

Minimizing Communication Barriers

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***Editors' Note:** The authors focus on a problem that bedevils international negotiation teachers – your language isn't the students' language. Sadder but wiser after many experiences, this multinational team has compared notes, and presents a checklist of fundamentals. Basic as these principles may appear on the surface, the authors point out, they are honored in the breach more than the observance.*

Introduction

The challenge presented is how to conduct a negotiation workshop for a global professional group when the presenter speaks one primary language that is the learned or “second language” of most workshop participants.

Many dynamics contribute to a workshop session's energy, inspiration and insight. Sometimes, though, specific language or teaching practices create barriers to learning, or discourage participation by some or all participants. Our goal is to identify targeted aspects of a workshop presentation that facilitate student engagement, minimize obstacles and promote accessibility.

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Workshop Context

We presume the following workshop setting and teaching strategies:

1) a two-day negotiation workshop that includes the presentation of material by the workshop leaders, often in lecture format, and participant engagement using interactive exercises designed to sharpen their performance skills in negotiation;

2) each workshop day consists of approximately 7-8 hours of continuous activity;

3) global workshop participants who have practical negotiation experience as business persons, lawyers representing clients, or organizational leaders (such as leaders of Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs]) but who have not systematically studied the negotiation process in a classroom or workshop environment;

4) a workshop group size of about 30 persons;

5) the language of workshop instruction – and the language of the reading and exercise materials – is English;

6) the lead workshop presenters include persons who: a) speak English as their first and only language or b) have a first language other than English but who present materials to workshop participants in English;

7) the presenter is well-versed in the materials she presents and has primary responsibility for sharing that information with participants;

8) the presenter is well-prepared for the workshop substantively, but has only modest, and perhaps no information or familiarity with the workshop participants or the nature and extent of their professional experience;

9) the first language of most, but not all, workshop participants is some language other than English – and the first language for participants need not be identical (e.g. most but not all participants are Spanish-speaking);

10) for a small number of workshop participants, their first and only language is English; and

11) the workshop presenter has access to modest technological resources, including computers for PowerPoint slide presentations, capacity to show movies (via VHS cassettes, DVDs, etc.), and traditional classroom resources, including a whiteboard and flipchart.

These specifications may be numerous, but they are not uncommon. Each author has participated in presenting such workshops on dispute resolution topics. While we have made communication and pedagogical mistakes, thereby making the class less accessible to participants, we hope we have learned from them. We also believe that we have used other approaches that have been successful. We set forth guidelines below based on those combined

experiences, informed by insights from research regarding such pedagogical challenges. These guidelines are not exhaustive, but we believe they are sufficiently thorough to help presenters conduct more effective, accessible negotiation workshops.

Conducting an Accessible Global Negotiation Workshop

Our suggested guidelines can be succinctly summarized:

- 1) Be concise.
- 2) Use jargon-free language.
- 3) Use examples that workshop participants understand and value.
- 4) Support and require participant responsibilities in learning.

We set forth our more detailed suggestions below, first from the perspective of the presenter who is presenting materials in English but for whom English is not her native language, and second from the perspective of the native English-speaking presenter.

Guidelines for Workshop Presentation by Leader Whose Native Language is Not English But Who is Presenting Materials in English

1) Develop and Present an Organized, Prepared Presentation

It is particularly important for the workshop leader who is presenting materials in English, but for whom English is a second language, to prepare and deliver her materials in a crisp, clear manner.

We recommend that you develop an outline of your presentation. If possible, use PowerPoint slides or other presentation aides to display the outline; alternatively, prepare copies of the outline in advance and distribute it to participants.

Why present in what appears to be such a formal manner? First, presenting prepared, or shaped, remarks gives the presenter herself confidence about both her ability to present the material and the substantive integrity of the materials. When one speaks in one's native language, one enjoys a fluidity of presentation – and thinking – that is robust and spontaneous; that dynamic does not always occur when speaking in a foreign language. So rigorous preparation, displayed through such organizing vehicles as PowerPoint slides, enables the presenter to cover the materials in a coherent, organized way.

Second, using PowerPoint slides or classroom handouts makes it easier for each student to follow your presentation. It is important to

remember that each workshop participant will have “learned English” in a different way and will have different skill levels with the language. Listening to a non-native English speaker requires rigorous concentration and focus by all workshop participants – and particularly for those for whom English is an acquired language, perhaps starting from an entirely different linguistic construct than the instructor’s; you help that participant listen effectively if you provide guidance as to the content of the presentation.

2) Monitor Your English Accent

Do not apologize for your accent; after all, you are making it possible for many persons to participate.

But however fluent you are in speaking English, to a native-English workshop participant, your English will have a distinctive “accent.” More important, it will also be a different accent than that of other non-native-English speaking participants, so they will hear you in a manner different from that of the native-speaking student.

The challenge is clear: use your language skills as effectively as possible. Here are our suggestions:

a) Speak Loudly

Speak loudly. All participants must hear you. Use a microphone, if necessary. If a student has a hard time hearing you *and* finds it challenging to understand your accent, she will not be engaged.

b) Talk Directly to the Group

Position yourself so that you are speaking directly to all participants. Avoid the “professorial trap” of pacing back and forth in front of the group with your side to the audience and your face looking down. You can do that effectively when you are speaking in your native language to an audience who speaks that language. But in this workshop setting, such pacing back and forth positions you so that your body is turned away from a part (perhaps a significant part) of the class; that makes it very hard for listeners to hear and understand your words clearly. It is even more difficult to hear and understand you if you are “speaking to the floor.”

c) Make Each Participant’s Question a “Class Question”

If a participant asks you a question, respond in two ways. First, *restate* the question so that everyone understands it; often the questioner has spoken English in a way that is difficult for other participants to follow, so you must not assume that everyone who heard the question actually understands it. Second, be certain to state your answer to the entire group. The natural tendency when

responding to a question is for the workshop leader to focus her attention on the questioner, and to direct her response only to that person; after all, that is what one normally does in a “one-language” classroom setting. But, as natural as that is to do, it is a big mistake, for the rest of the group might not have heard the question and, more likely, will find it difficult to hear and understand your response in context. Treating the classroom presentation as having elements of a theatrical performance for an audience is desirable, not showmanship.

d) Speak at a Pace Comfortable for You

The pace at which you will speak depends on how comfortable you are in speaking English. If your language skill enables you to “speak like an Englishman,” then you should proceed accordingly. For many people, though, one speaks a foreign language more slowly than does the native speaker. You should not try to “rush” your presentation or remarks. You will be most effective if you talk at a pace comfortable for you. This is worth the price paid in “coverage.”

3) Insist On – but Support – Workshop Participants Assuming Their Responsibilities as Learners

Workshop participants have responsibilities as learners; they must not expect to listen passively while someone speaks to them for two days.¹

Part of the learning experience for this workshop – as in all educational settings – comes from participants learning from each other through the questions they ask, the answers they provide to questions posed by the presenter, or the experiences they share when doing exercises.

There are distinctive participant learning responsibilities for students when the presenter is a non-native English speaker. These include:

a) Participants Must Pay Attention

This is actually a challenging guideline on which to secure compliance. Busy workshop participants check their “Blackberries” for e-mails or feel their cellular phones vibrating with urgent calls. Traditional students “surf the net” on their computers. These and similar distractions make it difficult to learn. How can the presenter meet that challenge? She must make an explicit commitment as to how much time she will devote to a particular substantive segment and to scheduled break sessions. She can then ask that participants focus on the workshop materials during the presentation time. She must

then honor that commitment and call for a break at the scheduled time. And she must make certain that the time-breaks are long enough so that participants can comfortably return calls, as well as drink coffee and converse.

b) Participants Must Help the Presenter Clarify Information

The vocabulary of the presenter differs from that of the participants. The presenter wants to be understood. She must invite the participants to ask questions if they do not understand a concept or phrase she is using. Depending on the material being examined, a presenter could stop her presentation every 15 minutes or so and ask the participants to formulate one question or concern that they have about the material, or develop an example in which the idea or concept is applied to a practice setting. In that way, the presenter engages the participants' feedback to help expose what was understood and what was not.

c) Participants Help Educate Each Other by Respecting One Another

One of the most frustrating teaching situations in this workshop setting arises when a native-English-speaking participant answers a question or makes an invited comment. Such a participant can often make a valuable contribution to everyone's learning experience, but his or her efforts often fall short. Why is this? There are at least three factors. First, such a participant frequently speaks English very rapidly; second, sometimes the participant speaks with a rich accent (e.g. a Scottish accent or a broad U.S. "New England" accent). Finally, such a participant often uses a vocabulary that is difficult for non-native English-speaking workshop participants to understand. The combination of these factors makes it challenging for other students to understand the participant's question or comment, and his participation thereby sabotages the possibility of his contributing to *their* learning. That student must learn to respect, not intimidate or impress other workshop participants. He has a responsibility to participate, not showboat. How can the workshop leader transform that conduct into constructive participation without embarrassing the person?

First, she should ask him to repeat his comment, requesting that he speak more slowly so that all might benefit. She should feel comfortable in asking that person to stand and face the group when making his comment, thereby enabling all to hear. If the questioner has used words that other participants might not understand, the leader should ask the questioner to explain the meaning of the word

or to use a different phrase. In short, the leader's goal is to transform what might be a disruptive influence in the group into a positive resource. She can also emphasize that this requirement has a second, substantive purpose, in training the speaker to negotiate better in future settings that present similar conditions (Kovach, *Interplay of Culture and Cognition*, in this volume).

These guidelines support a sustained, engaging presentation. When blended with those recommended below for the native-English speaking leader, maximum engagement is still more likely.

Guidelines for Workshop Presentation by Leader Whose Native Language is English

The challenge for the native English-speaker workshop leader can be simply stated: How does she sustain engagement between herself and the group participants? We target our comments on the presenter's use of two pedagogical techniques: a "lecture-type" presentation, and the use of interactive learning materials, including videos, demonstrations, exercises, and role-plays.

1) Lecture Presentations

Every trainer shares the conceit that she is more engaging, vibrant and interesting when making a workshop presentation than is the stereotypical "non-practical" university professor who delivers a "dry," boring, though very informed, lecture. Even if that conceit were warranted (and often it is not), the trainer must be certain to follow best practices to make the lecture accessible to global workshop participants.

We use the term "lecture" to refer a form of presentation made primarily by the lead presenter (Eble 1988: 68-82). While the lecture can involve the presenter regularly eliciting questions and comments from workshop participants, the image is that of a workshop leader undertaking the primary responsibility for presenting information, ideas, concepts or puzzles to the workshop participants during a targeted time-span. While every presenter hopes that her presentation is engaging and motivating, our focus is identifying guidelines that help ensure successful participant engagement.

a) Deliver Targeted, Focused Lectures

It is the presenter's job to lead the workshop. Do it. Using the lecture format has decided advantages: one can communicate a lot of information in a short time frame; she can organize the flow and sequence of information in a way designed to make the materials easiest to understand by a new learner; and she can present the in-

formation without interruption or distractions. The drawbacks to a lecture presentation are also apparent: without questions posed, there is no way to check whether the information conveyed is understood by participants; one may misread the learning level of the audience and cover too much material; and, most undermining, the lecturer may understate, neglect, or otherwise fail to target points of relevance to the workshop participants' experience and desires, thereby making the lecture comments less engaging to them.²

Many U.S. workshop leaders assume that using a lecture format is inconsistent with the goals of conducting an effective, engaging performance-skill training workshop, so they opt to minimize lecture presentations. That assumption should be revisited. In many cultures, students or workshop participants expect that a presenter, much like a professor in their respective educational systems, is the expert who has responsibility for teaching or educating individuals, and they are there to learn from a master or highly regarded individual. For them, the teaching form used to share that expertise is the traditional lecture. For the workshop leader in a negotiations workshop *not* to make a lecture presentation dashes expectations and raises credibility questions among the participants about the presenter's expertise.

More substantively, a lecture in a negotiation workshop can be a very effective and efficient way to share information and perspectives. For example, one can use the lecture format to identify, compare and critique the distinctive and competing bargaining values and strategies embraced by distributive, principled and problem-solving bargainers,³ or use a lecture to introduce participants to the legal, economic and psychological literatures regarding such negotiating phenomenon as framing or reactive devaluation.⁴

In short, a good lecture presentation is a crucial component of an engaging workshop. How can the native-English speaking presenter make it effective and accessible to her global workshop participants? Each suggestion we noted above for the non-native English-speaking presenter applies here as well: speak loudly; talk directly to the group; and make each participant question a "class" question. But there are additional guidelines.

i) Keep it Targeted. Limit yourself *severely* in organizing the topic of your lecture presentation. If you want to cover nine topics, reduce it to four; if you want to cover five topics, reduce it to three or even two. Do not whine to yourself or others about "watering down" the subtleties and importance of your valued insights by restricting your presentation in this way. We are not suggesting that you deliver an inferior presentation, or that you simply give a "digest" version of

the topic. You want to be understood; you want the participants to grasp the materials you present. Give them space for learning it in a new language. You can always supplement your lecture with relevant reading handouts.

ii) Limit the Length. No presentation should exceed 50 or 60 minutes without some kind of break. Many observe that a person's attention span wanders after 20 minutes (Davis and Alexander 1977; Bonwell and Eison 1991), so remember how much more challenging it is to remain interested and engaged when the presenter is speaking a foreign language. Make it clear to the audience, through your syllabus and at the beginning of your lecture, how long the presentation will be; then, honor that commitment.

iii) Speak at a Measured Pace. For most native speakers, this can be stated more frankly: *slow down the pace of your oral presentation.* Native speakers, whatever their natural language tempos (in terms of number of words spoken per minute) speak at a pace that, to a new learner of the language, is remarkably fast. Slow down. We are *not suggesting* that you disrespect a workshop participant by thinking that you should speak slowly to them as though you were "talking to a 5-year old." Quite the contrary. The workshop participants are intelligent, engaging individuals. But they are working in a language and thought process that may not be as thoroughly grounded for them as are those processes in their native tongue. Think of giving traffic directions to a visitor to your community: we often speak more slowly, sometimes use hand signals to point the driver in a particular way, and sometimes even draw a map; we do that because our goal is to help that person gain an adequate understanding so that they can get to their destination. A workshop leader must embrace a similar goal: help the participants understand your remarks by talking at a pace that a reasonably intelligent person can follow.

iv) Describe or Explain the Concept. Then, if you think it necessary, use professional jargon to label it. We tend to speak in shorthand. In citing examples of government officials engaged in negotiating activities, is it helpful to reference the "negotiators who developed NAFTA" or the "Kyoto Protocols?" Who but the English-speaker might know those acronyms? The same is true for as simple an expression as: "Let's consider this negotiation. We have two parties. One party has been injured by the conduct of the Employer's supervisor." Why would anyone know that the "party" being referenced is a person rather than a social event? Does everyone know what a "supervisor" is? Choose words carefully.

v) *Eliminate Colloquial Expressions.* The greatest mistake that a native-English speaking person can make when delivering remarks to a non-native-English speaking audience is to use colloquial expressions. The expressions may be accurate and precisely relevant to the topic, but they are the most difficult matters for the non-native speaker to understand. For example, when describing competitive bargaining theory, how helpful is it to non-native English speakers to describe a compromise as “getting half a loaf?” About “bargaining in the shadow of the law?” About a statute that imposes a duty to bargain as having “carved out an exception?” Or even an expression as pervasive as: “Before (or after) 9/11?” What serves as shorthand while training native English speakers serves only to obscure when the audience is valiantly struggling in a language not their own.

2) PowerPoint Presentations (or Traditional Overhead Transparencies)

PowerPoint slides can dazzle. Their use is so ubiquitous that some workshop participants would criticize the quality of a program presentation if such technology were not used. So, use them. But be careful: their use can innocently and perversely create significant barriers to participant understanding and engagement. Here are some suggestions to make their use helpful:

a) Limit the Amount of Information Displayed on a Slide

Presenters create lively PowerPoint slides. The tendency is to create a slide that displays a substantial amount of information that comes “flying in” at the click of a button. To the non-native English speaker, this presents three significant learning barriers: 1) it is hard to see the entries; 2) if the vocabulary used in the lecture and the slide is new, the matter is not understood; and 3) the presenter often assumes that the audience can read the slide, so she proceeds to discuss its content without any further guidance to the participant. We can avoid these problems by using rigorously simple entries or formats on the PowerPoint slide.

b) Guide the Audience Member Through the PowerPoint Slide

Many presenters use PowerPoint slides in a presentation setting where the audience is persons whose first language is English. In that setting, when one posts the slide, the presenter tends to make two assumptions: a) that everyone can read the information on the slide (not just see it, but be literate in the basic language); and b) that as the presenter references a particular aspect and topic of the

slide, even if standing 15 feet away from the screen, everyone can follow her comments.

The dangers of those assumptions are obvious: for an audience member for whom English is not a first language, she may have no idea what (or where) on the chart the presenter is referencing. The presenter has created a barrier because she has assumed that the participant could read the posted slide entry *simultaneously with the presenter's discussing it*.

There is an easy fix for this important problem: when the slide goes up, stay near the slide and physically point to the entry or language you are discussing; if you are using a remote pointer, highlight the entry with the pointer. The presenter must treat the PowerPoint slide as an entry on a whiteboard: guide the participant's attention to the entry being discussed (even reading it for everyone, if appropriate), as any classroom lecturer often does when she takes her hand or marker/chalk to point to the comment on the whiteboard that is being discussed.

3) Interactive Exercises

Most workshop presenters use some teaching materials – a video presentation, small-group projects, role-plays or simulations – that engage the workshop members' participation in a manner different from that of primarily being a listener. We strongly endorse the targeted use of these multiple techniques.⁵ To ensure that these materials are accessible to workshop participants, and are therefore effective teaching tools, we offer the following guidelines:

a) Choose Subject-Matter Examples Carefully

You have multiple teaching goals when using case studies, role plays or simulations: a) to highlight how principles referenced in the lecture apply in practice, b) to sharpen participant analytical and performance skills, and c) to provide opportunities for diverse student learning styles. But using these materials can be devilishly challenging.

You must choose an example for the exercise that workshop participants can immediately comprehend and whose subject matter bears a "family resemblance" cross-culturally. The rights and obligations of a private sector employer and employee may be quite different, for instance, in the legal and social culture of the United States than in Spain or the Czech Republic; or the dynamics of a controversy involving a government regulatory agency and affected stakeholders may play out significantly differently in differing cultures. In order to advance the teaching point you wish to make, choose a fact-pattern least subject to multiple interpretations.

b) Keep the Written Exercise Materials Short

A written “fact pattern” should not exceed one page – two paragraphs is even better. Participants need time to read and embrace the materials; if these are too long, they cannot do so effectively.

c) Edit the Materials to Ensure Clarity

If the simulation involves a business transaction in which the valuing of “stock derivatives” or “junk bonds” is involved, rewrite it to eliminate those phrases. If a reference is made in the exercise to a “non-compete” provision in an employment contract between a TV personality and the company, revise it so that everyone understands the material.

d) Whenever Possible, Distribute Written Exercise Materials for the Second Day of a Two-Day Program at the End of the First Day

People working in a different language understandably might require more time to read and participate in an exercise. When an important component of the learning experience for workshop participants comes from the thoughtful execution of a role-play or simulation, the trainer must support that objective by giving everyone adequate time to prepare.

e) Wherever Possible, Designate Individual Participants for Particular Roles in a Role-Play Rather Than Telling the “Group” to Decide Who Assumes Each Role

The objective is to be as efficient and supportive as possible of persons working with foreign-language materials. By the end of the first day, you may have some sense as to the language and professional backgrounds of the workshop participants, so you can incorporate that information into developing balanced, capable teams. More fundamentally, it is important for the workshop leader to be clear with workshop participants as to what they are to prepare for and do when executing the role-play; otherwise, the leader jeopardizes the learning value of the applied experience.

Conclusion

When a negotiation workshop capitalizes on the strengths and insights of its participants, particularly when the individuals are from multiple cultures and have differing language practices, the sense of camaraderie, accomplishment, and stimulation is felt by presenters and participants alike. We share the above suggestions with the

hope that inadvertent communication barriers do not undermine that energizing, rewarding outcome.

Notes

¹ *But see* Kovach (2009) on learning expectations in different cultures, in this volume.

² Eble (1988: 79-81) identifies the various elements that he believes contribute to a lecture presentation's being effective or ineffective. Additional observations regarding the strengths and drawbacks of the lecture format are cited in Gardiner (1994: 38) and Bain (2004: 98-117).

³ The lecture could draw on such scholarly studies on negotiation behavior as those of Walton and McKersie (1991: 58-125); Fisher, Ury, and Patton (1991: 40-55); and Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello (2000: 11-44) to raise these points.

⁴ Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello (2000: 156-172) discusses some of these concepts.

⁵ For the learning advantages gained from using these methods, see Eble (1988: 83-97). For a thoughtful discussion regarding how to design and use role plays and simulations effectively, with thoughtful attention to intercultural dynamics, see Sharan and Sharan (1976: 159-86; 187-217).

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