

## The Importance of Language Negotiation in Initial Intercultural Encounters: The Case of the Service Industry Employee

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### Abstract

The present study discusses the importance of an underrated but highly important process for creating harmonious interpersonal relationships in intercultural encounters: that of initial language negotiation (ILN). Initial choice of language(s) involves a subtle interplay of contextual factors, stereotyped expectations and personal desires, and in terms of communication accommodation, can lead to both convergence and divergence. However, the near-universal acceptance of English as an International (as well as Intercultural) Language has virtually assured that English will be the default language of initial intercultural encounters in many contextual situations. In service encounters, especially, such is the case. Through questionnaires and interviews, the attitudes and reactions of service workers in Japan, to this default situation will be reviewed, and strategies of successful workers to ensure the mutual satisfaction of both parties will be discussed. The concepts of *serendipity*, *synergy* (Khubchandani, 1997), and *mindfulness* (Gudykunst, 2005), are emphasized as important goals in the training of service industry employees' ILN skills.

**Keywords:** Language negotiation, initial encounters, intercultural, EIL

### Introduction

The term “language negotiation” is used to express a discourse sequence which has the function of changing the language currently used in the discourse; that is, “all those stretches of talk in which participants do not agree on one common language-of-interaction” (Auer, 2002, p. 8). With respect to bilinguals, this can occur by choice at any time during a conversation. However, for both monolinguals and multilinguals, language negotiation has a different and highly important function; that of initial determination of the language to be used. Initial languages used in first-time encounters (Torras and Gafaranga, 2002) can arguably make or break a conversation if the wrong language is chosen.

Auer notes that “individual speakers’ ‘preferences’ for one language or the other [are] entirely dependent on the wider social, political and cultural context of the interaction at hand” (Auer 2002, p. 8). In initial intercultural encounters, this is especially true. Often, the context of the interaction will suggest a “default language” which is generally the language spoken in the immediate geographical surroundings. That is, in China one would be expected to use Chinese; in France, French. However, many countries in the world have more than one choice as a national or regional language, and the default

language may not always be obvious. Moreover, local expectations and preconceptions may often override the default language, as when a Japanese clerk looks at a Western face and “expects” English to be spoken.

Initial language negotiation (or ILN) of some sort is an inevitable process in virtually every initial encounter, and it is necessary to clarify the steps involved in that process. Interestingly, we may look to the field of computer language programming for a parallel to ILN. McGrath (2004, online) discusses an initial process used by computers to “define a common language” before they start communication with each other, which parallels the process used by humans under the same conditions:

Whether we are conscious of it or not, a communication algorithm is built into each and every one of us and it dictates how we talk to each other. It goes like this:

- (a) negotiate a communication language,
- (b) if successful (b1) start a conversation using that language, otherwise  
(b2) retry (a) until exasperated. (McGrath, 2004, online)

In contrast to machines, people are generally able to detect the most appropriate intuitively (we will clarify how in the following paragraph), and the majority of initial encounters never go past step (b1). Fig. 1 on the next page, however, shows a typical example of what happens when language negotiation proceeds from step (a) to step (b2) and loops back to (a) again: each partner will run through their available “arsenal” of languages before finally deciding on the best possibility for success. In the case of Fig. 1, the final outcome is the somewhat universal but dangerously deceptive language of gestures which, although often unavoidable, is bound to run into a certain amount of exasperation or at least confusion if both parties are not constantly aware of and monitoring for possible misinterpretations.



Figure 1. The Initial Language Negotiation (ILN) Loop

Although computers may follow McGrath’s algorithm quite automatically and faithfully, this is not necessarily the case with human beings. People usually go through a much more complicated, emotional and some would say irrational decision-making process. Thus, we

have to expand and qualify step (a), at which the actual original choice of communication language is performed. Assuming that the initial negotiator has more than one choice available, how does he or she decide which language is the best initial choice? Here, four factors are suggested as crucial in choice-making:

1. The context of the interaction suggests a “default” language
2. Expectations and preconceptions based on interlocutor features may override the default language
3. Subtler visual clues may override the expectations and preconceptions
4. Personal preferences may override everything else

Factor 1 involves initial use of what could be considered the default language within the context of the situation. As discussed above, this is usually the language of the surrounding environment—Japanese in Japan; French in France; Danish in Denmark. Where there are two or more possible language choices—e.g. French or English in Quebec, Spanish or English in Los Angeles; Cantonese, Mandarin or English in Hong Kong—or where the default language fails, then an interlocutor may make a choice based on Factor 2; that is, a language based on physical characteristics of the other party. The information thus provided, of course, will be based on stereotypes and expectations that will not necessarily be correct in the immediate context, but will at least generally be interpreted as an “understandable” misconception by the partner. At this point, the partner is expected to respond with this or another possible language choice, hopefully one which will prove a match.

Often the second factor will override the first. In East Asia, for example, English is often chosen as “first best” with a Western-looking communication partner, superseding the local language. However, the choice may not be successful if the partner is, say, Russian or French or German, or even English or American, if the partner prefers otherwise. If so, he or she may reject the first choice, based on stereotypes, and offer the local default language instead.

However, things are not always so simple. The initial language choice may be determined based on more subtle factors than contextual defaults and stereotypical assumptions. For example, airline attendants and other service industry employees often rely on clues such as their customers’ reading materials or previously overheard conversations in their decision-making. More expert readers of cross-cultural body language may even detect a language “aura” around a person, and subtle clues such as clothing, age, and even tone of voice may trigger the choice of one language over another.

Concerning Factor 4, it must be noted that we humans are not always necessarily looking for the perfect language match from the point of view of successful communication. Self-oriented needs such as our desire to “practice” a certain language, or to establish or confirm an identity as an expert or professional, may override all other considerations in terms of judgments viz. the environment and/or interlocutor. Wherever there are strong personal preferences for a certain language, it is bound to be the one chosen, or none.

Finally, another possible negotiation outcome is not to choose a single language; that is each participant may persist in using the language of his or her own personal choice. Here, the

communicative outcome may be more or less successful depending on their respective levels of ability in their partner's language. This is referred to as "parallel codes" in Pan (2000, p. 18).

### Convergence or Divergence?

The approach taken towards language negotiation in this paper stems from the tradition of communication accommodation theory (Giles, Bourhis & Turner, 1977; Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991). This theory assumes that interlocutors use strategies to achieve their goals in communication with others, and that these strategies can vary according to group identity and role. Therefore, as stated by Gallois, et al. (2005, p. 122), "CAT is a theory of both intergroup and interpersonal communication, invoking the dual importance of both factors." Moreover, "CAT has in recent years embraced more of an intergroup perspective for examining interpersonal communication" and "social identity plays a major role in accommodative processes." (Giles, et al., 2007, p. 135). The present research discusses language negotiation as an accommodation strategy invoked by individuals in customer service roles.

Convergence and divergence are two motivating factors in communication accommodation theory. Convergence is the conscious or unconscious act of modifying one's language to be more similar to that of the interlocutor, showing friendliness, solidarity and a desire to communicate successfully. Divergence is the exact opposite; the modification of language away from that of the interlocutor in order to assert one's own identity, make a statement or fulfill personal preferences.

The ILN sequence is highly affected by these two motivating factors, which can indeed make or break the entire conversation. Consider the following two examples of convergence and divergence, respectively.

#### Convergence

A: (enthusiastic English student) Excuse me, where are you from?

B: (European tourist) I'm from France. *Furansu-jin desu*.

A: You are from France! When did you come to Japan?

B: Ah...*shu kan mae*. One week ago.

A: Oh your Japanese is very good!

B: Thank you! Your English is very good too!

#### Divergence

A: (enthusiastic English student) Excuse me, where are you from?

B: (long term Japanese resident) *Tokyo desu*.

A: Ah...what is your country?

B: *Nippon desu yo*. (Japan!)

A: Oh your Japanese is very good!

B: *Atarimae!* (Of course it is!)

In both dialogs, A projects the identity of a confident English user who is interested in pursuing a conversation with B, whom s/he believes to be an English speaker based on

stereotypical observation. In the first case, even though B is not a native speaker of English and has suggested Japanese as an alternative, there is still a strong sense that s/he is willing to use English to accommodate to A and continue the conversation on A's terms. Here, the desires of both parties match; English is selected as the preferred language, the goal of mutual understanding is achieved and the conversation is likely to mature into a friendly dialogue or more. In the second case, however, B clearly identifies him- or herself as a virtual Japanese native who wants to be accepted as such. B shows understanding of English when s/he answers A's overtures, but reinforces the conscious effort NOT to accommodate to B but rather to reject English as the communication language. There is clearly a conflict of interests, which will not likely resolve itself unless one partner decides that the success of the communication should supersede personal desires or identities.

Of course, the above discussion is not meant to imply that convergence is a prerequisite for intercultural initial encounters and that divergence is bound to result in failure. Although convergence can be a great help, it may be better to diverge and be clearly understood rather than converge and risk not getting the message across. As Callahan (2007, p. 17) notes, apparent divergence (that is, non-accommodation to the partner's language choice) may actually "show accommodation to the ...perceived linguistic affiliation and abilities" instead.

However, there are other ways to converge with a partner rather than simply agreeing to a choice of language. These include accommodation skills such as varying one's own language choice in terms of accent, vocabulary and/or speed in order to convey the desire for success of the conversation and recognition of the linguistic limitations of the partner. The next section will give an example of a case in which these skills could have been successfully employed, but were not.

### **An In-Service Case: The MAC Encounter**

In service encounters, especially those in cultures such as Japan and the US, the service worker will generally try to accommodate to the customer's choice of language if possible (Callahan 2006, 2007) in order to preserve the customer's positive face and to acknowledge the unequal position of the server (i.e. "the customer is always right."). However, such accommodation is often difficult if not impossible due to language constraints. Here is one such example (Yoneoka 2007), which was related to the author a few years ago by a local fast food clerk of somewhat advanced age:

*"The other day a foreigner came in and wanted to ask if he could use the restroom. He said something but I didn't understand. Then he made certain gestures, and from these I understood he wanted to use the toilet. I told him "three floor" (It's on the third floor) but he didn't understand me. In the end, he left the shop, unrelieved. What did he say? What should I have said?"*

In this episode, dubbed "the Mac Encounter," the service worker's desire to communicate successfully and fulfill the wishes of the customer was sincere, and not having been able to do so had clearly led to some disappointment. Instead of simply telling the clerk to study English harder, however, the author attempted to approach the question from the point of view of communication accommodation. Given the linguistic limitations evident on both sides of

the attempt, what went wrong? And what could have been done to make things right?

As discussed in Yoneoka (2007), critical points of miscommunication in the encounter are as follows:

1. The clerk did not understand the initial inquiry of the customer.
2. The customer did not rephrase his inquiry, but instead used a gesture.
3. The clerk did not clarify her understanding of the customer's gesture.
4. The clerk did not support her utterance of "three floor" with gestures.
5. The customer did not ask for further clarification.

Except for the first point, wherein the initial misunderstanding actually occurred, the other four misunderstandings could have been repaired simply by reversing the situation; to wit,

1. The customer could have rephrased his inquiry in easier terms and at a slower speed; e.g. "Do you have a toilet?"
2. The clerk could have clarified her understanding of the customer's gesture.
3. The clerk could have supported her utterance of "three floor" with gestures.
4. The customer could have asked for further clarification.

Fig. 2b demonstrates what the differences in outcome might have been if these repairs had actually taken place:

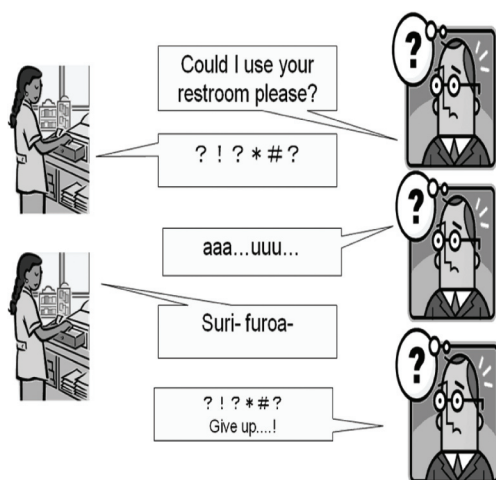


Figure 2a. The "Mac Encounter"  
Unrepaired

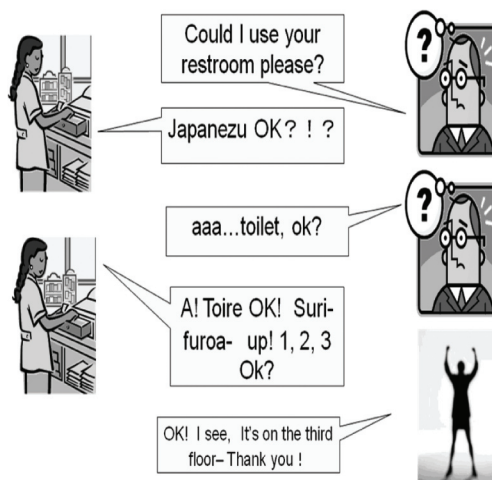


Figure 2b. The "Mac Encounter" with  
Repairs

How do service employees acquire skills such as these? Accommodation strategies of repetition, clarification, and use of gestures may come as second nature for some, but may take a great deal of practice and training to develop in others. As discussed in Yoneoka (2007), the best type of training is positive, actual experience (cf. Cai and Rodriguez 1996-7)—the kind that comes with encounters which have results as in Fig. 2b above. Negative, vicarious experiences such as role-play training and correction may not have much effect, and may even create heightened anxiety. Making the service employee aware of the importance of

accommodation strategies and developing positive rather than negative attitudes may better prepare them to meet their next “Mac Encounter” with greater confidence and higher chances of successful outcome.

### A Survey of Initial Language Negotiation Needs

With the importance of initial language negotiation (ILN) explained and its process clarified above, a questionnaire was devised to determine how often ILN needs can actually be expected to occur, and under what circumstances. Naturally, these questions are highly context-bound; the present survey was performed within the context of an average, mid-size town (approx. 800,000) in southern Japan, but very different results can be expected in a smaller rural town or at a world-famous tourist attraction. A total of 134 mid-level 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year university students (all English majors) answered an online questionnaire about their ILN experiences at their part-time jobs. Although ILN needs may involve both foreign and alternative languages (such as sign language or Braille), this questionnaire concentrated only on the former.

Table 1 shows that the most common type of part-time job was restaurant or food service, followed by sales. However, a significant number (35 or 26%) of students mentioned “other” jobs, almost half of which were at a cram school and/or as a teacher or instructor. Other jobs mentioned were telephone sales, amusement park attendant, post office clerk, etc., and included both service and non-service work. 78% of the students reported that they always or usually serve customers at their part time jobs, while only 15% rarely or never do so. Most of these latter students were those who worked at jukus or private cram schools.

Fifty of the 132 students (38%, labeled “ILN experienced”) indicated that they had actually been approached in a foreign language: English, Chinese, and/or Korean. This rather small proportion rises with length of job experience to 55%, 66%, and 67% respectively for those who reported having worked over 3 months, 6 months, and one year. Thus it can be said that 2 out of 3 students in this city who have worked over 6 months will experience ILN encounters. For the experienced students, we see a rise in the proportion of traditional service jobs: food service and sales, and a decrease in the “other” work, which included cram school and private teaching, where ILN encounters would be less expected.

Table 1. Percentage of Students by Part-Time Job Type.

<b>What kind of part-time job do you (did you) have?</b>	<b>(all)</b>	<b>(ILN experienced)</b>
Restaurant or food service	61(45%)	26(52%)
Shop or sales	25(19%)	12(24%)
Hotel, wedding hall, tourism	13(10%)	5(10%)
Other	35(26%)	7(14%)

For the purposes of this research, whether the work is in downtown Kumamoto or not is an important factor, as there is a higher chance of meeting non-Japanese speakers (both tourists and residents) in the downtown area. Table 2 shows that over 51% of the students worked in



the downtown area, but that a slightly higher percentage (54%) of the ILN experienced did so. However, we do note that ILN experience was clearly not limited to downtown workers, indicating that ILN needs can occur anywhere.

Table 2. Percentage of Students by Part-Time Job Location.

<b>Where is (was) your part-time job?</b>	<b>(all)</b>	<b>(ILN experienced)</b>
Downtown Kumamoto City	68(51%)	27(54%)
Kumamoto City (not downtown)	34(25%)	12(24%)
Kumamoto Prefecture (not city)	24(18%)	8(16%)
Outside Kumamoto Prefecture	8(6%)	3(6%)

In terms of length of work (Table 3), there was a wide range of responses, from 26% who answered less than one month to 29% who responded more than one year. Although 52% of the ILN experienced students worked more than one year, there were notably also 14% who had experienced ILN needs within the first month of their work.

Table 3. Percentage of Students by Part-Time Job Type.

<b>How long have you done (did you do) this job?</b>	<b>(all)</b>	<b>(ILN experienced)</b>
Less than one month	35(26%)	7(14%)
One to two months	28(21%)	3(6%)
Three to six months	19(14%)	5(10%)
Seven months to one year	13(10%)	9(18%)
More than one year	39(29%)	26(52%)

As to whether students had been approached in English (Table 4), only 37% had had such an experience, and 63% did not have such an experience. If we omit the responses of those who rarely or never serve customers, however, this percentage drops to 58%; moreover, if we omit students who had been working less than two months, the numbers reverse: now, 58% of the students have had experience using English on the job. As above, this percentage increases further with job experience: almost 70% of students that have worked more than one year have had to use English at one time or another. For other languages, the ratio is much lower: only 14-15% of students have ever been spoken to in Korean or Chinese. Even among the ILN experienced students, the percentages are 30% and 32% of students respectively for Korean and Chinese. Considering the fact that some 90% of the tourists to this mid-size town are from East Asia (over 50% from Korea), this data indicates a mutual acceptance of English as a default international language.



Table 4. Percentage of All Students (ILN Experienced in Parentheses) Who Have Been Spoken to in English, Chinese, Korean

<b>Did you experience ILN and, if so, how often?</b>				
	Yes, often	Yes, sometimes	Yes, once or twice	No, never
English	4%(10%)	7%(18%)	27%(72%)	62%(0%)
Korean	2%(4%)	2%(6%)	11%(20%)	85%(70%)
Chinese	2%(4%)	2%(6%)	10%(22%)	86%(68%)

The second part of the questionnaire targeted the 50 “ILN experienced” students who reported having been approached in any foreign language. As most of the students had never studied Korean or Chinese themselves, it is assumed that they used either English or Japanese in response to the latter languages. Their reported success in these encounters is shown in Figure 3. As can be seen, only 1(2%) reported having never been successful, and 4(8%) reported having always been successful. The remainder of the responses were divided between sometimes and usually, with 22 responses (44%) each.

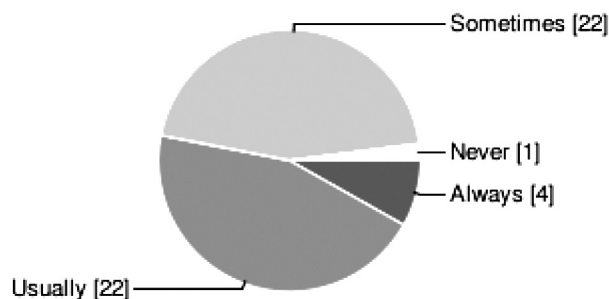


Figure 3. Reported Success in Using English for Communication

Table 5. Reported Percentage of English Use with Perceived Racial Characteristics

<b>How often do you (did you) use English with people who look ...</b>					
(Percentage)	East Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Korean)	South/SE Asian	White	Black	Other
90-100%	7 (14%)	2 (4%)	16 (33%)	2 (4%)	3 (6%)
70-80%	4 (8%)	3 (6%)	7 (14%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)
40-60%	7 (14%)	4 (8%)	7 (14%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
20-30%	7 (14%)	9 (18%)	9 (18%)	7 (15%)	7 (15%)
0-10%	24 (50%)	31 (64%)	10 (21%)	34 (69%)	35 (71%)

Table 5 shows the reported percentages of ILN encounters with customers of different perceived racial characteristics. Although 33% of the students reported having virtually all of their encounters with Caucasians, this can be considered quite low in light of the fact that many Japanese still tend to consider English a “white” language. Moreover, almost half of this percentage (14%) reported virtually all of their ILN encounters as being with fellow East Asians, which is surprisingly low considering the large percentage of East Asian tourists. Omitting the students who reported 0-10% of encounters for each race, we find 50%, 36%, 79%, 31% and 29% reporting encounters with each group respectively. Although perceived Caucasians top the list, followed by East Asians, these figures demonstrate that English is actually used with all kinds of people.

### In-Depth Interviews

Next, in-depth interviews of 7 of the 15 students who indicated successful communication (*always* or *usually*) in English and had worked one year or more were conducted to determine the specific conditions of their work and the “secrets” of their success. Interestingly, four of the seven students worked at Japanese restaurants (sushi, soba and general Japanese), one at another restaurant (a cake shop named “Suisse”), one at a hotel, and two at convenience stores. Three of the students worked in the downtown area, three in other parts of the city, and one in a different prefecture (Okinawa). Characteristics of the work of the 7 students are summarized in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Characteristics of the Work of Seven Students with Extensive ILN Experience

	Location	Type of Work	Customers	Visual Aids
A	downtown	restaurant (cake shop)	mostly Western (1-2/month)	English menu
B	downtown	hotel	mostly Asian (several/day)	English map, guidebooks
C	suburbs	convenience store	teacher (only one)	none
D	downtown	restaurant (Japanese)	mostly Asian w/tour guide (several/week)	English menu, explanations
E	suburbs	restaurant (soba)	mixed (several/week)	Plastic food display
F	Okinawa	convenience store	mostly US armed service (1-2/week)	none
G	suburbs	restaurant (sushi)	Western student w/homestay (only one)	none

From the interviews, several characteristics emerged. The first was the difference in frequency and type of ILN encounters, ranging from several times with a single known customer (in the case of Student C, an English teacher, and Student G, an exchange student who frequented the establishment with his homestay family) to 40-80 times a day with a large number of unknown customers (in the case of Student B).

The second characteristic was the dependence on the context and the location of the job. The downtown workers generally had a greater variety of customers, whereas two of the three suburban workers had white customers only. The third suburban worker (Student E) worked at a strategically very interesting location—a soba restaurant at a large shopping mall en route to Aso Volcano, an internationally famous tourist attraction. This shopping mall was the lunch stopover for group tours, as well as being within sight and easy walking distance of the terminal train station for express trains from Fukuoka, the main international gateway into Kyushu. Due to this location, Student E reported serving a variety of customers with a variety of needs. Student F, the only one who reported working in a different prefecture, did her part-time job in a restaurant in close proximity to a US army base in Okinawa, and her customers were mostly US servicemen and women and their families. Another interesting example of context dependence was provided by Student A, who worked at a cake shop called “Suisse”, and who reported an unusually high percentage of customers from Switzerland!

Third, although these students all had at least average ability in English, there were clearly other factors that emerged to explain their success. One commonality was the fact that most were treated as the “default” linguists at their work, and customers were referred to them by other employees when ILN needs arose. Moreover, several students expressed a high level of comfort using English with all types of guests (not only perceived Caucasians). Importantly, most made good use of written and visual resources—maps in the case of Student B, and English menus and show-window food for Students A, D and E, who all worked at restaurants. On the other hand, there were no foreign language resources for the students who worked at convenience stores (Students C and F) and the revolving sushi restaurant (Student G), but it can be argued that the products themselves were on prominent display in both places and were themselves the visual aids.

A fourth observation is that some of the service workers found themselves in situations where an interpreter was already present. Student D, who worked downtown at a large-scale Japanese restaurant that caters to international tour groups, mentioned the fact that although she frequently waited on large groups of foreign tourists, she often did not need to use her English language skills because of the presence of the tour guide. Student B also mentioned the role of the tour guide in helping foreign tourists check in and out of the hotel, but otherwise, the tourists were generally left to fend for themselves linguistically. Similarly, Student G had only one foreign customer, whose homestay family acted as interpreters. However, she developed a good relationship with this customer and even received a small gift from him upon the occasion of his return.

Finally, it should be noted that the linguistic preparation/training offered by their respective employers ranged from excellent (presence of English manuals, “how to eat shabu shabu,” menus, maps, etc.) to poor (the hotel, for example, provided no guidance as to how to communicate with international guests). From a linguistic management point of view (Honma 2009; Yoneoka 2009), this is a point that requires further study in order to help companies train their employees, even part-time ones, effectively.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study has clearly shown that most service workers, even in the suburbs of a smaller city

like the one in question, are likely to encounter ILN situations sooner or later. This likelihood becomes higher depending on the size and location of the business, the length of time spent on the job, and specific characteristics of the service provided. Moreover, different ILN needs can be expected not only for different types of work, but also for similar work in different contexts. Companies with a high-possibility profile in terms of attracting international customers (due to their location, size, specialty or even their name) must give special attention to their employees' handling of ILN encounters. It is very important that service companies provide not only visual aids but also guidance and training in what to do in an ILN situation – even for part-time workers – as the customers will judge the institution by the actions and accommodating abilities of all of its employees.

The best start to a successful cross-cultural encounter is successful language negotiation – a “common arsenal check” of languages to find the best fit for the situation. Successful ILN encounters seem to require more than mere language ability—a positive attitude, practical experience, and use of visual aids can make the difference between success and disaster. Indeed, it is possible to communicate successfully even with minimal common language (but maximal common ingenuity), with the right combination of the above factors.

How, then, should part-time service workers be trained in order to be successful in ILN situations? Effective methods would include teaching accommodation skills such as repetition, clarification, vocabulary simplification and rate of speech. In addition, companies that have written materials for their workers (such as the “How to Eat Shabu Shabu” instructions mentioned by Student D) should make sure that their employees are aware of what is written and can give further explanation or elucidation if required.

Khubchandani (1997) defines two important concepts that should be recognized as part of successful ILN. One is *serendipity* (i.e., accepting the other on his/her own terms, being open to unexpectedness), and the other is *synergy* (i.e., putting forth one's own efforts). These concepts help “develop positive attitudes to variations in speech ...in the process of ‘coming out’ from their own language-codes to a neutral ground” (Khubchandani 1997, p. 94). Emphasis on these values can help service employees become aware of their own needs and shortcomings, and thus deserve a place in ILN training. Similarly, Gudykunst's (2005) *mindfulness* or “the process of thinking in new categories, being open to new information, and recognizing multiple perspectives; ... an awareness of our own assumptions, viewpoints, and ethnocentric tendencies when entering any unfamiliar situation” (Griffin, 2003, online glossary) is an important concept to impart to employees who seem to have difficulties with ILN encounters.

Student B, the part-time hotel clerk, relates that she is especially careful when international guests ask her to recommend a good restaurant. Rather than making assumptions based on her own cultural knowledge and background, she generally begins with the question “Can you eat raw food?” This gambit shows a natural sensitivity to cultural differences and needs that combines all three of the concepts described above: serendipity in showing cultural sensitivity and openness to personal differences, synergy in making her own sincere effort to find out the guests' preferences, and mindfulness in using new information rather than stereotypes as the basis of her recommendations. It is indeed remarkable that this student/part-time hotel employee received no ILN training or guidance from her superiors; however, not all employees have such natural talent.

This final example from Student B demonstrates the importance of these three skills. Similarly, initial language negotiation encounters can and should begin with the tacit question “Can you speak my language?” with the response of the interlocutor dictating the appropriate follow-up path. ILN tactics and sensitivity can be approached in language and communication classes as well as in company training by encouraging serendipity, synergy and mindfulness, and by actively teaching accommodation skills.

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