

# COMMUNICATING IN GLOBAL ENGLISH

## Working across languages

An important element in multicultural teamwork is language. Frequently, a multicultural team is composed of individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and this influences group interaction and relationship building in a number of ways.

When forming multicultural teams you may therefore benefit from an exploration of linguistic diversity, asking group members about their language skills and comfort using the shared medium that is English. The insights thus gained can later help you identify linguistic resources in your team (e.g. access to texts published in Russian, Danish or Chinese). But knowledge about team members' linguistic competence will also help you anticipate the conflicts or misunderstandings that can arise as a consequence of individuals' different exposure to and command of English.

## 'Global English'

Globalisation has created the illusion that we are all inhabitants of a planetary village, consuming the same products and communicating through English, the Latin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But consider the way English is used by the other members in your team – do you all speak English in the same way? If not, what is the effect of the varieties found in your group? Compare to communication with people from a background similar to your own – what is the difference in the quantity and quality of interaction? And what does this tell us about multicultural teamwork?

'Global English' should be treated as a different language from Standard British or American. It is shaped by all of us and coloured by the linguistic idiosyncrasies and mannerisms of all the world's languages. In other words, there is no 'standard' in Global English. A Lithuanian or Chinese variant of English is no worse – or better – than that spoken by the natives of Ireland, Australia or Canada. What matters is your ability to make communication work – to formulate statements that are accessible to team members with a different mother tongue, and to receive messages in an open-minded fashion, making an the effort to listen carefully to the words uttered, even when distracted by team member's use of an unfamiliar accent or vocabulary.

When working through the shared medium of Global English, it is crucial that all varieties of English be accepted as equal. We all bring into the intercultural encounter linguistic preferences and biases. A Danish student, for instance, is likely to prefer a Dutch, German or Swedish variant of English to that of a Chinese or Ugandan. This is not because Germans necessarily speak better English than the Chinese, but they make mistakes that are similar to those of a Dane, and their message will therefore appear to be more comprehensible.

To favour certain types of English is natural and need not create problems in multicultural teamwork. However, what you need to watch out for is ethnocentrism – jumping to the conclusion that because the German is easier for a Dane to understand, s/he is necessarily 'better' at English. Do you have the professional training to assess other students' linguistic competence? If not, please leave any language assessment to experts trained in English grammar and pronunciation.

## How competent are we?

Do you have a background in Modern Languages? If not, you may never have been subjected to a professional assessment of your English level, and you might assume that you are relatively fluent because you have always managed to make yourself understood when travelling around the world. But did your English work because of your own language skills? Or should your communicative success instead be ascribed to your counterpart who was willing to listen and accept your message in spite of a heavy Scandinavian accent or poor grammar?

Fluency in a language means that you possess a combination of different skills, e.g. reading and writing, oral proficiency, access to different linguistic registers, communicative strategies and sociolinguistic awareness. In order to increase people's awareness of linguistic competence the European Council has developed a framework defining a set of criteria that enable experts to place all language users on a scale from *Basic* to *Proficient User*. You can read more about the European Language Portfolio here: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio/home>

The European Language Portfolio has been adopted by Aalborg University as the framework used to assess the linguistic competence of all lecturers teaching in English. A full assessment probably requires the involvement of a language expert, but even without this support, you can gain a better understanding of what, more precisely, 'good' English demands from the definitions provided. In addition, the European Language Portfolio draws our attention to themes that are worth bearing in mind when working across languages in a multicultural team.

## Mapping linguistic competences in a multicultural team

To map the linguistic resources in your team we recommend that you do two things at the beginning of your project period: 1) establish the linguistic resources of your team and 2) perform a self-assessment of your skills in the working language of your group (typically English).

*1) Mapping linguistic resources:* You need to know what language skills group members possess early in the process so you can take into account your access to information published in languages other than English when selecting your project theme. Most groups probably start by finding out more about group members' native languages, which makes sense as this is where you are likely to find their highest level of linguistic competence.

However, please bear in mind that many are multilingual today, mastering, perhaps, a national language, an ethnic minority language, and an 'international' language such as English, German or French. An example could be the Dutch student, who has grown up in a family speaking Arabic and been educated at English-medium institutions in the Netherlands and Britain. Such a person is likely to have mastered three languages, Dutch, Arabic and English, at a relatively high level.

To find out more about group members' skills and competence level, you may want to rely on the relatively common distinction between 1) *native* 2) *second* and 3) *foreign* languages. The current author claims to have one native language (Danish), one second language (English) and five foreign languages (German, Spanish, Latin, Swedish, Norwegian). The difference between second and a foreign language competence is partly your proficiency, partly your exposure to the language. When in the example English is thus claimed as a second language, this reflects the author's MA

education in English as well as her international experience, working and studying in the UK for five years.

2) *Self-assessment of your linguistic competence:* In addition to linguistic resources a group also needs to know how comfortable members are working in the language chosen for shared activities. Inspired by the competence levels identified in the European Language Portfolio, we have developed a self-assessment questionnaire that you can use to identify your own strengths and weaknesses in your shared language. We recommend that you compare and discuss your results in the group as this will help you anticipate communicative problems such as ‘talking too much’, ‘being silent’, slow/poor writing or plagiarism (cf. *Introduction*, pp. 18-20).

**Tool for self-assessment:**

	Good		Medium		Basic
<b>Oral proficiency</b>					
I can express my opinions easily in English/other language					
I have no problems understanding spoken language					
I am able to participate in an academic discussion					
<b>Written proficiency</b>					
I can express myself in correct and clear written language					
I can write both personal and academic texts					
I can present complex theories and concepts in my own words					
<b>Linguistic repertoire/vocabulary</b>					
I read and understand a variety of genres					
I can distinguish between academic and popular texts					
<b>Communicative strategies</b>					
I like to take the floor and control interaction in group debates					
I tend to remain silent in discussions as I dislike interrupting other people					
I try to mediate, using questions to bring silent group members into the discussion					
<b>Sociolinguistic awareness</b>					
I am good at understanding accents even when they are very different to my own					
I see it as my job to understand; I will ask questions if everything is not clear.					
I adapt my language, attending to other people’s linguistic level and needs					