

There are several factors to consider when adapting training materials for global learners.

## Customizing Training for International Audiences

BY GILDA BONANNO

Globalization is a key driver of business growth and expansion, and it has resulted in increased demand for training and development for international audiences. However, when conducting training programs for people outside of your country, you can't just "drag and drop" your content and expect it to be successful internationally. You'll need to customize your program so it's relevant to another country's culture and can enable participants to achieve results. Here's how.



## Localize your training

Your training content (handouts, workbooks, slides, videos, etc.) includes language, idioms, names, and examples that are common and relatable to your country and culture. Idioms can be particularly difficult to translate. For example, the sentence “To make a long story short, you have to edit the materials so you can be on the ball and make it as easy as pie so no one gets bent out of shape” would be unintelligible to someone who is not familiar with American idioms because these groups of words have connotations beyond the literal denotation of each word.

If it isn't possible to edit out idioms in your materials, share with the

participants a list of the idioms used and explain them so they do not interfere with the training session's overall message.

Idioms are only one area of concern; there are other areas where your materials may cause misunderstandings due to unfamiliarity. I use case studies as the basis for role-play exercises as part of my training programs in the United States. When conducting training in India, however, I change all the names used in the role-play exercises to common Indian names. For example, in one role play, Stephanie and Brian became Sita and Rajesh. This change enabled the participants to focus on the new process and skills instead of getting tripped up by unfamiliar names.

When you review existing materials or create new ones, take the time and effort to localize them so they'll be more common in the countries where you will conduct the training.

## Steer clear of pop culture

When you use a cultural reference, international participants may not be familiar with it. For example, they may not know popular U.S. television shows such as *Friends*, *The Sopranos*, or *Breaking Bad*. Despite the globalization of entertainment and media, many television programs are still only broadcast in the United States. Even if the audience has heard of the show, it may not understand the nuanced meaning you're attempting to draw from a particular character or specific episode.

The same can be true for American sports. I once heard an American executive in Thailand refer to the exercise of giving an important presentation as “like playing in the Super Bowl.” In the

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United States, it would be fairly obvious that he was referring to the Super Bowl championship in American football. Thus, he meant that the presentation was crucial and should be done with the highest level of skill. However, the audience in Thailand did not understand the reference.

If you use cultural references with international audiences, be sure to explain their specific meanings. As with idioms, you can ask for the local cultural equivalent. While this discussion can be a fun way to promote intercultural understanding, it does take time from your training materials.

## Verify participants' language skills

When offering training in other countries, the requirement is usually that all participants be fluent in English. However, standards of fluency vary. For example, when teaching presentation skills in Italy for participants from Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and Holland, I followed my usual practice of verifying fluency by consulting local staff on the ground when I arrived and talking to participants on the first day of the training program. I realized that the participants' comprehension of written English was better than their comprehension of spoken English, which had implications for my presentation skills training slides.

My general strategy when using slides is to use more pictures than words and then deliver most of the explanation by voice in front of the live audience. In this case I decided to modify my slides to adjust them to the actual language skills of the participants. I added more text in complete sentences so the participants could





read them on screen, and then reinforced those key concepts while delivering the slides and interactively ensuring that they understood. This strategy made it easier for the audience to comprehend what I was trying to communicate.

### Customize the training based on cultural differences

Cultural differences influence organizational hierarchy, interpersonal communication styles, and how people relate to one another within an organization. This, in turn, can affect what happens in the classroom.

As part of a program in China for high-potential employees from China, Japan, Thailand, and Korea, we asked the participants to give each other feedback in the small working groups they had been assigned to since the first day. The feedback would include overall observations as well as comments on specific class exercises, such as giving a presentation and participating in the team building activity, and had to contain both positive feedback and areas for improvement.

The participants were employees of a global company based in the United States. The company leadership wanted to ensure that employees were comfortable giving positive and negative feedback because it was valued as a key skill for success. Based on my previous experience teaching in China and my conversations with local HR staff, it was apparent that this was not an exercise the participants could do easily. Giving negative feedback openly and directly could be seen as a violation of the cultural norms of not challenging others and not causing someone to “lose face.”

We had to spend time establishing the premise that feedback is a gift that shows you’re interested in other people’s success and that positive and negative feedback can help by providing

vital information about their behavior and its impact on others. We explained how giving feedback—and being open to receiving feedback in return—was a way to demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and the organization’s growth. We modeled how to deliver feedback in a respectful and professional manner and then had the participants practice it.

With much encouragement, examples, and practice, they became more comfortable with the concept of feedback and how to use it. All of this took more time on the program agenda than it would have in the United States, where giving and receiving feedback is a more familiar concept and the focus of the training program would just have been how to use it effectively.

As you prepare to train global audiences, it is essential to partner with HR or subject matter experts working in that country to provide guidance and offer a reality check for everything from your materials to when food breaks should be scheduled. Verify everything when you land and be willing and ready to gather local information and make adjustments as you are conducting the training program. The extra work pays off in more learning and a better classroom experience for the participants and trainers.

■ **Gilda Bonanno** is a trainer, speaker, and coach who helps people develop powerful presentation, communication, and leadership skills so they can be more successful; [gilda@gildabonanno.com](mailto:gilda@gildabonanno.com), [gildabonanno.com](https://www.gildabonanno.com), [@GildaBonanno](https://www.instagram.com/GildaBonanno).



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