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.

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.

to be continued…

EXPATRIATE POSITIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY (Conclusion)

Besides the very high cost of maintaining an expat and family overseas, there are two other developments that have contributed to the reduction of expat roles in recent times: communication technology and the quality of local talent.

As little as twenty years ago, the telex and fax were the most common means of document communication. Telephone monopolies created exorbitantly high international phone rates making conference calls prohibitively expensive. Restrictive airline reciprocity agreements kept fares high. Communication options were limited and slow and the need for someone on-the-scene to report, analyze and advise was high.

New technology has brought us to a 24-hour-a-day workday with nearly instant communication capabilities from almost anywhere. Improved, expanded and competitive air travel options have brought down the cost of flying. International texting, mobile phones, email, video-conferencing, and faster translation services utilizing modern communication technology, have all helped to keep the foreign-based corporate headquarters management in close touch with their colleagues and partners in foreign markets.

Importantly, the wired world now provides customers (end-users, subsidiaries or distributors) with knowledge of worldwide markets and competitive trends. They are no longer exclusively reliant on the home office's dissemination of consolidated competitive and market info from around the world. (And as perhaps an unintended consequence they are also less prone to accept HQ's own filtered versions of competitive news.) The important role of "conduit of information" that the expat used to play has been largely obviated by technology.

Foreign subsidiaries and distributors are often managed more effectively by good local managers whose strength is understanding the local business practices, the competitive environment and customer needs. Over the last decades, the pool of well-educated local talent has greatly expanded, many of them with exposure to foreign practices or with expat experience themselves, combined with good language abilities. It is difficult to find an expat with the requisite skills to manage such situations as well as, let alone better than, a local manager.

So then, returning to the original question: "Does an expatriate position still make sense in the 21st Century?"

Large, multinational companies are not the focus here. Virtually all of them have the resources in place to handle the requirements of an expat position and make it an enjoyable and rewarding experience for the manager as well as his/her family, which in turn is a return on investment for the company. The positions are usually part of a well-established executive development program. The 21st Century is a global world, and global experience cannot be anything but an important part of career development.

Neither is the focus on the personal positive enrichment gained from the experiences of an expat position, either for the employee or the family. This benefit is virtually beyond question. (And for the children of expats who are able to live overseas for a good part of the “language window” period, they will also gain language skills that will last the rest of their lives and will better prepare them for their own future careers. The subject of “language window” and other communication concepts will be discussed in future articles.)

Our focus rather has been on business decisions by small and medium-sized American companies without those resources and established programs. For them, it very much depends on the particular situation of each company, their objectives in each market, and the skills and background of the people they choose to send on assignment. Misunderstandings or miscalculations in any of those areas can have results ranging from an ineffectual expat to a downright disaster. Sending a skilled expert won’t guarantee a successful expat mission if he or she alienates everyone in the environment or angers the decision makers (government or industry) by insensitivity, ignorance or inappropriate behavior.

The right person chosen for an expat position can build valuable relationships with overseas colleagues and customers, provide unique expertise to strengthen the company’s presence in the local market, and greatly reduce costly problems due to miscommunication. A successful international assignment will provide the company with a more well-rounded and enlightened manager better able to think outside the box since his/her insights and analytical skills will now have been greatly broadened and will no longer be limited to just the narrow range of a singular domestic regional experience.

However, with costs having escalated so much in the last decade, no company, regardless of size, is immune to the burden of maintaining expatriates, so each staffing decision must be weighed carefully. The conclusion common to both sides of the argument may be this: if the requirements for an international position cannot be met by a well-qualified local candidate, and if the objectives of the position are well-defined and require the unique expertise, guidance and skills that only a non-local hire can bring, then the expat position is justified. Further, if the company has any serious intention of developing and being competitive in the international marketplace, it is vital to their business success to develop and maintain a body of equally knowledgeable and skilled international managers equal to the task. And since the U.S. no longer has the monopoly on good ideas, good products or high standards, those international experiences will enhance domestic competitiveness as well.

THE CASE FOR EXPATS

Remember those old adventure movies that have a Western family living in luxury in some exotic location? Gorgeous house in beautiful surroundings. Private nannies for the kids. Car and driver at Madame’s disposal. Leisurely power lunches with the movers and shakers of the local business and political communities. White jacket and bow tie cocktail parties and dinners with the rich and famous. Regrettably, that lifestyle is long gone (if it ever really existed, except for all but a handful.) Unfortunately, a certain anachronistic image does remain in the minds of many of the homebound – ask any expatriate manager today. The reality is quite the opposite: a fast-paced, highly stressful and competitive environment with 18-hour days, six days a week, courtesy of local and home-office demands enforced by overnight courier services, email, text messages, video-conferencing, mobile phones and the internet.

There has been a definite trend in recent years towards reducing – and even eliminating altogether – the number of expats in favor of local nationals, for financial and other reasons. But has today’s global business environment really changed so much as to permit the elimination of the expatriate manager entirely? Does an expatriate still make good business sense in the age of corporate downsizing, restructuring and cheap electronic communication capabilities?

There is no definite “one size fits all” answer since circumstances vary between industries, and even among companies within the same industry based on their size, market objectives and extent of local operations, if any. To help understand if it is appropriate for your situation, let’s take a look at some of the main advantages and disadvantages of expatriate positions, starting here with the “pros.”

There are many traditional reasons for sending and maintaining an expat in a foreign country: providing a “face” for the home corporate office in important markets; providing unique technical expertise; providing unfiltered (or at least an alternate) assessment of marketing and other information sent to the home office; ensuring the adherence to corporate procedures and policies; and developing the managerial and international skills of the manager.

Underlying all these potential objectives are two of the most significant advantages: *communication* and *relationship building*. Even within one’s own culture and language, relying exclusively on email and telephone to maintain an important relationship with a customer or staff is almost unheard of. And communicating across cultural and linguistic barriers is so much more difficult, as any experienced international manager knows. Yet how much of an international business relationship is entrusted to people who never, or only rarely, meet their overseas customers and have not established a personal relationship?

The expat’s on-the-spot involvement and expertise raise the quality of communication, which helps to overcome those hurdles and avoid costly miscommunication problems. Let's face it, the quality of English communication emanating from the average clerk in a distributorship or subsidiary is apt to be less than stellar. Equally, the general level of foreign language ability of the average clerk at the home office is probably zero. It is thus understandable that the home office's expertise may be insufficient to accurately discern the meaning behind the often convoluted English produced by graduates of overseas foreign language education systems. Compounding that is the almost universal refusal of native English-speaking business people to learn and use "international English" in their communications, treating both native and non-native speakers to the same style of memos, bulletins and directives. (In the U.S., this is tendency is reinforced by the ever-present paranoia about deviating from the sanitized phrases approved by the legal department.)

As a bridge between the two camps, the expat can explain the meaning behind the foreign-generated English memos to the home office (or clean it up before it's sent out) and, conversely, break down the corporatespeak and legal babble for the local office. How much is this worth? It is easy to calculate the cost of problems, project delays and lost customers, but much more difficult to quantify exact figures for problems that were avoided, processes that went more smoothly, or customers who remained satisfied due to better communication. As an example, a recent study* indicated that US hospitals, lose US$12 *billion* a year due to "poor communication." While admittedly that comparison is a slight stretch since many factors are involved in that specific example, nonetheless taking even a fraction of that number and multiplying it across all companies in all industries doing business internationally, and adding additional linguistic, cultural and logic barriers into the equation, we will arrive at a pretty big number.

An expat with good credentials from the home office provides another valuable link: knowing *who* to contact about *what.* Common to all businesses is the organizational chart, which shows all the official hierarchies and reporting channels within the company. And common to all those same companies is the separate reality of how the organization *actually* works. Directing the flow of information to the appropriate people saves time and gets things done efficiently. Even in Western businesses, a friend in the right places can help move that order out in record time or get that approval routed *posthaste*. This is no less true in the local office in a foreign country, where getting something done requires a good knowledge of how the system works and where the real bottlenecks lie.

…to be continued

* "U.S. hospitals waste $12B annually due to poor communication" (Healthcare Finance News, March 10, 2014)

The Least Corrupt Country in the World is…

Transparency International is a Berlin-based organization whose mission is "to stop corruption and promote transparency, accountability and integrity at all levels and across all sectors of society." They publish the annual "Corruption Perception Index." This index ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. According to Transparency International's metrics, "a country or territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 – 100, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and 100 means it is perceived as very clean. A country's rank indicates its position relative to the other countries and territories included in the index. This year's index includes 177 countries and territories."

So, the United States tops list of "Least Corrupt Countries in the World…?"

April Fool!

The United States didn't even make the Top Ten. We're Number 19, just above Uruguay and right below Japan. Respectable? Sure. But 18 other countries are even more respectable…

Take a look at the full list: http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results. You can also download a copy of their full report, loaded with interesting comparisons and groupings.

Just a little April Fool from an international perspective…

COUNTING THE HOLES Pt. 2: Important Lessons

There are some important lessons to be learned from "counting holes" (see the previous post, *Counting the Holes, Part One).*

First, Japanese (and many other high-tech oriented countries') customers pay very strict attention to quality. These local quality standards and expectations may be higher or broader – or both – from what is customary in the U.S. This can be "news" to many engineering and hi-tech firms that might be used to dealing with just meeting minimum ISO (International

Standards Organization) requirements. After all, these specifications are just the minimum specifications. *Expectations* can often be higher in many countries.

Taking Japan as an example again, there is a deeply engrained expectation of high quality in the manufacturing realm, which can be seen as a manifestation of Japanese cultural values, where mastery of perfection in an art (or anything else) is always held in the highest regard. Almost all Japanese manufacturers have at their core the "zero defect" philosophy built on the statistical analysis methods pioneered by American statistician W. Edwards Deming after WWII. Deming is regarded as having had more impact upon Japanese industry than any other non-Japanese person. He was honored in Japan in 1951 with the establishment of the Deming Prize, today considered the most prestigious and famous industrial award in Japan. No analysis of the rise and success of Japanese industry and products will fail to give W.E Deming his due credit. (Today his work is carried on by the Deming Institute.) Yet despite that, his concepts and philosophy began to gain some modicum of recognition and adoption in the U.S. only shortly before his death, with the creation of the U.S. Malcolm Baldrige Award in 1987. Even today, few Americans have heard of this award.

Deming's industrial and design practices have evolved into the "zero defect" approach virtually all Japanese companies build into their manufacturing processes, and in turn, Japanese customers build into their buying expectations. By contrast, much of the U.S. manufacturing sector still bases its design processes on the concept of "minimum percent of defects." "Zero defects" is very hard to achieve, and no matter how good and advanced the manufacturer, some defect will occur. Rigorous application of a "minimal defects" approach will yield minimal defects, a goal much easier to achieve. The gap in results between the two approaches, at least for high quality manufacturers around the globe, can be small, maybe even the same. But the gap in *philosophy* is huge. The achievement of say, a 4% defect rate against a target of a 5%, would be cause for celebration (and maybe corporate bonuses) according the minimal defect approach, but for criticism and increased pressure for process improvement under a "zero defects" approach.

This difference with Japan (and other advanced-technology countries) can set up smaller U.S. companies for an unwelcome surprise when confronting customers who are demanding different and very high technical and quality standards that they are not used to domestically. Engineers, marketers and customer service, among other groups in a company, often balk at the level of technical detail, commitment to quality, and customer satisfaction demanded by many of their overseas customers, their Japanese customers being the prime target of complaint.

Another area of difference in quality perspective with many international customers is that they are also concerned with the *appearance* of the product, not just its performance. When products do not meet stated specifications – even cosmetic or minor ones – many international customers take it just as seriously. For Japanese consumers, for example, "Scratch and Dent Discounts" are not a consideration. Customers demand perfection.

The implications for US manufacturers are that product shipments that consistently contain out-of-spec products or visual imperfections will erode confidence in the manufacturer. This lack of confidence inevitably filters down to the field sales force level, and will eventually negatively affect the sales of the product.

This brings up another point about specifications. US companies tend to be very legalistic and narrow in their interpretation of contracts and product specifications based on U.S norms. Recognize that a consistent pattern of customer complaints about “poor quality” or “frequent trouble” is an important information stream about potential problems in product quality in a certain environment. Use your customers’ or distributor’s incoming inspection process as an extension of your own quality control. (We’ll return to this subject in a future column.)

Your international customers’ input is an important source of feedback to improve the quality of your product and your process to meet consumer preferences and expectations, in addition to environmental demands that may not be present in the U.S. domestic market. When they hold your feet to the fire, don’t ask, “What difference does it make?” and try to avoid raising your quality standards. See what can be done to satisfy the world’s most demanding customers. You’ll end up building a reputation for quality around the world. Why not reap the benefits of having somebody else count the holes for you?