

# Writing for global audiences

**Gina Cuciniello** looks at how the use of Global English can improve communications when writing to international staff

**T**he spread of the English language is one of the greatest success stories of our time. There are more than a billion people worldwide who speak English as a second language and this number is now expected to rise to two billion within ten to 15 years. More and more, we find that our colleagues, customers and business partners are non-native English speakers. This presents us with a problem: how can we communicate clearly in writing with this growing readership?

Our task is even more difficult if we consider that, in writing, we don't have the non-verbal cues to tell us that our message is understood. The frowns or questioning expressions will prompt us to try different ways of expressing our ideas. With writing, we often have one chance to get our message across effectively. Telephoning to clear up misunderstandings helps, but time zones can make this difficult with our international readers

The writing of emails, reports or letters that obtain the desired results for this readership

presents us with many challenges. To overcome these, we need a new language with which to communicate with these readers.

Previous attempts to invent new languages, such as Esperanto, have not been successful. After much fanfare, this language has practically disappeared. But, fortunately, inventing a new language to communicate with our international audience is not necessary as one already exists. The *lingua franca* is English itself - in its new global form.

## Global English is a language owned by everyone and accessible to everyone

So what is Global English? It is the language, words, phrases and sentence construction that is generally used and understood throughout the English-speaking world, as opposed to local versions such as American English and British English. It is a language owned by everyone and accessible to everyone.

But it is a language we need to learn. And it is up to us to learn the skills necessary to adopt this language in our communications. We need to rethink how we communi-

cate in writing with international readers, to reduce the chance of misunderstandings that are costly, both in terms of company time and company money.

Reducing misunderstandings becomes paramount when we consider the increasing number of English speakers worldwide. In business, the phenomenal boom in outsourcing contracts by many multinational companies based in the US and Britain has led to, and fuelled the need for, more staff communicating in English.

In the past, native speakers were seen as the authoritative users of English as the language of communication. Indeed, we have become complacent about the world using English as its language for all business communications. But our world dominance is coming to an end.

Today, less-proficient English speakers tend to see our use of the language as a hindrance to smooth communication, rather than a help. One of the reasons for this is that we tend to bring cultural baggage to the language and assume our readers understand what we are trying to say. Take an example of a word from our popular culture: in 2005 the term 'chav' entered the Collins dictionary. International colleagues who are less familiar with British language and culture may scratch their heads at a reference to a job candidate being 'dressed like a chav'.



Native English speakers tend to use words, as well as cultural references, that are unfamiliar to non-native speakers. Indeed, proceedings in meetings often go more smoothly in international companies where no native English speakers are present. Where English is the language used in training sessions, international participants often prefer the trainers to be non-native English speakers, such as Dutch or German, because they find their avoidance of idioms and slang easier to understand.

It seems our use of our own language presents problems when running training sessions for international participants.

But now a more international form of writing has emerged independently of our use. And it is in our own interest to follow the trend and learn the rules of Global English, instead of expecting less proficient speakers to adapt to us.

### How do we adopt a more global English?

So, the need is clear. But how do we ensure our written communications, whether in e-mail, reports or marketing literature, are clear and achieve their objectives for this ever-expanding group?

Global English means eliminating ambiguity by writing plainly and using simple sentence structures. We need to make it crystal clear how we want our readers to interpret points we're making because we can't afford to give the reader a reason to think 'what does this mean?' In short, we need to write specifically with our international readers in mind.

People from some cultures may interpret things literally and reach the wrong conclusion. Expressions like 'it's just round the corner' and 'at the end of the day' may lead readers to spend time pointlessly trying to work out what they mean.

One Belgian financial analyst told me how he was seething with rage all day after receiving an

email from his American counterpart telling him to 'stick to his guns' over an issue. He eventually discovered from an English colleague that his US counterpart had suggested that he refuse to change his mind – and not to mind his own business, as he initially believed.

### Simplify your English

The idea of using a simplified English came from aircraft manufacturers, which were required to write aircraft maintenance documents for non-native English speakers. The aim was to help with speed-reading, ease understanding and facilitate translations. Here, with these mission-critical documents, the need for clarity was especially important.

#### Simplified English suggests the following:

- Use simple tenses. Instead of writing 'if the certificate had been corrupted, it may have been recovered', write 'if the certificate is lost it may be recovered'.
- Use one meaning, not multiple meanings, for words. 'Close the door' is correct, while 'do not go close to the wheels' is not. Instead, you should write 'do not go near the wheel'.
- Use an approved word list. Restricting writers' use of words to a limited and approved list aims to eliminate the possibility of any ambiguity arising. Some companies are now putting together their own approved word lists for their staff.

It is true that the notion of simplified English is helpful to writers with international audiences and, to a degree, simplified English can be seen as synonymous with global English or international English.

### A good reason to forget correct grammar?

Global English is no excuse for sloppy grammar and punctuation. Many business English language

learners will have spent years polishing their English and will spot an error quickly. Moreover, some cultures put great store by accurate spelling. Japanese executives, for example, are known to ensure that any correspondence authored by them will be grammatically correct, precise in meaning and reviewed and edited in great detail. They will look unfavourably upon poor writing and its author.

Equally, the old adage that humour does not cross borders needs to be strictly observed. In some cultures, such as Japanese, German and Scandinavian, jokiness is often seen as frivolous and unprofessional. More often than not, readers will not get the joke and will waste time trying to work it out.

### Which spelling?

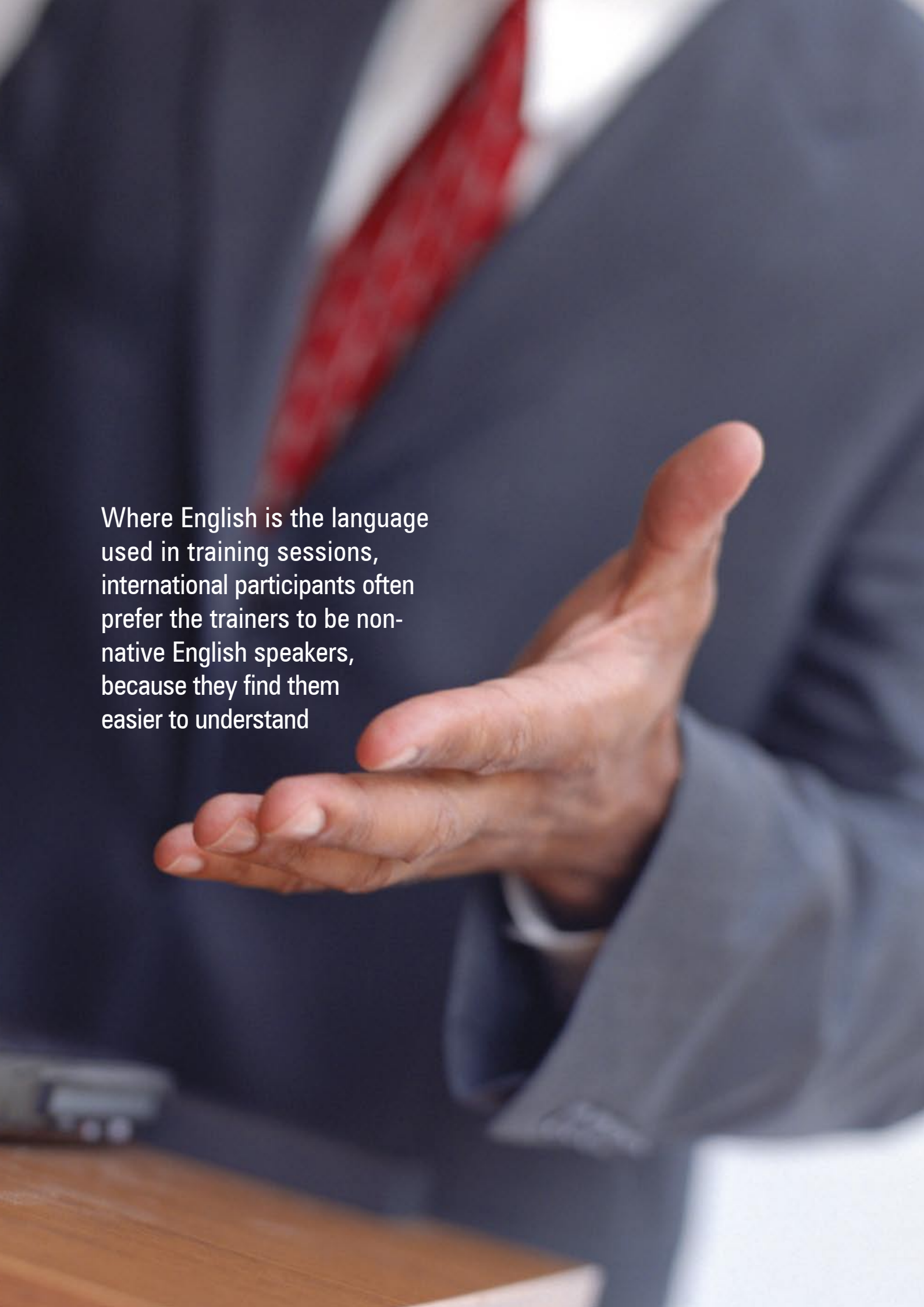
Often, I'm asked whether a writer should use British or US spelling when writing to world audiences. This is a tricky question. Firstly, you need to find out if your company specifies this in a corporate style guide. If it doesn't, you could spell according to your organisation's country of origin. Of course, this may be difficult if it is a small company in a remote place in the UK with most of its operations in the US. In the end, we will probably follow the internet's example and use US spellings. This will certainly make our lives easier and save us time worrying about it.

### Choose those words carefully

Native English speakers tend to use shorter verbs to express ideas. Indeed, there is a trend now towards using a more conversational style of writing and writing as we speak, instead of using formal language. This adds significant value to documents, as it makes our text more alive and relevant.

But although our ideas are clearer and easier to grasp, this also presents a problem. We tend to use the shorter words that cause confusion for non-native



A close-up photograph of a person wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red tie. The person's hands are raised and gesturing, with fingers spread, as if they are speaking or explaining something. The background is blurred, showing a wooden desk and a white object, possibly a chair or part of a desk.

Where English is the language used in training sessions, international participants often prefer the trainers to be non-native English speakers, because they find them easier to understand

readers. The word 'get', for example, has numerous entries in the dictionary and its meaning often proves to be a great source of confusion for non-native readers. Choose words you feel your reader is familiar and comfortable with, which may mean preferring the more formal words.

Most international readers have no knowledge of Latin, so text sprinkled with Latin words and expressions will confuse them. Asian readers, in particular, have rarely come across Latin words, and may waste valuable time on their interpretation rather than on grasping your point. The use of NB and PS at the end of emails is often a cause of puzzlement, too.

Strong, direct statements are easier to understand than more subtle, complex ones. It is better to write 'the delivery will now arrive next week' than the slightly more complicated 'the delivery will not arrive until next week'. With the latter sentence, less proficient English readers may even reach the conclusion that the delivery will not arrive *at all* next week.

### Some tips for adopting Global English

#### Keep sentences short and simple

Shorter sentences are easier for readers to follow. Write with impact. Use one idea per sentence.

**Avoid strings of abstract nouns** It requires less effort to read 'sessions for transferring customer skills' than 'a customer skills-transfer session', so break up long noun combinations.

#### Use the 24-hour clock and state time zones clearly

For example, write 13.00 GMT instead of 1pm to save your reader time doing calculations.

#### Use presentation and layout

The way you present your information will increase the clarity of your message. Using bold sub-



headings and indents helps to highlight your points.

#### Write simply and plainly

Don't write to impress. The most frequently used word on the planet is okay. Get your meaning across in the most simple and easily understood way.

#### Choose more familiar words

Prefer the kind of verbs that your readers are more likely to understand. These are often more formal such as 'let's examine the problem' instead of 'let's go through the problem'.

To sum up, Global English is here and we need to wake up to this. To communicate well with our international colleagues and business partners, we need to become more aware of the pitfalls that can occur in our writing.

We must also bear in mind that,

although English is the international language of communication in the world of business, proficiency in English varies significantly across countries. Staff must therefore transform their writing into a more acceptable form so that international readers can understand and act accordingly.

Learning the skills to negotiate understanding with non-native speakers may initially require time and effort. But, since Global English is here to stay, we must make an effort to learn how to use it, so that international readers can work at the speed and ease with which they are familiar in their own language. ■

**Gina Cuciniello** runs training courses on written communications in the UK and internationally. For further information, go to [www.WordsInTime.com](http://www.WordsInTime.com) or contact her directly on 0870 085 7012.