

## Problem, issue or setback.....

### Softening language for cultural communication

From the phrases below, decide which one you would use when communicating with other countries. What do and don't you like about the other phrases? Look at the underlined words, how do they sound to you? Would you change them and if yes, what word could you use? Would you mix a few sentences together?

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#### Describing problems

There are a few minor problems which need to be solved.  
Look, there are some problems which need to be solved.  
We are experiencing a few technical difficulties at the moment.  
It seems our systems are playing up at the moment.

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#### Saying you don't understand

I'm sorry, I don't understand your concern.  
I'm not quite sure I follow you, do you mean that.....  
I'm sorry, what do you mean by that?

Saying you don't understand on the phone is often much shorter. Can you think of two or three word phrases which are better for the telephone?

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#### Simplifying language

Let me explain this in more simple terms .....

I'll explain again in language you can understand .....

Let me explain it a slightly different way .....

Simply put .....

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#### Asking people to hold the line (telephone)

Wait one moment please .....

Could you please just hold the line .....

Just one moment, I'll check .....

Please hold .....

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#### Describing the reason for errors

The error was due to a mistake at our end  
The reason for the issue is still unknown; give me time to check it  
It doesn't work because there is currently an issue with the server

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We want to resolve the issue today

You said the project would be finished by this week

I'd like an answer today

If I were you, I'd launch the system in July

## Lesson Objective

To highlight the importance of language diplomacy in Business English and identify key words and expressions which can cause problems with and breakdowns in communication.  
Lesson time: 60 minutes Level: Pre- Intermediate → Advanced.

## Lesson Plan

1. Write the following sentence:

**“Send me the documents by Friday, please”**

Discuss with your class whether they would be unhappy to receive an email like this. If they are all fine with the email, ask how international colleagues and customers might feel and therefore how can you make it more diplomatic. If they are all unhappy, ask how this can be improved to be more diplomatic. Participants can discuss in pairs then general feedback. As a trainer, be sure to not just correct the language but also diplomacy of the language too.

2. Next, hand out the worksheet. In pairs, the participants discuss which phrases they feel are diplomatic and which phrases are direct. They can either rank them in order (1 being the most diplomatic to 3 or 4 being the most direct) or they can eliminate the phrases they feel could make the recipient unhappy and explain their reasons for this.

Allow plenty of time for discussion then feedback as a group. Encourage lots of justification for answers and correct where necessary.

At the end of each category, the trainer gives their opinion and explains which ones he or she thinks might be considered impolite or too direct.

3. Explain that in Business today, more and more people (especially in customer-based communication) have a problem with the word “problem.” Some people argue that you should never use the word “problem” with a customer because it evokes a very negative emotion and could convey that there is no solution. Words like “issue,” “setback” or “hurdle” are used instead to show that there is a solution.

4. With this in mind, go back to the worksheet and highlight the underlined words in the text. Explain that these words are considered (by some) to be too negative. Ask the participants to discuss possible synonyms for these words which could be a little softer. Feedback as a class and use your native knowledge to judge if the synonyms are softer or not.

5. Finally the participants then look at the 4 sentences at the very bottom of the worksheet. You can do 1 of two things (or both) with these sentences

a) Ask participants to make these sentences more diplomatic using the softening language and phrases from the previous activities.

b) Ask the participants to write a reply diplomatically to these sentences, if they received them from customers or other international colleagues.