

# Working Across Language Barriers

**When working with international customers, clients, and partners, whether virtually or face-to-face, the language barrier is often the first and most tangible challenge you encounter. While English is widely spoken in business circles, often extremely well, there are tips and suggestions for improving communication with all levels of non-native English speakers.**

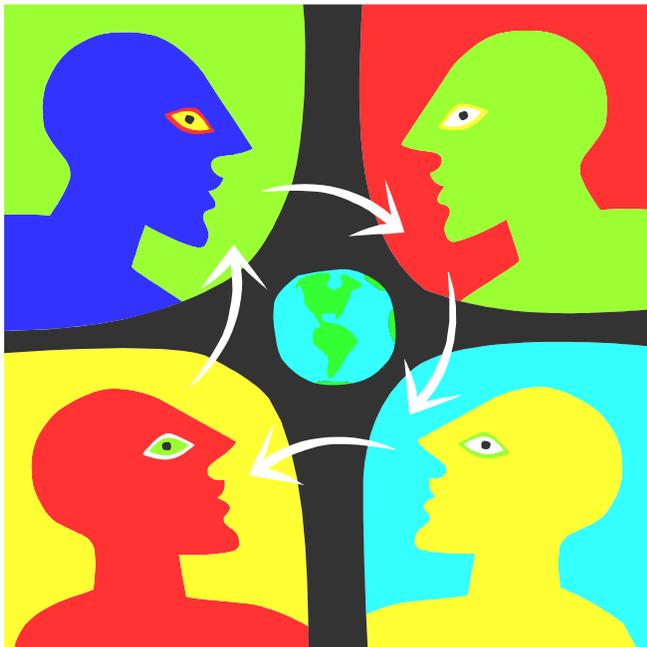
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## Understanding foreign language learners

It is important to understand the process of learning a foreign language because it gives you insight into how people progress from the most basic communication to the most elaborate and fluent.

In general, there are 4 principal levels of non-native English speakers (NNES):

- **Beginner:** Understands the most basic phrases and is able to generate short simple sentences. This may also be referred to as “survival” English.
- **Intermediate:** An expanded vocabulary and understanding of grammar allows for more complex phrases and actual conversation, within fairly narrow limits.
- **Advanced:** A thorough grasp of most grammar rules combined with a very broad vocabulary make conversation more precise and more fluid. While there are still limits to their abilities, these limits cause few challenges.
- **[Near]-Native:** Nearly indistinguishable from a native speaker in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure, the only clue may be their accent and/or mildly awkward phrasing at times.



The mastery of a foreign language typically progresses from passive processes (reading and listening) to active processes (writing and speaking). Many NNES, for example, will have little difficulty in reading a text but may have great difficulty in discussing the text or recreating the text verbally. The obvious business implication is that written communications will most likely be understood much more easily, quickly, and thoroughly than verbal communication.

While listening skills are often developed earlier than robust speaking skills, be careful not to assume that NNES’s listening skills far exceed their speaking skills; there is usually some level of correlation between the two.

It is often most difficult to communicate with those learners who are in the Intermediate to Advanced stages because you may be uncertain what they may or may not be understanding. With beginners, your expectations are fairly low and you know to communicate as simply as possible. With Near Native speakers, you can be certain that communication is clear unless you are specifically questioned about something. With those in between, however, you must make a conscious effort to continually judge whether the communication has been effective.

Any tips and suggestions for communicating with non-native English speakers (NNES) should obviously be compared against the skill level of the NNES. For example, few of the tips suggested here are appropriate for communicating on the high level at which most Near-Native speakers operate.

## Understanding oral communication

When having a conversation with a NNES, whether over the phone or face-to-face, it is possible to improve communication by keeping certain strategies in mind.

Often times, a NNES may not be able to generate the terms they would like to convey but will immediately recognize them when they are suggested to him/her. To aid in your comprehension when speaking to a NNES, it is helpful to be a “walking thesaurus”, running through the options for what they may wish to be communicating. For example, someone who says, “The paper is reviewing by the chef,” may actually wish to say, “The document is being reviewed by management.” Being able to interpret oral communication in this way can make even the most basic conversation more fruitful. Be cautious, however, not to constantly finish NNES’s sentences for them in an attempt to “speed along” the conversation.

Assuming a beginner/intermediate NNES is able to communicate the basic part of his message to you, you should recognize key concepts such as a “need”, a “want”, or a general question. Probing with simple follow up questions should help you reach a level of clarity.

If speaking face-to-face, never be afraid to seek out an informal interpreter from around you who can help the communication process if necessary.

## Reflective or active listening

Many of the principles of reflective or active listening may also be beneficial when dealing with NNES. Some of these principles include:

- (a) In addition to listening for content, listen for feelings which may help you understand what the NNES is attempting to communicate.
- (b) Be patient and allow the speaker to express themselves without interruption.
- (c) Be cautious not to put words in the NNES's mouth.
- (d) Reflect back your understanding so that the speaker is confident you are grasping the discussion.

## Leveraging an understanding of accents

Accent decoding is often needed when you encounter someone who has not had extensive language training and who still maintains a very strong accent from their native language. Understanding the source of the accent (basic pronunciation rules of the NNES's native language) may help you recognize words more immediately and add to your comprehension, making the interaction more fluid and effective, regardless of the NNES's level. While experience is often the easiest way to learn to decode an accent, language-specific resources with pronunciation clues such as those found in a "Basic Portuguese" book may also be helpful.

## How do we simplify our speech?

To aid NNES in their comprehension of our spoken communications, there are various aspects we should consider.

Imagine yourself in a situation where you are talking with a highly educated professor and are seeking to understand something about which she is an expert. You will appreciate if the professor makes a concerted effort to explain things without using jargon you may be unfamiliar with, and without invoking concepts which may be beyond your current level of understanding.

### *Be cognizant of the **complexity** of your language:*

**DIFFICULT:** "I would have thought that by now you would have been able to finish the necessary documentation."

**BETTER:** "I thought you would have finished the documentation we needed by now."

### *Be cognizant of **colloquialisms**:*

**COLLOQUIAL:** "We are way too pressed for time to be spinning our wheels like this!"

**BETTER:** "We don't have the time to be this unproductive."

Interestingly, many larger English words with Latin roots are similar across many western languages and are actually easier to understand than shorter, more idiomatic English variants. For example, "supervise" rather than "oversee", "reproduction" rather than "copy", and "responsible for" rather than "charged with". When simplifying your speech, do not always search for the shortest word but perhaps the most standard word.

While it is always helpful to speak more slowly and clearly, even in conversations among native speakers, do not overemphasize each and every word for this is usually received as insulting and is rarely constructive.

If it is difficult for you to slow down your conversational speed, try to incorporate more pauses or repeat, with other words, what you have already said. Do not be afraid to make your speech somewhat redundant, by using synonyms and rephrasing. Most likely the NNES will be glad to be given a second chance to catch up with what you are saying without interrupting the flow of the conversation. In addition, this practice is often a confidence booster for the NNES because it provides him/her with the feeling of participating in a fluid conversation.

## Understanding written communications

Written communications are often more complete and understandable than spoken communications because the NNES is able to reflect on her word choice and structure without the immediate pressure of performance. Unfortunately, the major drawback is that immediate feedback loops which allow you to seek clarification if the written text is not completely clear are unavailable.

As in speech, it is usually easier for a NNES to confirm what they would have liked to have said, if they were more fluent and had a greater command of the language. For example: in the case of e-mail, a NNES will usually appreciate a clarification response e-mail from you re-stating your perception of the important points.

In our own language, we often judge others' politeness based on complex structures or use of subtleties that are used to reflect warmth, openness, and kindness. For example, consider the following 2 sentences; which seems abrupt and "less polite"?

*I was hoping you would have a moment to help explain the memo which was sent this morning.*

*I need you to explain this morning's memo.*

It is important to remember that a NNES using the latter is likely limited by vocabulary. It is thus harder for him/her to convey subtleties, even though they are easily able to convey such subtlety in their *own* language. Thus, try to refrain from making judgments about the tone of the text of a NNES, and be careful when trying to read meaning into the way a text may be "abruptly" worded.

## How do we simplify our writing?

Although there are numerous strategies for improving and clarifying writing, the following suggestions are specific to helping a NNES's comprehension of our written communications.

- When writing, use short simple phrases with uncomplicated sentence structures. The more elaborately you write, the more difficult it will likely be for the recipient to understand.
- Avoid slang and idioms – Americans rely heavily on sports analogies.
- Write out or explain abbreviations and acronyms.

### **Are there other general tips, tools, or best practices for working across language barriers?**

- Learn to adjust your communication styles (both verbal and written) depending on the recipient. Not all NNES need you to simplify things – only those with a lower level of comprehension.
- Humor rarely translates well and you will be most successful by avoiding it entirely unless you are sure that the NNES has fairly advanced English skills. Even then, what is considered “humor” differs greatly by culture and your humorous comments may simply be interpreted as odd or inappropriate.
- Refrain from correcting a NNES who is attempting to communicate with you. Instead, use the correct term or format in your response.  
*\*Be wary of anyone who asks you to correct their English “if they make a mistake”. Aside from potentially being a barrier to communication and time consuming on your behalf, even the most eager learners soon get frustrated at constant corrections, often to the detriment of the relationship.*
- Remember, if you are trying to decipher speech or text from someone who is attempting to communicate *from* a foreign language which you don’t speak, they have already made a significant effort at communicating. The onus is now on you to make an equal effort at understanding.
- Any 2<sup>nd</sup> language learner will tell you that phone conversations are the most difficult form of communication because of the lack of non-verbal clues and the inability to see lips moving. Phone conversations should be well-paced and clear. Even advanced NNES may have difficulty understanding someone who does not consciously attempt to speak clearly.
- SPEAKING LOUDLY has never helped anybody understand a foreign language better. However, speaking more loudly and clearly, especially in a noisy environment or on the telephone, may be helpful.
- A common tactic for intermediate to advanced speakers who wish to clarify something they seem to have missed is to ask a question using words they did understand. For example, “What was that about the deadline?” indicates that they understood there was a point regarding deadlines but may have missed the full meaning. This is a good sign that you need to focus on your clarity and speed.
- Get in to the habit of following-up phone conversations with a short e-mail, if possible, clarifying key points or necessary action items.
- In the case of near-native speakers, it is important to remember that although they speak English extremely well, this does not mean that they are as “culturally native”. One’s ability to speak English is NOT necessarily an indicator that they understand doing business the “American way;” such presumptions can lead to significant miscommunications.
- Simplifying written and verbal communications does *not* mean you should avoid pleasantries and “get right to the point”. This direct style of communication, while theoretically more efficient, is not always the best way to communicate with someone from a different culture

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