

Using a Language That's Not Your Own: Experiences of Multilingual Employees

Published in The Diversity Factor, Spring, 2006

(This article is based on the experiences of multilingual and monolingual employees in a U.S.-based English speaking company. The company has worked hard for more than five years to become multicultural and equitable, and to change from a white, male-dominated organization to one that includes women and people of color at all levels.

There have been many successes on this journey. The company has expended substantial efforts to support and promote women and people of color, develop active employee support groups, create an Ombuds program, develop guidelines for improved communications across the company, and create a system for improved communication when dealing with external contractors who have limited English ability. The company has required diversity training for all employees, established expectations that managers develop diversity-related skills, and encouraged periodic conversations about diversity among top leaders.

The employees who contributed to this article chose to remain anonymous. They did so out of respect for the company, because the issues they raise have not been broadly discussed or resolved among their colleagues. When this article was shared with company leaders, there were a variety of reactions, especially sadness that multilingual employees have some painful experiences in the company.

In spite of the decision to remain anonymous, the employees consider it a success that this article was written: there is space in this company for these voices to be heard, and there are organizational efforts underway to support multilingual employees and challenge unsupportive behaviors by English-speaking employees)

Multilingual employees are sometimes treated as “less than” and the remarkable assets they bring to an organization are often not appreciated. It’s not simply the problem of having to find the right words to use. It’s the energy it takes to use a second or even third language for daily communication. It’s using a communication style that’s different from your first language or considered rude in your native culture. Working and living in an environment where communicating in a language that is not your own can take a huge emotional toll and can stimulate internalized oppression: a point at which you believe that you’re not “good enough,” even though in reality you’re a highly-skilled employee.

In this article, you’ll “hear” a conversation among multilingual employees who met to discuss their experiences. They’ll share some of the dilemmas they face every day: not knowing the right word to use, not being understood because of an accent, being ignored or discounted, having to change or give up a way of communicating that is familiar in their native language and culture. At the end, they’ll share some suggestions for how organizations can support multilingual employees, challenge English-speaking employees who are less than supportive and, in general, improve communication across language differences.

Observations from Multilingual Employees

Sofia: I grew up speaking Spanish and, to be honest, I didn’t want to learn English for a long time. But eventually I learned English. I’ve been using English for the past 15 years,

since my freshman year in college. I've been in my current job for seven years and I work in a field dominated by men.

At least once every day, I think to myself, "I can't speak English." For example, sometimes I don't know a technical word for something, and I'm afraid to ask -- maybe the men I work with will think I don't know enough about my job, when the issue is that I just don't know the English word for something technical. I know what that thing is in Spanish. And on the phone, it's particularly difficult to speak in English, especially when the English-speaking person on the other end is getting impatient with me.

I wonder what it would be like to do my job in an all-Spanish-speaking environment? I've never had the opportunity. All my work experience has been in an all English setting and I have no idea what it would be like to do my job without having to worry about my accent or grammar, or just knowing the right word to say or just even understanding someone. I presume taking away the language-related insecurities would free up space in my brain to focus on other things, like my actual job!

Patrick: My background is obviously different than most of the people around me. I bring a different culture, but a very rich one, too. I left my home country in Africa a few months after I was born, lived in Europe with my family and grew up speaking French. Ever since, I've traveled the world and spoken close to a dozen languages. I learned English when I moved to the U.S. in my early 20s.

Contrary to what people generally think, learning a new language and customs, and living in a new country is as hard as one can imagine. Today, I speak and I think in English more than 90 percent of my time. I am well aware of how much my culture, background and accent play a role in how people judge and perceive me. I spend a lot of energy worrying about being understood by the people who review my performance. I always wonder if they take things that they don't understand or find odd about me as a sign of my weakness or even my weirdness.

Doug: I was born and raised in the U.S., learned English, and never really had to use another language, even though I studied French and then later Spanish. I married a German woman and moved to Germany a few years ago. While my experience as a white American man living in Germany is very different from the experiences the two of you have shared, I can really identify with what you've both said about the difficulty of learning and using another language.

After my marriage, I began taking classes to learn German. I'm finding it much harder to learn a new language at 56 years old than as a young person. Some people enjoy learning a new language. For me, it's stressful.

I use German about 90 percent of the time when I'm talking with native German speakers in social settings, in stores or on the telephone – and sometimes, Germans will switch to English to accommodate me. Compared to the level of your fluency in English, my German is terrible! And yet like you, I'm acutely aware of how much energy I spend worrying about making mistakes, being understood, taking up too much of the listener's time, and wondering if I'll get "caught" not understanding something when I've been nodding my head as if I do.

The experience of speaking German has given me an immense appreciation of adults who come to the U.S. and are trying to learn English – especially those who came under duress as political refugees, or simply to earn enough money to survive. And, like many immigrants to the U.S., I speak my native language at home. My wife, who is from Germany, is fluent in English. It is comforting for me to be able to communicate and be understood; it gives me energy to go out and speak German. I know who I am in English; I don't know (yet) who I am in German. I don't know if I ever will.

Sofia: Sometimes I've spoken Spanish at work with other native Spanish speakers. Except for a couple of times, people at my current job have been okay with that or indifferent. But at previous jobs, non-Spanish speakers gave me negative reactions to speaking Spanish. Most times their comments were of mistrust: they thought we were speaking Spanish only because we were talking about them. They took offense and went as far as asking us to only speak English in the workplace. And sometimes they threw out "Go back where you came from if you don't want to speak English." It seems that they got insecure, because they couldn't control what they didn't understand. And I can relate to that feeling.

Patrick: I will always remember when I first started working in the U.S. many years ago. It was an experience of cultural shock and having to deal with the stereotypes people had of me. My boss used to conduct site visits and spoke to all the staff, but not me. Not a word. He would simply walk past me as if I was transparent. His attitude always puzzled me because I simply could not comprehend that one could hire somebody and never take the time to talk to that person.

A few months after I started working at that job, I found out my boss ignored me because he thought I was mentally challenged. Not because I could not speak proper English, but because I sometimes did not understand some of the language the guys used in the field! This was a shock. I realized that I needed to be like all the guys in the field, walk the walk and talk the talk. So I worked really hard to learn the trade and minimize the negative impact that my accent and my background could have on people around me.

Last year, I made the transition from field to office work; it was my first experience in the "corporate world" after 16 years in America. I thought the transition would go smoother. But I was wrong. I have never been more aware of all the things that make me different. It struck me that I had to learn again how to fit in, to make sure people would not consider my accent to be a sign of intellectual weakness, or that they would not see me as being odd because I did not respond to some of the slang they were using.

During my first year, I was asked if I wanted a language coach to work on my accent. Even though it was meant to help me, I found it awkward. I felt uncomfortable. I was almost offended.

Sofia: As I listen to you and think about my experience speaking English at work, I am realizing that it affects me more than I am willing to admit. This is amazing to me! And it's actually distressing me to become aware of how many times a day I do let the insecurities about my communication skills affect how I do my job. At times, I do feel

that because of my accent I am “assumed stupid until proven smart” and this can feel exhausting.

Just this morning I had to talk on the phone with a colleague about some quality control issues at a job we recently completed. We talked for a few minutes about the issues and then he suggested we conference call one of the suppliers for the job. I was aware that adding one more person on the phone adds to my uneasiness, but I felt as the project manager that I should take charge. So I started the conversation with the supplier but somehow it all seemed awkward having him on the line, too. He had to get off the line for a few seconds during which my colleague offered to take over the conversation. I agreed to it.

When we were done with the conference call, my colleague and I talked a little longer. I don't believe he realized this, but he was explaining things to me that I already knew and suggesting to me what to do next. The phone call with him ended, and I wondered: does he do this with other project managers? Is it because of my English, because I am a female, because I am younger? Am I just being too sensitive?

When he took over the conversation with the supplier, I thought it was considerate of him to ask me, as opposed to just taking over. And, the fact that he asked me while the other man was away from the phone helped keep our “communication issue” separate from what we wanted to accomplish with the supplier. I am sure we came across as a team on the same page.

But I felt deflated. When this happens, I tell myself that it is not about my English, that it makes sense for him to take over because he is older and a male can more quickly put the other man at ease. I understand that the ultimate goal is to do whatever we have to do to get the job done right, so I know we did the right thing. But I wish things were different.

Doug: Last fall, while I was working on a project in Europe, I watched a similar conversation between a U.S. manager and an Italian employee, only this one was less subtle. She (the Italian employee) spoke and understood some English – he (the manager) didn't speak or understand any Italian. During their meeting, which the Italian woman had requested to gain his perspective on a project, he repeatedly interrupted her, told her that what she needed was something different from what she had asked for, and then proceeded to offer his suggestions about that. As the conversation continued, she spoke less and less, and her English deteriorated. By the end, he was practically doing all the talking. The next day, she confronted him about his behavior. In describing the anger she felt towards him, the word she used was “excited.”

One of the things that stood out for me when she confronted him was the way that he focused on her use of the English word “excited,” at the expense of being in a dialogue with her. As she confronted him, he was quiet and, to his credit, he seemed to listen carefully and didn't appear defensive. But he didn't ask her any questions as a way to better understand her experience, nor did he apologize in any way for his behavior. His only comment was to ask her to explain her use of the word “excited.” He asked her three times what “excited” meant before he got an answer he understood. Later, she told me, “I don't want to talk with him again.”

As I reflected on this, I realized how I've been stuck on the literalness of language in conversations with my wife, instead of seeing the bigger picture. My wife's English is great, but sometimes her English doesn't make sense to me. Usually, it doesn't make sense because I am listening to the literal meaning of her words (as I understand English!). I'm not listening to what she is really saying about her thoughts and feelings. I now think this is what is meant by an expression I've heard from women and people of color, in reference to how men and white people listen: "He's listening to me but he's not hearing me." If I listen to my wife carefully, and take in all that she is "saying" with her words, voice, facial expression, body language... then maybe I'll hear her.

Patrick: It's true. There is much more to communication than the words that we say. We live in a technological world where cell phones and emails play a big part in how we interact with each other. One-on-one interaction is no longer the norm. You want to talk to your coworker who's only 20 feet away you send him an email or give him a call. To me this is too impersonal and rude.

Although I was raised in Europe, I carry with me the culture of my native country in Africa. There, it's an oral and story telling culture. When I was a boy and would visit my relatives, we'd sit around at night and listen to stories. That was both entertainment and education. So when I communicate with people it's important for me to see them and to share some stories.

Until recently, I made every effort to walk around and talk to the people I work with, but I stopped after coworkers made comments about that. So now, I'm becoming accustomed to the communication tools we have and I'm using them so that I can be as efficient as my coworkers. I might not like it, and I might be uncomfortable with it, but I have to learn to do it as part of my work.

Sofia: Me, too -- I have to rely on the phone at work, but it is not my preferred way of communication. I believe in general I do okay after so many years of having to do business on the phone. But often there are days when I am just "off," and I know I should avoid any "tough" conversations on the phone as I can be far less confident and could easily get eaten alive. I do feel I am missing something if I can't speak face to face, use my hands, make eye contact, and smile. All of those things can fill in the blanks and compensate for when I don't feel confident communicating in English.

Doug: If our goal is communicating, then it seems to me that English speakers could try to use another language, even if our ability to do is limited. A couple of years ago, I was leading a focus group in Paris. In this office, managers were expected to be fluent in English, but support staff weren't, and more importantly, support staff in general didn't feel very confident using English. Unfortunately, the focus group was in English.

When I noticed that the support staff were not talking, I decided to switch to French. My French is not very good, but within a few minutes, they had a lot to say. A French colleague later said, "You're right -- your French isn't very good -- but the most important thing is that you were trying to use their language, and so they believed that you wanted to hear what they had to say."

Sofia: Until we had this conversation, I hadn't fully realized the impact on me of speaking English day in and day out. And until now, I certainly haven't talked about this with anyone at work.

I suppose the saying "ignorance is bliss" can be true when it comes to limitations. I've known about the damage of being stereotyped, but I have been too busy "doing things" to have time to stop and analyze how I am affected.

Patrick: For me, having a support group for multilingual employees has been a great place to talk about our experiences. I think it's a great example of how people from different cultures and languages can work together. We understand each other although we have different accents and come from a variety of backgrounds. I've found that in this group we understand each other better than people who come from similar backgrounds. You'd think it would be the other way around, but it isn't. It almost seems that when there is no dominant characteristic of a group, people seem to get along much better.

Suggestions for Improving Communication Across Language Differences

In organizations with multilingual employees, we believe that it's important to provide support to multilingual employees based on what they say they need, not what others believe they need. At the same time, we believe that it's important to challenge monolingual employees who may be making assumptions about multilingual employees. For example, managers or colleagues might believe that a multilingual employee has a performance problem based primarily on a perceived lack of English language fluency. While there might be some need to improve fluency, our experience is that sending an employee to a language course or an accent coach may not feel supportive to the employee nor will it necessarily have a noticeable impact on performance. We'd rather start with the assumption that the employee is competent to do their job and has adequate English-speaking ability, especially if s/he attended a U.S. university or college.

With that in mind, here are some strategies that managers might try:

- When there appears to be a "performance issue," frame the issue in terms of improving skills in a particular context, rather than a general communication or language issue. A "particular context" might be leading a team meeting or negotiating on the phone. Offer coaching for this skill.
- Bring feelings into conversations with the employee. Ask them how it feels to use English all the time at work. Remember that the emotional cost can be high when a multilingual employee doesn't know or can't remember how to say something in English: they may be too embarrassed to ask, fearing that others will assume a lack of competence.
- Ask about cultural differences between the current organization and "how things are done" in the country or community where the first language is used.
- Consider that there might be a cultural difference impacting performance. For example, a multilingual employee might be "quiet" in meetings when the organizational norm is to speak up and share expertise. Looking through the lens of

cultural difference might lead you to wonder if the employee is being respectful of others in the meeting and waiting to be asked. Looking through the lens of competence might lead you to assume that the employee has “nothing to say” and therefore doesn’t “belong” in the meeting. Try asking the employee about their behavior in the meeting, find out what the employee thinks and feels about their participation and share your expectations for their participation.

- Ask the multilingual employee what might work best when conducting an annual review, and adjust the process to account for cultural differences in how people talk about and evaluate their performance.
- Find another employee who speaks the same first language as the multilingual employee. Let me know that it’s okay with you if they use their first language. Ask this employee to “check in” about how things are going at work.
- Start a multilingual employee’s support group.
- Support monolingual employees who are interested in learning a language spoken by multilingual employees.
- Consider using a translator for everyone’s benefit, as a strategy to improve understanding and overcome some emotional humps.
- If it seems quite clear that there is a difference in English comprehension, have a frank discussion with the multilingual employee about the potential for a comprehension issue. Ask the employee what they would find helpful as a way to improve their comprehension. But do this after trying some of the other strategies above, and combining it with having an equally frank discussion with the employee’s manager and/or colleagues about the potential for a comprehension issue on their side: perhaps they are not taking the time to “hear” through an “accent,” but instead are becoming impatient, taking over or maybe they are misunderstanding how the multilingual employee is using a particular word.

A Final Comment

To be able to acknowledge language differences and work through them may feel uncomfortable for everyone involved. But we believe that it is essential to acknowledge these differences and work through them in service of creating a workplace that is supportive of all employees, especially as organizations globalize.