

## The Language of Business: Some Pitfalls of Non-native / Native Speaker Interaction

**Gunta Rozina**

**Abstract.** Why non-native speakers of English find it more difficult to communicate with native speakers than with each other?

The author of this article will try to address the issue and present her approach of training learners of ESP to cope with some linguistic and pragmatic difficulties that can arise unintentionally between native and foreign speakers of English and share her experience gained while teaching ESP at tertiary level in Latvia.

The paper addresses the issue of expanding foreign language learners' competence of communicating transnational information. It reveals author's effort aimed at assisting non-native ESP learners of Banking Institution of Higher Education, Riga, Latvia to encounter and tackle problematic areas of business English to communicate ideas skillfully and with confidence as globalization of modern business requires training of professionals who can function successfully and adequately in multinational environment.

There is little current research done on the style and strategies of non-native / native speaker interactions in English, but it is often evident that native speakers enjoy the supremacy and considerable advantage of using their mother tongue to achieve superiority or to attain a success in business communication in conducting, negotiations or at the meetings. Besides, this linguistic superiority might develop a potential for rooting out a bias towards non-native speakers' attitude to communicate ideas precisely and with confidence. Furthermore, foreign speakers might feel at a disadvantage linguistically and probably therefore, in business relationship as well.

Consequently, the author of this paper has an opinion that some cultural and linguistic implications can unintentionally cause problems to foreign speakers of English. Even more, it is the teacher of English who can assist learners to bridge the "language gap", which might turn to be a cornerstone to succeed in international communication, and it is the teacher of English who can raise learners' foreign language communicative competence. Teaching the use of a neutral "international" form of English is an important field of training because it means assisting learners to recognize that English as a global language has a multiplicity of application and that a relevant one should be chosen for each type of spoken or written interaction.

The **aim** of this article is to address the issue *Why do non-native speakers of English find it more difficult to communicate with native speakers than with each other?*

Thus, the author intends to reveal some approaches taken to assist non-native learners of ESP at Banking Institution of Higher Education, Riga, Latvia to cope with some linguistic and pragmatic implications of international communication.

### The Current Status of English

Having the role of a *lingua franca*, English currently is the common global language for communication between people in business, finance, banking, politics, etc.

Over 700 million people speak English as first or near native second language.

According to David Crystal, 75% of all conversational mail conveys documents in English, and 80% of electronically stored and transmitted data is also in English. This supremacy of English grants a considerable advantage to native speakers of English.

On the other hand, non-native language users feel at a disadvantage linguistically and probably, in the business relationship as well.

Native speakers of English are sometimes consciously aware of this inequality and exploit it skillfully to their own advantage.

Thanks to communicative competence, they often dominate in international meetings of corporate international companies, where national or disnational interests are set against company goals.

Such situations give rise to resentment and often cause misunderstandings on both sides.

### Introduction

Referring to J.L.Mey, foreign language competence is acquired through its two basic components (1998: 44):

- a. linguistic competence,
- b. pragmatic competence.

The nature of foreign language competence is a topic of considerable interest and importance for those who deal with training non-native English language users to cope with linguistic implications and the application of linguistic theories, methods, approaches to tackle language problems, which arise in arrange of human, cultural and social context. The author of this article will deal with

some of the issues to assist non-native learners of English to sidestep the problems to gain communicative competence the latter constituting an important element of pragmatic competence and will consider the role of *collocation* competence which often places a range of obstacles to foreign language users in their way of gaining *linguistic* competence.

### Communicative competence

By introducing this concept, the American linguist Dell Hymes has pointed out that *knowing pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary does not mean language competence*. What is more important – language users have to be aware of how to apply the foreign language appropriately in the society they found themselves.

The concept applies to non-native language users as well; they also have to acquire both linguistic and communicative competence while undergoing foreign language studies to use it adequately and effectively.

In working with a wide range of English course participants from different backgrounds, all of them undergoing intensive business and professional English training at LTS Training and Consulting in Bath, England, A. Pilbeam, a Senior partner of LTS has noticed that certain patterns of *problem areas* are typical for native speaker communication:

- a. unfinished sentences and sudden changes of direction in midsentences;
- b. long, complex sentences with several subordinate clauses;
- c. use of idioms, e.g. *let's call it a day*;
- d. extensive use of colloquial expressions, e.g. *the bread and butter things, we have the thumbs up*;
- e. speaking very quickly;
- f. speaking while laughing;
- g. use of abbreviations and jargon, often company related, e.g. *how many FTEs will we need? (how many full time employees will we need?)*

Moreover, having participated in a number of international conferences, tenders, meetings and negotiations, the author of this paper has observed nearly the same areas causing perplexing problems to non-native speakers of English.

1. In discussions, particularly in informal group work (brainstorming, problem solving sessions) there is a frequent use of colloquial idiomatic expressions to create more relaxed atmosphere. There is much word playing, looking for unintentional double meanings in what people have said. This entire linguistic behavior is mainly unconscious, but it poses thorny problems to non-native speakers as they hardly can keep up with the speed of interchange and the frequent switches of topic. No doubt, if a foreign language speaker uses idiom himself/herself, he/she bears a great risk either to be misunderstood completely or to be misinterpreted. Anyway, it is still a challenge for a non-native speaker at least to have a good grasp of the notion of the idiom applied, e.g. *He has been here donkey's years* (He is an old employee); *He is a bit of a lame duck* (he often needs

help from others); *There is more in the pipeline* (We will have extra business in the future).

2. In presentations, a range of strategies to maximize the effectiveness and to create a sense of kinship within the group are applied:

- a. use of specific metaphoric expressions, e.g. *the company has a finger in the pie* (the company has a financial interest in...) or *the company has broken even* (the company makes neither a profit nor a loss);
- b. extensive use of abbreviations, e.g. in the area of correspondent banking (EDI – Electronic Data Interchange; EMS – European Monetary System, etc.). A specifically precise knowledge of abbreviations accepted by the International Chamber of Commerce is required to deal with Incoterms, e.g. *under a CPI contract* (Consumer Price Index) or *In a CIF contract* (Cost, insurance and Freight), etc.

3. Other problem areas posed to non-native English speakers could be:

- a. use of phrasal verbs with several prepositions, e.g. to put up with, to keep up with, to come up with, etc.;
- b. use of words or phrases that are false friend, for example, in English and Latvian:

*eventually* = finally (English) = at the beginning (Latvian)  
*Intelligent* = guided by intellect (English) = guided by good behavior and having good education (Latvian).

### Collocational competence

Referring to J.Sinclair, a lexical mistake often causes misunderstanding, while a grammar mistake rarely does.

This quotation supports the concept that teaching non-native language users to recognize and apply lexical chunks of the language is a significant element in the acquisition process of the foreign language.

J.Sinclair, D.Willis, M.Lewis, and many others, have made an important contribution to the way in which foreign language teachers think about lexis and its important role in the whole teaching process.

The English language teaching has always recognized two types of collocations where patterns have been evident:

- a) idioms;
- b) phrasal verbs.

M.Lewis, in *Implementing the lexical approach* points out that teachers of ESP in particular should notify the importance of collocations to enable non-native English language users to develop the awareness of the lexical nature of language and thereby to recognize and eventually produce sound language “chunks” themselves (1993: 60). An analysis of learners’ speech or writing skills shows that the lack of collocation competence is an evident weakness of non-native language users, as collocation is the key to fluency.

Native speakers can speak at a relatively fast speed thanks to language stored in their mental lexicons. Similarly, their reading and listening comprehension is “quick” enough because they constantly recognize and apply “chunks” of language.

Thus, the main difference between the output of the native/ non-native speakers is that native speakers use lexical chunks while non-native speakers construct the language from single words.

To develop non-native learners’ collocation competence, several factors should be considered:

- a) language is full of collocations;
- b) collocations reflect the way the language is stored in the mental lexicon of learners;
- c) collocation awareness helps non-native language users avoid errors and improve expressions, e.g. *the question “What are the possibilities with Latvia sales”*. The question sounds more natural if asked *what is Latvia sales potential?* or the sentence *In this company you can move to a higher position, sounds improved if expressed*. There are excellent promotion prospects in this company.

Considering the above stated, the author of this paper tends to think that the lexical approach being one of the recent and effective approaches of developing collocation competence, should be closely linked to developing communicative competence of non-native speakers of English due to the following factors:

- a) lexis should be one of the central organizing principles of the syllabus;
- b) the teacher’s role should change from a language – practitioner to a language – provider;
- c) different strategies for new vocabulary acquisition at different stages of learning have to be applied:
  - beginners need words plus simple collocations;
  - intermediate learners need expanding collocation competence with the words they have already stored in their mental lexicons;
  - advanced learners need more elaborated strategies to extend the word – stock they already have.

### Explicitness and direct statements

According to Adrian Pilbeam, The British have a wish to avoid over directness partly due to politeness, partly to avoid any confrontation.

This quotation partly explains the extensive use of modal verbs (may, might, would, could, etc.) and modifying phrases (slightly, somewhat, fairly, etc). For example, *your order is going to be late* sounds polite if expressed *your order may slightly be delayed*; *We want you to reply immediately* sounds more indirect if stated *We would be grateful to have our immediate reply*.

What is said on the surface is not the whole meaning; sometimes almost the opposite meaning applies. This is an

important fact to consider when teaching business correspondence, e.g. how to convey negative information. To express a negative idea in a more indirect way, the combination *not very + positive equivalent* is applied, e.g.

*They are a very old fashioned company (They are not a very forward – looking company), or, We got a very cold reception (we did not get a very warm reception).*

To furnish sensitive information with the display of the tact double negatives are used in written business English, e.g.

*The charges for this service are common sounds tactful if expressed The charges for this service are not exceptional; We think you understood exactly what we meant sounds considerate if stated We do not believe you misunderstood what we meant.*

At this point, considering the linguistic peculiarities of euphemisms is an effective approach of coping with veiled meanings of comments, sometimes requests or invitations. For example,

*I will bear that in mind* (I’ll probably do nothing about it); *that would be difficult* (It is impossible); *we must meet for lunch sometime* (Not a definite invitation); *perhaps we could consider some other options* (I don’t like that idea).

### Some hints to assist non-native learners of ESP

Non-native English language users find it easier to communicate using simpler, more direct and less culture bound variety of English. It is often reported by non-native speakers of English in the international business community that they understand each other whatever their first language background is; native speakers also find it difficult to understand non-native speakers although the latter often seem to be communicating effectively with each other.

Considering the above stated, the author of this article tends to assume that while teaching ESP, certain skills should be developed reasonably well to enable non- native learners of English to communicate with confidence:

- a) assisting learners of English to tailor their register of communication to the situation they are in;
- b) avoiding over- sophisticated vocabulary: use of a simple word rather than a less common word, e.g. *goods* rather than *commodities*, *to buy* rather than *to purchase*, etc.
- c) making learners’ way to coping with business idioms, metaphoric expressions, abbreviations;
- d) emphasizing the need to rephrase and to summarize oral statements frequently thus giving a listener a second or third chance to understand the message properly;
- e) developing the skill of coping with less indirect style of communication.

### Conclusion

The paper has been its author’s attempt to prove that English as a global language has many varieties of application, and ESP learners have to be trained to enable them to choose an appropriate one for each situation or type of interaction.

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### Verslo kalba: sunkumai, kurie kyla bendraujant svetimosios ir gimtosios (anglų) kalbos vartotojams

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamas didėjantis specialiosios paskirties anglų kalbos studijų vaidmuo universitetiniame lygmenyje Latvijoje. Straipsnio autorė kvestionuoja tam tikrus komunikacinių įgūdžių tobulinimo būdus besimokantiejiems, kuriems anglų kalba nėra gimtoji. Procesų, dėl kurių anglų kalba šiame amžiuje tapo pasaulinės svarbos kalba, analizė rodo, kad poreikis vartojamai kalbai nuolat viršija pasiūlą. Anglų kaip svetimosios kalbos vartotojai tarptautinėje verslo bendruomenėje teigia, jog jie vieni kitus supranta, o anglų kalbos, kaip gimtosios vartotojus suprasti yra žymiai sudėtingiau. Tačiau anglų, kaip gimtosios kalbos vartotojai teigia, jog jiems sudėtinga suprasti tuos, kuriems anglų kalba nėra gimtoji, nors pastarieji dažnai efektyviai bendrauja tarpusavyje. Pagal A. Pilbeam (D. Britanija) iškeltą teoriją, anglų kalba, kaip svetimoji kalba, versle turi savitus standartus, kurie yra plačiai priimti ir suprantami bent jau pačių svetimosios kalbos vartotojų (2001: 16). Išanalizavusi svetimosios ir gimtosios kalbos vartotojų bendravimo sunkumus, straipsnio autorė siūlo, kaip išplėsti besimokančiųjų ir vartojančiųjų svetimąją kalbą pragmatines (komunikacines) ir leksines (žodžių junginių) kompetencijas.

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## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX 1

#### Being tactful

#### Language focus - modals and modifiers

1. Your order is going to be late (*may, slightly delayed*).  
.....

2. We want you to reply immediately (*would, grateful*).  
.....

3. You've made a mistake on the invoice (*there, seem*).  
.....

4. You still owe us USD 280 (*there, seem, outstanding*).  
.....

5. You haven't given us the discount you promised us (*we, not seem, receive*).  
.....

6. Our prices will go up from Jan 1st (*we, may, slight increase*).  
.....

7. You haven't enclosed the complete packing list as requested  
(*seem*).  
.....

8. The delivery will be late because of problems in our finishing shop (*you, may, experiencing, few*).  
.....

### APPENDIX 2

#### Although business letters are direct they are also diplomatic and tactful

1. Your order is going to be late

We regret .....  
.....

2. You still owe us USD 200.

There is .....  
.....

3. We are not willing to give you more time to play

Regrettably we must.....  
.....

4. The statement is wrong  
.....

5. Mr Carr cannot accept your invitation because he's already busy that day  
.....

6. We want you to answer this letter immediately.

We would .....  
.....

### APPENDIX 3

#### Avoiding over directness by the British

1. It would be good if you could do the report by Friday.

(*Friday is deadline*)2. We must meet for lunch sometime

(*Not a definite invitation*)3. Perhaps we could consider some other options

(*I don't like that idea*)4. I'll bear that in mind

(*I will probably do nothing about it*)5. That would be difficult

(*It's impossible*)

