

Communicating with Nonnative Speakers

By Bill Gruener, Member, Boston Chapter STC

Many of us speak only English, especially if we are “American,” yet we increasingly find ourselves wanting or needing to communicate with business colleagues who speak English as a second or third language. When many of us speak, however, we do so openly, quickly, and fluently – factors that can confuse or confound nonnative English speakers. Slowing down is hard, and after a few minutes, many of us often realize that we have lost a listener.

To encourage easier native-to-nonnative communication, I polled multilingual colleagues for suggestions on how to communicate more easily with nonnative English speakers. Their responses have been compiled into the following list:

- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly.
- Have face-to-face conversations whenever possible because body language adds meaning. (Every respondent stressed this particular point.)
- Avoid noisy locations where multiple conversations are taking place.
- Keep conversations one-on-one in order to avoid potential distractions.
- Remember that phone calls are difficult because of no face-to-face contact.
- Pause often and ask if you've been understood.
- Speak slowly when giving a phone number, address, or some other number.
- Use simple sentences, especially when writing. (“Click OK.” instead of “Select the OK button and press.”)
- Use widely accepted international business terms such as “invoice.”
- Use common English words found in small, simple dictionaries. (“Please read the specification.” instead of “Peruse the specification.”)
- Choose a single, common verb that explains the action of a sentence. (“Analyze the profit margins in the ACME report.” for example, would be better than “Give me your take on the margins.”)
- Avoid two word verbs ending with OFF, UP, or ON. (“She quit.” instead of “She gave up.”)
- Be careful with using the verbs “get”, “look”, “take”, or “put” because those verbs have many varied meanings.
- Avoid verbs used colloquially. (“Deliver the work order to Bob in manufacturing.” instead of “Hoof it to Bob.”)
- Avoid every day jargon and local expressions.
- Avoid idioms, idiomatic phrases, or any metaphors. (“He was robbed.” instead of “He was taken to the cleaners.”)
- Avoid words from other languages adopted by the English language. (Use “appetizers” instead of “hors d’oeuvres.”)

- Avoid humor based on knowledge of the language.
- Assume and accept that your listener does not understand everything you've said.

By following these steps, we increase the chances that we are being understood whenever we interact with nonnative English speakers.

Bill Gruener is a technical writer working and living northwest of Boston, MA (USA). He has contracted with Schneider Electric, Fidelity Investments, and Sun Microsystems. He had extensive publishing experience before retraining as a technical writer and earning a masters degree in Technical and Professional Writing from Northeastern.