

WHOEVER SERIES



“WHOEVER” DOESN’T SPEAK ENGLISH WELL

Michael K. Wilson

This booklet is written to give Christians an appreciation for the difficulties encountered by migrants who are severely limited in their ability to communicate in English. Practical advice is given about the various ways in which Christians can help such migrants and reach out to them.

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Facing the Challenge

A Land of Many Languages

There are 5000-6000 languages spoken on earth, depending on where one draws the line between a language and a dialect. Over 200 of these are spoken by more than a million people each. About 2000 languages are now spoken by fewer than 1000 speakers each. There are about 200 surviving Australian languages. More than half of these are spoken by fewer than 10 people each.

In one out of every four homes in Australia you will hear a language other than English being spoken. Make that over one in three for Sydney and Melbourne. Indeed, there are now many metropolitan suburbs where English is not the most common language spoken at home.

Some new migrants are competent English speakers, even though they come from non-English speaking countries. Many who come from the Indian subcontinent are illustrative of this. But many arrive speaking little or no English.



“WHOEVER” YOU ARE...

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Whoever you are:

- God loves you
- Jesus died for you
- Believe in Jesus
- Receive life

The Impact of Age on Language-Learning

Babies and children learn language in very natural contexts involving considerable social interaction. But mature-aged migrants who enter Australia with limited ability to speak English are not like babies who enter the world. For most there will not be a comparable natural environment involving high levels of social interaction with native language speakers. Those who arrive as children or young adults are likely to have much more natural opportunity for such language development. Add this to the often greater capacity of younger people to learn new things and we can appreciate how very difficult it is for older migrants to make significant progress in learning English.

JUST KIDDING



What happens to such migrants if they continue to have very limited English-speaking ability? Inability to speak English places clear limits on a migrant's employment opportunities and ability to engage with the mainstream Australian way of life. It may prevent migrants from accessing health care services.

Unless migrants can substantially improve their English-speaking ability it is almost inevitable that they will become heavily dependent on the community of those who speak the same heart language as themselves. Isolation and

impoverishment are consequences – difficulties that probably will impact most seriously on women.

Even with competent guidance it takes hundreds of hours for migrants who come with poor English to learn to speak English with reasonable fluency. One Canadian survey indicated it takes a migrant an average 900 hours of tuition to reach basic fluency in English. It has been estimated that it takes Australians between 1200-1500 hours of instruction to learn Japanese or Mandarin Chinese, about double the time needed to learn German or French. People from Asian countries often require about the same length of time to learn English.

Language and Inter-Generational Relationships

The impact of age differences on language-learning ability tends to create problems between the first and second generations. It often happens that children end up interpreting for their parents. In many cultures this itself engenders a sense of shame.

A Czech proverb states: “Learn a new language and get a new soul.” Our identity is very much tied up with the language we speak. For migrants who can’t speak English well it is impossible to capture the essential spirit of Australian culture. Because of their concern for their children this often causes them to be fearful, overly protective and conservative. At the other end of the scale, the younger folk have a much better feel for Australian culture and for what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. As Christians we are very much aware of what is wrong with our own culture. But even when the children of young folk try to live within the parameters of normal, healthy Australian modes of behaviour they often feel that misunderstanding parents are imposing unreasonable restrictions.

The vast majority of our world’s people believe that their own culture is superior to all others. That is, people are naturally ethnocentric. First generation migrants are no exception. If their children had grown up in the country and society from which these migrants came it would be expected that they would share the culture of their parents, along with its values and ways of behaving and relating to others. Tensions often develop, when first generation migrants in Australia try to raise their children to share the culture they themselves have known since birth. They instinctively know that their children need to speak the same language if they are to grow to share the same culture.

As Goethe observed, “Language is the dress of thought.” Migrants’ ability to express their thoughts to

Importance of Heart-Language

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela

“Language is the dress of thought.” Goethe

“The limits of language are the limits of my world.” Wittgenstein

English-speaking Australians is frustrated by any deficiencies in their English-speaking ability. Now that these migrants are living in Australia this also means that they experience frustration in communicating with their own children if their children only speak English and cannot speak the language of their parents well. We need to appreciate that language does not merely contain and reflect ideas. It may be too much to say it shapes the way we perceive and think about reality but it certainly profoundly influences our perspectives and understanding.

For example, if the children of Greek Orthodox parents in Australia grow up speaking Greek well then they are much more likely to share a great deal in common with their parents. But the children of many migrants are first and foremost English-speakers and speak the language of their parents poorly or perhaps not at all. In this case there will almost inevitably be considerable cultural disparity between the generations.



Discouragements to Language-Learning

Why don't many migrants make a greater effort to learn English? Some migrants have put in many hours but have been dispirited by their lack of progress. Since social interaction is crucial for language, migrants will be at a disadvantage especially if they are of a retiring or introspective nature.

Human nature being what it is, people tend to avoid the possibility of experiencing embarrassment and humiliation that may come from making mistakes in what they say. Migrants may also be deterred by responses they receive, or believe they are receiving, from mainstream

Aussies. Many migrants and refugees are highly intelligent people who have occupied key positions of employment and status in the countries from which they emigrated. Indeed, many already speak more than one language even though they don't know English and that's more than can be said for most born and raised in Australia! However, because of their inability to speak English, migrants now find themselves being treated as though they were children. For example, they hear Aussies speaking extra slowly to them with raised voices.

The Biblical Challenge

The Tower of Babel incident (Genesis 11) describes how God thwarted godless unity by confusing languages. In the preceding chapter we find *The Table of Nations*, which treats ethnic and linguistic diversity as an outworking of God's creation purpose. Indeed, one of the things stressed in the Tower of Babel account is that the builders' plans were diametrically opposed to God's revealed will. So, when we read the two passages together we properly conclude that God was not merely judging the Babel builders. He was also sweeping aside their resistance to his plan for people to spread and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). Paradoxically, linguistic and ethnic diversity are as much blessings of God as they are a result of human hubris.

Accepting the Challenge

In medieval Britain a knight challenged another knight or enemy to a duel by throwing down one of his gauntlets (gloves) on the ground. The opponent picked up the gauntlet to accept the challenge. Faced with the challenge of ministering to people who are still learning English, many churches are refusing to pick up the gauntlet. They have chickened out rather than accept the challenges that language barriers pose. For example, because we can't speak a particular language we treat the matter of reaching certain people with the gospel as the responsibility of those Christians who do speak that language. Certainly encourage such Christians to spearhead such ministries. But pick up that gauntlet when it is plain that otherwise these precious people will be left without opportunity to respond to the wonderful life-giving offer of the gospel of grace.

There are many practical ways of rising to the challenge:

Demography: Become familiar with the languages that are spoken in your church's locality. The ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) website (www.abs.gov.au/) now makes this information easily accessible and in great detail. This site even enables a church to identify the languages spoken in a small block of streets.

Language resources: Acquire well-attested gospel materials in strategic languages. Copies of single gospels are of particular importance. Include, where possible, DVDs and mp3s. Many find *The Jesus Video*, now available in many languages, to be a very useful tool. In ministry to Muslims the DVD *More Than Dreams* has proved to be very effective.

Be wise in deciding whether to charge or not when distributing resources. Some Muslims have received a negative impression of Christianity when large quantities of free gospels have been distributed. Why? Because many of these hand-outs ended up littering pavements and piled up in rubbish bins. To Muslims it is unthinkable that their holy book should be treated in such a way. Sometimes materials can be left with the person concerned and collected later (this also provides opportunity for discussing the material).

Leave multilingual materials, where appropriate, in waiting areas and other centres where the community congregates, e.g. surgeries and hairdressers' salons, second-hand clothing shops such as ANGLICARE Op Shops, Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul centres, local Community Information centres and local shops which sell ethnic products.

Materials in many languages are available from the Australian Bible Society; Bible League; Campus Crusade for Christ; LIFE Ministries; European Christian Mission; The Pocket Testament League; and Scripture Gift Mission.

Signage: Church signage helps people sense that the church is relevant to them. Use not only English but also target languages. Make known any language facilities that the church offers, such as ESL classes or tutoring or help with form-filling.

Visitor's Pack: If there is one language that is especially spoken in the locality or by those who visit the church, then prepare a visitor's pack for such people, arranging for it to be translated and printed in that language. It is advised that the pack contain not only essential information about the church but also about government and community services available for migrants and refugees.

Greetings: People are usually delighted if you are able to say even a few words in their language. At the very least, learn to greet your non-English speaking background contacts in their language.

Some examples of how to say “hello” in other tongues:

Arabic	al-salaam a-alaykum
Bosnian, Croatian	zdravo
Chinese	ni hao
Farsi	salaam
Greek	kalimera (Kah-lee-MEH-rah)
Hindi	Nah-mah-STAY
Indonesian	selamat pagi (seh-LA-maht PAH-gee)
Italian	ciao
Japanese	konnichiwa (Koh-NEE-cheewah)
Korean	an-nyung ha-se-yo
Spanish	Hola (OH-lah)
Tagalog (Filipino)	kamusta
Turkish	merhaba (MER-ha-ba)
Vietnamese	chao

Muslims use a universal greeting: al-salam alaikum.

English language classes/groups: Some churches have Bible study groups that use easy English and/or run English as a Second Language (ESL) conversation classes. For many churches this latter strategy is very viable. It only takes a few volunteers to form a team. Not all in the team need to be directly engaged in teaching, since there will be a need for various forms of support. It is not wise to have a class dominated by one person who does all the teaching. Well-run classes make sure that over 60% of all talking is done by the students themselves. Support from church leadership and ownership of the ministry by the church is vital for sustainability of such ministry. The church also needs to consider how to smooth the way for amenable persons to make the transition from ESL into the wider life of the church community.



Bi-lingual worker: Some churches engage a ministry worker, either volunteer or paid, who speaks the language of those the church is seeking to reach. This person must be respected by those people. Don't appoint someone simply because the worker speaks the language.

Sensitivity to illiteracy: Some migrants come from societies where book-learning has not been part of their upbringing. In their homes you will find it hard to locate a book. Some migrants are completely illiterate. It can be alienating for such folk if the moment they arrive at church they have literature put in their hands.

Visuals: If significant numbers of folk visiting your church have limited English-speaking ability, then make a special effort to use visuals to enhance comprehension. Project the words of songs onto the screen, along with the outline of the sermon and perhaps some of the key points being made. Some churches give copies of the sermon to migrants so they can read this in sync with the actual delivery of the sermon. But it may well be more advisable to hand these copies out at the end of the service. The English-learning ability of migrants is better developed if they learn to listen to the sermon being spoken at a reasonably normal speed and then read the script afterwards.

Language spot in the service: One church has a five minute spot each week prior to the sermon, to focus on a key word to be used in the sermon. This was especially, but not exclusively, for the benefit of non-English speaking background people. The word would be projected on to a screen, a definition given, and sentences used showing the sense of this word.

Sitting alongside migrant visitors: Here a welcomer introduces a visitor to another church member who ushers the visitor to a seat and sits alongside. In the case of non-English speaking background visitors who are unfamiliar with church services it is a great help to have someone showing them how to use the hymn book, find the Bible passage and explain basic things.

Bilingual ministry: This might take the form of a bilingual Bible Study or church service. Thought must be given as to how translation will be made (e.g., directly, or through headphones).

Learn another language: If practicable enable clergy, a ministry worker or some of the congregation to learn the language of a people group you are seeking to reach.

Take time to listen: If someone speaks with a strong foreign accent don't assume you cannot communicate with him or her. Listen with patience. It greatly encourages those struggling with English to find a listening ear.

Social engagement: Include such migrants in social events that are not language-intensive and will allow them to enjoy friendship and the experience. There are many possibilities, e.g. bush walks, bus or ferry trips and other outings. It will help these migrants to enjoy the time all the more if there are others with them on the trip who speak their language.

Why not arrange to go shopping with your migrant friend or perhaps ask to be shown how to cook some of your friend's favourite dishes?

Finding the right church: Some migrants, despite having very limited English-speaking ability, join English-speaking churches. Perhaps they want to identify with mainstream Australian culture or do this for their children. If migrants with limited English are Christians then, for the sake of their spiritual formation, we will sometimes want to help them find a suitable church that worships in their language.

Useful Resources

ESL Resources: <http://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/esl-resources/>

Aussie ESL (Judy Rowlands): <http://www.aussieesl.com/>

Omniplot. The Online Encyclopedia of Writing Systems and Languages: <http://www.omniplot.com/language/phrases/index.htm>

Jennifer's Language Page: Greetings in more than 2800 languages: <http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/>

Questions

1. What languages are spoken in the area accessible to your church?
2. What scope does your church have to minister to the people who speak these languages?
3. In what ways does your church make special provision for those who have limited English-speaking ability?
4. What else might your church do to be more effective in ministering to those with limited English-speaking ability?

For more titles in the “Whoever” and “Contending with Culture” series of booklets see the listings at: www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au



In an Australia that is becoming ever more multicultural, “whoever” will often be someone coming from a quite different culture. This presents particular challenges for churches intent on reaching “whoever.” We think here of all churches, not merely dominant culture churches that may be predominantly Anglo-Celtic in composition. As your church faces these challenges may you know God’s guidance and enabling as you set yourself to be the channel of God’s love to “whoever.”

Need Advice?

Contact Mike Wilson, facetofaceintercultural@gmail.com

More resources: www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au

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