

If I'm Using a Second Language... Can you really know who I am?

By Cooper Thompson, VISIONS consultant

"Although I was raised in Europe, I carry with me the culture of my native country in Africa. There, it's an oral and story telling culture. When I was a boy and would visit my relatives, we'd sit around at night and listen to stories. That was both entertainment and education. So when I communicate with people it's important for me to see them and to share some stories.

There is much more to communication than the words that we say. We live in a technological world where cell phones and emails play a big part in how we interact with each other. One-on-one interaction is no longer the norm. You want to talk to your coworker who's only 20 feet away you send him an email or give him a call. To me this is too impersonal and rude."

While working on a VISIONS contract with a U.S. based construction company, I got to know several employees whose native language is not English. Patrick, who I quote above, was raised in a French speaking community. He is recognized in the company as a very hard-working, skilled, and valued employee. And he uses a second language at work.

"I learned English when I moved to the U.S. in my early 20s, and today, I speak and think in English more than 90 percent of my time. I will always remember when I first started working in the U.S. many years ago. It was an experience of cultural shock and having to deal with the stereotypes people had of me. My boss used to conduct site visits and spoke to all the staff, but not me. Not a word. He would simply walk past me as if I was transparent.

A few months after I started working at that job, I found out my boss ignored me because he thought I was mentally challenged. Not because I could not speak proper English, but because I sometimes did not understand some of the language the guys used in the field! This was a shock. I realized that I needed to be like all the guys in the field, walk the walk and talk the talk. So I worked really hard to learn the trade and minimize the negative impact that my accent and my background could have on people around me."

Although I am a native English speaker, I have experienced first hand what Patrick describes. At the age of 53, in 2003, I moved to Germany and began learning German. I, too, was ignored and not recognized for my abilities. And I often thought, I can't speak German.

Although I am now considered fluent, I still get nervous when I need to use German, and my ability to use German goes up and down each day, depending on my relationship to my speaking partner and the context in which I am speaking. A veteran language teacher once told me, “It can take 20 or 30 years for someone to really master a second language, assuming that they really work at it.” When she said that, I felt relief: maybe I wasn’t so slow and stupid after all.

Employees using a second language, in general, have to work harder than native speakers. Because of this inequality, I wish that native language speakers would make an extra effort to communicate with second language users. So if you are a native speaker and want to improve your ability to communicate with second language users, here are some suggestions:

- *Pay close attention to what the other person is communicating.* They are using your native language, but in a different way than you are used to hearing it used. Listen with your heart and your head. Assume that there are things you can learn from and about the other person, but that what they can give you might come in an unfamiliar package. They are adapting their language to communicate with you; are you willing to adapt your language to communicate with them?
- If you have the opportunity, *listen to them use their native language.* You could even ask them to speak with you in their native language. You might not understand their words, but if you pay attention, you might understand something about them. And you might notice that they seem to be a different person when they use their native language. The first language is the language of the heart and home, so when someone uses their native language, it is possible that you are seeing them as they really are.
- The process of making contact—how you communicate with each other—requires effort from both of you. And *how you communicate may be more important than what you actually communicate.* You won’t understand everything, and it may not be possible to really “know” the other person. You can, however, learn from and with them, and in the process, learn about yourself.

The quotes from Patrick are excerpts from *Using a Language That’s Not Your Own: Experiences of Multilingual Employees*. The full article can be found at www.cooper-thompson.com/essays, along with many other essays Cooper has written and an excerpt from his new book, *Losing My Voice and Finding Another*, about his personal experience learning German.