

Use of the English language inside my work: Radiation Protection Expert

General description

My main activity of work is related to protection from ionizing radiation. I am a physicist with a specialization course on Health Physics that is the discipline devoted to the study of the applications of ionizing radiation in the different fields: industry, health, research and also, as it is now having a new “renaissance”, in nuclear field. I perform my activities both for my firm that is a governmental body, but also with frequent connections with other experts mainly in Europe, but seldom in the US or Argentine, mainly coming from similar governmental bodies but also from universities and industry.

As a matter of fact the reading of open literature papers is a daily activity and usually I devote at least 1 h of my daily working time to reading papers of relevance, highlighting the new concepts, ideas, results already obtained in a specific field of my activity. I must be able to resume concepts coming from these papers and think in English. Other times there is a request for a review of information on a specific item, due to the resonance of the problem, as in the case of depleted uranium ammunition in Kosovo or in the poisoning (and subsequent death) with Polonium-210 (radioactive material) of Litvinenko (the Russian spy). In a few hours you need to be able to write a note to your chief or to read the press releases from the UK governmental bodies (as in the Polonium case) or to give advice to a governmental body like the Armed Forces. In this case knowing English is a real asset.

International links to other experts

Different experts from European countries meet once or twice each year. By now I have a 10 years' experience in meetings, throughout Europe, (UK, Germany, Hungary, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece etc.), on specific arguments. English is a common language sometimes we call it “the common scientific English” to exchange ideas, building or updating competences also by means of common research programs. Spoken English is the way to explain concepts but also to share ways of life in different European countries and we often find deep differences in the way the problems are addressed in the other countries. As usual we speak of politics, public schools systems, health care systems, nuclear power development and energy budget in each country etc., and I find the way my colleagues e.g. from UK or B, report on Italian governmental decisions, or sometimes on the Italian Prime Minister jokes in G8 meetings very interesting ...

Contracts with EU

In the period 2002 -2005 a joint venture among 8 institutes from EU member states (F, D, UK, UA, B and I) were partially supported by a contract from EU inside the 5TH framework program on Nuclear Energy. I am involved in that as Italian representative. Our duty, as task group, had been the development of general guidelines to be adopted by member states for the calculation of internal doses from introduction of radionuclides inside the body. As the parameter “internal dose” cannot be directly measured but only inferred on the basis of whole body or excreta radioactivity measurements, these guidelines should help in harmonizing methodologies and in providing to all the internal dosimetry community numerical tools for addressing such problems. In such a frame we have to report to EU, This work has been done mainly by our German coordinator but I also have to describe my working activities during precise time intervals. In this case the English mother tongue review (always kindly done by our English colleague) helps me in improving my written English.

Developments of papers

As can be imagined during the work we have to develop guidance documents, reports of activities, minutes of meeting and power point presentations of activities and results. This task is always fatiguing as you must use the correct word both in scientific sense and also be aware of the “false friends“ which sound well in Italian, but are not present in the English vocabulary at all. Sometimes I have heard from another Italian colleague a “concrete reason” meaning “real” reason and not related to cement with what concrete is made.

Peer review activity

In recent times increasingly I have been called to perform “peer review” of manuscripts for the publication on an international journal. I have to take care of the organization of the material, as a scientific paper has a strict structure : Introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, conclusion and last references. Recently I have reviewed a Korean paper . The English needed to be improved and also some issues related to the content had to be clarified. I only gave permission for publication after this had been done.

Speaking in English

Speaking in English is another expression of the language that I must be able to do.

Speaking to explain concepts as in different training courses. I have been engaged by the International Atomic Energy Agency several times (in Hungary, Iran, India, Greece and Czech Republic) to give lectures on my subject to participants of a course with different mother tongues but in the common English language. In these cases the most difficult thing, at the beginning, is to properly understand the speech of e.g Jordan or Hungarian or Indian participants, asking questions and speaking an approximate English, with his/her nation accent and intonation. I have developed this practice . If I have not understood a question (partially or at all), due to the tone of voice or the incorrectness of the sentence or of an English word , or if I have not understood the remark, I, in my turn, ask a question beginning with “ *Are you asking me* ” and trying to repeat what I have understood ,and finishing with.. *Am I right ?* “ In this case I give my interlocutors a second chance to explain their thought more clearly ,and myself an opportunity to improve my understanding. In my experience this helps me to be more polite towards them, and to correctly answer their questions.. and 90% of the times this works !!

Speaking to discuss arguments

I also avoid telling people they are wrong . Instead I always say: ”As far as I can understand, you are telling me thatI’m afraid I don’t agree with you , but maybe I’m wrong ...”. This helps working together a lot . Sometimes your colleagues appreciate your help and kindness during the work sessions and I have also been successful with colleagues who always believe they are right, to the point that they often try to reconsider their thoughts on the basis of my reasons.

Speaking to present results without debate

It is always a problem to remain in the allotted time. If the organization of a congress gives you only 5 minutes to make a presentation you must be aware of that or nobody will be listening to you after your time is up being disappointed by your “theft” other speakers’ time. So I have developed the attitude to repeat the presentation several times , in front of a mirror, of my wife or my son, and asking them if I am sufficiently clear for them . If the answer is affirmative ”, I am confident that also everybody in the congress, who are more familiar than them with the issues of my speech , will follow me.

Speaking to have an interview to respond to a position at the IAEA Agency

I have done this experience only once. I was very stressed before the job interview. I was thinking that my English would not be fluent enough, and in that case I would not have the possibility to interact with my interviewer. The technical staff put us in connection I was in Bologna, and my interviewer in Wien with a

microphone in front of me and the TV screen divided into two parts: the interviewer taking up the main part, and my image as they saw it in Wien in a small section . It was difficult but at the end I was pleased with myself.

So I think that English is as important as Italian in my work. Improving it is always the task I try to engage myself in.

Carlo-Maria Castellani, 01/05/2010