

# Professional English, Inc.

## *Speaking, Writing, and Cultural Training*

Fall/Winter 2006

### Communicating Better with Your English as a Second Language (ESL) Employees

By Dr. Maureen Archer

ESL employees often struggle to overcome the "language barrier" created by strong accents, rapid speech, body language, and new vocabulary.

For example, a native English-speaking supervisor might ask an ESL employee, "I **neejada checkout da'nvintory asap.**" To understand the request, the ESL employee must understand which sounds are dropped when native speakers talk rapidly, as well as the idiomatic meanings of "check out" and "asap." Without this information, an ESL employee might wonder "What is a neejada?" and "Where is the asap?"

By using the following tips, we native English speakers can be better understood by non-native English speakers:

**Slow down** (without talking down). This gives the ESL employee time to translate and form a response. Maintain a respectful adult-to-adult tone.

**Enunciate.** During normal speech, native English speakers drop sounds and change many pronunciations, using terms such as "gonna" and "wanna." Clearer enunciation of small words will help ESL employees comprehend better.

**Be concise and emphasize key words.** Take time to focus on the main idea. Instead of saying "What you just described is of interest to me," simplify it to "Yes, I am interested."

**Avoid idiomatic phrases.** These include idioms ("it's a piece of cake"), multi-word verbs ("come up with"), euphemisms ("go to the little girls' room"), and sports metaphors ("hit a home run"). It is better to use more literal phrases.



**Write out instructions and directions.** Many ESL speakers are better readers than listeners. Follow up a conversation with an e-mail message or letter that outlines the main points of your discussion.

**Discuss miscommunications** as they arise. If you say something in jest and the employee becomes angry or withdrawn, explain your intentions. Humor, which is strongly culture-bound, often translates poorly across national boundaries.

**Don't talk louder.** ESL speakers are usually not hard of hearing.

**Anticipate that body language is different.** For example, Japanese usually nod to show that they are listening, not that they agree with what you are saying. Deeper nods will convey agreement.

**Remember that ESL employees, who speak well in their native languages, are often frustrated by their inability to function well in English. Your patient assistance will help avoid miscommunications and promote a positive work relationship.**

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**FACT: Over 33 million people in the U.S. currently speak English as a second language.**

## Workplace Cultural Differences:

- In many **European** and **North American** cultures, the focus is on the individual (an “I” perspective). These cultures believe in individual decisions and rewards for individual achievements, so competition is encouraged.
- Throughout the rest of the world (**Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America**), the focus is on the group (a “we” perspective). These cultures believe in group decisions and loyalty to an organization, so competition is discouraged among individuals.

**Cross-cultural training develops awareness between people where a common cultural framework does not exist. In the business world, this means better interpersonal understanding, more effective communication, and a more productive business environment.**



## Dr. A's Corner:

### The Two-level ESL Program



A successful English as a second language (ESL) program includes training for two key groups:

- 1) the employees whose English skills are too low to effectively and safely perform their jobs  
- and -
- 2) the managers who work with them.

By providing work-related speaking, listening, reading, and writing training, employers gain ESL workers who are safer, more efficient, and more communicative on the job. With better English skills, these employees can also be groomed to move up into supervisory roles.

By providing cross-cultural workshops to its managers, employers will gain a more positive work environment because miscommunication and misunderstanding will be reduced. Also, managers who follow the guidelines outlined on the front of this newsletter will have more successful interactions with their ESL workers.

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To discuss your employees' communication needs with Dr. Archer, feel free to contact her at (757) 873-0116 or [archer@allenglishtraining.com](mailto:archer@allenglishtraining.com).

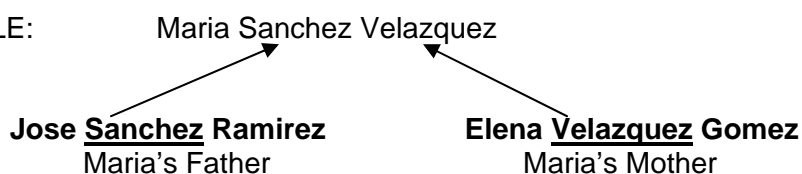
## What's in a Name?

Some employers have been embarrassed to learn that the last names by which they refer to their employees from Spanish-speaking cultures are not the last names the employees use for themselves.

In the Spanish-speaking world, the surname system is quite different from that in the U.S. For example, an unmarried individual's full name is comprised of their first name, their father's surname, and their mother's surname. Both surnames are used on official documents, but the mother's surname is often dropped for unofficial situations.

Normally, Maria would be known in the workplace as **Maria Sanchez**.

EXAMPLE:



It is always best to ask your employees which surname they prefer.

