

Exporting English

We English are very bad at learning other languages. We have become complacent because so many people around the world have learned English. We often have good intentions to learn another language, but what if we have trading partners in several countries? Which language should we learn? Are we likely to achieve a working knowledge of any of them that exceeds our overseas partner's existing knowledge of English? What if we simply have no flair for languages? Should we sit back complacently and encourage our overseas agents to improve their English?

There are a number of things we *can* do without massive investment in training, and without having any flair for languages. We may not know much of our partners' languages, but we do know a lot of English. We should put our effort into using English in a way that makes it easy to translate:-

First of all, remember your message is a tool for achieving your aims. It is not a work of literature. There are no points for artistic content, or demonstrating that you know where to use a semi-colon; or that you know what esoteric means. Clarity is everything.

Simplify what you have to say. Before you start to speak, do some editing in your head:- Avoid figurative speech and idiomatic expressions. Use small words rather than big ones. Use common words rather than obscure ones. Don't try to convey too many ideas in one sentence. Two short sentences are better than one long one. In short, put some work into how you use English.

We tend to be less formal when speaking than when writing. Try to write the way you would speak. Cut out unnecessary words from your sentences. The adjectives and adverbs are often dispensable. This article is written in the imperative form (Do this, do that...). It is more economical with words than the more tentative form "This should be done".

We are taught that it is good English to avoid using the same word too often. Forget this when you are writing for translation. Always use the same word for the same thing; otherwise the meaning of the two words can diverge in translation.

Don't use technical jargon unnecessarily; your partner may use a non-technical linguist to help with translation of letters. Think about how your words will be translated or could be mis-translated. Engineers know a "bush" as a simple plain bearing, but it could easily be translated into a small tree. A hydraulic ram was translated into a "water sheep".

Use sub-headings or write a series of numbered points, rather than an essay. This breaks up your message into more easily understood sections, and encourages the use of short sentences. It is easy to refer back to numbered paragraphs in subsequent correspondence.

The symbols for SI units of measure ("kg"=kilograms) and chemical symbols, like (H₂O) are international. English names for units and chemical elements are not universally understood. Use the symbols, and don't invent new ones. 500 grams should be shown as "500g", not "500gm".

In conversation, it is obvious to start speaking slowly, but you must keep checking yourself; you will tend to return to your normal speed - especially if you get absorbed in the conversation.

Getting speed of speaking right is difficult. You don't want to patronise. I had taste of this when I tried to buy an ice cream in the Yosemite Park in California. Detecting something alien in my Derbyshire accent, the ice cream man went into "Foreigner Mode":- "We have only chocwiches, that's .. choc-o-lateice cream be-tween two .. (He waved two fingers)..cho-co-late ..wafers."

If he speaks fluent English, you will tend to speak more quickly in reply, than if he is hesitant. This may be too fast. (If you've ever tried using your school French when on holiday, you know how quickly your pleasure at remembering a few French words evaporates when you get an incomprehensible torrent of French back in reply!).

It is best to assume that you need to speak more slowly than he does, then ask if he would like you to speed up. (They may be reluctant to admit that they want you to slow down - if you are going too fast)

If you can see that they don't understand, first try repeating what you just said more slowly and enunciating the words more clearly. Resist the temptation to use a completely different set of words at the same speed.

People who have learned to speak English very well, and understand perfectly when we speak to them directly, often find it much more difficult to understand us when we speak to a colleague - at our normal speed- and in our local accent!

Try to play down your accent and avoid dialect words. Listen to your partner's accent. If they use "American English" then feed it back to them. You have watched enough American TV to know that "ball" is pronounced "barl" etc.

If your partner uses the wrong technical word for something, but you know what they mean, think twice before you correct them. Is it expedient for you to adopt the word they have chosen? A conversation about natural gas was satisfactorily concluded with both parties referring to "earth gas".

In conversation, avoid "contractions" such as "couldn't". Take a little more time to say "could not"

Avoid asking negative questions: - "You don't want me to hit you, do you?" may yield a logically correct "Yes" from a Chinese. This can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings....

Don't forget that a picture is worth a thousand words - and faster to translate too. Get out your pencil and paper to help technical discussions. Put more illustrations in your sales literature and operating instruction manuals.

Avoid hand writing your messages unless you can do it very clearly. Deciphering poor handwriting (particularly after it has been faxed) can add considerably to the burden of translation, especially for the Chinese and other nations who don't use Roman characters.

The above strategies show how you can cut down misunderstandings in your dealings with overseas trading partners by putting some effort into how you use English. The key word is "effort". Don't forget to play your part in the translation process.

It only takes a little more effort to learn a few words of greeting in each language. Your effort will be rewarded with a smile and your partner will be encouraged to demonstrate his superior linguistic skills.....

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