

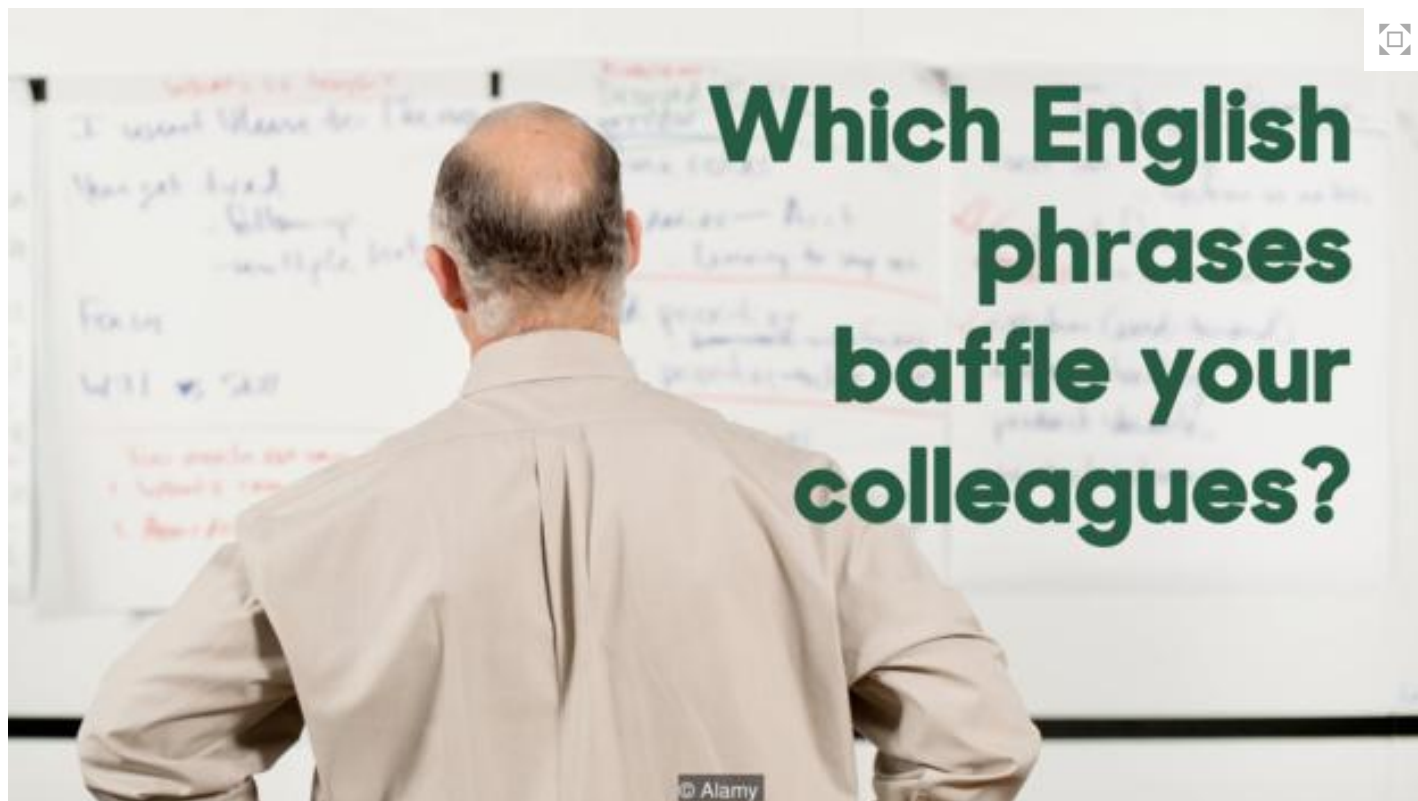
With non-native English speakers outnumbering native speakers, it's up to Anglophones to learn how to speak their language within a global community.



By Lennox Morrison
16 December 2016

Until seven years ago, Chicago-born Ben Barron had worked only with fellow Americans. But when he took a job with Zurich Insurance Company, an international company headquartered in Switzerland, Barron found that his new colleagues across Europe, who used English as a shared language, had difficulty understanding him.

“Fortunately I was surrounded by people who would stop and say things like, ‘So what do you mean by that?’ and make me clarify,” he recalls. “So I started to become aware of some of my own verbal communication habits that might lead to misunderstandings.”



Ever wonder, "Are we even speaking the same language?" Share your experiences with us on Facebook.

After taking an in-company e-learning course to help native English speakers communicate better with non-native speakers, Barron slowed down his pace of speaking and edited his "American speak" to avoid jargon and idioms that don't translate globally.

"That e-learning exposed me to the thought that maybe people could not process my verbal information as quickly as I thought they were," says Barron, who is now the company's senior learning and development consultant for international operations, in Schaumburg, Illinois.

"Another takeaway was avoiding the use of sayings," he says. "For example, a saying like 'That dog don't hunt' which means 'That's probably not that good of an idea'. That's a very southern American saying that people didn't understand."

He also filtered out references to baseball and football and changed his writing style. Instead of contractions like 'can't', 'don't' and 'doesn't', he writes the phrases out in full.

Barron is one of a small but growing number of native English speakers recalibrating how he uses his mother tongue.



Learning global English can help you communicate with colleagues (Credit: Getty Images)

Turning the tables

With non-native English speakers now vastly outnumbering native speakers, it's up to the latter to be more adaptable, says Neil Shaw, intercultural fluency lead at the British Council, the UK's international educational and cultural body. About 1.75 billion people worldwide speak English at a useful level, and by 2020 it's expected to be two billion, according to the British Council.

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In the Council's new intercultural fluency courses launched in September, native English speakers in countries from Singapore to South Africa have been prompted to rethink how they communicate. "It's a bit of a revelation to many of them that their English isn't as clear and effective as they think it is," Shaw says.

Increasingly, English is being used as a lingua franca. "It's not an exotic thing anymore to be working in a global, virtual team," says Robert Gibson, an intercultural consultant based in Munich, Germany. "It's everyday life for many people and it's quite stressful and difficult."



During his presidency, George W. Bush was known for garbling his English (Credit: Alamy)

It can be a culture shock for native speakers to encounter new varieties of English.

“The English language is changing quite radically,” says Gibson. “The trend is not to have one or two clear standard Englishes like American English and British English, but to have a lot of different types of English.”

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Chinese English, known as chinglish, and German English, called denglish, are examples, he says. “English is also developing within organisations. In companies, they have their own style of English which is not necessarily understood by native speakers. We are getting away from saying that there is a standard English you need to conform to [towards] saying that there are different standards of English for different situations.”

A native-speaker disadvantage

Mother-tongue English may not even be an advantage anymore, says Dr Dominic Watt, sociolinguistics expert at the University of York in the UK.

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It's the native speakers who are the odd ones out

“It's not necessarily in your interests to be a native speaker of English because you haven't had to go through the same learning process that the non-natives have. So they're all on the same page and it's the native speakers who are the odd ones out,” Watt says.

At the European Parliament, for instance, non-native speakers complain to the Anglophones, “Can't you just speak English like the rest of us do!”, says Watt. “The power balance has shifted a bit by sheer virtue of numbers.”

Gradually, native speakers are realising that something is going wrong with the way they're communicating, says Cathy Wellings, director of the London School of International Communication in the UK.



Are your colloquial quirks confusing your colleagues? You'd be surprised (Credit: iStock)

“People are presenting to a non-native speaker audience and they realise that it isn't going across as well as at home, or they're great negotiators at home but they don't end up winning the deals when they

take it overseas,” she says.

Monolingual English speakers have no insight into the challenges faced by non-native speakers. “One of the things I always reinforce with native speakers is that the cognitive load of operating in another language is high, it’s tough and tiring, so if we native speakers can help them out it’s going to make it easier,” Wellings adds.

When it comes to English grammar, learners often outshine native speakers. “In written business communication courses with mixed groups, the Brits can be quite sheepish that they don’t know the grammar that non-native speakers do,” she says.

Slow down and shut up

The most useful change native speakers can make is to slow down their speech, says Bob Dignen, director and owner of UK-based York Associates, the international communications training provider that created Zurich Insurance’s e-learning course, English for the Native Speaker.



Native speakers on average speak 250 words per minute, while the average intermediate non-native speaker is comfortable with around 150 words per minute

Native speakers on average speak 250 words per minute, while the average intermediate non-native speaker is comfortable with around 150 words per minute, Dignen explains. “To speak at a slower speed is a behavioural competence that can take six to 12 months to master. Actors learn these skills — to control speech, increase the length of pause,” says Dignen. “You can kind of train by just recording yourself on a mobile phone as you speak to somebody and then play that back and try to control your speech until you’re speaking at 150 words per minute.”



Spanish King Felipe VI listens to a translation at the UN (Credit: Alamy)

Articulation is also important, he says. “Instead of ‘I will’ we tend to say ‘I’ll’ and then in fast speech we don’t even say that we say ‘ull’. Begin to non-contract and say ‘I will’ and ‘I am’ rather than ‘I’ll’ and ‘I’m’ and you can make yourself more intelligible.”

Monolinguals tend to use a communication style that leads “unwittingly to the marginalisation of the non-native speaker in conversation,” he says. “It leads to dominance in terms of talking time with the monolingual speaking more than the non-native speaker.”

“Shutting up and asking more questions is what I counsel native speakers to do. It makes a huge, huge difference.”

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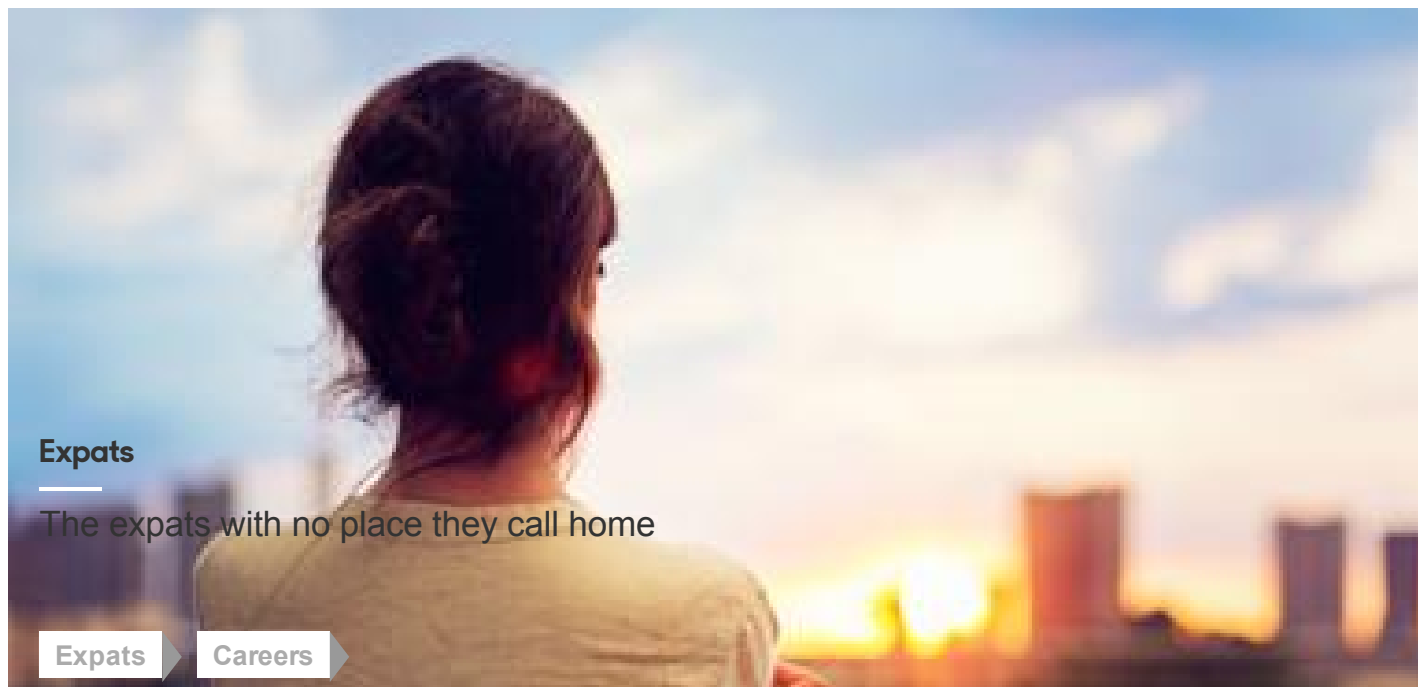


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