
Communicating Across Language Barriers

By Lothar Katz

One of my favorite humorous video clips is a Berlitz commercial for their language learning programs.

At a German Coast Guard radio station: a young guy gets a short briefing by an older colleague on how to operate the station and is then left on his own. Soon after, a voice comes in over the air, in English:

*"Mayday! Mayday!" ... "Hello, can you hear us? Can you hear us?"
"We're sinking! WE ARE SINKING!"*

The young guy, little more than a kid and unsure what to do, eventually pushes his microphone button. He speaks with that 'classic' German accent:

"Hallo!" ... "Zis is ze Djerman Coast Gard."

"WE'RE SINKING, WE'RE SINKING!"

"Wot are you zinking about?"

Funny. (Thanks, Berlitz!) To be fair, the Germans might not be the best targets for this kind of fun anymore, since the average command of English improved considerably in the country over the past 20 years. But is there anyone doing global business without a few similar experiences: of language barriers introducing substantial misunderstandings into the communication?

Are you a native English speaker? Then you surely must know what I am talking about here. Oh, you aren't? Congratulations! You probably have an advantage, at least when communicating with other non-native users of the language. In my regular inquiries on the subject, many non-native speakers report that they find it easier to listen to a French, Brazilian, or Pakistani person speaking English than to an American or Brit. That's because native speakers tend to talk much faster, mumble syllables, and use lesser-known words and slang.

The following list shows a few suggestions that may be useful for both groups. These strategies help when communicating across language barriers, no matter whether it is theirs, yours, or both:

- **Speak slowly and pronounce word endings clearly.** Native speakers tend to find this harder than non-native ones since speaking slowly is often considered boring. Don't fall into this trap. Asking a counterpart to slow down may help make their accent less of an issue, by the way.
- **Keep it simple.** Avoid slang words, colloquialisms, and sports expressions. Use the simplest words and phrases you can think of. If you fear they might not exactly say what you are trying to convey, remind yourself that so much is lost in translation anyway that keeping your points simple is your best, and sometimes only, chance to get your message across.

- **Repeat yourself.** Studies show human communication being only 60 percent effective. That's face-to-face, between speakers of the same language! When communicating across languages, maybe without even seeing each other, the percentage goes down much further. In other words, it is smart to repeat what you already said (in different words; orally and in writing; etc.). Rule of thumb for important messages: Three is a charm!
- **Visualize and ask others to visualize.** While our preferences may be different, most humans take in visual information much better than orally or in writing. Remote communication benefits greatly from using graphs, flow charts, and other ways to visualize important concepts.
- **Use email or (better!) chat to clarify questions.** Most non-native speakers of English read and write the language better than they are able to speak it. Email helps but tends to substantially slow down any dialog. Consider using chat instead, as it allows for near-instantaneous written communication.
- **Ask your counterparts to summarize their understanding.** This may seem potentially awkward but will be well received if done respectfully. Saying something that sounds close to "Hey you, I'm asking you to summarize what I just said because I don't think you're very smart" obviously creates a huge risk to the relationship. However, if the message is "You and I are both communicating in a language that is foreign to us, which is hard. I appreciate your part in it. We all know the decision we are discussing here is very important. Would you mind summarizing your understanding so we can verify whether we both share the same one?", there is no such risk and your counterpart will welcome the opportunity for clarification. After all, he/she also wants the communication to work well!

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