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It Takes Two to Tango

Tango requires effort and patience and the willingness to learn. But, the rewards are awesome. A connection with another human being that some describe as . . . a dance of communication and connection.

—Florintino Guizar¹

Pierre, Liz, Yoshi, and Wendy reflect the many faces of international professionals* working in English. As we have seen, they encounter

* The phrase *international professionals* was first used by Vince in the late 1990s after working with hundreds of native and non-native speakers of English who were struggling to communicate effectively in their respective organizations. He felt the term “ESL” (English as a Second Language) employees only referred to non-native speakers who needed baseline help in English. The term captured neither the advanced non-native nor the native speakers working in multilingual environments. Hence, he coined the phrase “international professionals” and has used it to help organizations identify this specific group of individuals and address their unique set of challenges.

hurdles on the path to success because of the interplay of language and culture in global business. They want to inspire, encourage, and motivate others to reach their full abilities. They are all dedicated leaders, fast-trackers, high potentials, and star performers who share a common bond: English is driving them crazy!

Throughout their discussions we uncover some of the underlying emotions and ongoing challenges that reinforce their experiences. In the workplace, they are out of step and struggle to be authentic, effective, and included. Each is clearly on a leadership track, but that path is clouded as their talents and abilities are hidden while their confidence is stifled because of linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Yet, together they find a bond and a collective wisdom. Our international friends reflect on their situations not with despair, but with humor, social grace, and goodwill. They find hope in one another's stories. They recognize themselves as seasoned leaders managing complex businesses in an interdependent world. They rally around their common frustrations and find an outlet where they can express their stories to a sympathetic audience. Even though working in English causes anxiety and insecurity, they are motivated leaders and up for the challenge. They simply need better solutions, and their organizations need a clearer vision of how to handle the phenomenon of the widespread use of English.

How widespread? According to Mark Robson of the British Council, "English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide—that's one in every four. By 2020, we forecast that 2 billion people will be using it."² Clearly, English is becoming the language of choice for global conversations.

In addition to the staggering number of people using English worldwide, a *Newsweek* article titled "Not the Queen's English" indicated that, as early as 2005, non-native speakers of English outnumber native English speakers 3 to 1.³ A recent *Wall Street Journal*

article stated that “almost one in 10 adults of working age in the U.S. has limited proficiency in English, more than 2.5 times as many as in 1980.”⁴ These staggering numbers indicate that the spread of English has been changing methods of communication and will impact global organizations in their talent-retention strategies, workforce-development initiatives, and diversity and inclusiveness processes. If the axiom is true that people drive the success of an organization, then such success depends on the interactions of both native and non-native speakers of English.

Our focus in *Leading in English* is on the seasoned international professionals who work in English every day—native and non-native speakers of English alike. Most of the solutions available in the marketplace focus on the beginning or intermediate non-native communicators—those who still need to build their foundation in English. Very little attention is paid to the advanced native and non-native speakers working across language and cultures.

Our audience for this book includes the following:

- The non-native-speaking* global leaders who are working in English in:
 - Their home countries
 - Global, multilingual environments
 - English-speaking countries, leading a native-speaking workforce
 - English-speaking countries, reporting to a native-speaking boss
- Native-speaking* global leaders who are working in:
 - Countries where English is the business language but not the local language (like Liz)
 - Global, multilingual environments

*When we use the terms *native-speaking* and *non-native speaking*, we are referring to English unless specifically noted.

- Home countries—United States, United Kingdom, Australia—leading a multilingual workforce
- Home countries, reporting to a non-native speaker

So why does English cause so many problems even for these professionals who are already strong or even native in English? Our airport-lounge characters certainly fit the profile, and we will examine their stories. But we begin with a suggested mind-set shift. A very useful idiom that we have in English is that “it takes two to tango,” which will serve as our new mantra in this book. The tango is an energetic dance that requires both partners to be highly attuned to each other in an interplay of responsive movements—“a dance of communication and connection,”⁵ as Florintino Guizal, an expert in Argentine tango, describes.

Another well-known English idiom is “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This idiom suggests that people should behave like the native people of any given environment. Originally, it referred to the dominance that the Romans once had in the world and the expectation that outsiders should conform to their norms. Not too dissimilar is our current status quo, which—perhaps not overtly stated—is that people who speak English should adapt to Anglo-Saxon norms, not only linguistically but also behaviorally. Yet it may take years before a non-native speaker can fully understand what those norms entail. At the heart of this discourse is the relationship that exists between people who do not speak the same native language and whose accents communicate that they are not from here (wherever here may be).

Leading in English strives to change the international business code from “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” to the more inclusive thought behind the concept “it takes two to tango.”

When a relationship is founded on trust and a level playing field, communication improves, regardless of the hierarchical status. But what does it mean to “level the playing field”? Many global organizations that are embracing diversity and inclusion seek solutions to help the non-native speakers. These are very useful and necessary initiatives.

However, very few solutions are provided to help native and non-native speakers better understand each other. It takes two to tango. We support a new set of standards for using English that reinforces both groups. We further want to ensure that the purpose of communication is to understand an intended message rather than to make hasty judgments about how the messages are sent. Language limitations are not personality or intellectual defects. They are also not a reflection of personal incapability or cultural disrespect. Our aim is to reduce misunderstanding, accept a certain amount of ambiguity, and create tools and strategies to better communicate. Period.

Leading in English represents many stories from various international professionals who both struggle and succeed in English. As a point of reference for the reader, “we” and “our” collectively represent the three authors of the book. Vince Varalle, a native English speaker, consults with Fortune 500 companies and has trained and coached thousands of international professionals. Joerg Schmitz, a native German speaker, is a cultural anthropologist with extensive experience helping leaders and organizations navigate the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Stephan Mardyks, a native French speaker, is a world-renowned expert in the field of global learning and development.

During our journey, we have asked numerous international professionals to reflect on their own relationship with the English language. We’ll be sharing many of their stories in the pages to come. Most of the stories come from the perspective of non-native English speakers, but we have also collected interesting examples from native speakers who struggle expressing themselves, especially in public.

Here is an example that we find quite illuminating. Stephan learned about it from a friend, who is a native French speaker:

Despite speaking perfect French (having been born and raised in Paris), I was not seen as “true French” by most of the people I went to school with and later by my colleagues at work. As the

first generation born in France, from a Dutch family, I was just different.

Actually, some people would say—“You’re so-o-o not French!”

I quickly understood that I needed to work for international corporations where success is based on personal achievements, not where you come from.

Traveling, meeting and working with different cultures across the world, was invigorating to me, and I was not seen as only “French” but more as a cosmopolitan person. Working in English as non-English speakers was “part of the job” and a nonissue for most of us.

Promoted in my early thirties as VP, I had been asked to lead the global strategy and operations of a new venture based in Atlanta. Part of my job was to lead a global network and an American staff.

My English was okay in a professional context, but not so great for the folks taking my order at the fried chicken and grits restaurant next door. Granted, being dressed in an Italian suit and tie with some French cologne was probably not the best camouflage.

I clearly understood that I had been given this leadership position not only due to my potential but also to help people be more globally minded. I was indeed the perfect alien for the job to be done.

When everyone was playing “Monday morning quarterback,” it took me a little bit of time to understand that they were not talking about American football. How confusing.

I always had this belief that the American dream was also about “melting together.” But I totally missed the fact that it does not apply if you have a foreign accent. You have access to the pot but you can’t melt.

Nothing was about my skills and know-how anymore—everything, all day long, was about my thick French accent and perceived French persona.

Yes, I know what you're thinking: not the worst accent to have; but try to understand—all day long I heard “you're so-o-o French!”

So, here I am, leaving the French culture for not being French enough, just to become the ultimate aristocratic Frenchman in Atlanta.

I spent so much time and effort trying to fit in and reduce my accent. I wanted so badly to be seen and heard for what I had to say—not the way I was saying it. It was exhausting. Not only did I have my day job like the others, but I also had to deal with my accent and the endless feedback about it.

The biggest compliment at that time was being asked if I was Canadian—at least that was getting closer!

One day—after a critical business presentation in front of the most important executives of our multinational—I realized that I would never be seen for who I am, but would always be seen as an outsider.

In my mind, I was NIH—Not Invented Here.

I was so discouraged that day that I came back home, opened the front door, and immediately went and collapsed on my bed.

I was thinking—What do I do? Do I go back to France? But I was an outsider there, too.

Good thing that I'm not a drinker. By the way, I'm a Frenchman who does not drink wine but can explain the taste difference between Pepsi and Coke . . . but that's another story.

And then in the middle of the night I had this epiphany—my style and accent are going to become my brand, just like Henry Kissinger.

I was going to be myself and not try any longer to belong at any cost. My accent was part of who I was and I would stop focusing on the issues related to it. From now on I would just be myself. Take it or leave it!

The morning after, I regained my confidence and freedom. I did belong—not because I was part of any old boys’ club, but because I could contribute and do good.

I became (as I was told) a much better leader in the U.S., and for some reason my accent became just a detail—not a “definer.” In hindsight, I think that I was part of the problem.

His transformation from discouraged outsider to confident leader came when he stopped trying to fit in and learned to value his own unique identity and the distinctive contribution he could make. His focus shifted from reducing his accent to leading his team, and once he made that shift he unlocked a new reservoir of energy. We’ve seen a similar result in the lives of many international professionals as they learn a new way to navigate the world of English.

We use the term *English* both in a literal sense—referring to the actual language—and in the wider metaphorical sense, referring to the dominant medium of communication that defines relationships and meaning, which is symbolically tied to the history and culture of English speakers. All of us can use the English language explosion to enhance our careers, motivate others, and embrace the spirit of inclusion. However, we must not fall prey to thinking that English in business means we should conduct ourselves as U.S. Americans, Canadians, or Brits.

The easy assumption is that to use English we should adopt the behavioral norms and behaviors of the people who use it the most. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Whether the thought process is conscious or unconscious, the prevailing status quo is that “if you communicate in English, you should conduct business like we do.” The reality is that the business world is accepting English as its lingua franca, but not necessarily adopting a new way of life; the language shift does not come paired with an automatic cultural shift. Miscommunication often comes not just from language but also from

the combination of using English across many cultures and business situations.

Every single day, people on global teams from multiple countries and from various language backgrounds are using English to connect with one another, manage complex ideas, and move their companies toward profitability. Like a garden hose without a nozzle, the ideas stream from one person to the next, from one group to the other. They flow from interactions including face-to-face meetings, web-based conferences, e-mail messaging, social media, teleconferences, texting, and so forth. While the levels of ambiguity might be high, people rally around the essential themes, derive their action plans, and move their agendas ahead.

Amidst this flood of English, even native speakers can unexpectedly be at a disadvantage. A chemist from northern New Jersey, Bob, recently explained to a group of other native-speaking colleagues that he—as the only native English speaker on his team of eight—struggles the most in understanding the team’s direction. The group wanted to know how that could possibly be. Well, the garden hose is streaming ideas without a filter. Grammar mistakes are made, accents are diverse, and ambiguity runs high—all characteristics that native speakers fight against, but all common traits among the non-native speakers. They use English as a delivery platform and not as a way of life. The other native speakers wanted to know: “Don’t you have a high degree of miscommunication? Aren’t deadlines missed?” Bob’s answer was most interesting: “Of course we do. But no more than when I work with a team of all native speakers.”

So why is communication in English easier for non-native speakers working with one another? Logic might tell us that native speakers would be able to convey their thoughts more clearly to non-native speakers. In our research with participants from around the world, we have found the opposite to be true. Because native speakers communicate with a shared set of symbols and codes—most of which are

intuitive—non-native speakers can be at a loss when communicating with them.

You can see the intuitive understanding that native speakers have with one another in the following dialogue between two native speakers in a New York office:

Bill: Hey, I just heard that the marketing department has been told they can work from home on Fridays. We should do that, don't you think? I can talk to Linda [the boss].

Sharon: Hmm. [Sharon tilts her head and raises her eyebrows.] You'd better be careful. You know how traditional Linda can be. Listen, I'm off running to a meeting. We can talk more about that later if you want.

Bill reads Sharon's body language, recognizes her hesitation, and decides to hold off on his suggestion. Message received by Bill: he had better not ask Linda about possibly working from home on Fridays.

Now, take the same interaction with Hector, who has recently arrived from Mexico. In his cross-cultural training program, he has been told to be proactive and share his ideas. He is an outgoing fellow and wants to fit in right away. His slight grammatical mistakes are reflected here.

Hector: Hello, Sharon. The marketing department have been approved to work from their home on Friday. What a good idea. I should talk to Linda [the boss] to see if it is a good idea for us.

Sharon: Hmm. [Sharon tilts her head and raises her eyebrows.] You'd better be careful. You know how traditional Linda can be. Listen, I'm off running to a meeting. We can talk more about that later if you want.

Hector thinks, "Well, I did consider this carefully as Sharon suggested, so I should approach Linda in a very structured way." He decides to

speak with her about the idea. Hector did not correctly read Sharon's body language. He also did not pick up on the cue that Linda is very traditional and might not be receptive to having the group work from home on Fridays. Message received by Hector: he should carefully construct his message when speaking with Linda.

Now let's examine the same interaction with Hector and Chen, who is from China and has been in the United States for three years.

Hector: Hello, Chen. The marketing department have been approved to work from their home on Friday. What a good idea. I should talk to Linda [the boss] to see if it is a good idea for us.

Chen: Hmm. [Chen frowns.] I'm not sure such good idea. Maybe you should not hold meeting.

Hector understands all the negative cues, appreciates Chen's advice, and decides not to approach the boss. Message received by Hector: he had better not approach Linda about this idea.

The hose has no filter, and the thoughts—while not linguistically perfect—come out pure. Non-native speakers are at a disadvantage when working with native speakers who fully understand all the hidden codes and messages. As we have seen from Bob the chemist, native English speakers can also be at a disadvantage when working globally, whether on an intact team at home or on assignment in another country. Liz is discovering the challenge of using English where her filter—the nozzle on the hose—is different from the filters of those with whom she is communicating. Shortly, we will look at Liz and her dilemma.

Because of the missed cues, a lack of confidence on both sides prevails. The impact can be severe for non-native speakers, who are often overlooked for promotions, not chosen to face clients, and not encouraged to participate in important direction-setting meetings. There are many reasons why. Perhaps the lead manager does not believe an individual is ready for the complexity of the

communication needed. In addition, the engagement team might not believe the client will accept a person with an accent as a credible voice. The individual contributor can also lack confidence and thus not speak up for fear of making a mistake or freezing up in a key situation.

We fully realize that most non-native speakers living in an English-speaking country want to adapt to the local norms, understand the cultural cues, and become strong communicators. Simply look at Wendy's situation. She not only needs to embrace English, but also needs to do it in a way that satisfies her colleagues in Dallas. We do not shy away from that reality. In fact, we support these professionals, like Wendy, by focusing on how they can develop stronger English in business, social, and everyday interactions. They want to advance their careers and contribute to the success of their organizations. In turn, the organizations that value diversity and inclusion are implementing solutions that help the non-native speakers.

Yet, it takes two to tango. These international professionals are only 50 percent of the equation. Does Wendy's leadership team in Dallas:

- Attempt to better understand her language and culture?
- Realize how hard it is for her to adjust to not only the linguistic, but also the cultural and business norms?
- Ask themselves what that might be like for them if they lived in China?
- Sponsor any orientation programs about how to best communicate with non-native speakers?

Perhaps an empathic approach might help them to understand the great success Wendy is already experiencing. We encourage native speakers to develop stronger relationships with non-native speakers by first recognizing that the filters—the nozzles on the hose—do not come naturally. Once both sides of the communication equation

embrace each other's strengths and challenges, we foresee global enterprises:

- Recognizing and retaining their talent
- Uncovering hidden assets by helping people gain confidence in English
- Setting clear expectations
- Developing higher-performing teams
- Forging stronger synergies

We have hard work ahead of us. We are not promoting English as the preferred language but rather as the platform for international professionals to understand one another, to ensure that their delivered message will actually be their intended message. Yet we must be mindful of the fact that as a platform for global business, English creates inequities, barriers, and challenges that if not navigated carefully, will undermine the collective experience, potential, and performance.

The struggle begins when we put the Anglo-Saxon nozzle on the hose and expect everyone to adapt and understand the filtered messages. By embracing new strategies, tactics, and solutions, together we can dance the tango—that high-energy dance—in rhythm. *Leading in English* helps to establish a mind-set shift and create new standards for using English.

What are some of those strategies? We have broken down the learning needs for international professionals—both native and non-native speakers—into a three-step progression for improving communication and effectiveness. *Leading in English* is organized along these three steps.

Speaking Clearly—It's about You

This first layer gets the most attention in organizations. Accent modification—while sometimes needed—is overly recommended

and not always necessary. Many people have strong accents but are easily understood, whereas others have mild accents and sound muffled. In these cases, the focus should be on clarity of speech. While individuals can benefit from a personal learning plan to correct any articulation or pronunciation issues, their primary focus should be on developing confidence.

Speaking with Impact—It’s about Them

The second layer represents a personal shift where the speaker no longer worries about her English, but rather focuses on her audience by answering the question: What does this listener or group of listeners need from me to best understand this interaction? Perhaps it is speaking more slowly on the telephone or speaking with more emphasis and vocal variety during a meeting or presentation. Impact learning involves increasing one’s range of expression so that the audience pays attention to the message.

Developing a Compelling Narrative—It’s about Moving Them

The final layer is the leadership piece that helps to motivate a group toward action. Leaders create connection by understanding the power of visualization through examples, scenarios, and targeted storytelling. Furthermore, they deliver concise, compelling messages that are sincere and activating.

Let’s examine how these steps relate to our characters in the introductory chapter. By taking a deeper look at Pierre, Liz, Wendy, and Toshi, we provide an opportunity to investigate some challenging experiences that international professionals face while working in English.

First we have the bartender, who is a native speaker of English. Then come our international professionals, who are native speakers of French, English, Mandarin, and Japanese, respectively. They are quite fluent and advanced in English, a necessary skill for executives doing critical business around the world. All of them are accustomed to dealing with high levels of complexity, and seek better solutions for communicating in English. We further explore the various contextual situations that lead to their frustrations. Our task in *Leading in English* is to provide the tools needed to ensure successful communication across language and cultural boundaries.

Here are the characters and the archetypes they represent:

The Bartender (native speaker), “The Wall”: His real name is Steven.

The bartender stands in the way of Pierre and his lunch order. Nothing will be accomplished since the bartender hears “accent” only, quickly shuts down active listening, and fails to understand the intended message. The bartender represents old-school thinking: he hears an accent and assumes, perhaps unconsciously, that the person has less intelligence, education, and capability. Even after Pierre’s multiple attempts, the bartender remains confused until a third party—in this case Liz—clarifies the order. The bartender is a metaphor for someone who stands in the way of successful communication for international professionals.

Pierre, “The Misunderstood”: Pierre is not thrilled when the simple act of ordering a cheeseburger doesn’t go as planned. While the interaction in the lounge frustrates Pierre, we later find out that in business situations as well he feels inadequate, loses confidence, and fosters some resentment. His accent in English—and the way people listen to his accent—is causing him frustration.

Liz, “The Surprised Native Speaker”: Liz is speaking in her mother tongue but having a hard time connecting with the Brazilians she works with. While she was expecting to struggle with Portuguese, she did not anticipate having trouble in English. Liz is like the many native speakers working globally in non-English-speaking countries.

Wendy, “The Confused”: Her real name in Mandarin is Wenling. Wendy wants to get better in English. She lives and works in Dallas and has been identified for accent modification classes. However, she is always being told that her accent is easy to understand. Neither the organization nor Wendy understands how she could improve her overall communication skills. Wendy already performs well in certain areas of English, but those talents go unrecognized. She is at a loss for what to do next.

Toshi, “The Unheard”: His full name is Toshihiro. Toshi sits quietly in brainstorming sessions as his mind races to figure out a way to go about sharing his thoughts. He was not asked to prepare anything for the discussion. He sits patiently and watches as all the native speakers interrupt one another with great ease. Toshi quickly but quietly becomes frustrated. He does not want to be rude. On the other hand, if he does not participate, he may be perceived as being ill prepared for the meeting. It’s a double-edged sword.

Let’s begin by examining the various interactions among our characters.

Pierre just couldn’t seem to make the bartender understand his order. Many observers may note that Pierre was in the United States, so he had the ultimate responsibility to be understood in English. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Well, we believe that it takes two to tango. Why couldn’t the bartender seek to clarify and help Pierre? Easy solutions were available to assist in the food order to ensure that the intended message would become the received message. That interaction should have been easy. In this context, the bartender failed to make any extra effort. On the other hand, Pierre was stubborn; he could also have made that interaction easier. The communication went awry. In other situations, we recognize there are times when both sides are motivated to understand each other but can’t cut through the barriers. The reader should note that speaking clearly, the first level of our learning system, includes both the speaker being more clear and the listener making a better effort to understand.

In Chapter 2, we will go into greater depth about the dilemma of accents.

Let's examine Liz and her challenges. She is the wild card in the group as the only native speaker, but, interestingly, her challenges are not that dissimilar to those of the other characters.

"What am I to do?" she thinks. "When the company declared English as the official language, I thought that it was a lucky break. However, I find myself being misunderstood all the time. My team and I are behind on work, and we can't seem to catch up. I am not getting through to them. I took the company course on doing business in Brazil. I am following those baseline principles, but, honestly, they do not really help. I'll never give up, but this is more difficult than I thought it would be."

A common assumption about native speakers is that they are confident in their English language capabilities, but we know many who struggle to communicate effectively. Frustration sets in when they are met with quizzical looks and empty stares. They use numerous idioms and do not realize that such phrasing might not be understood. Some speak far too quickly. Liz tries to speak slowly, but the last thing she wants to do is become condescending and act like a teacher working with grade-school children. She also feels lost when her team speaks in Portuguese right in front of her. "Are they speaking about me? Mocking me? Is there something they don't want me to know?" She understands cognitively that these questions reflect far more insecurity than reality; however, emotionally she feels like an outsider, which makes her anxious.

Interestingly, her lounge colleagues are surprised that she is having difficulty communicating in Brazil. They can't fathom that Liz feels disadvantaged. Pierre in particular finds this intriguing and, with good humor, he is almost happy to hear it. He and Liz got a good laugh out of that as they realized their issues were not as dissimilar as they may have thought. Trying to be a good leader, Liz wants to strip away any

ambiguity and connect with her Brazilian direct reports. She has a positive attitude but knows that she has not formed a strong team because of the inequity in English. Both sides need a strategy to help them bring synergy to their work and their relationships.

Liz supports non-native speakers when needed. After all, she readily stepped in and helped Pierre order his food. Pierre could have been insulted by Liz's interference, but he appreciated her efforts. Why can't Liz reverse the process and help her Brazilian colleagues understand her English? Well, it takes two to tango. We are unsure of the English level of the Brazilians she is working with; however, we do know that neither side is making the necessary adjustments. The intended message is lost, and communication is faltering. Having worked with leading executives around the world, we are told by many that a lack of collaboration and poor communication are the heart of failed projects. The "us" versus "them" mentality must change before problems can be solved.

Liz represents "them" and is clearly an outsider in Brazil. No one has ever explained to her the best approach for working with non-native speakers. But she represents—to the locals—the dominant role of U.S. culture; thus, the use of English also makes them feel like outsiders. The insider/outsider experience is at the heart of developing inclusive mind-sets and behaviors in the global workforce. The dynamics change based on the context and are often quite complex. Liz does not feel like an insider when working in Brazil—and certainly from a social perspective she is an outsider. She needs help to navigate the never-ending tasks of relocating to another country. She must develop strong outsider skills by getting closer to the native groups and understanding the rhythms of the local environment. However, she must also understand the challenges her Brazilian team faces when she uses English. Just as Liz is an outsider to the culture, they are outsiders to the language.

Maja Egnel, vice president of talent development and diversity at Skanska, states:

An outsider will often experience a lack of control, and feel weak, confused, vulnerable, and frustrated. Outsiders are expected to adhere to the rules set by the insiders, and must work harder than insiders for the same opportunities. They will spend a lot of energy trying to be accepted by the insider group, and they are often less engaged, motivated, and satisfied.

The insider experience, on the other hand, is very different, since most insiders might not even realize their insider status. The insider group has the formal or informal power to create the rules, and will be the ones reinforcing compliant behavior In fact, not feeling valued and included has a deteriorating effect on performance as well as commitment and company loyalty.⁶

Liz is a bright executive and a strong leader who has both people and project management skills. She will manage both her insider and outsider roles. International professionals are chosen because of their adaptability and are usually the cream of the crop, resilient souls who know how to adjust and prepare for success. We want to support Liz and the millions of other international professionals working in English across borders and boundaries by advocating communication strategies to use English that fosters understanding and enhances inspiration. Liz needs to be clear in her speech, deliver impact in her messages, and develop a strong narrative.

Let's turn next to Wendy, known as Wenling in Mandarin. Like many Chinese women living and working in the United States, she decided to take a coaching program to help with her communication skills. While she thought that the company's accent program might help a little, she decided to go with a more customized approach with a personal coach. After performing an evaluation of her overall skills, the coach determined that her accent and clarity of speech were effective. However, this only caused Wendy to become even more frustrated. She said, "While it is nice to know that I don't have a strong accent, I am still being judged by native speakers and my promotion will be

denied unless I improve my English.” She did not want to hear that language is a 50/50 proposition and that native speakers also must adjust. Wendy is realistic, knows her environment, and must improve.

But what adjustments does she need to make? Why is she so down and out about her English? Why does she lack confidence in all forms of her communication? Yes, she does tend to drop the “s” sound at the ends of words and does make some minor grammatical mistakes. However, she is clearly understood and has a strong enough vocabulary to describe virtually any situation around her. Nevertheless, she has little impact on her audience. While the easy recommendation is to follow the second stage of the learning plan—speaking with impact—most organizations and most of the professionals themselves are not aware of this level of learning.

Wendy’s dilemma is a central theme in this book. She is not only expected to speak English fluently, but also expected to act like the other leaders around her. She wants to adapt and learn the necessary skills. However, Wendy is lacking pop and pizzazz in her messaging. Passion in English is displayed through vocal variety—the rising and falling of intonation, alternating speeds, and framing ideas. Wendy has been told to slow down her entire career and has thus turned into a monotone speaker. Her career advancement depends on this impact by gaining credibility with clients, influencing coworkers, and inspiring direct reports. The organization expects her to be a strong leader with solid skills, and she expects the same for herself. Wendy does not shy away from her perceived challenges. She embraces the additional opportunities to learn, just like so many international professionals.

These non-native speakers find themselves at the crossroads of business, language, and culture, but their challenges are often not understood or appreciated by the native speakers they work with. Wouldn’t Wendy’s occupational life be so much easier if the native speakers of English accepted the fact that she is doing so well in English? They could value her clear speaking and strong base of grammar. They could better understand that strong intonation is

not a reflection of passion where Wendy comes from. Wendy's learning would be easier if her counterparts better understood what it feels like to communicate complex ideas daily in another language. That level of empathy is sorely lacking in most organizations.

A key insight here is that organizations in native-speaking countries unintentionally isolate international professionals by not recognizing and valuing their strengths. Performance reviews tear down their confidence and make them feel inadequate. Worst of all, neither Wendy nor the organization knows exactly how to help plan for her improvement. The immediate response is that non-native speakers need to reduce their accents. That knee-jerk reaction is causing trouble. It takes two to tango. It also takes two to build better performance improvement plans.

Unlike Wendy, who has lived in the United States for 15 years, Toshi has arrived recently and is far more comfortable in his native Japanese. He tries to understand the norms of American culture by "standing up and being counted," as he has been told. But he does not know what that means, nor does he know how or when to do that.

Toshi is having a hard time communicating in English. He also feels that the cultural classes he received did not help. In fact, all our professionals in the lounge agreed that the corporate solutions did not prepare them well for their global work. Toshi gets confused because the course content told him that Americans behave in a particular way, but then he has others tell him something different. To make matters more confusing, he finds the actual behaviors of Americans to be very different from both what he has been taught and what he has been told.

Interestingly, Toshi learned about brainstorming in culture classes, but he still does not understand the purpose and finds that the process has little value. Toshi's reaction to brainstorming is quite interesting. While business professionals in the United States view brainstorming as structured discussions, many non-native employees view it simply as chaos without a chance to interact. A French colleague marveled at one particular meeting when the U.S. facilitator said, "There are no

dumb ideas.” She leaned over and quietly said, “There are plenty of dumb ideas, and she just wrote one down.”

Saying something without careful consideration is hard to imagine for Toshi. The thought of interrupting someone is even worse. One of his frustrations represents a huge challenge for non-native English speakers when working in English. “How exactly do I get a word in?” The Americans and the British seem to do it with ease. One of our U.S. colleagues laughed when he heard us discuss how challenging it is for second-language speakers to squeeze their way into a conversation. He said, “I never even thought about it. Interrupting is a national pastime in the U.S.”

In fact, Toshi finds it quite distasteful. He is not alone, as many of our Canadian friends also find consistently “butting in” to be an annoying habit. Yet everyone who comes to English-speaking countries is told that you should participate. The phrase “stand up and be counted” is taught in almost every cross-cultural program. The problem is that when people get to the United States they have no idea how to do it. We work with many clients who have been living in the United States for years and have found this to be a huge challenge.

As an example, last year we had the opportunity to coach a Chinese scientist working in a major pharmaceutical company. Let’s call her Ling. Her communication challenges, as explained by the organization, were accent and clarity of speech. However, once we evaluated Ling’s skills we found her accent to be mild and her sound production problems minimal. These perceptions arose because she very rarely spoke up at meetings, kept hushed tones over the phone, and lacked confidence in her current skill set.

The perceptions did not reflect the reality, as we often discover. Interestingly, Ling’s grammar was impeccable even though she rated herself as below average. Our coaches encouraged her to speak up at meetings and taught her to use some polite language to interject herself into business conversations. Ling explained how rude it felt to interrupt; she imagined her father’s frowning face as she committed such a

faux pas. However, we showed her some gracious and polite expressions to interject herself into a business conversation. We further encouraged her to increase her volume. We also noticed that she had no trouble speaking up and, being a brilliant woman, she had strong ideas to contribute. She was clearly ready to share her voice and be heard inside the organization.

A few weeks after the start of her coaching sessions, we got a call from her manager. First, the manager praised Ling's quick learning style and how she was now such a great contributor to the weekly status meetings. "But," she added hesitantly, "could you please explain to her that she does not have to speak quite so much. Who knew Ling was so long-winded?" We all had a good laugh at that—including Ling, who quickly learned to find the balance between when to speak and when to listen.

Toshi also told an interesting story about how one presenter showed a slide that said "GOTCHA," without explaining what the term meant to his non-native audience. Toshi's colleague was so annoyed by this lack of consideration that he left the room. We certainly feel that Toshi's colleague overreacted, but imagine if that presenter took the time to explain "gotcha" and recognized that there were second-language speakers in the room. Everyone would have then been on the same page and the meeting content could have been clearly understood by all participants.

How much better would it be for his team leader to understand this about Toshi. Perhaps she could ask Toshi, prior to the meeting, to prepare some remarks. Then during the meeting, she might invite Toshi to speak. The available tools are easy to access, but the spirit of exchange needs to be revamped. As the world gets smaller, we need to challenge the dictum "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Improved communication happens when everyone understands that it takes two to tango.

In fact, millions of people around the world are facing the same dilemma as Wendy and Toshi. The world, whether or not it is fully

embracing it, is choosing English as the language of business. In this book, we do not explore why. We also do not examine hypothetical questions such as what language might supplant English in the coming years. It's not that we don't care, but that we are responding to the practical dilemmas that international professionals face right now. They use English every day and must build their careers on it. The market addresses their challenges with a limited range of language learning options, and expects non-native speakers to flock to these programs. Some of the programs are well targeted, but most fail to address the sophisticated needs of advanced communicators. The solutions very rarely address the convergence that is impacting the three critical areas of communication: language, culture, and business.

In addition, very few solutions exist for native speakers because their problems are not recognized. The prevailing thinking is that native speakers have an advantage and that everyone else can take language-training programs to catch up. That simplistic thinking does not prepare native speakers for global business. They need to adjust to non-native speakers by understanding how to:

- Decipher accents
- Expect limited vocabularies
- Anticipate odd syntax
- Control speed of communication
- Manage tone and range of expression

Throughout *Leading in English*, we address the challenges and possible solutions for both native and non-native speakers. Furthermore, we use actual stories from these professionals to illustrate our key points.

In Chapter 2, we cover the role that accents play in global business and the impact on individuals who are having a hard time being understood.

In Chapter 3, we explore innovative solutions for international professionals to deliver impactful messages.

In Chapter 4, we examine the importance for leaders to develop a compelling narrative.

Throughout the book, we detail how international professionals can put all this information together and form a comprehensive plan that will establish a new standard for using English worldwide.

Happy reading. We hope that you find new strategies to enhance your relationships and improve your experiences in English.

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