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*Cross-Cultural Communication,
Speaking and Presentation Skills,
English as a Second Language*

Breaking the Language Barrier

BY STEPHANIE NICKERSON

Here's how trainers can make themselves better understood in English, even when it isn't their first language. The techniques also work well for trainers who talk too fast.

What good is your training if trainees don't understand you? Perhaps you deliver your presentations in English, even though English isn't your first or native language. Or, you may have a regional accent that makes your English difficult to understand. Or, like some trainers, you may talk so fast that people have trouble following you. Here are some tips to help you communicate more effectively.

First, speak more slowly and distinctly than usual during the opening minutes of your presentations, so that participants can get used to your speech patterns and style. Clarity is especially important when meeting a new group, introducing unfamiliar terms, and discussing technical materials. Write down information to give trainees written as well as verbal cues.

One way to slow yourself down is to make red marks in your training notes to indicate pauses or the need to elongate vowel sounds. You might even draw red stoplights. Or, you can write "slowly," "pause," and "wait" in the appropriate places. Rehearse your notes aloud. During sessions, maintain eye contact with trainees and watch their facial expressions to see whether

they understand what you are saying.

If you have an accent, don't apologize for it. Trainees are likely to think it's charming, once they can understand your speech patterns.

At the beginning of a session, tell participants to stop you when they don't understand. If you get stopped often, you need more practice outside of the classroom. Try to remember that being stopped means that participants are interested in what you have to say.

Another approach is to learn to pronounce correctly the sounds that are unusual in languages other than English—such as the "th" in "then" and the "th" in "thin." People whose native languages lack those sounds typically substitute a "z" or "d" sound for the "th" in "then" and an "s" or "r" sound for the "th" in "thin." For example, my French-Swiss grandmother used to say, "Zeeze leetle seengz zat confuse me." ("These little things that confuse me.")

Such substitutions can cause misunderstandings. You need to articulate such sounds very carefully and write the words and phrases in which they appear. And a little body language for clarification wouldn't hurt.

Another cause of misunderstandings is the differences in rhythm—in other words, emphasizing the wrong syllables. I worked with a Bangladeshi trainer who referred to "affordable" housing as "AFF-ord-ABLE" housing. It took a while for trainees to catch on.

To avoid emphasizing the wrong syllables, ask someone who is fluent in English to pronounce unfamiliar words, and then imitate his or her pronunciation. To help you remember the correct pronunciations, devise a kind of shorthand for marking the accented syllables in your notes. Then practice the correct emphases. The pronouncing guide in most dictionaries can be a useful job aid.

Try not to let your concern about your English interfere with your interactions with trainees. Be enthusiastic and let your personality come through. People will understand you better than if you spoke perfect, but robotic, English.

Outside the classroom

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" asks the old joke: "Practice, practice, practice." One way to start speaking more clearly is by emulating the speech patterns of U.S. newscasters.

They typically use what is called "general American speech." And they tend to have good diction. Simply repeat their phrases while trying to match the sound, rhythm, and pace of their speech.

If you don't speak English in your day-to-day life, try to create opportunities. I read about a U.S. immigrant from eastern Europe who practiced English by calling toll-free 800 numbers. You probably won't want to do that. But you should speak English every day with people who speak it as their first language. You might even barter with someone to trade language lessons. Reading English isn't sufficient practice.

Another way to improve your English pronunciation is to ask friends and colleagues to correct you, but only when you're not in a training session. Make sure you understand the correction and then repeat it aloud.

Then there's the cork method. Pare a wine cork to about one inch in length. Place it vertically between your upper and lower front teeth. Then read aloud—poetry, a newspaper, the back of a cereal box, or whatever. Speak slowly and clearly, exaggerating the consonant sounds and lengthening the vowel sounds. You won't sound great, but the exercise causes the important muscles—the tongue and lips—for speech articulation to work hard. The principle is similar to practicing scales on the piano. After you remove the cork, the tongue, lips, and jaw will feel very relaxed.

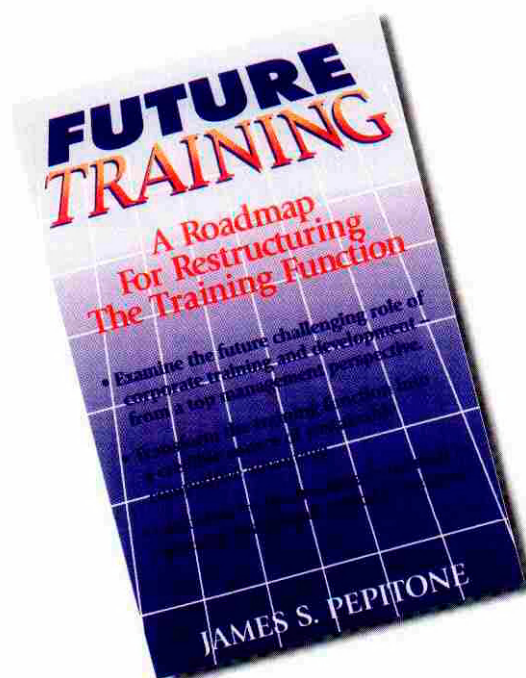
Do the exercise for five minutes at most. Repeat it several times a day for several months. Your speech muscles will stretch and strengthen. And your speech will become clearer and more fluent. A word of caution: Don't do the exercise for longer than five minutes at a time without the

guidance of a speech professional.

It's not easy to develop proficiency in a new language. But it is worth the effort. After all, communication is one key to being an effective trainer. ■

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