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European English and the ForAge Network

ForAge is a multilateral network, partly funded through the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme. It includes 15 partners from EU countries who have worked together for over three years on issues around later-life learning. A major goal has been to become an easily accessible repository of work from across Europe that includes material about ageing, learning and older adults. The network aims to provide support and encouragement for those who engage with later-life learners.

As part of its mission, the ForAge network aims to raise issues that are related to the development and sustainability of later-life learning opportunities.

One key issue is how English is used in European projects. There are two main aspects to this:
(a) The use of English in the development of projects – and here we can call on our own experiences.
(b) The use of English by older learners across Europe – either as pan-European project participants or as later-life learners.

We have created two discussion newsletters to pursue these issues. Newsletter 16 looks at the use of English in the ForAge network.

English in the ForAge Network

The European Lifelong Learning Programme required that projects should be conducted in English, French or German. ForAge is an English-speaking partnership. Two of the countries involved (the UK and the Republic of Ireland) use English as a home language but all the other partners are using a language which is not their own in a variety of interactions, formal and informal, orally and in writing.

The partners in the ForAge network undertook their activities by fielding teams of between two and six members. During the project all of these people needed to be able to use English in order to complete their tasks. No test or common standard of English was required of partners joining ForAge – responsibility for ensuring proficiency was devolved to the partners themselves.

During the early period of the project it became clear that there were noticeable differences in the level of competency among the members of the partnership. None the less, each national team had sufficient collective or individual competence in English so that all partners could fulfil the demands of a complex and challenging project.

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Within the ForAge project partners used English in a wide variety of tasks, such as to:

- ✓ participate in four transnational business meetings (presentations, discussions, debates, information-sharing).
- ✓ participate in three ForAge conferences, as speakers, workshop facilitators, discussants and rapporteurs.
- ✓ engage with a wide variety of people (policy makers, strategists, professionals, volunteers, older adults).
- ✓ provide synopses, analyses, research findings and documentation for the project.
- ✓ lead other partners in various aspects of the work.
- ✓ submit papers for publication.
- ✓ engage in virtual and social media correspondence.
- ✓ stimulate debates on the ForAge forum.
- ✓ complete quarterly reports for the coordinators on activities and expenditure.
- ✓ translate material for distribution nationally and for the website.

This enormous range of activities has demanded significant and sophisticated handling of English in terms of vocabulary, register, style, nuance, and grammar. At times it has been necessary for native English speakers to fulfil an editorial role, amending and redrafting language as required.

What is 'European English'?

It became evident relatively early on that the complexities of the ForAge vision and content had the potential to cause misunderstandings between partners. Some of these could be attributed to the diversity of the ForAge team and to varying social, political and cultural factors affecting their views and opinions.

Some confusion, however, was created simply by the use of English by a large group of individuals for whom it was not their first language. The partnership employed the term 'European English' to refer to the adapted forms of English which were used by participants to debate issues and in discussions but which were not always compeletly clear to English speakers.

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ForAge's European English is an example of a variant of English called 'English as a lingua franca' (ELF) defined as 'the use of English as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages' (*Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English* http://www.univie.ac.at/voice).

When English is studied as a foreign language the learner focuses on meeting native speaker norms in order to identify with the culture and values of English speakers. ELF users, on the other hand, focus on practical functionality, accommodating each other's social and cultural backgrounds and code-switching into other languages that they know in order to achieve efficient intercultural communication. English native speakers, unfamiliar with ELF, may find themselves at a disadvantage because they do not know how to use English appropriately in this form of communication.

The impact of 'European English'

The use of English as a lingua franca for a project language raises a number of practical issues to be addressed from the outset by both native English speakers and non-native speakers. The goal is to create an environment where all partners feel enabled to use English without feeling uncomfortable and thus all are able to make their voices heard. Actions may include the following:

- ✓ Achieving early consensus in the understanding of terminology relating to European project work requirements (for example: what is the difference between 'dissemination' and 'exploitation'? What does 'valorisation' mean?).
- ✓ 'Translating' the formal language of the project summary and proposal and other documentation relating to the conduct of European projects into less formal, more accessible and practical language.
- ✓ Taking account of the impact of language differences in the preparation and conduct of partnership business meetings and conferences (for example: using plain English, using repetition and re-phrasing, enabling clarification and verification, paying attention to diction and minimising the effects of accent or dialect).
- ✓ Ensuring that written communication is clear, avoids unexplained jargon and is succinct and concise.
- ✓ Recognising the value of multi-lingualism in promoting common understanding (for example: encouraging debate in several languages to secure meaning of key terms).

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- ✓ Creating a positive language environment where participants feel able to seek help, question and correct.
- ✓ Encouraging reflection about, and the sharing of differences in, meaning of key terms across partner languages.
- ✓ Factoring in time to allow for the effects of the use of European English.
- ✓ Recognising the physical effects of other language use (tiredness, lapses in concentration, loss of fluency and accuracy).
- ✓ Establishing when formal translation may be necessary (for example: in the production of materials for publication in English, putting items on the English website or in the understanding of legal requirements relating to the project).
- ✓ Considering ways in which people outside the project can easily access what has been produced (for example: creating a glossary or lexicon of commonly-used terms, and ensuring that publications, websites, and promotional material use plain language).
- ✓ Celebrating the language diversity of a partnership (for example: including other language versions of documents, commentary, and opinion on websites, and providing translations of project products).

The impact on both English native speakers and ELF users of operating within a multi-lingual context may be underestimated.

Factors such as confidence, harmony and success can easily be undermined in an environment where language issues are overlooked.

Communication and older adults

The ideas of the ForAge partnership on 'European English' have largely arisen from its influence on the project. Dealing with language matters raises questions about the general impact of language use in Europe.

The European Union promotes proficiency in at least three European languages – one's mother tongue and two others (Barcelona objective 2002) and warns that languages must not be a barrier to free movement, work and participation in society, and that marginalised language groups should be identified and included in society
http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/learning-languages/languages-in-education_en.htm

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Members of the ForAge network would be interested to learn more from readers of this newsletter, and individuals and organisations involved in later-life learning about:

- The experiences of other pan-European initiatives in their use of English (ELF), not just those whose first language is English but those needing to communicate in English as a second language.
- National data relating to proficiency in European languages by age.
- The status afforded to language as a tool for national and European integration.
- National language policies relating to the integration of older adults from minority communities.
- Opportunities for older adults to learn European languages and data about participation in language learning by older people.
- National initiatives to stimulate interest in and engagement with Europe by older people.

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