THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIFTH SKILL IN LANGUAGE LEARNING
EXEMPLIFIED BY ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

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An anecdotal introduction

Why do Asians always lie?
Lately I was conducting a seminar on intercultural communication for the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was designed for Swiss citizens who work abroad in Swiss embassies and consulates together with local employees. All participants had already had different assignments in different places all around the world and had an experience of working abroad of 5 to 30 years. During the introductory activity, participants were asked to interview each other and, among other topics, were asked to come up with 'burning issues' in connection with working with local employees. One woman who had worked in Eastern and Western Europe, the Far East, Africa, South America and the USA hadn't experienced any difficulties, but she had one burning question to ask, " Why is it that Asians always lie? You explain to them a task for example, and ask them whether they have understood, and they always smile, nod and say 'yes, yes', but later you realize that they haven't had a vague idea about it. Why can't they say that they don't understand? How can I trust them if they don't say what they think?"

The Swiss woman was referring to her experiences in South Korea and in Singapore. She spoke good English and so did her counterparts. Still, understanding didn't take place. There was misunderstanding and misinterpretation – probably on both sides. Both parties were struggling with each other's value systems and did not appreciate each other's communication style (Asians lie! How can you trust them! / The big-nosed Westerners are ever so rude to ask such direct questions, and this in front of others!).

As English has become the leading global language and is widely used to communicate between cultures which – for most part – don't use English as their first language, it seems logical that the four classic skills of language acquisition (*reading, writing, listening and speaking*) are not enough to guarantee successful interactions. In addition, we need to teach cultural aspects related to language. We need to look at different ways of saying things as well as teach students mindfulness when it comes to understanding others. This skill of mindful interpreting is what we mean by the *fifth skill.* Whereas the four classic skills can be taught by addressing mainly the cognitive development of language acquisition, the fifth skill aims at the affective development, at behaviour and successful interactions beyond words.

Deficiencies of the monolingual native speaker.
Last autumn (fall) I was visited by some dear friends from the UK. While they were touring some places of interest in the Swiss Alps I was marking a diploma thesis on the topic of *The Impact of Diversity on Talent Development* (based on a survey of one of the big global companies of Switzerland) of a student of mine studying at our school of management. As my Swiss student was part of an international class he had to write all his academic papers in

English. When my friends happily returned, they wanted to share their experiences. I was very pleased that they had had such a nice day, but still, it did not stop me from feeling that I had been wasting my time reading a mediocre paper in intelligible yet *bad* English. I couldn't hide my grumpiness, so my friends asked me why I was feeling so miserable. I talked about my frustrating day evaluating and correcting the paper. As the topic sounded very interesting they wanted to read it themselves (both my friends have a first and second degree from a British university, one is a former head teacher and the other one a director of a group of local school psychologists). The result was: They understood the individual words but the paper did not make sense to them at all. In parts they had no idea what my student was writing about.

Why did I understand what my student wrote and why didn't they? Indeed, the topic was familiar to me and less so to them – but what really helped me was that I spotted, for example, the German word order or some literal translations of Swiss-German idiosyncrasies and the fact that I had gone through the process of foreign language acquisition myself. I can well imagine a group of international diversity managers, all non-native speakers of English, using English as a lingua franca communicating together and happily understanding each other using a basic standard English with some international job-related lexical expressions showing high tolerance for linguistic diversity and correctness. Understanding each other seems more important than communicating in a 'correct' way from a native speaker's or language teacher's point of view. The deficiencies of the monolingual native speakers of English are of linguistic nature: They are related to the intelligibility difficulties they encounter when someone uses their language in another way.

English as a preferred lingua franca in a globalized world

Some facts: According to current statistical surveys (Crystal 2006 and Graddol 2006) one in three of the world's population (c. 2 billion) use English to some degree. The vast majority of speakers of English are people who use English as a second or foreign language. Mother tongue speakers only account for some 400 million. The ratio between non-native speakers and native speakers is 4 to 1! And the process of English language acquisition by non-native speakers is still accelerating. An example: Within the formal education sector an estimated 176.7 million Chinese were studying English in China in 2005 (Graddol 2006). Another astonishing figure: Some 80 percent of international business communication is done in English (Graddol 2006). In many large companies, English has become a working language.

Non-native speakers of English are not only using the language, but they are shaping it.
No other language has ever been used by so many people in so many different parts of the world. English has become the world's common linguistic denominator. Whether you are a Malaysian business executive on business in Germany, an Indian IT specialist working for an American company in Bangalore, a Swiss researcher giving a talk on nano-technology at an international conference in Amsterdam, an Italian minister in the EU parliament in Brussels or a Japanese tourist in Bangkok, you are probably speaking English. The reason for speaking English in all of the above situations is the same: The users have to switch to this foreign language, because if they spoke their mother tongue, understanding wouldn't take place. But most speakers are bound to set the quality standards lower for a second or third language. The focus is much more on the transmitted content than on the correct form compared to native speakers. As we all have experienced ourselves, the act of using a foreign language is often a real struggle. We are constantly translating what we would have said in our own language

and cultural context and we are trying to find words that come close to what we want to say. While we are quite aware of differences in the grammatical and lexical usage of language we are less likely to be aware of our own cultural context and the context of the receiver. And, as the transmission of the context is more important than using the language brilliantly, adding the fifth skill in language teaching makes very much sense and fosters intelligibility.

It is a fact that English has become the preferred lingua franca and the non-native speakers of English outnumber the native speakers by a large number. So we have to adapt our curricula and approaches of teaching English. We have to become more pragmatic: The usage should dictate our approaches. There should be less focus on teaching English as a foreign or second language than on teaching *global English, English as a lingua franca and English for young learners.*

The consequences for English as world language are yet not clear; we are in a transition period and according to David Crystal (2006) "we are experiencing a linguistic revolution in which old models are being replaced by new ones and a transitional period is inevitably one of great uncertainty". Graddol suggests that we should try to help our students to become "fluent bilingual speakers who retain a national identity in terms of accent, and who also have the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker" (2006: 87). Andy Kirkpatrick, professor at Hong Kong Institute of Education, asks for a new type of language teacher to meet the challenges brought up by teaching global English. " In today's complex and globalising world, well-trained, multilingual and culturally sophisticated teachers are needed to teach learners of English … It is time for those involved in the ELT profession to resist employment of untrained native speaker teachers." (In: Graddol 2006: 121). It seems very logical to me, if we want to train our students to become bilingual and culturally sensitive towards other speakers we need to foster the fifth skill – and only culturally sensitive teachers can do that.

A last reason for promoting the fifth skill in language learning lies with our modern communication technologies. The Internet, e-mail, chatting, blogging, and the use of text messages are all broadening our world. Through all of these modern technologies, contacts beyond our physical borders are easily achieved. As more and more people have access to these technologies, more and more possibilities open up to us to communicate across borders and huge spaces within seconds. In addition, the fact that modern technology is enabling new patterns of communication has global implications for the fast changing and diversifying English language and its patterns.

Whether we like it or not, we have to learn to teach global English. We shouldn't be suffering that a paper written on *The Impact of Diversity on Talent Development* is not up to the traditional language standards as mentioned in the anecdotal introduction. We have to teach a common standard, to learn to appreciate diversity, to value variety and to focus more on the pragmatic side. This includes mindful interpreting.

The fifth skill: Mindful interpreting

The fifth skill aims at understanding multilingual and multicultural contexts. It enhances intercultural competence, a key success factor in an interconnected, fast changing and globalized world. If we manage to increase the intercultural sensitivity of the language learners, we help augment their ability to make complex perceptual distinctions around their

own cultural experiences. As learners' awareness of cultural differences becomes more differentiated, they potentially increase their competence in intercultural relations.

Some definitions
Intercultural competence
- "In general terms, intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts." (Bennett 2004:149).

Culture
There must be thousands of definitions of culture. As the world gets 'flatter' and diversity increases, culture cannot be defined by national culture only. Two definitions of culture seem to be suitable for our purpose:
- "Culture is the learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of a group of interacting people." (Bennett 2004)
- "Culture is a shared system of meanings. It dictates what we pay attention to, how we act and what we value." (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997: 13)

If we define culture in this way, it becomes evident that culture has not only elements which are easy to spot (the objective cultural elements), but also some hidden elements that have to do with the value system of the person (the subjective cultural elements). The latter are interlinked with what we believe is right or wrong, good or bad, and with norms and values. They include verbal and non-verbal behaviour and describe different ways of how we communicate. These subjective elements are largely shaped by the socialisation process of the individual. The elements of subjective culture comprise nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, social class, region and education and other factors. Within an organisation we could add department and profession.

Different communication styles
The first anecdotal story raises the questions why Asians lie and why they can't say that they don't understand. Of course, they don't lie and of course they say that they don't understand. But the point is that they say it in their indirect way and not in the direct Western way. Therefore competent intercultural communicators don't teach each other to communicate as they do themselves but to interpret different ways of saying 'no' and resist their urge to evaluate the other speaker. A good friend of mine who is a Japanese professor claims that there are 80 different ways to say 'no' in Japan, but the Japanese word 'no' is not among these 80 possibilities.

One of the first scholars who focussed on differences in communication was the U. S. American Edward T. Hall. He explained some of the differences in the way we communicate with the concept of *high-context and low-context cultures*. Whereas high context cultures focus more on the context, are more intuitive, indirect, implicit and sensitive to synchronicity, low-context cultures focus more on the content, the word, are more analytical, direct, explicit and sensitive to causality, events related to each other over time. In general, one could say that in high-context cultures information is *known* whereas in low-context cultures information is *taught*. This is only one of the many cultural differences in communication.

Different value orientations
Let us – for the last time – reflect on our initial story. Why does it seem rude to the Asian speaker to be so direct and why does it seem dishonest to the Westerner to smile and say

'yes'? There are other concepts that could help to understand the differences. Among others, Charles Hampden-Turner came up with seven different value orientations. Five describe how people relate to each other, one describes different concepts of time and the last one explains how we relate to nature. The dimensions *universalism versus particularism* seem most appropriate to explain the misperceptions in our example.

Universalistic cultures tend to have a strong focus on rules and schedules and less on the relationship. A word is a word. A deal is a deal. A written contract is a written contract and counts under all circumstances. Exceptions are generally disliked and there is only one truth or reality, that which has been agreed on. Communication is direct so that it doesn't leave room for interpretation. All in all, universalistic cultures are task oriented.

Particularistic cultures, on the other hand, reflect more on the relationships than the rules. Legal contracts are more readily interpreted, and a trustworthy person is the one who honours the particular circumstances and respects flexibility and synchronicity. Communication is high-context, so intuition and interpretation are necessary. All in all, particularistic cultures are relationship oriented.

Therefore the Asian speaker might see it as inappropriate to openly disappoint her boss by saying "No, I don't understand" but signals her insecurity through non-verbal behaviour about this matter. The relationship with her boss is more important and the answer 'yes' reflects the hierarchical relationship between the two. It might also be that the Asian participant tries to hide disappointment and embarrassment because of the direct question in front of her colleagues. There is a lot of room for interpretation and speculation. Each situation is unique and has to be analysed depending on the particular circumstances.

If we want to teach culture we have to get across that high-context behaviour is neither good nor bad but different from low-context behaviour. Universalistic systems have their strengths but in their extreme also weaknesses, and so do particularistic systems. If we teach learners about these differences, we can enhance mutual understanding across borders, and more satisfying interactions will happen. Charles Hampden-Turner suggests the following three-step process:

- First, we have to *recognise* the differences. It is not enough to learn about the others. It might be even more important to learn about yourself. Your way of communicating is not normal to the rest of the world.
- Second, we have to *respect* differences. Whether we like it or not, Asians and Westerners don't follow the same communication patterns nor have they the same value orientations. We have to learn to appreciate the differences.
- Third, we have to *reconcile* the differences. Differences can be complementary if we focus on the qualities they bring along. If a high-context person teams up with a low-context person to take a strategic decision, the outcome might be more sustainable than if it had been a decision of two people of the same orientation.

The more intercultural and poly-contextual competencies learners of global English show, the higher are the chances for mindful cross-border contacts and the greater are the chances of success for the individual as well as for the organization she or he is representing. We are living in a globalized and interdependent world.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Fritz B. Simons, a colleague from Witten Herdecke University in Germany. "The one that does not cross borders or takes up the challenge of differences, is necessarily limited:
- in her/his experiences
- her/his thinking
- her/his feelings
- her/his acting etc."

The fifth skill has become the key success factor for sustainable intercultural interactions and diversity management, and English, as a lingua franca, is the preferred and neutral tool to communicate across borders.

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