Reading Ex. > A Communication Barrier

The discovery that language can be a barrier to communication is quickly made by all who travel, study, govern or sell. Whether the activity is tourism, research, government, policing, business, or data dissemination, the lack of a common language can severely impede progress or can halt it altogether. 'Common language' here usually means a foreign language, but the same point applies in principle to any encounter with unfamiliar dialects or styles within a single language. 'They don't talk the same language' has a major metaphorical meaning alongside its literal one.

Although communication problems of this kind must happen thousands of times each day, very few become public knowledge. Publicity comes only when a failure to communicate has major consequences, such as strikes, lost orders, legal problems, or fatal accidents - even, at times, war. One reported instance of communication failure took place in 1970, when several Americans ate a species of poisonous mushroom. No remedy was known, and two of the people died within days. A radio report of the case was heard by a chemist who knew of a treatment that had been successfully used in 1959 and published in 1963. Why had the American doctors not heard of it seven years later? Presumably because the report of the treatment had been published only in journals written in European languages other than English.

Several comparable cases have been reported. But isolated examples do not give an impression of the size of the problem — something that can come only from studies of the use or avoidance of foreign-language materials and contacts in different communicative situations. In the English-speaking scientific world, for example, surveys of books and documents consulted in libraries and other information agencies have shown that very little foreign-language material is ever consulted. Library requests in the field of science and technology showed that only 13 per cent were for foreign language periodicals. Studies of the sources cited in publications lead to a similar conclusion: the use of foreign- language sources are often found to be as low as 10 per cent. The language barrier presents itself in stark form to firms who wish to market their products in other countries. British industry has in recent decades often been criticized for its linguistic insularity — for its assumption that foreign buyers will be happy to communicate in English, and that awareness of other languages is not therefore a priority. In the 1960s, over two-thirds of British firms dealing with non-English-speaking customers were using English for outgoing correspondence; many had their sales literature only in English; and as many as 40 per cent employed no-one able to communicate in the customers' languages. A similar problem was identified in other English-speaking countries, notably the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. And non-English-speaking countries were by no means exempt - although the widespread use of English as an alternative language made them less open to the charge of insularity.

The criticism and publicity given to this problem since the 1960s seems to have greatly improved the situation. industrial training schemes have promoted an increase in linguistic and cultural awareness. Many firms now have their own translation services; to take just one example in Britain, Rowntree Mackintosh now publish their documents in six languages (English, French, German, Dutch, Italian and Xhosa). Some firms run part-time language courses in the languages of the countries with which they are most involved; some produce their own technical glossaries, to ensure consistency when material is being translated. It is now much more readily appreciated that marketing efforts can be delayed, damaged, or disrupted by a failure to take account of the linguistic needs of the customer.

The changes in awareness have been most marked in English-speaking countries, where the realization has gradually dawned that by no means everyone in the world knows English well enough to negotiate in it. This is especially a problem when English is not an official language of public administration, as in most parts of the Far East, Russia, Eastern Europe, the Arab world, Latin America and French- speaking Africa. Even in cases where foreign customers can speak English quite well, it is often forgotten that they may not be able to understand it to the required level - bearing in mind the regional and social variation which permeates speech, and which can cause major problems of listening comprehension. In securing understanding, how 'we' speak to 'them' is just as important, it appears, as how 'they' speak to 'us'.

Level C1

Text taken and adapted from Cambridge (2000) Cambridge IELTS 2. 2nd Ed. CUP. UK.
Exercises adapted by Andrés Barón-Ávila
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LIVEWORKSHEETS

A. Complete each of the following statements (1-4) with words taken from previous reading passage. Write NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS for each answer.

1. Language problems may come to the attention of the public when they have _____ such as fatal accidents or social problems.

2. Evidence of the extent of the language barrier has been gained from _____ of materials used by scientists such as books and periodicals.

3. An example of British linguistic insularity is the use of English for materials such as _____.

4. An example of a part of the world where people may have difficulty in negotiating English is _____.

B. Choose the appropriate letters a-d for questions 5-7.

5. According to the passage, 'They don't talk the same language' (in P1) can refer to problems in ____.

a. understanding metaphor
b. learning foreign languages
c. understanding dialect or style
d. dealing with technological change

6. The case of the poisonous mushrooms (in P2) suggests that American doctors ____.

a. should pay more attention to radio reports
b. only read medical articles if they are in English
c. are sometimes unwilling to try foreign treatments
d. do not always communicate effectively with their patients

7. According to the writer, the linguistic insularity of British businesses ____.

a. later spread to other countries
b. had a negative effect on their business
c. isn't as bad now as it used to be
d. made non-English-speaking companies turn to other markets

C. List the four (4) main ways in which British companies have tried to solve the problem of the language barrier since the 1960s. WRITE NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS for each answer.

8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____

D. Choose the appropriate letters A-D and write them in boxes 12 and 13 on your answer sheet.

12. According to the writer, English-speaking people need to be aware that ____.

a. some foreigners have never met an English-speaking person.
b. many foreigners have no desire to learn English.
c. foreign languages may pose a greater problem in the future.
d. English-speaking foreigners may have difficulty understanding English.

13. A suitable title for this passage would be ____.

a. Overcoming the language barrier
b. How to survive an English-speaking world
c. Global understanding - the key to personal progress
d. The need for a common language

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