Survey: 'Business English in International Organisations' Preliminary Report

In August and September 2014 we ran a survey to learn about the experiences of employees who do international work in English. It was completed by 144 SAP employees from 17 countries.

Main Findings from the Survey

Of the non-native English speakers who completed the survey, many answered that they had to work harder, felt less influential and were less confident when working in English than when working in their native language. Many enjoyed working in English.

General Findings from Other Research in the Field of Applied Linguistics

There are several differences between the type of English used by native speakers and the type used by non-native speakers. Non-native speakers are more successful at using 'English as Lingua Franca' or ELF, which generally contains fewer idioms and less complicated phrasing and sentence structure. There is also a behavioural characteristic of using supportive, interactional strategies to ensure understanding and successful communication.

Non-native English speakers are generally at a disadvantage when communicating with native English speakers.

Native English speakers tend to use a native style of English (for example, American or British English), even in international situations, and they generally do not use the supportive, interactional strategies.

From socio-linguistics research we know that the language we use to express ourselves plays a role in conveying our identity. Non-native speakers can be at a disadvantage because this expression typically involves the use of language that is regarded as 'incorrect' in situations where a native variety of English is the standard.

Many studies have shown that difficulties in comprehension cause information losses. This seems to have three main causes: non-native speakers who have an inadequate knowledge of English, difficulty (by both native and non-native speakers) in understanding the various accents in which English is spoken internationally, and native English speakers who do not adapt their English for international situations.

From an earlier BEIO study in 2013 of email communication at SAP we found that many emails sent between native and non-native English speakers contained ambiguous messages.

Conclusions and What's Next

Our survey reveals some work difficulties experienced by many of the non-native English speakers and the findings from general linguistics research show possible causes for these. Further research is needed to explore the link between the two. Also, we would like to survey more employees to increase the statistical validity. We do not report on the responses from native speakers because the sample was too small so we would also like to increase these in order to discover their experiences too. We also plan to do interviews. As a research methodology it mitigates some of the inherent weaknesses in

surveys and it can reveal cause and effect information.

Detailed Findings

1. Participating in Conference Calls and Meetings

When participating in conference calls and meetings, most of the non–native English speaking employees enjoyed working in English, but for some there were negative effects such as having to work harder and feeling that they have less influence, and a few employees sometimes choosing not to participate.

The problem that affected this group the most was having to work harder when working in English compared to working in their native language.

When we asked if employees felt they had less influence when working in English, it was interesting that this problem was experienced more by the employees who worked most often in English. This is the opposite of what we expected.

- 84% of non–native English speakers (often or always) enjoyed working in English.

- 48% of non–native English speakers were not completely confident that they were understood (when speaking in English)

- 35% of non–native English speakers (often or always) had to work harder to be effective than when working in their native language. This increases to 59% when those who worked harder 'sometimes' are counted.

- 36% had to prepare more to be effective than when working in their native language. This increases to 58% when those who had to prepare more 'sometimes' are counted.

- 17% felt that they had less influence (often or always) than when working in their mother tongue. This increases to 42% when those who felt they had less influence 'sometimes' are counted.

  If native English speakers were present the number who felt they had less influence (often or always) increased by 3% (from 17% to 20%)

- 6% chose not to participate in conference calls or meetings (sometimes, often, or always) because they might not be understood. This increases to 11% if native speakers were present.

2. Participating in Projects

The responses about projects were in most cases similar to the responses about conference calls and meetings. In one case they were different: 7 to 8% more non–native English speakers said they had to work harder in projects than in conference calls. This difference increases from 9 to 10% if native English speakers were present. In general, it seems that project work is more challenging than meetings and conference calls when working in a second language.

- 84% of non–native English speakers (often or always) **enjoyed working in English**. If native speakers were present this was slightly lower at 79%.

- 39% of non–native English speakers (often or always) **had to work harder** to be effective than when working in their native language. This increases to 66% when those who worked harder 'sometimes' are included. If native English speakers were present

the number increases to 43%.

- 14% felt they were **less effective** (often or always) than when working in their native language. This increases to 31% when those who felt they were 'sometimes' less effective are counted.

  If native English speakers were present the number who felt they were less effective (often or always) increases to 16%. This increases to 37% when those who felt they were 'sometimes' less effective are counted.

- 20% felt that they **had less influence** (often or always) than when working in their native language. This increases to 41% when those who felt they had less influence 'sometimes' are counted.

  If native English speakers were present the number increases to 22%. This increases to 43% when those who felt they had less influence 'sometimes' are counted.

- 6% **chose not to participate** in projects (sometimes, often, or always) because they might not be understood. There was very little difference if native speakers were present.

3. Reading English Texts

When reading English texts:
- 37% did not completely understand guides (example: for procedures and tools)
- 34% did not completely understand communications from senior management
- 31% did not completely understand intranet (corporate portal) pages
- 22% did not completely understand email from colleagues they know

4. Writing English Texts

We asked employees if they wrote English texts for an international audience. Specifically we asked about the writing of documents and mass communication, for example e-mail to many people. We also asked about training and advice in writing English texts.

- Half of the employees have to write texts for international audiences of more than 20 people
- 21% have to write texts for international audiences of more than 100 people.
- More than 75% said that training in writing English for an international audience would be helpful

The Authors of this Preliminary Report

The 'Business English in International Organisations' (BEIO) survey is part of a project run by Terry Haggerty, an SAP employee, with Elisabeth Hampel, Karolina Jagodzinski and Susanne Strubel-Burgdorf who are researchers at Bonn Applied English Linguistics, Bonn University, Germany.