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Communications Challenges In A Smaller World

Abstract

Technological change and overlapping social, environmental, educational and political issues have increased the need for understandable communications among the different countries of the world. Because English is widely used, many Americans have no other language capability and are at a disadvantage in many situations. In addition, changes in the ethnic composition of the United States have intensified the need for skills in other languages. The need for second-language skills is perhaps greater among agriculturalists than it is for other areas. The Cooperative Extension System has important roles to play in expanding these communication skills.

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Introduction

Through modern communications and transportation systems, the world is rapidly becoming a smaller place in which the economic, social, environmental, educational, and political issues of one country tend to overlap with those of other countries. Such overlap of issues emphasizes the need for clear, concise and understandable communications among the general population of the different countries as well as among the leaders of those countries.

When we consider the profound impact of the unification of the European Community (EC) in 1992, the economic progress and competitiveness of far eastern countries such as Japan and Korea, or the increasing U.S. dependence on farm laborers from non-English speaking nations and changing immigration patterns, do those of us who speak only English assume too much regarding the need to communicate in other languages? Are we perhaps somewhat arrogant regarding our

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need to be familiar with other languages, and blinded to greater opportunities that may exist? Perhaps we need to become more attuned to the fact that we are living, working and trading in an international arena that we can affect more appropriately by improving our communication skills and conducting educational programs in languages other than English alone.

For those in academia, English is indeed the standard language for many scientific journals. Yet, such journals are only a tip of the iceberg when we consider communication needs in a shrinking world with its ever-increasing development of transportation, electronic communication and economic systems, changing political atmosphere, and immigration patterns.

Indeed, successful integration of arriving immigrants into U.S. society who have dramatically different ethnic backgrounds than those immigrants of earlier years surely provide unique educational programming opportunities for Extension educators.

Communications Technology

The ease and spontaneity of television anchormen conducting interviews via satellite with someone in Russia, Japan, or another foreign country is an accepted achievement of the electronic age. In addition to our long-depended-upon telephone systems, newer technologies such as facsimile systems and satellites are now vital components of international communications.

FAX machines are rapidly becoming a key link in inter-office communications in both national and international settings. Recently, in preparation for an Extension international staff development program

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called North Carolina Agriculture in the World, which included a European study tour, we received FAX transmissions in French, German, Spanish and Dutch. In most cases, we were able to interpret the messages with a reasonable degree of accuracy and to respond to our European colleagues within a few hours. In contrast, telephone conversations were much more difficult or impossible due to language barriers. With the telephone, the ability to speak the language(s) in question would have helped considerably. For the FAX transmissions, sufficient familiarity with those languages to read or generally recognize the substance of the messages would have met our communications needs. However, the need clearly existed for some multi-language abilities, regardless of the communication means.

In many state and county Extension offices, we can receive and (in fewer cases) send programming via satellite. Imagine how much more effective satellite communications would be for us if we were multi-lingual users. We could readily learn about policies and practices from around the world and we would be able to transmit educational programs in the native language of our intended audience.

Language Diversity In The European Community

Within the EC, which is made up of twelve countries, all parliamentary actions must be translated into nine different languages. Official languages within the Community include English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, German, Greek and Danish (European Parliament, 1988). In a normal day's drive within the EC, it is quite easy to

encounter a rich and diverse world of languages. Such language diversity, while culturally rich, does not lend itself to easy communication when preparing to exchange ideas on international economics, politics, or other pertinent subjects.

Even though many foreign businesses and political leaders speak English as a second or third language, we in the United States need to be able to communicate with our international counterparts in their native language(s) if we intend to enhance our dealings in the world arena. In attempting to communicate with our international counterparts who are multi-lingual, we are at an incredible disadvantage if we can understand only English.

Competing In The International Arena

The emergence of Japan and western Europe as awesome economic powers is surely not by accident. Rather than other countries being dependent upon the United States for industrial products and other goods, we now find ourselves depending on many foreign-made products for our day-to-day living needs.

Yet, examples exist of U.S. firms successfully competing in the international arena. The intricacies involved in this field are demonstrated by a major U.S. farm equipment company which sells a farm tractor with its engine made in its French factory, the other components made and assembly completed in West Germany, and then shipped to the United States to be sold through its U.S. dealer network. Similar arrangements in the industrialized countries are becoming the rule rather than the exception. Such international trade examples clearly

Challenges In A Smaller World demonstrate how language barriers are being transcended by some individuals and companies.

While the international trade arena may appear to be functioning well, can the Cooperative Extension System have a more direct impact on our ability to communicate in the world arena to meet current and future needs? For example, numerous language communications challenges exist within the agricultural community. Some real examples include an apple-packing plant operator in southern France dealing with apple packers on the U.S. west coast almost daily; West German Extension workers explaining their agricultural problems and opportunities to a group of U.S. Extension visitors; U.S. vegetable growers communicating with their counterparts in Mexico or Chile regarding the progress of their crops; or the North Carolina sweet potato grower needing to give instructions to Hispanic migrant farm workers to sort for quality. Such examples of multi-lingual communications in the agricultural arena point out the need for language training that is directly focused toward a specific enterprise, subject, or purpose.

Shifting Immigration Patterns

The changing composition of the flow of immigrants into the U.S. during the past several years has further accentuated the opportunities for Extension in the language arena. As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, during the past 60 years there has been a dramatic decrease in immigrants from Europe, while those persons arriving on our shores from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, and the far eastern nations have increased dramatically. Many of these immigrants have joined

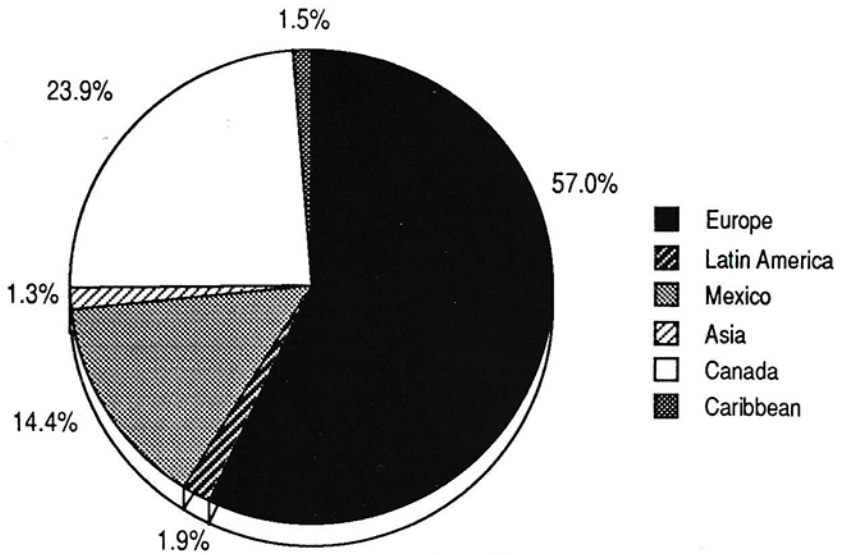


Figure 1
Country of Origin for U.S. Immigrants
1929

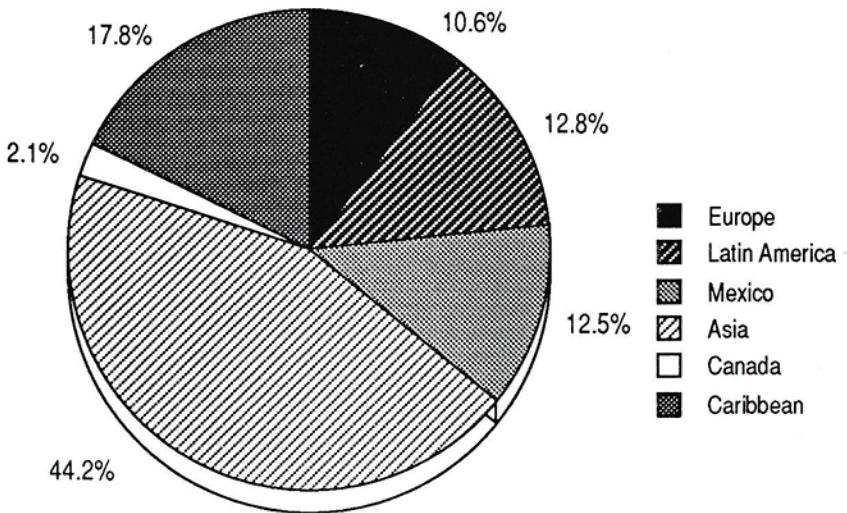


Figure 2
Country of Origin for U.S. Immigrants
1987

with others of similar origin to form distinct ethnic communities in urban areas, while others, especially Hispanics, have joined the agricultural work force. Of the 2.5 million persons employed as hired farm workers in 1987, 14 percent were Hispanic (Oliveira and Cox, 1989).

In order to adequately communicate with these immigrants and their families and provide them needed educational opportunities, Extension educators must understand their native languages. Extension educators and others who are properly equipped with language skills can be catalysts in enhancing communications among immigrants and helping them become acclimated to their new community and culture such as an innovative program by the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service in northern Virginia for immigrants from the Far East. Similar educational programming opportunities and leadership is also growing for Extension in agriculturally-related communications between farmers and their immigrant farm workers.

Based upon current trends, more and more immigrants will be providing the labor pool from which farmers will depend on in the future. An example of the dependence on farm workers is evident in North Carolina. In 1988, there were approximately 27,500 migrant farm workers employed, primarily during May through August. Of these 27,500, about 24,000 or 87 percent, were Hispanic, primarily from Mexico (N.C. Employment Security Commission, 1989).

In North Carolina and many other states, migrant labor is crucial to the production of many commodities. Often there is no available local

substitute for the migrants. Ideally, farmers and agencies working with the migrants would communicate in Spanish; however, that is often not the case. Most of the people working with the migrants must rely on crew leaders to interpret and relay information to the workers. This system has, in part, led to abuses of wage, salary and other labor laws. Increasing our own ability in Spanish will help provide communication opportunities with these workers to help them meet their basic language skills needed for simply getting by in their changing agriculturally-related communities. Because there is great natural reluctance to deal with someone with whom we cannot communicate, Extension workers can be much more effective in program provision if they improve their own foreign language skills.

Language Training Availability

To accommodate the basic "get-by" language needs of travelers, numerous commercial language programs have been developed, usually with a booklet and accompanying audio tape. The business community provides language training through audio-cassette programs as well as through extensive workshops. These programs are usually expensive and require a commitment of time beyond that normally associated with language training for tourists.

In local communities, both foreign language and ESL (English as a Second Language) training may be available through any number of state, county, municipal, and private organizations. Yet, relevant language training which is specific for the agricultural community,

whether for agribusiness concerns, farmers, or immigrant farm labor, seems to be in short supply.

Implications For Extension Service Professionals

In international travel, we soon learn some universally accepted forms of communication. These may include pointing a finger at an item desired, waving a handful of the local currency and smiling politely, to name a few. While these forms of communication may work in a few limited situations, they obviously do not suffice for more complete forms of communication if trade arrangements are being made or information is being shared.

Within the realm of foreign language training, we think there are two major reasons for Cooperative Extension to be involved. First, Extension is qualified to specify the kinds of agriculturally-oriented language training that our clientele and our own personnel will need. Second, Extension has a long history of successful educational training experience and has in place many of the systems and technologies to accomplish it well.

For example, our specialists could produce video training tapes depicting actual communications in agricultural situations to help make training relevant. Audio tapes that deal specifically with agricultural dialogue rather than a potpourri of typical tourist-type information, about restaurants, shops, etc. could be most valuable in establishing improved communications in foreign languages. Simple computer programs for agricultural producers with word comparisons could be done relatively easily.

Because many Extension spe-

cialists are located on college campuses, it would be convenient to temporarily employ foreign students to assist in the development of comparative video, audio, photographs, posters, computer software, or other materials for training purposes.

In addition to using standard language training opportunities, Extension can prepare its own professionals for multilingual communication through international exchange programs, sabbaticals, foreign study grants and through staff development programs, such as the North Carolina program which involved a two-week study tour of agricultural policy, research, extension and production in Western Europe.

Extension can also improve its communications with migrant workers. As we travel on transportation systems in foreign countries, it is easy to see safety instructions and promotional information printed in two, three, or more languages. Learning from such examples, we as educators could develop information cards or posters with pertinent word comparisons for farmers and farm workers to review as they perform their daily tasks. Such visual aids could also be developed for migrant families in the areas of personal hygiene, foods, and food safety.

No one can or should expect agricultural producers, farm workers, agribusinessmen, or agricultural communicators to become fluent in several languages. Yet, the international arena is upon us with global trade, markets, and shifts of population. In order to function effectively in this shrinking world, those persons who gain at least some multi-language skills will be better prepared to communicate with our

competitors, bilingual multi-cultural communications challenges in a smaller world of migrant and seasonal farmworkers during peak harvest by county, 1989." (Mimeograph) Raleigh, North Carolina.

neighbors, or those immigrant farm workers whom we depend on to harvest our crops. Agricultural educators can and should play a significant role in the development of such multi-language capability of our staff and our clientele.

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