

TLP Five-Minute Read Over Coffee – Contributing with confidence to meetings



Virtual meetings can create new challenges when English is not your first language. It can be harder to read body language and poor audio can make listening more challenging. '**Zoom fatigue**' - multiple back to back meetings - makes concentration more difficult. It can also feel more tiring to sustain long and complex discussions online.

10 principles to make virtual meetings more effective for non-native speakers.

We have highlighted and defined key terms.

1) For a more formal meeting send an **agenda** (*the one page doc describing the plan of the meeting*) well in advance. The agenda should clearly list the different **items** (*topics*) in the meeting. Each item needs a short, clear description, with the name of the presenter, if appropriate. The agenda should highlight the date and time of the meeting and, again, if more formal, the attendees.

As a very '*rough and ready rule of thumb*' more than 5 agenda items might be hard to manage in a one hour online meeting.

- 2) Leave an opportunity for any questions (**AOB - Any other business**) at the end of the meeting. Give **participants** (*people who actively contribute to a meeting*) an opportunity to ask any further questions or clarify issues discussed. This is great practice in a fast-paced meeting for non-native speakers of English.
- 3) Make it clear who is **chairing** (*managing*) the discussion. This person needs to track time against **agenda items** and make sure everyone is given sufficient time to speak - again vital when English is not your first language. The **chairperson** (*facilitator of the meeting*) can gently remind participants to avoid interrupting. Trying to listen to a discussion online in a different language - with multiple speakers talking over each other - is not easy.
- 4) Give time at the start of the meeting for some **small talk** (*non work-related discussion*) to warm people up. Something, many of us are missing, is that opportunity for light **chit-chat** (*informal conversations*) around a coffee point with colleagues. It is easy to ignore this when working online. It can also help non-native speakers tune into English before getting down to the meeting agenda.
- 5) Establish one person to take **minutes** (*notes of the meeting*) **and actions** (*the next steps from the meeting*). Avoid the trap of making it the junior member of the team! A rotating principle can be a great tactic in developing a sense of shared responsibility.
- 6) Recording the meeting can be a great help if the conversation is very technical/complex and detailed minutes need to be taken. Always get everyone's consent before recording the meeting and be mindful that a recorded meeting can make people more self-conscious about speaking English.
- 7) Avoid abbreviations, technical jargon, idiomatic expressions, etc... It is very easy for a native speaker to create barriers to understanding in a meeting context. Being aware of your audience and making small adjustments to your language - makes a big difference.
- 8) Create a culture whereby participants do not feel silly asking for clarification on language points. Making people feel comfortable about not knowing a particular word in English can take real stress out of online meetings.
- 9) Slow down your pace when presenting. We receive lots of feedback from employees who feel frustrated by native English speakers making no attempt

to speak slowly. When speaking/presenting to non-native speakers add more **checkpoints** (*to clarify understanding*). This can be done in a constructive and non-patronizing way. **Example:** *Would you like me to talk that through/go over/summarize/that again/one more time?*

10) Summarise the actions at the end of the meeting, making sure they define the **'who', 'what' 'when'**. This again promotes a shared understanding. Ensure the notes and actions use plain English and keep the sentences short and sharp. Less is more!
