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### COMMON SOCIO-CULTURAL PITFALLS TO AVOID IN CONDUCTING PRESENTATIONS IN ENGLISH

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*The article focuses on the common socio-cultural pitfalls made by Russian students while presenting in English, such as ignoring the audience, avoiding eye contact, misuse of pronouns and prepositions, using too much nouns and passive verb forms, etc. The article presents some possible ways of avoiding these mistakes.*

**Introduction.** Being human, most of us automatically assume that our cultural norms are universally upheld and we are often left confused when people don't share our cultural axioms. People from different countries see, interpret and evaluate things in different ways. What is considered an appropriate behaviour in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another one. Besides, cultural differences affect the norms of various forms of communication. When we speak in public, much of our success in adapting to the audience hinges on establishing common ground and drawing on common experience. So a simple overview of basic cultural assumptions would be enough to give us the knowledge to avoid most serious miscommunications [1].

Many authors (G. Pavlovskaya, G. Elizarova, J. Comfort, A. Wallwork) notice that Russian-speaking presenters, however, tend to have some difficulties in following socio-cultural features that characterize the Anglo-American speech behavior. Unawareness of cross cultural differences is the main reason for the typical socio-cultural pitfalls. According to G. Pavlovskaya, all cross cultural pitfalls can be divided into 3 groups: verbal (concerning the usage of the English language), non-verbal (dealing with non-verbal behaviour) and sub verbal (considering contact with the audience, politeness and concern for the listener/ the speaker) (see table 1).

Table 1 – Groups of common socio-cultural pitfalls

Verbal pitfalls	Non-verbal pitfalls	Sub verbal pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– failing to use transition words;</li> <li>– misuse of prepositions;</li> <li>– using “false friends” incorrectly;</li> <li>– using nouns instead of verbs and passive verb forms instead of active verb forms which make presentation sound awkward;</li> <li>– lacking a clear focus and ignoring time limits;</li> <li>– misuse of personal pronouns;</li> <li>– literal translation of idioms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– using a monotone voice and showing a lack of dynamism;</li> <li>– failing to give the presentation a structure;</li> <li>– reading directly from the paper, avoiding visual aids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– being impolite using imperatives and modals;</li> <li>– ignoring the audience, avoiding questions</li> </ul>

Let us consider in more details the most common pitfalls made by Russian speakers while presenting in English and the possible ways of avoiding them. In this article we are going to dwell on the mistakes mentioned above in table 1, which make presentations irrelevant and confusing.

#### Verbal pitfalls

**Failing to use transition words.** It is important to guide the listeners through the spoken information using signposts and language signals. They give an advanced view of the organisation of the whole presentation or its next section. Signposts tell the listener where you are in the presentation, where you are taking them next and where they have just been. Transitions may signal either the topic of the whole talk, the beginning or the end of a section of the talk, a new point in a list, a contrasting point, an example, or a point of special importance [4].

**Misuse of prepositions.** In Russian, the role of prepositions is partly played by the language's 6 cases, but as English lacks a complex case system, prepositions have increased importance. Where English and Russian use the same preposition in a given construction, we would not expect errors to occur, e.g. *rely on* – *рассчитывать на*. However, where the languages differ, mistakes are more common. Let us compare the following (see table 2):

Table 2 – Examples of misuse of prepositions

English	Translation	Russian Mistake
depend on	зависеть от	depend from
refuse	отказаться от	refuse from
graduate from	закончить	graduate __ university
divide into	разделить на	divide on
wait for	ждать	wait __ someone
listen to	слушать	listen __ music
explain to	объяснять	explain __ someone

## Linguistics, literature, philology

If we are able to understand where our languages differ, we can focus on these points of divergence and learn the correct forms through repetition and practice. Relying on your native language instinct when speaking English will lead to mistakes similar to those listed above. This is an entirely logical process of transfer from the mother tongue.

**Using “false friends” incorrectly.** Russian presenters often get into trouble with their “false friends”. “False friends” are pairs of words in two languages that are written or pronounced identically or similarly but differ in meaning [5]. For example:

*You should be very **accurate** with different sorts of jokes, personal stories and anecdotes presenting for an international audience.* (accurate ≠ careful)

*You do not need any special **instruments** to install Power Point on your computer.* (instruments ≠ tools)

*If we **realize** our plan till the end of the fiscal year we will be able to break even.* (realize ≠ fulfill)

***Momentous** actions should be taken to prevent terrorist attacks.* (momentous ≠ immediate)

*During the last **decade** there were 15 road accidents and their number doubled this week due to bad weather conditions.* (decade ≠ ten-day period)

**Using nouns instead of verbs and passive verb forms instead of active verb forms which make presentations sound awkward.** Spoken English, which is quite conversational, is quite different from written English, which is more formal. While academic and business writing may use a lot of nouns, spoken English sounds more natural when you use more verbs [2]. Passive constructions are used by English people mostly in written speech. So when we speak by means of passive voice we may sound impersonal and the audience will fail to follow us. Let us compare two versions which are parts of a speech for a presentation (see table 3):

Table 3 – Comparing two versions which are parts of speech for a presentation

ORIGINAL	REVISED
<i>The main advantages of these techniques are a minimum or absent sample pre-treatment and a quick response; in fact due to the relative difficulty in the interpretation of the obtained mass spectra, the use of multivariate analysis by principal component analysis, and complete-linkage cluster analysis of mass spectral data, that is to say the relative abundance of peaks, was used as a tool for rapid comparison, differentiation, and classification of the samples.</i>	<i>There are two main advantages to these techniques. First, the sample needs very little or no pre-treatment. Second, you get a quick response. Mass spectra are really hard to interpret. So we decided to use two types of analysis: principal component and complete-linkage cluster. We did the analysis on the relative abundance of peaks. All this meant that we could compare, differentiate, and classify the samples.</i>

The original version would be difficult to understand even if it were in a manuscript. The audience would find it hard to assimilate so much information at a single time. And for the presenter, it would be hard to breathe while saying such a long sentence (74 words!) without a pause.

The solution is to

- split the sentence up into very short chunks (12 words maximum) that are easy for the speaker to say and easy for the audience to understand;
- use more verbs (the original contains only four verbs but around 20 nouns);
- use the active form and personal pronouns.

The revised version contains a series of short phrases. And the result is something that sounds natural and that the audience will enjoy listening to. If the speaker talks like in the first version he risks alienating or confusing the audience.

**Lacking a clear focus and ignoring time limits.** As G. Elizarova says: “Russians are very much into theory; they use a lot of historical and philosophical digressions while talking, never coming straight to the point” [3]. The members of the audience have time restrictions and we should respect them. In the United States and Canada, an efficient presenter is one who starts and finishes the presentation on time. However, time is viewed differently in eastern and western cultures. When presenting in an international context, it is better to consult a local partner or colleague to find out what is considered “normal”, even if it seems strange or differs from our own practices back home.

**Misuse of personal pronouns.** While talking about personal achievements in scientific work, expressing personal opinion or giving recommendations Russian and British/American presenters use different personal pronouns “I” or “we”. According to statistical analysis by I. Vasilieva, the most frequent pronoun used by Russian speakers is “we” and it forms 95.5% of all the pronouns. While the usage of “we” by English-speaking presenters does not exceed 31%. Another startling fact is the difference in using the pronoun “I”: 0.5% and 69% relatively. I. Vasilieva says that these pronouns have different meanings in different cultures [7] (see table 4).

Table 4 – Cross-cultural peculiarities of using pronouns “I” and “we”

British/American culture		Russian culture	
"I"	"we"	"I"	"we"
personal autonomy	team work	egocentrism	collectivism
personal commitment	avoiding personal commitment	lack of modesty	modesty
being concerned with the discussed issue	being unconcerned with the discussed issue	arrogance	experience and work of the group

**Literal translation of idioms.** The problem is that when Russians start literally translating idioms into English it turns to be a total mess that causes some misunderstanding. E.g.:

*Он свалился с луны* ≠ *He fell down from the moon* → *He does not understand ABC of the position, he has no clue about something*

*В рубашке родиться* ≠ *to be born in a shirt* → *to be born under the lucky star.*

*Он съел на этом собаку* ≠ *He ate a dog on that* → *He knows that inside out, he is an expert in that.*

Although many English learners enjoy using idioms, the speaker should avoid using them unless he has mastered the use of the idiom. An idiom used incorrectly sounds hilarious or ridiculous and will surely detract from the seriousness of the talk.

#### Non-verbal pitfalls

**Using a monotone voice and showing a lack of dynamism.** The voice is the primary means of communicating with the audience. No matter how interesting the material, if you speak in a monotone voice, you will lose your audience. An effective voice should be vital, audible and clear. Of course, voice will be affected by age, gender, physiology, health, motivation, and past experience. Nevertheless, people of all kinds can learn how to make their voices more effective by learning about voice production, breathing techniques, vocal exercises and voice care. As well as using inappropriate tone of voice, another common mistake is to freeze in one spot for the duration of your presentation. Body language impacts a great deal of how we communicate, and can reflect quite accurately what is going on inside us. It includes body movements and gestures (legs, arms, hands, head), posture, muscle tension, eye contact, skin coloring (flushed red), even people's breathing rate and perspiration. It is important to recognize that body language may vary between individuals, and between different cultures and nationalities. So it is fine to put on a "brave face" when you are about to do a presentation in order to communicate excitement and passion for the subject of the presentation and to look confident. However, being too flamboyant with the gestures may make the audience laugh.

**Failing to give the presentation a structure.** The way we receive and absorb information in an oral presentation is very different from how we get it by reading a paper. When we read, we control how fast and in what order we want to absorb information. We can scan the whole paper quickly if we wish, and we can skip certain parts. If a written paper is well organized, we are guided by the section headings and paragraphs and we can see how the points fit together.

While watching a presentation, we have no control over what or how or in what order the presenter will give us this information. So in your preparation, everything you do should be oriented to making what you say easily and immediately understandable to the audience [2]. This is achieved through a clear and logical structure of a presentation. The "classic" presentation structure usually includes the following sections [3]: introduction, outline, main body, summary, and conclusion. In the introduction the speaker welcomes the audience, introduces himself and creates a positive emotional atmosphere. In the outline the speaker announces the title/subject, the purpose, a plan of a presentation. In the main body the presenter expands more on the main parts of the presentation announced in the outline. In the summary the presenter summarizes the key points briefly. And in the conclusion the speaker gives recommendations, outlook, etc., thanks the audience and welcomes the audience to ask questions.

#### Reading directly from the paper, avoiding visual aids

English speakers usually use a written script or slides which help them to memorize what to say at each step of their presentation. As a result English presenters sound natural and do not have to read the whole text from the paper. Russians, on the contrary, tend to avoid using visual aids and just read what they have written down. Consequently, their speech is less encouraging and do not attract any audience attention. [2].

#### Sub verbal pitfalls

**Being impolite using imperatives and modals.** Imperative constructions and modal verbs expressing obligation may cause offence if they are addressed to British or American audience. So it is better to find English equivalents so that they sound appropriate for British and American listeners [8]. For instance:

*Don't ask any questions till the end of my presentation! → I'd like to ask you to hold your questions till the end.*

*You must demonstrate cultural awareness if you want to succeed presenting to an international audience. → It's important to demonstrate cultural awareness to be successful presenting to an international audience.*

**Ignoring the audience, avoiding questions.** Interaction between the speaker and the audience is appreciated and expected in America, but this is not so much the case in Russia. Meeting a person's gaze establishes a personal connection, and even a quick glance can keep people engaged, but nevertheless, "Russians are not sensitive to the non-verbals and appear to be shifty-eyed", mentions G. Elizarova [3]. Sometimes Russian speakers seem uninterested in whether the listener understands or is interested in what they are saying; they rarely ask for feedback, while for English presenters "question time" is one of the most important parts of their performance. There are different ways of asking questions in English. But to sound polite and friendly to an English-speaking audience, we should know how to ask polite questions. For example, instead of "Please, tell me ..." it is better to say: "Perhaps you could tell me..."; instead of "Do you know/Have you any idea..." you should say "Do you happen to know..."; "I'd like to ask you" should be replaced by "Can/will you tell me.../Could you possibly tell me.../Do you think you could tell me.../Would you mind telling me."

**Conclusion.** When you are communicating, you should always consider the audience – and particularly if you are giving a presentation. A "professional" presentation is one where you put the audience first. You think about how the audience would most like to receive the information you are giving. The key to an effective presentation is that you have a few main points that you want the audience to remember and that you highlight these points during the presentation in an interesting way. Knowing as much as you can about your audience's cultural background before preparing your speech will ensure that you are more effective in delivering it. Speakers should be aware of cultural differences and public speaking traditions, demonstrate cultural awareness, search for and use culturally appropriate material. It takes practice and effort to deliver a good presentation. But, if you know how to avoid the pitfalls, your presentations will be inspiring, motivating and informative.

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