



What Did You Say?

COMMUNICATING ACROSS LANGUAGE BARRIERS

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It was December 23 and I ran into my local 7-11 to get a few lottery tickets as last minute stocking stuffers. Because I was in a rush and harried by holiday season pressures, I blurted out my usual rapid-fire speaking style to the poor, unsuspecting Korean clerk behind the counter. "I'd like five rub-off lottery tickets."

I couldn't understand what she said, but I could read the confusion on her face. So, I repeated my original request, only this time louder and slower. "I'd like five rub-off lottery tickets." Again she said something unintelligible to me, this time looking even more bewildered. For the third time, louder and with even more exaggerated mouth movements, I repeated my request. In exasperation, she went to the computerized ticket machine and punched out a ticket with five quick picks.

By this time my burn had turned to a boil and I said between clenched teeth, "This is not what I asked for. I want five rub-off tickets!" At this point another clerk came to her rescue, saying a few words in their native language. The no longer frantic clerk turned to me and with a smile of relief on her face "Scratch-off, scratch-off," she kept repeating.

This incident points up some of the difficulties and frustrations experienced on both sides of the language barriers we face regularly in our multicultural society. It also clearly shows the mistakes we often make in communicating with people whose command of English is limited.

What doesn't help

The biggest stumbling block in situations like these is the anger that often results from the frustration of not understanding or being understood. That anger becomes a powerful saboteur of communication in two ways. First, a message that comes out of anger threatens the receiver, making him/her less able to use the little English they may know. Anger also blocks the thinking of the sender, preventing that person from finding creative solutions to the impasse. So, the sender keeps repeating the same unsuccessful behavior, each time louder, slower and with more irritation and not getting the desired results.

What does help

Avoiding anger is a beginning, but that's not enough. The following tips will help you

find alternatives to louder and slower.

1. MAKE IT VISUAL

As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Using pictures, signs, diagrams and symbols gives you another dimension beyond words with which to make yourself clear. Had I drawn a picture of a lottery ticket, pointed to one or shown a sample, I could have quickly overcome my 7-11 difficulty.

A veteran army instructor who regularly taught courses to allied military personnel from many countries advised that diagrams, charts and graphs were critical aids in teaching his classes where most students had limited command of English. International symbols in road signs have long been used in Europe where there are many languages spoken in a relatively small area and where there is much travel between countries.

2. SHOW AND TELL

Kindergarten isn't the only place where "show and tell" is useful. Demonstrating what you are explaining can often get the message across faster than words in any language. Wouldn't you rather have someone show you how to do something than have to figure it out from written instructions in a manual? I could have taken a coin and made scratching motions to show the clerk what kind of ticket I wanted. In on-the-job situations, this works best when you first show the person who to do a task, then do it together, and finally observe the individual in action so you can be sure you've been understood.

3. USE THEIR LANGUAGE

If getting your message or information across is more important than showing your displeasure at their limited English, then using the other person's language may be your best bet. Don't panic. This doesn't mean you need to speak the other person's language. Emergency instructions, school district letters to parents, and signs in airports are common uses of bilingual or multilingual communication.

However, there are more. A local nursing home was temporarily stumped when its elderly residents kept complaining about not being able to communicate their needs to the mainly Spanish-speaking aides. The solution? Bilingually printed sheets with the twenty or so most common requests written in English in the left column and Spanish in the right. Now when residents need something, they just point to the request in the English column and the aide reads it on the corresponding line in the Spanish column.

Another example of bilingualism in action is the Teatre Para Los Ninos (Children's Theater) which performs Spanish/English musicals for San Fernando Valley elementary school children. A recent performance focused on changing role stereotypes, showing that it is okay for boys to cook and for girls to play basketball. Without the use of both languages, many students would not have understood the message.

4. TAKE IT EASY

When a language is not one's mother tongue, processing information in it takes longer. Not only is the vocabulary often unfamiliar, but grammar and intonation patterns are sometimes new. It is helpful to slow down and pause between sentences so the listener has time to let each segment of your message sink in. Then summarize at the end, pulling all the pieces together.

5. KEEP IT SIMPLE

"Take the ball and run with it." "Go the extra mile." "A tough row to hoe," "A thumbnail sketch." and "Beyond the call of duty." These kinds of idiomatic expressions are common in everyday speech. Most of us probably use many throughout the course of a day. Yet, for a non-native speaker who tries to translate them literally, they make no sense at all. In addition, jargon — words that are specific to a particular business or industry — may also be confusing. In construction, for example, calling mortar "mud," or talking about "roughing in the plumbing," would be difficult for anyone outside the profession to understand, let alone someone struggling with English. Finally, use simple words that are commonly heard, for example "problem" rather than "glitch" or "snafu."

6. SAY IT AGAIN

When you're having difficulty making yourself understood, it does help to repeat while using different words. If I had tried to find another way of describing the lottery ticket I wanted, I probably would have thought of "scratch-off," an expression the perplexed clerk would have understood.

One caution here, however. When looking for another way to say something, beware of cognates, words in other languages that look and sound similar to English words. The most common mistakes occur between Spanish and English. While "largo" in Spanish looks like large, it means long. And if you're embarrassed, don't say you're "embarazada" because that means pregnant

7. ASSUME CONFUSION

Whatever you do, don't ask people if they understand and then take their "yes" to mean they do. In many cultures, saying "no" is the height of rudeness. Besides, even here in this culture, we often say we understand even when we're a little fuzzy because saying we don't makes us feel inadequate.

Instead of asking, watch the person's face for non-verbal signs of confusion. Also watch behavior as the individual begins to act on what you've said. In my lottery ticket situation, the clerk's face told me she didn't understand, and when she walked over to the computer to begin punching in a quick pick, it was absolutely clear I had not gotten my message across.

8. GET HELP

When you've done steps one through seven and you still are having trouble, get help. A bilingual friend or colleague can often get you out of a bind. In many organizations, staff who speak other languages are listed and called on rotating basis to translate. In Interchanges between staff and customers or clients. That way the extra duty is spread more equitably and does not fall on the same person each time. In other organizations, those with bilingual abilities are given a pay differential for the extra service they provide. Just make sure the person who is doing the interpreting is fluent enough in both languages to be able to make things clear to all parties.

9. WALK IN THEIR SHOES

To help reduce your frustration and anger when you get blocked by a language barrier, try to put yourself in the other person's place. Have you ever been somewhere where no one spoke English? How did it feel? What would have helped you? Remembering these times gives you some empathy for the bewilderment that the individual might be feeling.

10. DON'T LAUGH

The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations reports that immigrants' most common request is that people not laugh at them when they try to speak English. When we're not confident of our ability in an area, we're particularly vulnerable and sensitive to slight. While you may not be laughing at the person's poor English, your joking manner or teasing banter may seem like ridicule.

A local bank executive recounted just such an example. While explaining a particularly complicated form to an immigrant with limited English skills, he turned and made some joking remarks to a colleague. A few minutes later, the customer called from home saying he had not appreciated being laughed at and treated as though he were stupid.

No matter what languages we do or don't speak, all of us need to be treated with dignity and respect. Communication that has these elements at the base will go a long way to bridge language and cultural differences.

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