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English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial	2
Currently on Offer	3
Grammar: Lessons from DeepL	4
Intercultural: Office Banter	5
Intercultural: Multicultural Class- rooms	6
Vocabulary: Teacher's Little Hel- pers	7



This newsletter marks a change for the Language Center as our fearless leader, Barbara Burr, prepares to leave us for her retirement. We wish to thank her here for her years of dedicated service to the Language Center and to the university as a whole and we wish her the best in her retirement. In the last few years in particular, Ms. Burr has increased the profile and offerings of the Language Center significantly. We hope that we can make her proud in the future with our continuing success.

The Language Center as a whole, and the English department in particular, are dedicated to supporting the University of Stuttgart's internationalization strategy. In 2019, our English instructors worked together to provide over 35 hours of training to university staff, administrators and leaders in preparation for the Excellence Initiative evaluation visit. Although the University of Stuttgart was not named an Excellence University, the preparations and teamwork realized in the preparations demonstrated how agile the English department can be.

In the English department, we look to the University of Stuttgart Internationalization Strategy to guide our offerings. With that strategy in mind, we developed an innovative new offering: our Multilingual and International classes, which combine two languages with intercultural training to prepare students for the global workplace. In Successful Applications in Germany and the USA / Erfolgreich bewerben in Deutschland und in den USA, participants focus on key differences between the application process and documents needed in English and in German as well as the best strategies for success in applying for jobs or internships. Participants can expect to finish the course with appropriate resumes that can be adapted and updated as necessary, giving them reliable materials to start their careers. Our Small Talk and Networking course in German and English further prepares students to interact with others professionally in both languages. We also offer Working and Studying in Spanish and English for students who plan to work in Spain or Latin America.

Some of our newest initiatives focus on internationalization again by offering support to instructors who want to teach in English. This is often called English as a Medium of Instruction. We will have trainings and online workshops available to help instructors clearly communicate expectations, give effective feedback, adjust materials, provide lectures, hold office hours, and otherwise communicate with students. Since instructors are often very short on time, these workshops and trainings will be offered in small groups or individually.

Building on the success of our German Schreibwerkstatt, the English Writing Center began offering mini-courses on a variety of writing topics in the spring of 2019. Students can choose from up to fifteen mini-courses on a variety of topics to build their own SQ: Academic Writing à la Carte, or just take individual courses out of personal interest. We are very happy to report that the Writing Center was able to overcome the challenges of the Corona crisis quickly and efficiently by offering 100% of the mini-courses online. The flexibility of these online courses has led to increasing enrollment and positive feedback. Additionally, we provide several writing courses for undergraduate and graduate students, including doctoral candidates.

In addition to the offerings described above, we still offer many other courses on academic English, English for engineering, business English and much more. For those who can't find what they're looking for among our courses and workshops, we also provide tailored offerings according to the needs of the participants at all levels.

Dr. Lucy Blaney-Laible

CURRENTLY
ON OFFER

If you are interested in any of the following, please click on the links or **contact us**.

- [Regular Courses](#)
- [Mini Workshops](#) (only with login)
- [Workshops for Master's and PhD Students](#)
- [Open Office Hours](#)
- [Schreibwerkstatt/Writing Centre](#)
- [Language Stammtisch](#)
- [Editing Service](#)
- [Intercultural Offerings](#)



Comments

Do you have any ideas for future issues or would like to give us feedback? Please contact us.



Subscription

Lessons from DeepL

GLOSSARY

incidentally:
by the way

conjecture:
an opinion or conclusion
based on incomplete
evidence

to play out:
to develop

the bottom line:
the most important as-
pect

to date:
so far

to shrug one's shoulders:
to raise and contract
one's shoulders to show
indecision or indiffer-
ence

*to shoot off a text, an e-
mail, etc.:*
to send a quickly written
message

proponent:
an advocate, someone
who is for something

to make great strides:
to make a lot of pro-
gress

Some of you have undoubtedly already heard about and used the new online translator DeepL, which was launched in August 2017 by the Cologne-based startup company that also owns Linguee. DeepL has been praised by many as a much better translator compared to its competitors. In January 2020 the company conducted [a test](#) to demonstrate the accuracy of their product. 119 excerpts from a variety of fields were fed into DeepL, Google, Amazon, and Microsoft, and the translations were sent to professional translators, who then ranked them in a blind test. The results: DeepL's English to German translations were favored 65% of the time, and Google was next with only 15%. In the German to English translations DeepL was chosen 70% of the time, and Google placed second with 20%. (*Incidentally*, DeepL's founder and CEO, [Gereon Frahling](#), had previously worked as a research scientist at Google.)

There is considerable *conjecture* about the implications of services like DeepL. As a language instructor, I have to certainly wonder what it means for my field. And I am not alone. For example, the mmb Institute recently conducted their [14th survey](#) about e-learning. The results showed that 20% of the 61 experts who completed the questionnaire believed that artificial intelligence tools will replace human teachers. While it remains to be seen how the roles of humans and machines will *play out*, on closer inspection of DeepL we language instructors can rest easy since it still makes numerous mistakes. *The bottom line* is that DeepL is in fact a handy tool, but one should be aware of the risks it poses in terms of language skills.

1. A work in progress

To date all machine translators (MTs) struggle with the finer nuances of language, and if one wants to be certain of the accuracy of a translation, a native speaker will need to check it. MTs especially have difficulties with tense forms, technical terms, idioms, and punctuation. Furthermore, shorter samples are more likely to lead to mistakes since a translator like DeepL requires a fair amount of context. Consider the following simple sentence: *Ich sage ihm, dass es nicht klappt*. DeepL offers three solutions: a) *I tell him it won't work*. b) *I'll tell him it won't work*. c) *I tell him it's not working*. A native English speaker would be able to quickly tell you that b) is the best translation. It is hard to imagine any context in which a) and c) would make sense unless more words are added, such as "Every

time I tell him it won't work, he just *shrugs his shoulders*."

2. Laziness factor

It can be tempting to take the path of least resistance and simply let an MT do the work. That is fine if you are using it for less important tasks like checking your understanding or *shooting off* a quick e-mail when time is limited. However, for foreign language learning it should be noted that relying on an MT too often means that one's language abilities will suffer. This is due to the simple fact that in order to commit something to memory, we have to spend a sufficient amount of time with it. This point was also stressed in a [research article](#) published in 2009 by Dr. Ana Niño, a Senior Language Tutor at the University of Manchester's Language Center and a long-time *proponent* of MTs in foreign language learning. She wrote, "All in all, students should also be educated in the belief that only by getting fully involved intellectually and by adding some creativity to their tasks will they learn properly how to communicate in the target language."

3. The human touch

Although MTs have *made great strides*, they cannot help you in the least with developing proficient writing skills, which take a long time to master as evident by the high number of writing centers at universities across the globe. Fortunately for language instructors, learning how to create convincing prose *seems destined* to always require a human touch.

To test your English and to see further examples of mistranslations by DeepL, click on the exercise below.

Dr. Joseph Michaels



Exercise

Office Banter

GLOSSARY

phatic language:
language used for social purposes

baffling:
confusing

office banter:
friendly remarks and jokes

chunk:
a fairly large amount

blurred:
not clear

prime:
very typical of something

What is phatic language? In a nutshell, this is language which fulfills a social purpose rather than language which conveys meaning. Better known as *small talk*, phatic language can range from a simple 'uh huh' to more baffling questions like 'How are you?', where the speaker may not expect any response at all, or at best a polite 'Fine, and you?'.
Conversely, in Germany phatic language does not really exist. When asked to respond to the question 'What is small talk?', our German students tend to reply 'useless language' or 'superficial language'.

But is this really the case? Does small talk serve any useful purpose or is it there simply to fill in some spare time before we can talk about the issues that really matter?

In British culture small talk and office banter is an integral part of office life. Large chunks of time are spent chatting to colleagues about non-work-related issues such as the weather, the local sports results or the latest TV shows. This serves to build rapport with others and to promote a lasting relationship. The UK has a culture which is relationship-oriented rather than one which is more task-based as embodied by the German model. The main focus is on establishing or protecting a relationship rather than achieving a task. In addition, the lines between private and work lives are much more blurred. The Brits are far more likely to continue socialising with each other after work at the pub than are the Germans, who tend to keep a strict division between their leisure and their work activities.

"Susanne Zaninelli, in her famous comparison of German and American attitudes to business relationships, contrasts two very different styles - that of the coconut (German) and the peach (American). This model identifies differences between very task-oriented individuals (coconuts) and more relationship-sensitive people (peaches)."¹ In coconut cultures there is a thin and hard shell of personal space, which takes a longer period of time to be penetrated. Starting a personal relationship is a slow process. In contrast, the peach has a soft outer layer. Friendships are expected to be made quickly. However, the truly private centre often remains secret.

The two models also affect the level of directness in communication. The coconut culture has a much more direct style of communication.

The peach seeks to avoid giving offence and adopts a far more indirect style. Here, 'reading between the lines' is a key skill.

In his famous 1976 book 'Beyond Culture' the anthropologist Edward T. Hall refers to this approach and coins the terms 'high-context' and 'low-context' cultures. Germany is a prime example of a low-context culture: communication is direct and explicit. In contrast, the UK tends to be a 'higher'-context culture. The situation and the relationship play a greater role than the actual words used. Communication is implicit, and softeners are sprinkled into the message. For example, a German would refuse an invitation to meet with the words 'That is too late'. A Brit would say 'I'm afraid that may be a little too late.'

The past continuous form is often used in softening language: 'I was wondering if I could leave a message.' 'I was hoping to catch Mike before he left.'

Negative questions are also used to soften language when making a suggestion: 'Wouldn't it be better to start the meeting at 8?'

The famous British understatement also creeps into softening language. For instance: 'We may have a *slight* problem with the shipment.'

This statement should cause alarm bells to ring since there is almost certainly a BIG problem with the delivery. Otherwise, it would not be mentioned at all.

For further information about small talk, see [this article](#) from a previous newsletter. For an article about high-context and low-context cultures, click [here](#).

Sylvia Grade & Cheryl Stenzel

¹Dignen B. and Chamberlain J. (2009) *Fifty ways to improve your intercultural skills*. London: Summertown Publishing

Multicultural Classrooms

GLOSSARY

ample:
sufficient

rapport:
agreement and understanding among people

to be aloof:
to be incommunicative and distant

Despite the Internet and learning apps classroom English is still important for a variety of reasons. It can help to hone your social and communication skills. Furthermore, when students of various backgrounds meet in the classroom, there is also ample opportunity to learn about cultural differences and train intercultural skills. For successful communication anywhere in the world it is important to be aware of these differences and adapt one's communication style accordingly.

Building rapport, the basis for long-standing relationships, starts with greetings and social chit-chat before the beginning of a lesson. Initial greetings are usually followed by "How are you?" This innocent phrase helps to break the ice and to set a positive mood but may be answered differently depending on the cultural context. While Anglophone people might just give a brief answer, others might want to give more details about their lives and how they feel in order to establish a communicative basis. The same applies to building rapport in general: In Western cultures it is a rather swift affair, whereas in Middle Eastern or Asian cultures it may take a substantially longer time to establish a positive relationship.

The beginning of a course provides an opportunity to introduce oneself. As a teacher you might talk about how long you have taught at this university, your academic background and teaching style. As a student you may share what subject you study, why you chose your subject and how long you have studied at the university. Here, one may find that some people volunteer information in a more open manner while others may introduce themselves in a factual way and appear almost aloof, avoiding eye contact. While the latter can signal disinterest in Western cultures, in Eastern cultures direct eye contact with a teacher or person of authority shows disrespect or can be seen as confrontational.

Cultural differences in directness may surface in the rest of the lesson. Academic Anglophones, for instance, tend to use modal verbs and softeners so as not to confront their communication partner. Hence, a sentence such as "You *may* want to rewrite this" translates as "Rewrite this".

In certain cultures asking questions implies that the teacher did not explain something well. A question then would pose a challenge to the

teacher's authority. The same applies for participation. Active listening skills and discussion are not encouraged in all cultures. Hence, students may hold back or even feel uncomfortable when their peers engage in a lively and confrontational discussion, according to the motto that "the nail that sticks out" is undesirable. What is more, some might not expect the teacher to ask them many questions since they expect the teacher to simply lecture while they listen.

At the end of a lesson there is a clear signal: "This brings me to the end of this lesson. Let's quickly go over what we have done today..." The instructor then gives a brief overview of the next session and concludes the lesson. The final sounds one hears may be knocking on the desks, a tradition that is unique to German academia.

Dr. Ines Böhner

Teacher's Little Helpers

GLOSSARY

teacher's little helpers:
play on words for
"mother's little helper,"
a reference to valium
taken by housewives in
the 1950s

*to brush up on some-
thing:*
to quickly improve a
skill, especially when
you have not used it for
a while

flashcard:
a card bearing infor-
mation on both sides,
which is intended to be
used as an aid in memo-
rization

retention:
the continued use, exist-
ence, or possession of
something

prescriptive:
relating to the imposi-
tion or enforcement of a
rule or method

sphere:
area

Several tools have been developed that are useful for learning and remembering vocabulary as well as learning pronunciation and brushing up on listening skills. Teachers may encourage students to make use of the tools as additional homework or as methods to assist them with when studying a language. Plenty of helpful apps are available on the market today, but it is essential to remember that they enhance your learning rather than replace the classroom experience.

Vocabulary learning tools

No matter how inexperienced or advanced a learner is, everyone can benefit from vocabulary building, even native speakers! The classic method of vocabulary memorization is the flashcard. The same approach is now available online. One platform is Quizlet, which not only has vocabulary sets but also allows users to enter their own terms. Users can choose from either translations or definitions. It is also possible to add pictures and a pronunciation guide either provided by the site or found online. The platform offers a number of different games and activities to learn the vocabulary and can support students' retention beyond the classroom.

Podcasts

For those of us who struggle with understanding native speakers, podcasts offer an interesting alternative to the typical listening tasks provided in language instruction. Many people enjoy watching movies and videos in the language they are learning, but they rely on the visual aspects to aid their comprehension. Pure listening, however, is far more challenging and therefore a good exercise. Fortunately, there has been a boom in podcasts over the last few years. Most podcast players can be switched to a slower speed so that they are easier to understand. In addition, a number of podcasts also offer a transcript so that you can read as you listen. At the end of this article, you will find a list of podcasts that could possibly be of interest.

YouGlish

While most online dictionaries offer a pronunciation guide, many feature prescriptive rules that instruct the learner how a word should be pronounced but do not always reflect some of the finer nuances one encounters in context and use. The makers of YouTube have entered the language-learning sphere by creating YouGlish. An English word is entered and an example of that word is given exactly at the point it occurs in several videos. The search function allows

users to narrow the search to British, American or Australian pronunciation. The transcript of the video is located under the video and each word in the transcript is hyperlinked to a definition and examples. YouGlish is now expanding to other languages and includes German, French and Spanish.

Getting started

With so many apps to choose from, where should you start? Our SZ tip is to start small and work your way up. Commit yourself to listening to one English podcast per week, whether on the train or in the gym. Add a vocabulary app to your phone and see if you can learn ten words this week. Before you know it, these tiny efforts can lead to great results and help you on your way to better language competence.

Suggested podcasts:

[Science vs:](#) a podcast which evaluates both sides of a scientific argument and includes a list of citations for each episode. ([Australian hosts](#))

[Scientific American 60-second Science:](#) daily short reports in the world of science. (US-American hosts)

[Scientific American Science Talk:](#) a 20-30 minute discussion with leading researchers about developments in science and technology. ([US-American host](#))

[Chemistry World Podcasts:](#) podcasts of various lengths in the fields of chemistry and biotechnology. ([British hosts](#))

Gretchen Chojnacki-Herbers