《英语说得地道有什么优势》

The last time I wrote about the widespread use of English, a reader commented that those who didn ’ t speak it as a first language often struggled at work.

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“Non-native speakers are at their biggest disadvantage when emotions come into play,” the reader wrote. “In a heated debate, those able to use cynicism, sarcasm or other weapons requiring linguistic mastery have an unfair advantage — and I have seen such unfair advantage being used many times. It can determine the course of corporate careers. Like mine.”

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The comment reminded me of two leaders who had made similar points about native English speakers’ advantages.

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The first was Steve Biko, the apartheid-era South African student leader, who split from white leftwing students because he believed blacks needed to develop self-reliance.

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Biko, who died in police custody in 1977, spoke excellent English, but it was not his mother tongue. He was acutely aware of being at a disadvantage in English-speaking company. He spoke before his death of the frustration of talking to articulate, intelligent, native English speakers.

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A very different leader, Percy Barnevik, the founding chief executive of ABB, the Swedish-Swiss company that adopted English as its corporate language, also spoke of the danger of “mistaking facility with English for intelligence or knowledge”.

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But does it follow, as the Financial Times reader asserted, that English speakers use their linguistic mastery to dominate discussions deliberately, inserting sarcasm where necessary?

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I asked two non-native English-speaking FT readers who have emailed me in the past what they thought.

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“Actually, I would tend to say the opposite,” Quentin Toulemonde, a Frenchman working in financial services in London, told me. “In an argument, I can pretend not to understand — to force my interlocutor to rephrase, which can perturb him.

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“Furthermore, foreigners have a more limited vocabulary which allows them to use stronger and almost tactless words, and to be excused for that.”

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Ivan Tejeda, a Spanish reader who has worked in the UK, Italy and France, said he had made strenuous efforts to learn about the local culture as a way of improving his ability to talk to colleagues at work. In the UK, this included watching comedy television programmes such as Fawlty Towers and The Office.

????????????????????•???(Ivan Tejeda)??(Fawlty Towers)??????(The Office)?

He had to make an effort in non-English speaking environments too. When he worked in Italy, he kept up with the local football news as it often came up in office conversation.

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He did not think native English speakers dominated work discussions on purpose. “I think what your reader is describing is more related to the empathy process than the deliberate use of sarcasm by English speakers.”

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Both these readers’ English is excellent, so they are perhaps not representative of most people in international companies who have to work in the language.

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I have certainly seen English-speaking holidaymakers try to use the language to bludgeon waiters, bus drivers or hotel receptionists into giving them what they wanted.

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I do not think I have ever seen it work. And I have never seen such bullying in a business environment. What I have seen is English speakers not being understood because their language is too quick, too garbled or overly colloquial.

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Of all the communication and public speaking skills, talking to non-native English speakers is one of the most under-appreciated.

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It does not come naturally to most English speakers, but, like all skills, it can be learnt. Rephrasing points in different ways helps. So do avoiding complex metaphors and watching people’s faces to see whether you are being understood.

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Because so few native English speakers speak another language these days they have little idea how hard it can be to operate in one.

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A failure to understand how you are coming across diminishes your impact, and can lead some to believe you are being cruel and sarcastic.

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