communication as possible; even worse, they are probably contributing to miscommunication.

In order to avoid those problems, and allow the foreign businessperson to build upon the fundamental level of English of the non-native listener, it is important to take time during the preparation of a presentation, and of course, in all oral and written communications, to use "International English." This will facilitate communication and maximize understanding with non-native speakers. Adjusting one's English is the only controllable variable for the majority of people in most situations to minimize problems and maximize understanding in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication. At the end of the day, people do business with people they trust. If they can't understand you well, they won't trust you very well, either.

Here are some guidelines and exercises to help make yourself a speaker of International English. These are ten simple but fundamental points. After they are practiced and mastered, the list should be expanded by adding from one's own personal

experiences.

The first is "The Golden Rule" (also known as the "Forrest Gump Rule.") It is much harder for some than it sounds and requires diligence and practice:

1) *Speak slowly.* This doesn't mean talking in some exaggerated tone, as if to a half-deaf great-grandmother, or in some demeaning "Me Tarzan. You Jane." truncated speech. It means using clear, crisp speech at about 3/4 of normal conversation speed. The average native English speaker speaks about 150 words a minute. The average person with reasonable comprehension of a foreign language understands about 50-100 wpm. Do the math. Listening to speech at a native speaker's natural speed, non-native speakers will lose more than 30% of what is said. Also, keep in mind that most English as a Second Language ("ESL") studies focus on standard British received or standard mid-western American pronunciation. Speakers with heavy regional or national accents will have an even lower comprehension rate.

2) *Avoid long, convoluted or winding sentences.* State the subject clearly. Avoid tangents and complicated sentences. Be direct, to the point. Your objective is to use clear simple words to get your concepts across. In writing, try to keep sentences to no more than a line or line and a half. Break it up into two sentences if need be. The objective is to have the reader get the point easily and clearly.

3) *Use simple non-culturally based comparisons.* Examples often aid in the comprehension of difficult concepts. Comparisons to such things as building a car, flying a plane or getting into a good school are probably universally understood in the same way. However, things like getting married, gift-giving or family relations often carry quite different nuances and messages in different cultures. So choose your analogies carefully.

4) *Write down all numbers above 10,000, particularly in Asia.* Asian counting is based on the Chinese numerical system of counting by *thousands*, not the Western “hundreds” base. Western counting uses the comma as the measurement unit or dividing point. For example, “123,123,123” is read “one-hundred-twenty-three” million “one-hundred-twenty-three” thousand, “one-hundred-twenty-three.” In Japanese and most other Chinese-influenced Asian languages, the commas are used only by common international convention but are unrelated to how the number is actually read. In the same example, “123,123,123” would be read as “one hundred million, two thousand three hundred and twelve ten thousand, three thousand, one hundred, twenty three.” Sound confusing? It is. Mutually.

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