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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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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.

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...
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 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 multilingual 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 at least four different 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 demonstrate that 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 agricul-
tural 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 commu-
nicate with these immigrants and
their families and provide them
needed educational opportunities,
Extension educators must under-
stand their native languages. Ex-
tension 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 agricultur-
ally 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 ap-
proximately 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 Mex-
ico (N.C. Employment Security
Commission, 1989).

In North Carolina and many
other states, migrant labor is crucial
to the production of many commodi-
ties. Often there is no available local
labor or mechanical 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 pro-
vide communication opportunities
with these workers to help them
meet their basic language skills
needed for simply getting by in their
changing agriculturally-related com-
munities. Because there is great
natural reluctance to deal with
someone with whom we cannot
communicate, Extension workers
can be much more effective in pro-
gram provision if they improve their
own foreign language skills.

Language Training Availability

To accommodate the basic “get-
by” language needs of travelers, nu-
numerous commercial language pro-
grams have been developed, usually
with a booklet and accompanying
audio tape. The business commu-
nity provides language training
through audio-cassette programs as
well as through extensive workshops.
These programs are usually expen-
sive and require a commitment of
time beyond that normally associ-
ated with language training for tour-
ists.

In local communities, both for-
ign language and ESL (English as a
Second Language) training may be
available through any number of
state, county, municipal, and pri-
ivate 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 multilanguage skills will be better prepared to communicate with our
competitors, our international 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 multilanguage capability of our staff and our clientele.

**References**


