

Nothing to be afraid of

To communicate in English is not as simple as it looks.
Vocabulary gaps, awkward wording, lack of elegance.
There are great opportunities in daring anyway.

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“So, how was it? Were you able to cope with it, or have your concerns been reasonable?”, a colleague I know asked when we met after the summer holidays. I had attended the ANSE (Association of National Organisations for Supervision in Europe) International Summer University in Croatia, and in the run-up I had told my friend about my mixed feelings concerning communicating at that venue – in particular: about being afraid to present myself inappropriately with my rusty English skills.

Self-predicted constraints

Despite my academic interest and my curiosity about the participants from all across Europe, a feeling of “self-predicted constraint” went with me: On the whole, I might be able to follow the lectures, but I concerned myself with imagining how I would embarrass myself with an awkward phrase when contributing to the discussion or talking during coffee break.

As a *lingua franca*, the English language permits communicating across the borders of each particular national language. But besides that connecting function and not for a few, the English language does represent a barrier – certainly no one likes to talk about it, particularly if it is about own deficits. Who likes to lower one’s guard? If you want to be up to date today, English skills are essential; it is not a plus to have them but a minus to have no or no sufficient command of English. But what does “sufficient” mean?

What wouldn’t bother me on a private journey, puts me on the spot in a professional context: the experience of occasionally stalling due to vocabulary gaps. The good feeling of talking *on an academic level* is unsettled by concerns of not being able to talk fluently and faultlessly *in English*. A challenge to my sovereignty – as well as an opportunity to review my attitude and to get into new experiences. Obviously, I wouldn’t be able to get my English flowing within a few weeks.

Making mistakes makes us approachable

Already during first conversations at the venue, I received – much to my relief – the impression that many participants felt the same: In a foreign language, we don't move as freely as normal, and while searching for the right expression, we become visible and audible with our faults and awkwardness. Not to be fluent in a language means not having command of every expression to the last detail, to be dependent on the courtesy of our dialogue partners and their will to understand us – but I experienced how just that uncertainty had not impeded but facilitated the encounter: Instead of restraining comments or coqueting with our individual deficits, we overlooked partially disputable grammatical structures – we simply listened to each other and courageously got into a conversation. Thus, something developed that I would like to label as a specific quality of “approachability”. Respect and humour certainly were essential. That means much more than language skills which are pragmatically “good enough” for exchange of information and for understanding.

To my impression, the different language skill levels of the individual participants were neither harmful to the quality of our encounters nor to sophisticated academic discussions. For sure, the time schedule of the Summer University gave plenty of time for communication and discussion and thus room for intensive exchange. Not understanding had its place, too. For the level of academic discussion as well as for successful encounters on personal level, I generally regard it as crucial that hosts of international venues, by providing appropriate settings, take up the challenge of heterogeneous participants potentially evoking the experience of foreignness, despite their curiosity and openness. To get into the different, unfamiliar, and perhaps to risk disconcertment, requires an atmosphere that encourages trying and making mistakes, and it does not merely depend on the individual willingness of the participants. Particularly the friendly and not competitive climate during the Summer University and the provided set-up, inviting to participate and interact variously, seemed to be very prolific to me; this encouraged me to get into conversation even without perfect English language skills.

Ready to feel like losing control?

Glossing over the lack of aesthetics, elegance and precision in phrasing is not what I am intending here at all. But understanding that my ambition to do everything perfectly is the main obstacle on my way encouraged me on the very first day to leave myself to the dynamics of the conversation without spending too much time on putting it right; my readiness to seemingly lose control was rewarded with the experience of flow. That surprised me, as language is one of my most important resources, if not the most important one, which I commonly use very deliberately and carefully. Verbalizing matters, putting them in words and phrases, is a central aspect of my work and of my self-conception as a coach and supervisor. Speaking English, I don't have the same means of shading and accentuation available, which doubtlessly is a restriction. At the same time, my focus was more and more directed towards a level of communication which is also crucial for my profession as a supervisor: non-verbal

communication beyond explicit verbalisation. By that, I mean gesture and facial expression on the one hand, and the room atmosphere, emotional nuances and vibes as context of the explicit on the other hand. I admit that at the end of some of the lectures my concentration weakened, and I was rather watching some speakers than listening to them; I primarily felt the sensual quality of what I heard: the sound of a voice, the intonation, how the native language would influence the pronunciation. Or I playfully formulated hypotheses when I was uncertain if I was receiving a certain part of the lectures as intended. In general, it was a revealing exercise to fill the abstract term “cross-cultural competence” with life and to track down my own confirmation needs and strategies, on my way in the foreign language.

It sounds so smooth when I am saying that experiencing me courageously getting into English was a productive unsettlement – yet, however productive it was: I clearly perceived the unsettlement. And my desire to cross the boundaries of venues on national level did imply really feeling those (language) boundaries when overcoming them. To get into experiencing the foreign demanded the venture of exposing me. But sharing the desire to get into relations and the openness to encounters turned the risks into great opportunities. It was stunningly easy to get into a conversation with others, and academic discussions were much less complicated than I had feared. I am very glad that I haven't missed out on all the encounters with peers from Norway, Croatia, the Netherlands, Latvia and other countries!

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