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August 2 1979 Vol. 147 No. 3168
Published fortnightly
Established 1902

The Foundry Trade Journal is the official organ of the Association of Bronze & Brass Founders; The Light Metal Founders Association; Foundry Equipment & Supplies Association; British Ironfounders Association; Metal Trades Organisations; the National Society of Master Patternmakers; and the Diecasting Society. Incorporating: Iron & Steel Trades Journal

FOUNDRY TRADE JOURNAL

Training in the Multi-racial Foundry

By A. Murray and M. Lockett*

The ironfoundry industry, like other industries such as textiles in West Yorkshire, is increasingly dependent on the immigrant worker. Large numbers of these immigrant work-people, especially those of Asian origin, speak little or no English when they arrive in the United Kingdom. It has been found that the employment of such an immigrant work-force creates special problems in the fields of communication and training. Across the country, several language training units have been formed to help both the immigrant worker and industry to overcome this language barrier. One such unit is based in Walsall and is led by Mr. A. Murray who has organised classes in several West Midlands companies including Duport Foundries. This article considers some of the problems, real and anticipated, faced by a foundry with a mixed labour force, and reviews the first full year of language training in the company.

Since 1975, the Government has sponsored a number of specialist Industrial Language Training Units, to help both industry and the immigrant worker to overcome the language barrier. In the West Midlands, the first such unit was founded in 1975 at Walsall, and in 1977 Duport foundries contacted the Walsall ILT unit for advice on language problems.

Problems of Mixed Labour Force

Duport Foundries was the first foundry company to undertake a language training programme in the West Midlands, and the present article considers some of the problems faced by a foundry with a mixed labour force. The article also reviews the language training programme over the past two years and looks at the ways in which the difficulties of running an industrial language course were overcome.

Duport Foundries is a group of mechanised iron foundries situated in the Tipton area of the West Midlands. The company employs a total of 876 people at its three sites and produces 1,000 tons of grey iron castings each week, mainly for use in the motor-vehicle industry.

The labour force is of mixed origin and of the 711 people employed on the shop floor it is estimated that 368 are immigrants. Most of these people are from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, with by far the

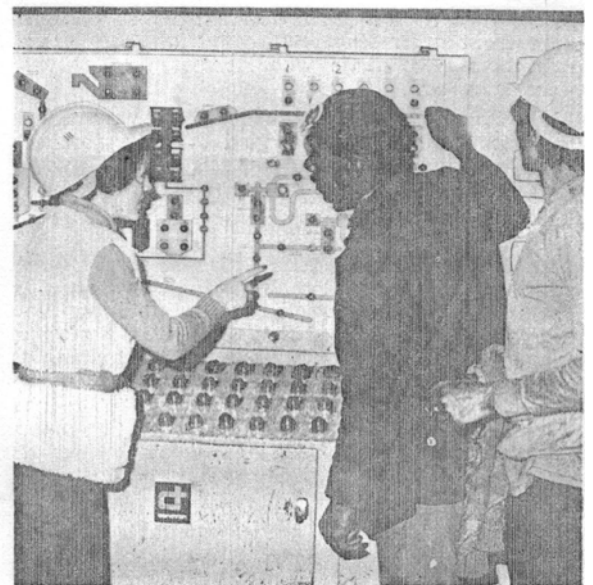
majority coming from the Punjab region of India. The company estimates that only 20% of the immigrant work force can speak good English and that a similar proportion has no English language ability at all. The remaining majority is able to speak only a few words of English.

The trade union has also been aware of a communication problem in the company and has backed up the efforts that have been made to deal with the problem.

Most employers with a large immigrant work force, and in the West Midlands that means an Asian work force, would accept without question that such a situation would create special problems of communication, particularly in the provision of instruction and training and in industrial relations.

Foundry supervisors in the Black Country tend to be very practical men and they rely almost entirely on the spoken word for the giving of instruction. Historically, foundry supervisors have enjoyed a close relationship with the foundry employee and after work that relationship has spilled over into their social life. In the area, whippet and pigeon

This control panel is marked in English. However, speaking English is one thing—reading it is another.



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A language class in progress. Management is encouraged to become involved—in this case the safety officer is explaining a point to a student.

racing, football and fishing have been the traditional recreation activities, whilst the public house was the venue for such social adventures.

Had this article been written 20 years ago, this relationship would have been true and only ten years ago it would have been substantially correct. It is no longer the case. At Duport Foundries, more than 50% of the total work force is of non-UK origin and for production workers the proportion of immigrants is now 60%. One long-serving supervisor recalls employing the first immigrant worker in his foundry as late as 1960. By 1968, the immigrant population had risen to 25% of the total employed.

Having recognised that the immigrant population is growing—in Duport Foundries it is growing at about 5% per annum—and believing that the immigrant worker has special problems, it is necessary to identify their problems and difficulties more carefully.

The most obvious problem to be faced is, of course, that of language. However, before discussing the language problem more fully it is important to recognise that there are probably several more down-to-earth areas which should be considered when running a foundry with an Asian work force. At first sight, not all seem to be relevant, but they may account for an abnormal attitude, or the actual absence of the Asian worker and any one of them will be very important to him.

Holidays: The Asian worker will expect to return to his homeland from time to time and it is becoming established that he should be allowed 13 weeks unpaid leave every two years. UK religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter will not of course have the same significance. It may be that he may want to celebrate a religious festival not catered for in the company's holiday list.

Marriage: Marriage is another area of the Asian's social and domestic life that may spill over and affect his work. Arranged marriages are still common and often cause anxiety and worry.

Religion: Many immigrants are Moslem and as such follow carefully such celebrations as the feast of Ramadan. Prolonged fasting during the daylight hours and throughout a working day can have a serious effect on a manual worker. It is not unknown for a man to collapse at work, although tiredness is the more likely symptom.

Toilets and Shower Facilities: The use of the ablution block can often be the cause of misunderstanding and the different customs of a mixed labour force can be a very emotive issue.

Swearing: Foundry work-people are never shy when it comes to expressing themselves verbally and use of some common swear words can offend an Asian. When immigrant workers communicate with one another in their own language, English-speaking foundry workers are often suspicious of what is being said and the individual may suspect the immigrant of talking about him.

Industrial Relations: There is a disturbing trend developing whereby immigrant workers are tending to join only one union and the work force is in danger, in the long term, of polarising into a union for UK workers and one for Asian workers. This may stem directly from the experience that Asians have in overcoming obstacles in their attempt to integrate into the British industrial society. One of these obstacles is language and their inability to understand the English. The other may be the average Englishman's apparent indifference to showing any desire to understand them.

Obviously, good communication is essential for harmonious industrial relations but, when all has failed and a stoppage of work occurs, the employer faces a new problem. The Asian family is closely united, and friends and relations are more likely to support a striking member of the family. Not all Asians are fully aware of trade union practices and agreed procedures. There is a danger that what is understood and accepted by the UK workers may



The teacher watches a fettler grinding castings in the foundry.

not be understood by the Asian workforce, and may be rejected.

Nobody should be in any doubt that these are very real everyday problems and to the immigrant worker and his shopfloor supervisor they can be very worrying.

Problems with Health and Safety

One of the main areas where lack of English language ability might be a problem is that of health and safety. It would be easy to assume that because the immigrant worker has difficulty in understanding English he is more likely to suffer an accident at work. Although there is some evidence to support this view, it is perhaps not so obvious as might have been anticipated.

During the 12 months ending December 31, 1978, the company reported 60 accidents to the Health and Safety Executive and exactly half of these involved immigrant workers. Since a little over half of the shop floor workers are immigrants (368 out of 711) it would seem that the immigrant worker is no more likely to suffer a *reportable* accident than his UK counterpart. In fact, the figures suggest that the exact opposite may be the case so far as Duport Foundries are concerned.

It is a well-known fact, however, that reportable accidents are not always the most reliable method of measuring safety performance. Duport Foundries record all accidents whether or not they lead to loss of working time and a recent sample showed that 65% were to immigrant workers and 35% involved workers of UK origin.

These figures would seem to suggest that an immi-

grant worker is more likely to suffer a non-reportable accident by a factor of two, although he is less likely to lose working time as a result of that accident.

Section two of the Health and Safety at Work act talks, amongst other things, about providing instruction, training and supervision for employees. Since this section applies to all employees and not just those who speak English, and because providing a basis for communication is reasonably practicable, Duport Foundries took the decision to begin language training in late 1977. This was motivated by the company's interpretation of section 2 to mean that it places a responsibility on the employer to *communicate*.

Early efforts at communicating with non-English speakers included several members of staff attending a Punjabi course. It was soon realised however that Punjabi was only one of several languages used by the work force and that helping the employee to communicate was the only sensible solution. In those early days, several direct translations of simple safety notices were made and these are still in use today. Translation of more complicated documents such as systems of work and the company safety policy were not so successful since many of the non-English speakers were also illiterate in their own tongue.

As with the spoken word, translation into several languages would have been necessary and so the company concluded that written communication would be useful, but limited in its application, especially in the area of health and safety. Being unable to communicate by spoken word or in writing may be a severe handicap but there is a third, and possibly even more important obstacle which stems from the way of life in the immigrant countries.

Vast Differences

Home to most immigrant workers is the agricultural area of the Indian sub-continent and their understanding of industrial life is limited. The few who have an industrial background have been used to vastly different working conditions and standards of safety. All aspects of life in the Western World are different and often quite alien to the immigrant when he arrives in Britain.

An accident which resulted in the tragic death of an employee a few years ago illustrates this point all too vividly. The man had lived in England for many years and spoke a limited amount of English. He was involved in a fall which caused him to injure his back, though not too seriously. The man was taken to hospital where he was detained overnight. The following day he was visited by friends and relations and appeared to be making a good recovery. Later that day he died in hospital.

It became apparent during the subsequent investigation that the man had never in his life seen a

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doctor and that he would certainly have no prior knowledge of what to expect in a hospital. Being put into a hospital bed, examined by nurses and doctors who spoke in a foreign language, wheeled on a trolley and placed under an X-ray machine and then being kept in overnight for more tests must have been a considerable worry. Just how much this hostile environment contributed to the man's death will never be known, but he suffered an asthmatic attack which in turn contributed towards him having a heart attack and dying, 36 hours after being admitted to hospital.

Tragic as that accident was, it only served to underline a decision that the company had already arrived at—to provide English language training for the non-English speaking immigrant. Language classes began in 1977 and have been operated by the Walsall and Sandwell industrial language training groups.

Industrial Language Training Surveys

Following the discussion referred to in the first part of this article, a survey of language training needs was organised in Dupont Foundries. Because of the large number of Asian employees, it was decided to limit the scope of the survey so as to cover one section, the dressing shop, in each of the four foundries in the group.

Industrial language training surveys consist of two parts. The first part is an assessment of the level of English of immigrant workers. The second part involves collection of data from supervisors, shop stewards, foremen etc., i.e. all those who come into contact with Asian workers.

English Assessment

As mentioned above, management had already made their own estimates of the language levels of immigrant employees; the industrial language survey was carried out in order to make an objective assessment of the situation.

The Dupont survey was based on a standard test which has been used in a number of similar companies. It is possible to use the test results to make statements about the functional level of English of the people tested. The test is reliable, objective and provides information about speaking, understanding, reading and writing.

The most important part of the test is of spoken English; it starts from standard interview questions on name, address, place of origin, job etc. Testees are then assessed on their ability to carry out simple sets of spoken instructions and to repeat simple messages. Finally, testees are asked about their job and requested to describe a part of their job-process. Next, a test of reading ability is given, using simple words and phrases in common factory

use, eg, safety notices. The test of writing ability is based on filling in a typical form, copying words accurately, and writing down a simple message.

Interviews with Management, etc.

The second part of the survey consists of interviews with representatives of all (management, supervision, trade-union representatives) who have to communicate with Asian workers as a part of their job. The aim of these interviews is to arrive at a full picture of the communication situation by asking where communication is important, where communication breakdowns occur, and what are the difficulties for production, training, safety, mobility of labour. The methods used in the company to try to overcome these difficulties (eg pidgin English, interpreters, sign language) are then discussed and their effectiveness is analysed. Staff are requested to give their own assessment of the problem and to suggest any particular areas where training may be necessary.

Survey Report

When the survey is completed and the results have been analysed and written up, a report is prepared for the company. The report describes the communication situation, draws conclusions from the evidence which has been gathered and, if appropriate, makes training recommendations.

Dupont Survey

The survey showed results which have since been confirmed as being fairly typical of foundries in the West Midlands (see note at end of article). Of those tested, the percentage of Asian employees who could not communicate adequately and were in need of training was 78%.

Fifty per cent were in the basic elementary categories. In other words these employees:

- 1 Could not follow a simple set of instructions;
- 2 Could not describe their jobs intelligibly;
- 3 Could not describe a simple process, and
- 4 Could not repeat a simple message accurately.

Twenty-eight per cent were in the intermediate category. These employees were able to communicate in English in routine situations, though some of them had severe pronunciation difficulties. In non-routine situations, these employees:

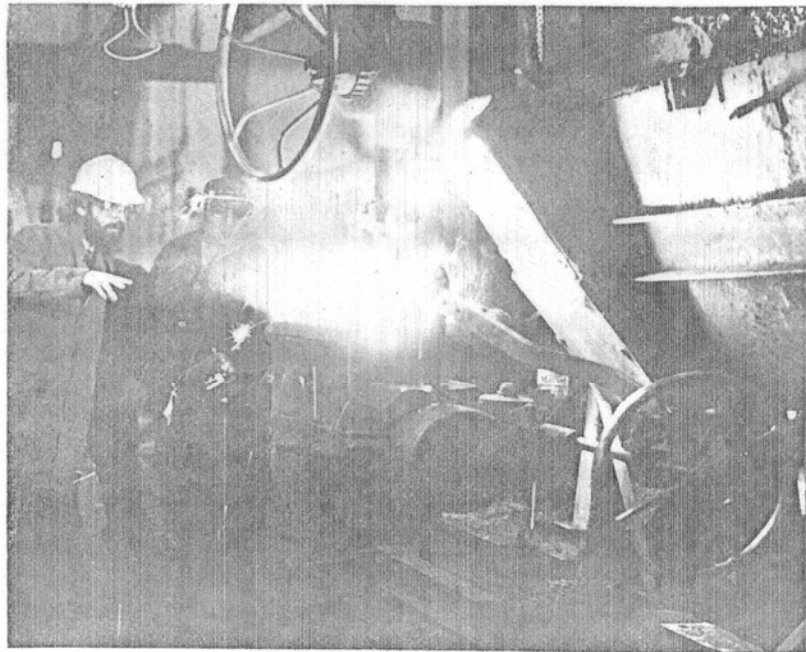
- a Could not follow unfamiliar instructions;
- b Were not always accurate in repeating messages;
- c Had difficulty describing their job fully, and
- d Were not usually adequately literate.

Twenty-two per cent were in the advanced category. These employees were able to maintain English conversation at a level adequate for most circumstances and most had a fair level of literacy. Language training was not recommended for those who scored at this level on the test.

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Explaining the terminology of a furnace tapping/pouring operation to an immigrant worker.

Interviews with Management

The interviews with management, supervision and trade-union representatives gave a fairly uniform picture of the problems caused by bad communication in the four departments visited. The problems mentioned most frequently were:

Misunderstandings: Instructions were not understood or incorrectly understood (even though the listener may have nodded his head to indicate understanding).

Loss of production time: Supervisors in all department reported loss of time due to the difficulty of communication, especially where operators had to be taken off production to act as interpreters.

Loss of supervisor time: All supervisors reported that considerably more time had to be spent in giving instructions, checking in work, filling in operators' batch sheets, dealing with misunderstandings/problems.

Safety: There were considerable difficulties in getting Asian workers to understand correct safety procedures. The problem began on the day a person joined the company and was given initial instruction at the induction stage. The safety officer thought that in the long term the only satisfactory solution would be to provide language training.

Training: Induction training and training in connection with transfer to another part of the process were both extremely difficult with non-English speakers. The company also felt that some Asians were not realising their full potential in the company because of poor communication.

Industrial relations: Lack of effective communication had caused serious problems in some situations, especially in sections where the workforce was practically 100% Asian. Alternative channels of communication sometimes developed and Asian workers sometimes felt excluded from the usual processes of consultation.

Interpreters: The use of interpreters, which was the only way of dealing with several of the problems mentioned above, was felt by management and supervision to be unsatisfactory. Neither side could have any guarantee that the correct message was getting across.

Lack of information: It was felt by managers and supervisors that they had a basic lack of awareness of their own workforce: Where they came from, what was their background, their religious practices and customs, what particular problems had arisen in multi-racial workplaces.

The results of the survey and the information gathered were then drawn together into a report which was presented to the company. Positive recommendations of the report were:

1 **Basic Language Training:** Priority should be given to those workers who had little or no English, and a pilot course, to be monitored and evaluated by the company and the ILT unit, should start as soon as it could be arranged.

2 **Specialised Language Training:** Some key workers with some English needed training at intermediate level, with particular attention to literacy.

3 **Management Training:** A brief course of semi-

nars for management and supervision should be organised to run concurrently with the language training. The seminars could include information on the Asian workers and opportunities for discussion of problems of supervision.

Language Training Programme in Duport Foundries

The report was considered and accepted by the Board of Duport Foundries in the summer of 1977, and a pilot course was arranged for September 1977. Since that time, four language courses, each for 10-13 trainees have been run by the Industrial Language Training Unit. The company's priority so far has been to train those workers who speak little or no English.

Each course lasts 12 weeks, and trainees are given a one-hour class each day. Classes take place in the afternoon, during working hours but at a time when some of the main production processes (melting moulding etc.) are coming to an end. As far as possible, trainees are selected from different sections of the foundries so as to minimise the effect on production. The content of the course was worked out jointly between the company and the ILT unit. ILT training staff spent several days in the company, observing the various processes, learning foundry vocabulary, talking to supervisors about the typical shop-floor communications and gaining the necessary understanding of the iron castings industry. The production manager, the training officer and the safety officer were also closely involved in the design of the courses.

The main subjects covered in the courses are:

- a Basic social conversation;
- b Following instructions;
- c Numbers, letters, weights and measures;
- d Making requests, taking messages;
- e Explaining job processes;
- f Understanding, regulations, company procedures;
- g Correct safety procedures, and
- h Understanding and describing faults, etc.

Wherever possible, visual aids and factory objects (eg faulty and good castings, grinders, tools, safety equipment, batch sheets, job cards and product codes) are brought into the classroom to be used. In addition, the language unit took a set of 60 slides of the foundries, covering all the areas in which immigrants work, together with important sites such as the surgery, wages office, personnel department etc. Although the course is intended to provide English language instruction, it provides a useful opportunity to pass on simple instruction in a relaxed atmosphere on subjects such as health and safety and industrial relations.

Effects of Training Programme

Although the programme has now been running for nearly two years, during which time four courses have been completed, only 45 immigrant

workers have so far been trained (15% of those needing training). A great deal still remains to be done, but all the courses have been evaluated, both from the point of language improvement and of improvement in shop-floor communication.

From the point-of-view of language improvement, the average performance of trainees on the standard test administered before and after the courses has ranged from 27-52% (trainees who start with lower scores tend to improve more dramatically). In broad terms, this means that the key objectives of basic spoken language courses have been achieved: Trainees, having completed the course, are able to follow a simple set of instructions, repeat a simple message, describe their job and maintain an elementary conversation.

Improvement in shop-floor communication is more difficult to measure and results were monitored by the administration of a brief questionnaire to supervisors. All supervisors reported that trainees had become much more communicative and were responding to instructions more effectively. Some trainees were initiating communication themselves, for example in requesting help or in getting material from the stores. The strongest comments were made concerning human relations on the shop-floor; Supervisors in one foundry in particular reported that workers who had always previously kept their head down at their work and had refused to respond to the supervisor had developed enormously in confidence. They would now smile and greet fellow-workers and supervisors; management felt the atmosphere in the foundry had undergone a major improvement during the course.

Improvement in production terms following the course is even more difficult to monitor. The only solid piece of evidence was the saving of supervisor time because trainees became able to write product codes on their work and fill in their own batch-sheets. The safety officer reported that men seemed to have a much better understanding of safety regulations and were wearing protective clothing more uniformly. Supervisors reported that, with some workers, they now had to spend less time explaining instructions to trainees. Inevitably more solid evidence will only become available in the longer term.

Management Training

"Training the immigrant in the English language is only half the equation", was the comment of a senior manager at Duport. "Communication is a two way affair, and it is equally important for management to make an effort to understand the Asian worker, his fears, his needs and his way of life".

A short course for management was held in 1977, and a course of three seminars in 1979. The first two seminars concentrated on the matters raised in the first part of this article: Background and traditions of Asian workers, the different nationalities and religions, marriage and the family, social and human relations, (eg caste). The senior shop stewards, including an Asian, attended these sessions, and considerable interest was shown by all

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levels of management in the matters discussed. Most people present confessed their ignorance of the whole background of this section of their workforce, and several managers commented after the course that they now understood the motivation behind some of the actions and attitudes of their Asian employees much more clearly.

Second Course

The second course, this year, has concentrated on specific problems of managing a multi-racial workplace. Three approaches have been used:

- i Discussion and advice arising out of the problems raised by supervisors themselves from their own experience on the shop floor;
- ii case study work, based on two dramatised documentary films concerning typical problems in a multi-racial workplace, and
- iii practical training for more effective communication by supervisors and managers with their Asian workers.

This training provides an effective back-up to the language classes, not only from the training point-of-view, but also from the aspect of providing a relaxed forum in which the very real problems in the multi-racial workplace can be discussed and possible courses of action can be evaluated.