

Employability Challenges for the Non-fluent Speaker

By Joshua Kreig

A client from China asked for coaching to become a better interviewer and presenter in English. He wished to express himself more creatively. I asked him how well he thought he expressed himself in Chinese. "It sucks!" he said.

Consideration: *Do you possess the skills? It is not the language, it is you.*

If you 'suck' at it in your first language, you will suck more with a weaker language skill set. Changing languages should not have a profound impact on ability, but language deficiencies expose skill deficiencies or can be seen as incompetency. The good news is communication skills are simply that – a skill set. But you must answer the question: "Do I possess communication skills?" Before looking at the nuts and bolts of communicating in a new language you must be able to do it in your first language.

Communication skills are an invaluable asset. Words, both written and spoken, are the instruments of business. The person who can maximize those tools has the greater opportunity for success. A person with dynamic communication skills is often perceived as having a higher aptitude than a person with weaker communication skills. Though there are numerous books and courses on the market to turn you into a good presenter the final decider will be, "Are you creative and dynamic?" The number one skill of the great communicators is that they approach their material from a creative and dynamic perspective.

That is what separates a boring presentation on the annual census report to a forceful one on the relevance of demographics in economic and political decision making. Anyone working in a foreign language should have a forthright evaluation of their skill set in their first language to help understand the challenges they will have in a new language.

If one discovers or knows their first language skills are lacking, taking skills development workshops in the non-fluent language will provide the opportunity to pick up some new skills and practice them in a safe environment. Having the opportunity to practice and receive constructive feedback will help increase confidence.

A client from Japan was a confident woman but quiet. Due to fears about speaking in English she seemed shy and reserved. She said in Canada people thought she was unfriendly.

Consideration: *Are you self-confident?*

Confidence! Over the last five years, I have discovered that confidence is the most influential factor for a non-fluent speaker. When learning and working in a foreign language a person's confidence level can be shaken. And the same rules apply: if you have confidence issues in your first language they will be exposed or magnified in a foreign language.

This confidence thing is a little tricky though. If you are over confident in your first language you may come across as arrogant in a foreign language. Language without finesse can offend easily. If

you lack confidence in your first language you may come across as shy, quiet, or even passive in a foreign language. An absence of language still communicates a lot to the observer.

We place great value on what people say or do not say. A key insight when trying to understand language confidence issues is the fear of being judge and the fear of looking stupid. Everything we say and write reflects who we are. We are judged, evaluated, and processed on our ability to communicate. We know this is happening in our first language, and any stress associated with it will be magnified in a foreign language setting.

I have often said my biggest fear is waking up one day and everyone discovering the emperor has no clothes. Appearing incompetent is a common fear among humans. Being embarrassed or looking stupid due to communication errors adds a strain on confidence. Further, not being able to perform at the same high level as in one's first language adds stress to the situation or task. The way to lessen these two fears is to accept they are a part of the process and by preparing well.

A client from Poland working in a bank found she spent 50 percent more time on emails than her fluent speakers. She felt as if she was always behind.

Consideration: Are you prepared for the extra work?

A mentor once said, "Fail to plan, plan on failure." This caveat is well-tryed. But for the non-fluent speaker it is twice relevant. It is folly to think one can walk into a non-fluent language situation and shine in the same manner and fashion as in a fluent language situation. One must take extra time to prepare material; it is a necessity that cannot be sidestepped. A non-fluent speaker has to allot more time for preparation; time which is spent asking one question: "Am I communicating well in an English context?"

Fluent speakers often resent having to polish foreign colleagues' work before it can be presented; it takes time away from their assignments. A Japanese client once reported she had to spend an extra two hours preparing for classes and meetings just checking her English. This caused her a lot of stress as she knew her fluent colleagues were working on the next project.

A client from Brazil asked me recently, "Why are Canadians so cold?" Meanwhile a Korean client enjoyed the "warm and friendly people" of the city.

Consideration: Are you culturally aware?

We have to consider cultural differences. Often there are multiple cultural differences to consider in the international business community. Team diversity can span numerous continents. Cultural differences among group members affect communication. "When in Rome do as the Romans do" is the first rule to follow when deciding on cultural communication differences. If you are in Canada then the Canadian way of life is the way to conduct oneself.

The non-fluent speaker must consider that the way people learn, network, public speak, and present in an English language environment may be different than their home environment. The use of voice, gestures, and body language differs across cultures. What may be polite in one context may be rude in another. Knowing which topics are appropriate or taboo is essential knowledge when communicating in a multi-cultural environment. Transgressions are never

publicly mentioned but they do have an impact on how one is seen and the manner in which one is dealt. Learning and communication vary across cultures.

These are the considerations for the non-fluent speaker when evaluating their communication skills. The challenges go beyond those of the fluent participant and beyond the basics of communication skills. By first considering skill, confidence, preparation levels, and cultural awareness the non-fluent speaker sets the table for a working experience that will build on existing skills while cultivating the ones required for the new language environment.

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Joshua also sits on the Advisory Board of Recruiting Now Inc. as a Senior Communications Consultant and brings a wide variety of business and communication skills to the organization, especially in the areas of diversity and in assisting newcomers to Canada.