

10 Strategies for Overcoming Language Barriers

By Kate Berardo

Language barriers are a common challenge in international business settings—and a two-way process. What native speakers often don't realize is that frequently it is not the other person's accent but their *own way of speaking* that creates the greatest barriers to effective communication. Use the strategies below to ensure you're not putting up your own roadblocks to effective international communication.

1. Speak slowly and clearly.

Focus on clearly enunciating and slowing down your speech. Even if you're pressured for time, don't rush through your communication. Doing so often takes more time, as miscommunication and misunderstanding can result and you'll ultimately have to invest additional time in clearing up the confusion.

2. Ask for clarification.

If you are not 100% sure you've understood what others say, politely ask for clarification. Avoid assuming you've understood what's been said.

3. Frequently check for understanding.

Check both that you've understood what's been said and that others have fully understood you. Practice reflective listening to check your own understanding (e.g. 'So what I hear you saying is...') and use open-ended questions to check other people's understanding. Ask, 'what's your understanding of this process?' instead of 'is that clear?'

4. Avoid idioms.

Business language is often contextual, and therefore culture specific. For example, in the US, baseball terms are used extensively: 'Straight off the Bat,' 'Ballpark figures,' 'Out in left field,' 'Touch base,' 'Strike a deal'. As a good general rule, if the phrase requires knowledge of other information—be it a game or metaphor—recognize that this may make your communication more difficult to be understood.

5. Be careful of jargon.

Watch the use of TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations) and other organizational language that may not be understood by others. If you use them, provide in parentheses a description of what these are so others can learn to use the same language you do.

6. Define the basics of business.

In international business contexts terms such as: 'success', 'doneness', 'meetings', 'punctuality', etc. may mean different things to different people. Spend time early in your communication defining what these mean to you and others. Invest in building a shared vocabulary.

7. Be specific.

Spell out your expectations and deadlines clearly. Instead of, 'Please get back to me shortly,' say 'Please email the completed report by 5 pm Eastern Standard time on Wednesday, February 21.'

8. Choose your medium of communication effectively.

Carefully choose your form of communication (phone or video conference, email, instant message, etc.). Be mindful not to 'overuse' email. While useful, there are times when the medium is likely to be ineffective. When a message is complex and complicated or there is tension or conflict that needs to be resolved, switch to another medium.

9. Provide information via multiple channels.

Follow phone calls with emails that summarize what's been said. When possible, provide presentations, agendas, etc. in advance so those working in their non-native language can get familiar with materials.

10. Be patient.

Cross-cultural communication takes more time. If not at all times, certainly initially you cannot expect your communication to occur with the same speed and ease as when you are communicating with someone from your own culture.

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