



ICOPROMO

Intercultural competence for professional mobility
*Compétence interculturelle pour le développement
de la mobilité professionnelle*



"Tu es Anglaise?"

Communicating across cultures

Verbal
communication

Rationale

It can be extremely challenging to try to convey complex ideas in a foreign language. Language users give up trying because they are afraid of making fools of themselves. Listeners tend to get bored with these attempts and move on to different subjects. This can bring about feelings of isolation and embarrassment on behalf of the foreign language user. In multicultural teams such a situation can become a major issue and requires a lot of attention from the outset.

Learning Outcome

Awareness raising of the importance of improving one's language skills
Awareness raising of the fact that good language abilities increase acceptance in the foreign community

Competences:

Create understanding for the emotional problems caused by lack of verbal communication skills
Dealing with limited verbal communication skills

Time

30 minutes

Participants

Up to 25

Materials required

Photocopies of handout



Procedure

1. Distribute the handout and ask participants to read the text.
2. Form small groups and encourage participants first to interpret the situation described in the text taking the perspective first of (a) the inept speaker and then (b) as the listeners may have perceived it.
3. Encourage participants to describe the feelings of the speaker/the listeners during this incident.
4. Ask participants if any of them have made any similar experiences during their stays abroad. Invite them to recall these situations and describe them to their peers.
5. Ask participants to suggest coping strategies (a) for foreign language speakers who are not fluent in the foreign language, and (b) for native speakers when they communicate with non-native speakers.

Debriefing

- (1) Lack of ability to communicate properly often results in feelings of helplessness, intellectual inability and it creates self-doubts among speakers of the foreign language. As a result, the native speakers may lose interest and may turn away from the conversation. Native speakers may not be patient enough to help the non-native speakers overcome these communicative hurdles. The result may be negative stereotyping on the part of the native-speaker and a feeling of resignation on the part of the non-native speaker, who tends to withdraw from the conversation.
- (2) Such behaviour is detrimental to team relationships and team effectiveness in multicultural teams. Speakers who lack language proficiency will not be able to contribute their ideas. Important input may be lost. Team members who feel that they are "useless" or "a burden" for the team tend to withdraw and lose commitment. Team cohesion will be lost and the team will not be able to use its resources properly.
- (3) Teams need to devise coping strategies for team members with lacking linguistic skills. Procedures have to be created that will ensure that the potential of each team member is fully used. In such a situation, team leaders need to play a major role. For instance, if they realise that the more eloquent team members get bored or impatient, they may have to sit down with the less eloquent team member separately to elicit their opinions or ideas. If the team has a member who speaks the language of the struggling team member, time needs to be set aside for translation of their ideas. In any case it will be essential to ensure that the less fluent team member is given an opportunity to voice his opinion and to make suggestions. Team members need to develop a special routine for turn taking, particularly during brainstorming sessions and when crucial decisions are made.

(4) Teams should be encouraged to come up with creative ways of solving this problem. The issue needs to be raised openly in the team. Team leaders need to be aware of the fact that the less eloquent team members will tend to downplay their lacking language skills because they are often embarrassed about this deficiency and are afraid that they will cause a slow-down of teamwork.

References

Turnbull, S. (2003) *Almost French: A New Life in Paris*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

**Facilitator's notes**

There are no recipes for coping with such a situation. All a team can do is try to be creative. What is most important, however, is that the team does not downplay the long-term effects that may arise from such a problem.



Read the following extract from *Almost French* by Sarah Turnbull:

"Tu es anglaise? Américaine?"

"Je suis australienne," I manage to reply to the fellow next to me. A faint ripple of interest spreads across the room. Compared to the English and American communities in Paris, the number of Australians is small, which makes us more of a curiosity. For French people, Australia looms in their imagination like a mythical final frontier which they dream of visiting but never will because twenty-three hours in a plane would be insupportable. Still, while none of them have ever been there, this group seems pretty well informed about my homeland.

A slim fellow – Jean-Marc or Marc-Jean, at a guess – starts talking about something he read in *Le Monde* concerning the push for Australia to become a Republic. "Why is Australia still tied to England?" he asks me, puzzled. As a staunch Republican, privately I am delighted for this opportunity to discuss the issue, to shed some light on it for a foreign audience. Taking a deep breath, I summon up my most eloquent French.

"Many want. Some they don't want. The old, for example. But I want."

There is a buzz of rapid conversation as Frédéric scrambles to elaborate: "It's just a matter of time ... Sarah thinks most young Australians ..."

"But why are you still loyal to the Queen?" pursues my interrogator.

Realising my first answer was hopelessly inadequate, I try to convey some passion.

"No, not true! The Queen, she okay, but not for Australia. Yesterday okay, but not tomorrow." Pathetically, I look to Frédéric who again steps in to decipher my message. Thank god he was listening when we'd discussed all this last summer. The conversation about the state of affairs in my country continues without me. Jean-Marc-Marc-Jean addresses all further questions to Frédéric. Inside, I fizz with frustration at my inability to communicate. I love these sorts of discussions! Or at least I used to. But it was as though in trying to express myself in another language I'd suddenly plunged fifty IQ points.

For the next ten minutes I try to sink inconspicuously into the sofa. Then another guest addresses me. Frédéric has to translate what they said.

"He said he's just finished reading *The Songlines*. He wants to know if you've read it."

In fact I have read Bruce Chatwin's book. And in my own language I'd be delighted to admit it. But saying yes now will only open another Pandora's box. I'll be expected to give an opinion, maybe even asked to comment on the plight of Aborigines, their living conditions or spirituality. I'll only be doing Aborigines and my country an injustice.

"Non," I say to save face.

Sarah Turnbull (2003) *Almost French: A New Life in Paris*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, pp. 46-48.

TASKS:

1. Read the text silently and highlight the parts where you feel the author is trying to convey some feelings, either on the part of the Australian speaker or on the part of the listeners.
2. Form small groups of three or four and start by summarising the situation from the point of view (a) of the Australian and (b) of the French.
3. Describe the feelings (a) the Australian and (b) the French may have experienced during this incident.
4. Discuss in groups whether any of you have been in a similar situation or may have witnessed a similar situation.
5. Discuss in groups what effects such a problem may have on multicultural teamwork.
6. Suggest some coping strategies (a) for the foreign language speakers, (b) for the native speakers, and (c) for the team leader in multicultural teams to ensure that also the voices of the less fluent members will be heard.
7. Compare your results with those of the whole group and discuss the pros and cons of the suggestions brought forward.