



Getting Your Message Across in International Presentations

James writes about the importance of adapting your English when presenting to people who use it as a second language.

As business becomes more global, we speak to an ever-wider range of nationalities and people. This is true in the multi-nationals, but also in the professions, and the public sector. It gives us greater opportunities for wider relationships and more business. Increasingly, the world is using English, and this appears to give us, as native speakers, great advantages.

However, there are dangers as well. As native English speakers, very often we think we can go into a presentation without having to prepare for that extra element - the English language - that our Japanese, German or Spanish counterpart has to when they make a presentation in English. In addition, we may forget to prepare for different cultural perceptions; because we use English, we often expect the cultural context to be ours as well.

The reality is that we need to prepare for business encounters with non-native speakers of English both linguistically and culturally. Take the example of a medium-sized pharmaceutical company in North Italy we worked with several years ago. They supplied medicines to the Italian market, and the only language spoken by employees was Italian. The company was taken-over in the mid-nineties by an Anglo-American multinational with the European headquarters in London. The new British general manager arrived and called a meeting for all management, to set out the new strategy. The employees understood little of the presentation, because he spoke fast idiomatic English. They left the auditorium in a state of panic, knowing that in future, they would be reporting in English. The presenter had not adapted his language to his audience.

This is not an isolated example. We hear similar stories whenever we train non-native speakers who deal with native English speakers. The young French aeronautical engineer on a management development programme with British and Irish fellow students, felt isolated as he struggled to keep up with their language. The group of French purchasing managers for a Franco-German pharmaceutical company had enormous difficulty understanding their British counterpart when he presented to them. The Japanese manager of a Japanese electrical engineering company could not understand the Scotsmen on his team. The list goes on.

We may ask: "*Why don't they learn better English*"? The answer is, they are doing so. Companies and individuals invest heavily in English training, and there are increasing numbers of managers around the world using English daily. Our foreign counterparts are meeting us more than half way by speaking our language. They use, however, a different form of English from the native speaker: 'Offshore English' (OE), is a practical, direct language used as a business tool throughout the world. It cuts out the idioms, expressions, indirectness, phrasal verbs and colloquial phrases that we use to add life, interest and magic to our language.

OE is growing rapidly. It enables managers from a Franco-Japanese automotive company to communicate effectively, or executives from an Italian-German manufacturing company to solve complex problems together. Frequently, non-native speakers tell us that it is easier to talk to the

Dutch, the Germans or the Scandinavians in English rather than the Americans, Australians or British.

Why do native English speakers not use OE? In our experience, it is because most people using English internationally do not realize that it exists. In addition, the relatively poor foreign language skills of native English speakers are well known, and many of us do not appreciate the practical difficulties of using a foreign language at work. We hear a frequent complaint: “*There is one American in my team of ten Germans, and so we all have to speak English at team meetings in Germany*”. Or that the British manager has been in Madrid for two years now, and still is unable to understand a presentation in Spanish. There are accusations of laziness, but more frequently of cultural arrogance.

The British person might counter this accusation by asking which language they should focus on. There is not much point in investing in Spanish, when the next job takes them to Germany, or France, or Russia. A very valid point. So, rather than learning a new language from scratch, which would take several years of intensive study for them to be able to conduct business in that language, what can native speakers do to help their non-native English speaking partners?

Clearly, adapting their language to OE is crucial. “*We’ll do it willy-nilly*” is difficult to understand. “*We’ll do it anyway*” is not. “*Without further ado, let’s get started*” is something we hear frequently at the beginning of international conferences. It is unnecessary and confusing to the non-native speaker without a knowledge of Shakespeare. “*Let’s get started*” is the message the speaker wants to get across.

Cut out those delicious idioms and expressions we love, and use unconsciously. A former British prime minister used a mass of cricketing idioms in a meeting with a Spanish minister proud of his excellent English. But talk of ‘*sticky wickets*’ and ‘*being stumped*’ totally confused the Spaniard, and before the next meeting he demanded it be conducted through interpreters.

Phrasal verbs are a minefield for anyone learning English, and often a more formal equivalent will be more easily understood. To a Frenchman or German, “*I’ll contact her*” is easier than “*I’ll get on to her*”, or “*Let’s postpone the presentation*” is more understandable than “*Let’s put the presentation off*”.

We also need to take into account cultural differences when we present internationally. The more we know what an audience in a particular country expects, the more effective we can be. The British prefer the presentation to be short and to the point, full of humour, metaphor and analogies. However, this can appear lacking seriousness in Germany or Scandinavia, or is not detailed enough in Japan.

A presentation keeping strictly to the timetable will be appreciated in Northern Europe, but may be less relevant in Italy, where a well-argued case with all the relevant facts is important, and if it takes longer, then the extra arguments justify the extra length.

Presenting internationally offers many challenges. We need to be aware of not only what we say and how we say it, but also what our audience expects from a presentation. The more we know about our own language, and how to adapt it to a non-native audience, the more the audience will understand, and be able to take an active part in the meeting. The more we understand the cultural dimension, the greater our chance of hitting home with the message we want to give, on the level that the audience understands and feels comfortable with. When we get it right, we can build relationships and trust, and do business effectively.