



English as a Second Language

This exercise (“Double-the-verb”) takes about 10 to 15 minutes. It is meant to help native English speakers understand the challenge that ESL speakers experience when working in English all day long.

Set up the exercise in the following manner:

We are now going to do an exercise. Please pair up with someone you don't work with frequently (as a way to do some networking). Once you have paired up, I want you to describe to each other what you did this morning, between the moment you woke up and the moment you got to work / this room, with a bit of a twist: Every time you get to a verb, you need to double that verb with a synonym. In other words, you have to find another verb that means the same thing right after the first verb, say the second verb and then continue your sentence. For example, “I woke arose at 7 a.m. I brushed cleaned my teeth”. So you describe what you did, doubling all the verbs while the other person listens. Then you exchange roles.

Give participants a couple of minutes; remind everyone to switch roles half way through the exercise. Debrief the exercise through a series of questions and answers.

Question to the audience: *How did it feel?*

Answer: *Awkward, tiring, painful, frustrating, etc.*

Question to the audience: *How did you change your story because you had to double verbs?*

Answer: *Typically, we make it shorter and skip a lot of details. Nobody talks about the colour of their toothbrush. We are so focused on the words that we forget what point we have reached in the story. We also miss important facts.*

Question to the audience: *How many of you got to work / the workshop without having a shower or getting dressed?*

Answer: *[laughter]*

Follow-up: *Not that you did, but some of you probably forgot to mention these two steps.*

Question to the audience: *In this situation, your counterpart can guess what you are going to say, so there is not much loss of information. But imagine that I had asked you to explain to me how to [insert here some activity that is typical of your organization] while doubling all the verbs. What would have happened?*

Answer: *Confusion*

Follow-up: *It would have been a mess. This is the challenge that ESL speakers face when working in English all day long. This exercise simulates the mental gymnastics that ESL speakers do all day long when they work in English. When we learn a second language (whichever second language we are trying to learn), we initially think in our first language and then translate mentally into the second language we are trying to speak.*

Question to the audience: *In Canada, many people learned some French at one point. Do you remember what happened when you were trying to speak French? You were thinking in English and translating mentally into French or Spanish word for word. Then, half way through your sentence, you get stuck. “How do you say this word?” and you go “Uh... Uh...” How intelligent did you sound at that point?*

Answer: *Not that much.*



Follow-up: *As a result, people often interpret lack of English skills as a lack of technical skills. We sound a lot less competent in a second language than we do in our first language. This interpretation can have serious consequences for organizations that try to recruit culturally different employees.*

Question to the audience: *Where did your eyes go when you were doubling the verbs?*

Answer: *Away from the other person, because we are looking for the other verb.*

Follow-up: *When we try to concentrate mentally on a task, we look at the ceiling, the floor or the walls – fundamentally, we are trying to allocate as much CPU to the word processing as possible.*

Question to the audience: *How is lack of eye contact interpreted by the average Canadian?*

Answer: *Rude, poor communication skills, not engaged, not confident, having something to hide.*

Follow-up: *Note that all interpretations are negative. You can see that this lack of eye contact may simply mean that the person is concentrating heavily or trying to show respect, as in the case of East Asians.*

Question to the audience: *Imagine that I asked you to speak like this all day long. What would have happened? Would you continue speaking doubling the verb during lunch?*

Answer: *It would have been terrible / I would not have said a word, I would be exhausted by the end of the day, etc.*

Follow-up: *This is why ESL speakers group by first language at lunch time.*

Question to the audience: *How do native English speakers react when they see a table of people who all speak a language other than English?*

Answer: *They are anti-social; they don't want to learn English; they don't want to integrate; they don't want us to understand; they are talking about us.*

Follow-up: *As you can imagine, in most cases they are just blowing off steam, or taking a mental break.*

Question to the audience: *What can people who speak English as a First Language do to communicate more effectively with people who speak English as a Second Language within their organization?*

Answer:

- *Enunciate properly; slow down as much as you can;*
- *Use simple vocabulary and sentence structure;*
- *Spell out your name or specific terms (particularly technical words);*
- *Stop and check to see if you are understood;*
- *Ask people to rephrase, rather than repeat;*
- *Avoid abbreviations like “gonna”, “wanna”, and double negative sentence like “isn't”;*
- *Avoid idioms and acronyms. Remember that the same acronym can mean very different things to different people. One example people usually remember is STD. It means Sexually Transmitted Disease to most Americans whereas it means Short Trunk Dialling to Indians – it stands for a long-distance telephone call there (Indian phone booths have STD written on them).*

Question to the audience: *What can people who speak English as a Second Language do to communicate more effectively with people who speak English as a First Language?*

Answer:

- *Practise English as often as possible;*
- *Listen to the CBC;*
- *Take accent modification courses;*
- *Use diagrams;*
- *If you are not sure people understood something you said, say it again in a different way.*