

THE ESSENTIALS OF “INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH” (Part 2)

Continuing from last month's column, here are the last six of the ten essential points of using "International English."

5) *Avoid negative questions/ tag questions.* English is somewhat unusual in that the framing of this kind of question doesn't really impact the answer; it merely reflects the speaker's guess at what the answer might be. (That in itself is an interesting linguistic idiosyncrasy.) Thus, "Are you hungry yet?" and "Aren't you hungry yet?," though reflecting the speaker's presumptions, elicit the same response in English ("Yes, I am," for example). These are two completely different questions in many other languages and will elicit different answers. "Yes, I am hungry," and "No, (*what you said is not true because*) I am hungry."

Tag questions ("You aren't tired, *are you?*") can be equally baffling, especially in Asian languages, since the listener isn't sure which verb to respond to. One is likely to get all kinds of variations – "No, I am," "Yes, I am," "No, I'm not," "Yes, I'm not," (and occasionally, "Yes, I can"), but unfortunately, you'll never be really sure whether the person is or isn't tired. It's best to stick with simple, straightforward questions (e.g. "Are you tired?"). That way you can be certain, "No, I'm not" means exactly that. Remember that old song, "Yes, We Have No Bananas Today"?

6) *Avoid combining questions with "OR".* Many languages have different grammatical ways of asking "or" and many just use two different questions. In English, it is common to drop the subject and join the two sentences, as in, "Should we continue working or (*should we*) take a break for dinner?" It is

especially confusing if the two questions are seemingly unrelated. The common response will often be a single "Yes" (or "No") based on either a guess at the question or what they remembered best. Better take the slightly longer – but clearer – approach and ask two distinct questions one at a time.

7) *Avoid idiomatic expressions.* English idiomatic expressions are usually cited by students around the world as the single most difficult aspect about learning English. Two seemingly unrelated words with independent meanings sometimes separated in the sentence by other words, are combined to give those two words together a new, unique meaning. Further confusing the matter is that the result of this combination could be one of several different meanings! For example, "He'll just *make* any old excuse *up*." The expression "make up" is separated by 3 words, and when combined, means "invent, fabricate".

It's hard for non-native speakers listening to a conversation or presentation to immediately piece together that meaning, especially when "make up" could also mean "cosmetics", "offset," "contribute", or "reconcile," among other things. By the time the listener figures out what the meaning should be, the speaker is usually further along in the conversation and a lot has been missed, thus laying a foundation for miscommunication.

The solution is to practice substituting the appropriate standard word for idiomatic expressions such as take up, take in, make up, make out, break down, fall out, look over, check out, etc. Look your presentation over and weed them out. (Or expressed in International English, "Review your presentation and remove those idiomatic expressions.") Importantly, analyze your own speech patterns to be more conscious of using them with non-native speakers. This will automatically trigger a little internal alarm when you do use them and will allow you to quickly add the standard word as a clarifier. The same advice goes for eliminating slang or sports expressions.

8) *Avoid jokes.* A standard rule in Western (particularly

American) business is to use humor to “break the ice.” While it is a universal axiom in business in any culture to try to establish a rapport with your counterparts, telling jokes or using humor is *not* universal. First, humor simply does not translate well. You run the risk of having to try to explain the joke over and over and embarrassing your counterpart because s/he doesn’t understand. Worse, your jokes might result in the listeners taking offense. And in many cultures, the use of humor in a serious situation, such as when one is an honored guest or speaker, can be interpreted as belittling the importance of the occasion, and thus insulting to the hosts.

9) *Learn metric.* (This is a special note for Americans.) At least memorize converted values. Virtually the entire rest of the world uses metric. Except for our cousins in the Old Empire who may retain memories of the Imperial Weights and Measures System, most of the rest of the world won’t know feet from inches or pounds from ounces. (If you’re completely unfamiliar with metric, start by learning to think in terms of “yards” rather than feet and then simply say “meters” instead of “yards.” This will greatly facilitate comprehension of area measurements and will enable you to take your first metric step almost painlessly. In writing, always include the correct metric equivalent.)

10) *Be polite – use names properly.* Many cultures and languages have strict norms for when and how to use given and family names. In Japan, for example, Japanese colleagues of twenty years still refer to one another as “Tanaka-san” and “Suzuki-san.” They may not even be sure of their colleague’s given name. French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, and German, among many other languages, have customs and etiquette for calling people by the formal or informal word for “you”. Many cultures and languages also use a different order of names, such as using the family name first. (You can always avoid confusion by saying “given name” and “family name” instead of

“first” and “last” name, since it doesn’t always apply the way you might think.) Many Americans try to learn what their counterpart’s given name is and then use it, under the mistaken notion that they are “just being friendly.” It can be harsh or rude in many cultures to be called a name by a stranger that only a few intimate friends and relatives use. Worse, don’t give a “nickname” to someone just because *you* can’t pronounce his or her name easily. They often have just as hard a time with your name.

11) *Speak slowly and clearly.* (No, there’s no editing mistake. I’ve included it twice, since it’s so important.)

These are the essential points of using “International English,” most of which are equally applicable to both written and spoken communication. Of course there are more! But by following these ten simple steps, the effectiveness of your communication with your non-English-speaking colleagues and customers will immediately and dramatically improve. How much easier is that compared with having to learn a foreign language! This will have a positive impact on your business and your personal relationships and decrease time-consuming – and potentially disastrous – misunderstandings.