

# Dance of Opinions



Sherwood Fleming

Mastering written and spoken  
communication for intercultural  
business using English as a  
second language

**FEATURING THE FIVE-STEP CLEAR METHOD**

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# Preface

Over the years, my clients have told me their stories about how things went wrong when using English as a second language within an intercultural business context. In almost every case they blamed their English skills and were desperate to find a way to avoid such situations in the future. I am going to share one of these stories with you now.

While your situation is unique, you might still recognize how your difficulties are similar to those of Pierre. Everyone faces these difficulties to some extent when communicating in English as a second language. However, you will discover, as Pierre did, that these difficulties are not insurmountable.

## Pierre's story

Pierre was waiting at the door of the boardroom, anxiously anticipating the arrival of international colleagues who had been invited to a day-long meeting. Some of them he knew, others he had never met. As the Product Development Manager for his division in France, he was usually very comfortable speaking to groups, when he spoke French. Today he would have to use English to introduce himself and then give a half-hour presentation about a poorly-performing company product that he had recently developed. Even at the best of times he would have felt slightly nervous and awkward presenting in English, but today he felt extra pressure to express his opinions and recommendations both persuasively and authoritatively.

He had given many presentations in English but he still felt unsure of himself. At times like these he wished he knew English better and that he had more time to devote to mastering the language. He had studied it a long time ago in school and had taken several short courses in the past two years. He now used it almost every day at work; but he was still uncomfortable in such situations. He felt at a disadvantage, especially with native English speakers.

After the awkward greetings, which seemed to take forever, he felt relieved when he was finally seated. He spent the morning listening to colleagues from other countries, with various levels of English competence, giving their presentations. Pierre wanted to ask questions and participate in an exchange of opinions but he hesitated. By the time he had formulated his opinions in his mind, the moment had passed. So he sat silently. It seemed to him like there was a [sea of words](#) swirling around him.

As the day progressed, speakers went more and more over their allotted time. When he was informed that he would no longer have thirty minutes to do his presentation as planned, he began to panic. He found his already weak confidence getting even weaker. When finally it was his turn to speak, he went through his series of slides mechanically, quickly reading each one, not daring to digress.

He deeply regretted that he could not even use his last few slides, which contained all the important conclusions, because the chairman of the meeting stopped him after only fifteen minutes. As he had learned throughout his education, and from years of presenting in French, you keep the conclusions for the end, after first providing all the facts leading up to it. That technique had worked well for him in France. However, in his own assessment, it had failed him miserably that day. He was concerned that he had damaged his reputation with foreign colleagues.

When I met Pierre, he told me that story with a tone of resignation in his voice. He pointed out that fortunately not all his presentations were such a disaster. Still, he never really felt confident about his command of this second language. Two years ago, English became the official company language. He was sure that using

English would get easier as a result. However, even with daily emails, phone calls and meetings in the office, he still did not feel satisfied with his skills.

For example, he confessed that he often postponed writing emails and reports in English. He wondered sometimes whether delaying what he found difficult was creating the impression that he was indifferent or inefficient. He also said that his German manager had a much higher level of English than he did. He worried that his opinions were not being taken seriously because he was not able to build a persuasive case for them in English. Was he imagining it or was he experiencing a real communication problem?

When I asked him what he thought was missing for him, he said what I have heard countless times from clients in a similar situation. He was convinced that if he had a more extensive vocabulary and a perfect grasp of more complex verb forms, then all his problems would disappear. Pierre was mistaken.

Because of my extensive background in showing native English speakers how to improve their writing, speaking and listening skills, no one can persuade me that good communication is all about grammar and vocabulary. Besides, nothing was fundamentally wrong with Pierre's verb tenses. It was also obvious to me that he had more than enough vocabulary to present his opinions well.

However, like many such international business people that I have worked with in the past ten years in France, he had reached an upper-intermediate level of English and did not know what to do to improve further. From many examples such as this, I am convinced that people like Pierre do not benefit much from additional English lessons. What he needed to learn was a new method to choose and organize what he wanted to say for an intercultural context. He also needed to learn to listen differently.

I spent the next eight sessions working with Pierre on the topics you will find in this book. During those sessions, he practiced using my five-step CLEAR method. As a result, he became more effective at expressing his opinions more persuasively and authoritatively with international colleagues and clients.

In addition, he was delighted to discover that by following my approach, his ability to understand was also improved. He could now ask questions quickly, with more precision. He could also hear when the person speaking was not being clear. This is a common phenomenon that I see repeatedly in my work with multinational business clients. In their own language, they know immediately when a speaker is not being clear and they do not hesitate to say so. In an intercultural context, however, they often assume their lack of understanding is their fault and hesitate to speak up. Pierre easily overcame this, as he later told me.

## **The two-way street called intercommunication**

Pierre realized something essential during the sessions we had together: communication is a two-way street called [intercommunication](#). If neither side knows how to take responsibility for communicating clearly and concisely, then miscommunication is inevitable. By becoming more aware of what is required within intercultural business contexts, Pierre was not only able to speak and listen better, but was now also able to help others speak and listen better.

For example, at our last session together, a few days after another international conference, he arrived smiling. He said that he had been very satisfied with what turned out to be the shortest yet most effective presentation he had ever given. People had apparently congratulated him on it afterwards. He was also able to follow other people's speeches with much less effort, now that he knew what to listen for. In addition, he told me that for the first time he was able to hear that some native English-speaking colleagues were actually not very good communicators. He had even interrupted one of them to ask a question requesting more clarity.

This was something that he would never have dared to do before.

At work he was also completing his English emails and meeting reports more quickly. That meant there were fewer delays. While he said he could not honestly claim that his manager was agreeing with his opinions any more than before, Pierre was less bothered by that. He felt confident that he was expressing his opinions more persuasively and authoritatively. According to him, their intercommunication had improved and he felt more optimistic about his future.

At our last session, I asked him for feedback on what he had learned. He replied, “What I have learned from you could fill a book. Thanks to you I now enjoy speaking and writing in English. I am actually looking forward to the next international conference!”

It is feedback like this from my clients that has inspired me to write this book. Due to the diversity of language structures and rhythms, there is not yet a universal standard for what “clear” is when using English within intercultural business contexts. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial to find a common ground and establish standards for intercultural business communication.

After decades of experience in a variety of communication fields, including work with international companies, my five-step CLEAR method for expressing opinions has been designed to establish such a standard; one that is effective, while also being simple to learn and to apply. It’s a standard that is flexible enough to be endlessly adapted to suit your needs as they change over the course of your intercultural career. My sincerest desire is that you, like Pierre, master expressing your opinions in English as a second language clearly, concisely and confidently.

# Introduction

**Are you currently working within an intercultural business context, using English as a second language at an upper-intermediate level?**

**Have you ever thought about improving your intercultural communication skills?**

Having worked with non-native English speakers within international businesses for the past decade, I can assure you that everyone is struggling with [intercultural communication challenges](#). So if you are having communication difficulties, you are not alone.

The clients I work with often tell me that something is missing for them when they use English at work. Specifically, they find it difficult to express their opinions in meetings, presentations and reports. They do not know what to do to feel more competent and confident in these situations. My clients often believe that the solution might be to further increase their vocabulary and master more verb tenses. But when they tried this and eventually realized that this approach was not the answer, they became discouraged. They did not know what else to do.

Rarely does anyone think of asking themselves two more-fundamental questions. First: “How do I communicate?” Second: “How do I need to change how I communicate when I use English as a second language within an intercultural business context?” Asking those questions inevitably leads to observing something that all cultures share but that we all ignore: how we speak and listen.

When using your native language within your own culture, there is no urgent need to be aware of how you speak and listen. Language is like the air you breathe; not only do you not pay any attention to it, you are probably satisfied with how you communicate. It is unlikely that you would think of trying to improve your [communication skills](#) in your native language. So it is not surprising that it would not occur to you to improve your English [intercultural communication skills](#). Even if you did think of that, what steps would you take to improve? Finally, how would you measure the degree to which your efforts were successful?

As with many of my clients, you no doubt currently judge your English speaking and listening skills by using a measurement of grammar and vocabulary. In other words, you are using the same measurement that you apply to your native language. But is that an appropriate measurement for a second language?

How many years have you spent mastering your native language? In contrast, how many years have you devoted to mastering English? You use your native language most of the time. Compare that to how often you use English. So does it make sense to measure your competence in both languages the same way?

After all, if perfect grammar and a huge vocabulary were the only requirements for good communication, there would be no miscommunication between people of the same culture and language. I am a Canadian, who before moving to France spent two decades showing thousands of native Anglophone speakers how to improve their communication skills. I know from this first-hand experience that communicating well is based on criteria other than just fluency in the language.

That is what motivated me to develop a new measure for those using English as a second language within an intercultural business context. And to develop a new method for dealing with the unique communication

challenges an intercultural context brings to both speakers and listeners. The priority cannot be to simply “speak English better.” Rather, it has to be communicating as clearly and concisely as possible, so that we can understand each other better.

Why is that important? I am convinced that without understanding, there can be no trust. Without trust, there can be no cooperation. And without cooperation, there is no future. From my point of view, the first step in building our future together is mastering the words we exchange today. In particular, the opinions we exchange today, which is the primary focus of this book.

## **We build our future in the opinions we exchange today**

Communicating our professional opinions clearly is not a luxury in today’s fast-paced international business environment; it is a necessity. Perhaps expressing your opinions effectively is not difficult for you in your native language. However, when you are using English as a second language on the phone, in emails, during meetings or presentations, are you expressing your opinions as persuasively and authoritatively as you would like?

In this book you will learn what communication is, what is different about communicating in an intercultural context and why that is the case. This will increase your awareness of what is really going on when using English in your particular intercultural business context. You will also learn how to get your opinions across clearly and concisely every time. You will gain confidence because you will know what to do, how to do it and when. You will also learn how to measure your progress as you gradually begin to implement my five-step CLEAR method for expressing opinions.

My aim is to inspire you to see speaking and listening from a different perspective; one that releases you from your preoccupation with correct grammar, perfect pronunciation and a vast vocabulary. You can then shift your priority to the essence of communication: using English clearly, concisely and confidently. Why? To be able to work more effectively and harmoniously with others within intercultural business contexts.

The CLEAR method for expressing your opinions in English as a second language, which I have evolved over the past decade of working with clients from a variety of cultures, is a unique, proven solution to what is missing for you.

## **What you will learn**

When you speak or write your opinions in English, what method do you use? If you are like many of my clients, your method is one of spontaneity. In other words, you simply begin speaking or writing without much prior reflection or preparation. When you speak or write spontaneously, do you worry that your English is inadequate?

Let me emphasize that if you have already reached an [upper-intermediate ESL level](#), it is not your English skills but your method of communicating that is inadequate. You may be surprised by my claim that speaking and writing spontaneously does not typically result in effective intercultural business communication.

Spontaneity is inadequate for a number of reasons. First, if you have not decided precisely how to express the point you want to make, you risk confusing listeners from other cultures.

Second, you spontaneously use a style of expressing opinions that you learned in your native language, even though you are now using English. You are not aware of what that style is or how it is interpreted by col-

leagues from other cultures.

Third, when you speak or write spontaneously you have not taken into account in what ways listeners and readers from other cultures are different from you. As you will learn, too many of us make the mistake of walking only one side of a two-way street I call [intercommunication](#). As a result, what we want to communicate often never makes it to the other side of the street within intercultural business contexts.

In this book you will learn to walk both sides – speaking and listening – with greater awareness, ability and agility. You will learn and apply my five-step CLEAR method for expressing your opinions in English as a second language within intercultural business contexts. The five steps of the CLEAR method for expressing opinions in English are covered in detail in Part 3. The rest of the book is devoted to related topics that will help you get the most out of those five steps. Throughout the book you will be pleasantly surprised to learn how to apply the vocabulary and grammar you already know. This will provide reassurance that your current English level is not what is keeping you from communicating effectively. You will also enjoy having a method that you can rely on for all your English business communication needs.

## How will this book benefit you?

Below is a list of the kinds of professionals that can benefit from using the CLEAR method for expressing opinions in English as a second language.

- Leaders and members of intercultural teams
- Project managers of international projects
- Managers and staff of restaurants and hotels serving international clients
- Supervisors or managers who host intercultural meetings
- Staff who present short reports or presentations at intercultural meetings
- Specialists who give lengthy presentations at international conferences
- Staff who write business documents and emails for international colleagues
- Leaders and participants in international telephone or video conferences

The list is by no means complete, since the desire to improve [intercultural communication](#) is not restricted to any job title. All of us have infinite possibilities to express our professional opinions at work; so it is more a question of how important expressing an opinion is to you. And how satisfied you are with how well you currently express your opinions in English. If you choose to increase your competence, your satisfaction will also increase; the two are inextricably linked.

In addition, you will simultaneously build your awareness of intercultural communication issues. Do you think of awareness as being a competence? Due to lack of awareness you may be making mistakes that you do not even know you are making. That is what I call [intercultural blind spots](#).

Even though my primary focus is helping you improve how you express opinions in English, you will also gain valuable [intercultural insight](#). By that I mean, you will be able to see many aspects of your intercultural context more clearly by reading this book and completing its exercises. My clients frequently tell me that such insight is the additional benefit they receive from working with me and using my CLEAR method.

## The underlying principles of the CLEAR method

The method I have developed is based on the key principles of clarity and conciseness. As you master the use of this method, you will soon feel more confident within any intercultural business context. I will define what

I mean by clear, concise and confident.

## **Clear**

Contrary to popular opinion, being clear when communicating is not about using the right word at the right time. So increasing your vocabulary cannot help you here. Clarity actually begins before speaking or writing. Are you clear about what you want to communicate? And do you know how to organize what you decide to say so that your listeners or readers from other cultures, at any level of English competence, clearly understand the point you are making?

Clarity is also not so much about what you say as about how your listeners interpret what you say. If you are not taking responsibility for participating in their interpretations, clarity cannot happen. This is something some of my clients already know how to do in their native language. However, they have to be shown how to transfer that ability when using English as a second language. Learning to consistently walk both sides of the two-way street called intercommunication is ultimately what clear means.

## **Concise**

Being concise is not about brevity for its own sake. Instead, saying only what is necessary helps to keep both the speaker and listener focused on what is important. This approach, when speaking a second language, is not a limitation but a strength. A lack of conciseness when speaking a foreign language not only leads to communication confusion for your listeners but undermines your confidence in your own English language skills.

Rather than complicating your life by endlessly trying to acquire more vocabulary and better grammar skills, why not simplify things? Learning to more concisely use the vocabulary and grammar you already know is a much more effective use of your time.

## **Confident**

Confidence is not about personality; rather, it is based on competence. When you know what you are doing, you are confident. When you are not sure what you are doing, it is impossible to be confident.

I will tell you a secret: within intercultural business contexts, no one is absolutely sure of what they are doing. No one feels totally confident. And that is not because they do not speak English well enough. Some of my clients speak English as well as I do and yet they admit that they still often feel unsure of themselves when writing and speaking.

After learning the CLEAR method my clients always report an increase in confidence. In other words, because they know what to do and when, they can practice improving. As they discover, it is not necessary to master the complete method before they can begin to enjoy increased confidence.

## **The process of change**

Going through a process of change is what all of us are experiencing when adapting to intercultural contexts. Change can mean many different things. For me, change simply means learning. This is the journey of learning I will take you on in this book.

You are starting where most of my clients find themselves. You cannot see what is happening when you communicate within intercultural contexts. We all suffer from intercultural blind spots; as I will say frequently, you cannot change what you cannot see. What I find is that most people using English within intercultural contexts see the need for improvement. However, they cannot see exactly what kind of improvement is needed. In this book I will lead you through a process to remedy that.

First, you will expand your intercultural insight. Once you can see what you want to change, you can practice taking the steps I suggest. As you do, you will gradually embody new speaking and listening skills. In both the short term and long term, you will be able to take action that you could not take before. The more you practice, the more automatic all this will become. You will be actively engaged in evolving your [intercultural communication style](#).

While we can label that process “change,” I prefer to call the process “learning.” This book is designed as a gradual self-learning program. You will achieve the best results if you work through it in the order presented.

## **How the book is organized**

Part 1 will increase your general awareness of speaking and listening. Part 2 will increase your awareness of opinions. It will also review some of the basics that you already know, but which you may be underutilizing, about how to express opinions in English. Part 3 will cover in detail the five steps of the CLEAR method for expressing opinions in English. Part 4 will show you how to apply all that you have learned to both spoken and written communication.

## **What you will learn in each part**

### **Part 1: Overview of Communication**

I begin by explaining my principles of communication, which will allow you to see your communication issues from a new perspective. You may think that your communication problems are personal. However, there are important cultural and historical aspects of how each of us communicates and the kinds of problems we have.

#### **When you complete the chapters in Part 1 you will understand:**

- What communication is and what it is not
- What all languages and cultures share in common
- How you acquired your current way of communicating
- How you need to communicate differently within intercultural contexts

### **Part 2: Dance of Opinions**

The way people express their opinions within both business and social contexts has been culturally learned. I have named that the [dance of opinions](#). What is the English dance of opinions? You will see that you, like others in English-based intercultural business environments, are expressing your opinions in your native cultural style, while only substituting English words.

#### **When you complete the chapters in Part 2 you will know:**

- How to identify your dance of opinions
- What parts of the dance of opinions are most important within intercultural business contexts
- The vocabulary and grammar to use for the dance of opinions in English as a second language
- How to dance appropriately within your particular intercultural business context

### **Part 3: The CLEAR Method**

Once you have reviewed the basics of expressing opinions, you are ready to learn my five-step CLEAR method. It will show you how to prepare and implement expressing your opinions verbally or in writing for

intercultural contexts.

I developed the CLEAR method in response to the challenges of communicating interculturally. First, people speak, listen and read with different levels of English. Second, you will often find yourself in meetings or at conferences where you are not given as much time to speak as you would like. Third, your listeners have different cultural expectations of you than you have of yourself. Under these conditions, knowing how to express your opinions clearly, concisely and confidently is a winning formula.

### **When you complete the chapters in Part 3 you will know:**

- What thinking you have to do in order to prepare yourself to express your opinions verbally or in writing
- How, why and when to choose what to say or write, using the vocabulary and grammar you already know
- How to organize what you want to say so it is easy to follow and understand
- How to deepen the involvement of your listeners
- How to be more persuasive
- How to build trust

### **Part 4: Applying the CLEAR Method**

My five-step CLEAR method can be adapted to all your written and spoken communication needs. In this part I provide you with hundreds of questions to guide you when applying what you learned in Part 2 and Part 3 to your written and spoken business communications.

As an added benefit, you will feel more confident, because you can practice improving your skills while also meeting your work obligations.

### **When you complete the chapters in Part 4 you will know:**

- How to apply my five-step CLEAR method to a variety of written and spoken business communications
- How to tailor it to your needs within your particular intercultural business context

### **How to use this book**

After two decades of training thousands of people from a variety of cultures in both Canada and France, I have come to the conclusion that there is no one right way to learn. So I will not presume to tell you how you must use this book. However, to get maximum value from it, I will suggest four things.

One, that you read it in the order presented, the first time through. In the first chapters I provide you with the conceptual framework on which the CLEAR method and exercises in later chapters are built. By reading the book in sequence you will understand the “why” behind the actions that I will suggest you take.

Second, that you do not wait to begin applying what I suggest until you finish the book. I have designed this as a gradual self-learning process. To help you with that, I have prepared a complimentary downloadable workbook that you can use in tandem with this book. I invite you to visit my website at [sherwoodfleming.com](http://sherwoodfleming.com) and download it, so that you can begin applying what you learn as soon as possible.

Third, that you think of this book as your personal **intercultural communication coach**. Even after you have completed it, I encourage you to refer to it frequently to help make your daily communication tasks easier.

Finally, any new domain requires the understanding of new terminology. You will find a glossary at the end of

the book listing all my intercultural communication terms. To make it easier for you, the first time I introduce a new term in a chapter, you will see it in red text. Then, if you need to, simply refer to that term in the glossary (if you are reading this as an eBook, you can click on the link). As you continue through the book, you will notice that you will have to refer to the glossary less frequently, since the terms will become familiar to you.

I am delighted that you have chosen to embark on this journey with me to master expressing opinions in English as a second language clearly, concisely and confidently. I also extend an invitation to you to contact me directly at [sherwoodfleming.com](http://sherwoodfleming.com), if you have questions or comments about this book or my work as a leader of intercultural communication seminars.

Now without further delay, let's begin.

This is the end of the free sample chapter from Dance of Opinions. The book is available for purchase from Amazon and other online booksellers.