Issue 13 Free Corporate Copy

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THE Language Key

Welcome Back!

to enhancing your business English and communication skills.....

Dear Readers

As we approach the end of 2017, there are some very exciting projects on the horizon at The Language Key. One of those is a package of Soft Skills courses which we will launch early next year. We'll keep you posted on this.

Verbal communication skills are very important in the workplace because they set the tone for how people perceive you. Let's look at one very important skill for any form of communication: delivery.

One thing to keep in mind is to relax, have a rock-solid opening, and smile. Be firm, be confident and be in control. Remember that the floor is yours, and the audience is on your side.

Don't start with a joke unless you are supremely confident - jokes are high-risk things at the best of times, let alone when facing an unknown audience.

Introduce yourself and tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them why you're telling them it; why it's important, and why it's you that's telling them. Tell them how long you're going to take, and tell them when they can ask questions.

If you are interested in learning more about our package of Soft Skills training, then please arrange a meeting with us.

With that said, you can also find out more by attending our popular English for HR Training Seminar, which is now open for registration. We had a huge turnout last May and have decided to host another on 24th November in Causeway Bay.

The seminar is a great chance to network and make connections with HR executives from major companies and industries across Hong Kong. Besides that, you can learn the most common errors made by Cantonese and Mandarin speakers (both spoken and written).

Due to the venue size, participants will be limited to 30, with a maximum of 2 participants per company. We expect to fill the venue again, so please contact Fion Lee to reserve your places.

Tom Crawford
Director of Training

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Workplace English Training E-Platform

No Space for the Dead to Rest in Peace

In **overcrowded** Hong Kong, the dead are causing a problem for the living. **Limited** land to build on and sky-high property prices mean Hong Kong has no more space to store the dead.

The problem will get worse because of Hong Kong's **ageing population**,. The number of senior citizens is expected to rise to nearly 25% of the population by 2024. The number of deaths each year will rise to 50,000 by the end of the **decade**, according to government forecasts.

In the 1960s, administrators of Hong Kong began encouraging **cremation** due to the lack of space for building new **cemeteries**. Now, the cremation rate has risen to about 90%.

To store the **ashes**, the government builds **columbaria** with thousands of **niches** for **urns** and **furnaces** to burn paper money. But supply hasn't **kept up with** demand as local councils usually **oppose** the building of new columbaria.

Part of the reason for this is that columbaria bring huge crowds during tomb sweeping holidays, causing big traffic jams and air pollution from the paper offerings being burned.

But there's another more important reason. Many Chinese believe in ghosts and that those ghosts bring down property prices sharply. In the world's most expensive housing market, residents are strongly opposed to new funeral businesses because of the negative effect they have on local property prices.

Families face a waiting list of up to six years for a government-provided niche, so some **turn to** private providers, many of which are illegal and charge fees of up to HK$1 million per niche.

Key Vocabulary

overcrowded – (adj.) describes a place with too many people
Limited – (adj.) small in amount or number
ageing population – (phrase) the average age of the people in a place getting older
decade – (noun) a period of ten years, especially a period such as 2010 to 2019
cremation – (noun) the act of burning a dead person's body, usually as part of a funeral ceremony
cemeteries – (noun) areas of ground in which dead bodies are buried
ashes – (noun) the powder after a dead body has been burned
columbaria – (noun) buildings with special spaces for holding urns containing the ashes of dead people
niches – (noun) hollows in a wall for holding urns, statues, flowers, etc.
urns – (noun) a container used for holding a dead person's ashes
furnaces – (noun) containers that are heated, and will burn what is put inside
kept up with – (phrasal verb) stayed level or equal with someone or something
oppose – (verb) disagree with something
turn to – (phrasal verb) think about or begin to consider something

Hong Kong Apartment Sets an Asian Price Record

A luxury home in Hong Kong set a price record for apartment sales in Asia despite the government's efforts to **curb** property prices in the world's least **affordable** market.

The **penthouse** unit at 39 Conduit Road project was sold for about HK$522 million, or HK$1.13 million per square metre. It comes with a private swimming pool and 3 parking spaces.

Hong Kong home prices hit all-time highs this year after climbing for 17 **consecutive** months, the longest winning **streak** since 1993.

Luxury home prices in Hong Kong regularly break Asian records. In November, two units in phase two of the Mount Nicholson project on Hong Kong's **prestigious** Victoria Peak were sold at an average per square metre price of HK$1.128 million, a regional record.

It now takes a household 18 years of **median income** to buy a home in Hong Kong, more than anywhere else in the world. That compares with 12 years in Sydney, and 8 and a half years in London.

In May, Hong Kong's government **tightened** the rules on bank lending for property development after expressing worries about banks' **exposure** to the real-estate industry.

The local monetary authority in the same month introduced **fresh** curbs on second-home mortgages as well as borrowers whose income is **derived** mainly from overseas **sources**.

Key Vocabulary

curb – (verb) control or limit something that is not wanted
affordable – (adj.) able to be bought or rented by people who do not earn a lot of money
penthouse – (noun) an expensive apartment or set of rooms at the top floor
consecutive – (adj.) consecutive events, numbers, etc. follow one after another without an interruption
streak – (noun) a short period of good or bad luck
luxury – (adj.) great comfort, especially as provided by expensive and nice things
prestigious – (adj.) very much respected and admired, usually because of being important
median income – (phrase) the income that divides a population into two numerically equal groups - that is, half the people have a higher income and half have a lower income
tightened – (verb) made rules, regulations, etc. stricter
exposure – (noun) the fact of being affected by something because of being in a particular situation or place
fresh – (adj.) new or different
derived – (verb) came from something
sources – (noun) the places something comes from

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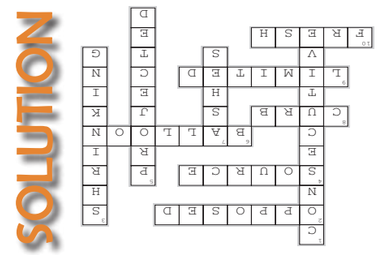
Vocabulary Test

Complete the sentences below and right (including the crossword puzzle) using the highlighted vocabulary from the three articles. Remember to use the correct part of speech and verb tense in each case. You'll find the answers below.

1. The young are worried about who is going to pay for the _____.
2. Salaries are failing to _____ inflation which currently runs at 5%.
3. Which country has the highest _____ in the world? It's Norway.
4. Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the UK are among the most _____ universities in the world.
5. Nearly all developed countries have a _____ for their older citizens.
6. _____ for males in the UK 100 years ago was just 50 years old.
7. I won't be able to _____ this month. Could you lend me some money?
8. The government has _____ the regulations on cigarette advertising to deter people from smoking.
9. If you buy a flat near a _____, you may get it cheaper than elsewhere.
10. People working with _____ in a steel factory must wear protective clothing.
11. Air traffic has increased 30% in the last _____.
12. In Phuket, we stayed in a _____ penthouse condo overlooking the sea.
13. The success of the project _____ everyone making an effort.
14. Hong Kong was hit by a _____ typhoon earlier in the year.

ANSWERS:

1. ageing population
2. keep up with
3. median income
4. prestigious
5. universal pension scheme
6. Life expectancy
7. make ends meet
8. tightened
9. cemetery
10. furnaces
11. decade
12. luxury
13. relies on
14. severe

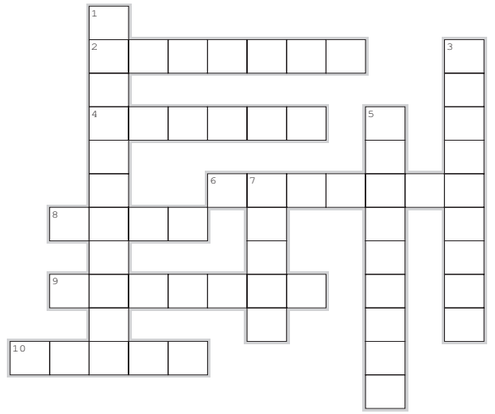


Across:

2. The proposed new system has been _____ by staff.
4. The bank will ask what the _____ of your income is.
6. Sales will hopefully _____ after the new product launch.
8. You will have to _____ your expenses if you want to make ends meet.
9. The company has a _____ number of vacancies.
10. Is there any _____ news on the terrorist incident?

Down:

1. Our clothing sales have fallen for six _____ months.
3. The _____ workforce would have to support a growing number of retired people.
5. The typhoon is _____ to hit the mainland 100 miles north of Hong Kong on Tuesday.
7. When I die, I'd like my _____ to be sprinkled in the sea.



Ageing Population is Cause for Concern

Hong Kong's men and women have the longest **life expectancy** in the world – 87 years for women and 81 for men – **implying** that more people will be **relying on** social services in the future.

In the last 20 years, the percentage of people aged 65 or over has risen from 10.3 per cent in 1997 to 16 per cent in 2117. This is expected to **balloon** to 25 per cent by 2025. And by 2041, it is **projected** that almost one in three will be aged 65 or above.

Meanwhile, the **median age** has climbed from 34 in 1997 to 44 in 2017.

Without a **universal pension scheme**, many elderly people, particularly those living alone, are also finding it difficult to **make ends meet**. In 2015, 30 per cent of elderly people were **living in poverty**.

Demand for care services, such as membership of neighbourhood elderly centres, almost doubled from 77,000 in 2003 to more than 143,000 in 2015.

The **severe** shortage of **subsidised** nursing home places means the elderly have to wait an average of 26 months. In 2015, 5,881 people on the waiting list died, up 73 per cent from 2005.

An ageing city has also brought about a big increase in **dementia** rates, which are expected to worsen over the next decade.

The growing number of elderly people requiring assistance is, however, relying on a **shrinking** labour force, with the city expected to lose 14 per cent of its labour force over the next 50 years. The big question is: who's going to pay for it all?

Key Vocabulary

life expectancy – (phrase) the length of time that a living thing, especially a human being, is likely to live
relying on – (phrasal verb) needing the help and support of someone or something in order to continue
balloon – (verb) quickly increase in size, weight, or importance
projected – (verb) calculated based on information already known
median age – (phrase) the age that divides a population into two numerically equal groups - that is, half the people are younger than this age and half are older.
universal pension scheme – (phrase) a pension scheme that gives all people basic income in old age
make ends meet – (idiom) have just enough money to pay for the things that you need
living in poverty – (phrase) not having enough money to pay for basic needs
severe – (adj.) extreme or very difficult
subsidized – (adj.) of something where part of the cost is paid for by someone or some organisation
dementia – (noun) a medical condition that affects especially old people, causing the memory and other mental abilities to gradually become worse
shrinking – (adj.) becoming smaller

Writing Conclusions to Business Reports

The concluding section of a report may be anything from a paragraph or a page or so in length, and should refer back to the original objective or 'aim'. Read through the original objective before you decide exactly what to say in your concluding section, to keep your mind well focused on it.

The Use of Sub-Headings

Look at the concluding sections from four short reports (Texts 1 - 4). Note that the writers have chosen to use precise sub-headings, instead of simply writing 'Conclusion'. You need to consider whether you are just concluding, just recommending, concluding and recommending, etc. Sub-headings enable writers to present their reports more clearly.

Text 1: Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the accident occurred as a result of the use of old and faulty equipment and not by any negligence on the part of the operator. We, therefore, recommend that Mr Kenneth Mak be reinstated and that the possibility of purchasing new and more modern equipment be looked into.

Text 2: Conclusion and Action

Thus, the complaints regarding the quality and quantity of food provided in the staff cafeteria would seem to be valid, and we have already taken action to make sure that the situation improves.

Text 3: Discussion and Recommendations

From the findings above, it would appear that the use of chemical dispersants is the only one of the three methods considered which is:

a. fully effective;
b. within a satisfactory price range; and
c. not dangerous to sea life.

Of all the types of chemical dispersants presently on the market, CX1100T is the least poisonous and best meets our needs.

It is therefore recommended that chemical dispersants be adopted as the company's standard method of handling oil spills at sea and that an order for 6 months supplies of CX1100T be placed with the manufacturers immediately.

Text 4: Conclusion and Recommendations

Mr Wong's work has always been of a high standard. He is a reliable and hard- working employee, and is highly respected by both his superiors and his subordinates. He would have no difficulty in carrying out the duties of a more demanding position.

In view of the above:

1. Mr Wong should be upgraded to grade 4D.
2. He should be given the post of Senior Clerk as soon as a vacancy arises.

Discussion

The concluding section of a report will probably contain the following two elements:

- A discussion and interpretation of the facts given in the findings section.
- A demand for action or statement of a decision.

A common mistake is to repeat the most important findings rather that conclude. Remember that a conclusion is reached based on the findings and is an interpretation of the findings.

In short reports, the above two elements will usually be contained in the same paragraph or section. In longer reports they will each have their own section with separate sub-headings.

1. Discussion or Conclusion

In this section the writer will interpret the facts given in the findings section. For instance, if the findings section contains the facts:

Company A would charge $10,000
Company B would charge $8,700

then we can arrive at the obvious conclusion that,

Company B is cheaper.

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2. Recommendations

The most common demand for action in a longer report is in the form of recommendations, and this is often given its own section heading. The action recommended should follow logically from the conclusion or discussion. If we have decided that,

Company B is cheaper.

then the logical demand for action is

It is recommended that Company B be awarded the contract.

Here's another example:

Finding:
Training Courses conducted by XYZ company have consistently received low evaluation grades.

Conclusion:
The standard of training that XYZ offers is below our company's expected standard.

Recommendation:
We should employ another training consultancy.

Language Considerations

The concluding section of a report is often regarded as the most important section. More often than not, the introductory and concluding sections are the only sections of reports which are read. Busy readers quickly want to know the background of the report, as well as the conclusions and recommendations/suggestions. The findings section is often either not read or just quickly scanned over.

It is important that you try to use the right kind of language in the concluding section. You need to sound businesslike and professional.

We have identified a few key words, expressions and grammatical structures that will help you achieve a more business-like style of writing.

Using Connectives

Look at the examples of the concluding sections of the reports above. Notice the connectives that are used and consider the function of each one.

In conclusion
To conclude
Therefore
Thus
In view of the above

All these connectives are common in the concluding sections of reports. The first two

In conclusion, and
To conclude

serve to indicate to the reader that the findings section has finished and the report has now reached its own conclusion. They are, therefore, often unnecessary if a section heading is used. The other three, **Therefore**, **Thus**, **In view of the above**, show that the writer's conclusion or recommendation is a logical result of what has gone before.

Tentative Conclusions

Often, writers may not wish to express a conclusion with complete certainty. Rather, they may want to emphasise that the conclusion has been reached on the basis of their findings only.

Therefore, it is often a good idea to use language which is tentative and expresses some degree of doubt. Look at the following examples of tentative conclusions. The phrases in bold allow the reader to express a degree of uncertainty.

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Conclusion:
The survey findings indicate that TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.

There are other ways of modifying the certainty of a conclusive statement. For example:

Conclusion:
It appears/seems that TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.

OR

It may be concluded that TV station A is more popular than TV Station B.

OR

We can conclude that TV Station A is more popular than TV Station B.

Sometimes the report writer may wish to draw attention to the doubts he has about the conclusions he makes, for example:

Conclusion:
The findings suggest that the accident was caused by the carelessness of the driver rather than by brake failure.

Recommending and Suggesting

Recommendations use the modal verb **should**. They are often signaled by an introductory phrase as in:

I (would) / (would like to) recommend that we introduce a new mailing system.

I (would)/(would like to) recommend introducing a new mailing system.

The company should introduce a new mailing system.

A new mailing system should be introduced.

Suggestions use the modal verb **could**. They are not as strong as recommendations. Alternative ways of expressing a suggestion are:

In future, it is felt that mail could also be collected on Fridays.

It is suggested that mail is/be also collected on Fridays.

I suggest that we also collect mail on Fridays

I (would) / (would like to) suggest that mail is connected on Fridays.

key idioms

If you "get cold feet" you suddenly become too frightened to do something you had planned to do, especially something important such as getting married or jumping out of an aircraft.

Business Meetings

Talking about Options and Choices

DIALOGUE

DENIS: OK. Now we're looking at the options for handling our on-line orders. They're going through the roof and frankly the lead-time for delivery is blowing out. We need to improve our performance in this area. And I'm willing to hear any suggestions.

TAN: Well, as I see it, we have three options. The obvious one is to employ more people to do the job. Another alternative is to automate the system more - cut down on the physical handling.

JOHN: And the third option?

TAN: We could outsource.

DENIS: What are the pros and cons?

JANE: Well, looking at increasing staff versus automation, we have to consider the cost. Automating has a higher capital cost than putting on more staff. On the other hand, employing more people is more expensive over a long term. If we keep growing, it'll cost more in the long run.

DENIS: How likely is it that we'll see continued growth?

TAN: I'd say it's a certainty.

JOHN: I'd say a high probability. Nothing's certain in business.

DENIS: So what about the third option?

TAN: Outsourcing? Well, it does take the problem off our hands. But we lose contact with our customers.

DENIS: What about the bottom line?

JANE: Outsourcing is the cheapest option, and the easiest - in the short term. But if we want to keep the operation in-house, the best option is automating our system. The only downside is that we're taking a risk that our business will keep growing.

JOHN: Which we hope it will.

Introduction

In this issue of The Language Key, we're going to look at how to discuss options and choices at business meetings.

When discussing options, we usually need to compare and talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each option before making a decision. Often there is little difference between the options so when making comparisions we can't always express our views with complete certainty.

We will present you with some useful language for expressing probability, as well as other language for asking about alternatives, suggestions and different ways of talking about options.

Discussion

Let's look at Tan's suggested options:

> Well, as I see it, we have three options. The obvious one is to employ more people to do the job. Another alternative is to automate the system more - cut down on the physical handling.
>
> And the third option?
>
> We could outsource.

Tan describes three options. First he lets us know that this is his opinion, by saying 'As I see it'.

Practise some different ways of letting someone know that what you're stating is your opinion:

> As I see it, there are three options.
> In my opinion, there are three options.
> From my point of view, there are three options.
> As far as I'm concerned, there are three options.

The three options are: employ more people, automate, and outsource.

To 'outsource' means to use an outside company. When presenting different options, we can order them by numbers, like this. Firstly, we could employ more people, secondly we could automate, and thirdly we could outsource.

We can also use phrases, such as 'one option is to' and 'another option is to...'

We can also use linking words, such as 'or' and 'alternatively'.

Or, we can use a combination of all these methods.

Now let's look at the language used to discuss these options:

> Well, looking at increasing staff versus automation, we have to consider the cost. Automating has a higher capital cost than putting on more staff. On the other hand, employing more people is more expensive over a long term.

When considering two options, we are comparing them. Jane talks about increasing staff versus automation. She is saying that she is going to compare these two things. Another phrase she could use is 'as against'. Let's practise.

> Let's look at increased staff versus automation.
> Let's look at increased staff as against automation.

When comparing two things, we use comparative adjectives.

Read what Jane says again, and see if you can pick out the two comparative adjectives:

> Automating has a higher capital cost than putting on more staff. On the other hand, employing more people is more expensive over a long term.

She says 'automating has a higher capital cost than putting on more staff'. 'Higher' is a comparative adjective.

We often use 'than' for the option that is being compared. Remember for words of longer than two syllables, we use 'more' for the comparative. Employing more people is 'more expensive'. Because Jane has already said what the second option is, automating, she doesn't need to say 'employing more people is more expensive than automating'.

Notice that she uses the phrase 'on the other hand'. This is used to introduce another side to an argument. Let's practice.

> On the one hand, automation is expensive. On the other hand, it's more efficient.

Another way of comparing two ideas is to use linking words such as 'but' , 'although' and 'however':

> Automation is expensive, but it's more efficient.
> Although automation is expensive, it's more efficient.
> Automation is expensive, however it's more efficient.

Now read the part in the discussion about the likelihood of continued growth.

> How likely is it that we'll see continued growth?
>
> I'd say it's a certainty.
>
> I'd say a high probability. Nothing's certain in business.

Denis asks how likely continued growth is. You can use the following words when talking about likelihood or how certain something is.

> Unlikely
> Possible
> Probable
> Certain

So we can say:

> It's unlikely...
> It's possible...

We can also qualify these with words such as 'very' 'quite', 'highly' or reasonably:

> It's very unlikely…
> It's quite possible…
> It's highly probable…
> It's reasonably certain…

And in a different kind of sentence, we can use them as nouns:

> It's a certainty...
> It's a possibility...
> There's a probability...
> There's a high likelihood...

Finally, look at what happens when we compare more than two options:

> Outsourcing is the cheapest option, and the easiest - in the short term. But if we want to keep the operation in-house, the best option is automating our system.

Did you notice the superlative adjectives used to compare more than two things?

> the cheapest
> the easiest
> the best

Now read through the list of key expressions on the right. These are just a sample of the types of phrases you could use in meetings when talking about options. Learn how to compare using a variety of different language structures. And learn how to express the probability of something happening in different ways.

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KEY EXPRESSIONS

Asking about Options
What are our options?
I'd like to discuss our options with you.
What options do we have for…?
Do we have any options?

Asking for Suggestions
Does anyone have any suggestions?
I'd like to hear your suggestions.
Who has any suggestions?
Would you like to make any suggestions?

Stating Options
We have a number of/several/three options.
We don't have many options.
Our options are limited/unlimited.
We have few options.

Stating Alternatives
The clear/obvious option is to …..
In my opinion, the next best option is to…
Alternatively, we could …..
Another alternative is to……
We could either ….. or ……

Comparing Options
Let's look at xxxx versus yyyy.
Let's look at the pros and cons of both options.
What are the advantages and disadvantages of ...
Xxxx is more expensive than yyyy.
Yyyy is not as expensive as xxxx.
Although xxxx is more expensive, yyyy is ….
Xxxx is cheaper; however, yyyy is…
Xxxx is cheaper; on the other hand, yyyy is…
Option xxxx is the cheapest.

Asking about Probability
How likely is ….?
What is the probability/chance of …..?
Is it likely that ….?

Expressing Probability
I'm certain/sure that …
It is highly likely that…
The company iwill probably …..
I expect that the company will …..
It is possible that the company will …..
The company is unlikely to …..

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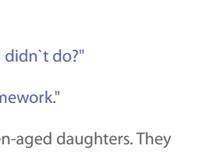
This month we spoke to Gregorio Lopez, a Human Resources Assistant Manager based in Mexico City. Gregorio studied in the US, as many Mexicans do, and returned to Mexico three years ago to work for a large Spanish company, Anobolo, which produces rubber parts for industrial use.

"Since returning from the US, the hardest thing I've found is keeping my English up to a good level. In the US every day I wrote in English, and spoke in English with my classmates, and everyone I met were English speakers. But then I returned to Mexico and got married: few people in my company speak English well, and my wife and family don't speak English at all. So for me, I have to try hard not to forget what I learned.

One of the ways I do this is by talking as much as I can, either on the phone or online, to my friends in the US. It's not always easy, but it's the only regular practice I get! At work, I make calls to the US or Europe where I need to speak with non-Spanish speakers, but this only happens a few times a week. I find learning and keeping my English in a non-English environment challenging. The internet has helped, though. I can chat a lot online with friends from all over the world and since English is the language of the internet, this allows me to get some practice. I also find online English-learning websites to be fun and very useful. I learn new words, keep up with new vocabulary, and get reminded of certain grammar points I always had problems with before. Some websites have good listening practice, too. For me, the internet has helped a lot!

Another thing that helps is reading as much as I can in English. One of my English teachers told me that reading is the best way to develop your vocabulary and I took this to heart! So I read magazines, newspapers, and sometimes even detective novels in English in order not to forget my English. It's not always easy and it takes a lot longer than reading in Spanish. But I think it's helped me."



A: Just look at that young person with the short hair and blue jeans. Is it a boy or a girl?
B: It's a girl. She's my daughter.
A: Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know that you were her father.
B: I'm not. I'm her mother.

A teenage girl had been talking on the phone for about half an hour, and then she hung up.
"Wow!" said her father "That was short. You usually talk for two hours. What happened?"
"Wrong number," replied the girl.

PUPIL: "Would you punish me for something I didn`t do?"
TEACHER: "Of course not."
PUPIL: "Good, because I haven`t done my homework."

There was a middle-aged couple who had two teen-aged daughters. They decided to try one last time for the son they always wanted. After months of trying, the wife became pregnant and nine months later delivered a baby boy.

The happy father rushed to the nursery to see his new son. He took one look and was horrified to see the ugliest child he had ever seen. He thought that there was no way that he could be the father of that child.

"Look at the two beautiful daughters I fathered!" Then he gave her a stern look and asked, "Have you been fooling around on me?"

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Mosalingua Business English (itunes . google . free)
www.mosalingua.com/en/our-apps/mosalingua-business-english/
This app will help you learn English vocabulary and language skills for the workplace. The integrated dialogues will also help you improve your oral comprehension.

Collins Business English Listening (itunes . google . free)
www.blog.esllibrary.com/2012/09/13/collins-business-english-app-listening/
Collins' first app features 55 recordings, with English accents from all over the world from native and non-native English speakers. You'll find useful tips about pronunciation, colloquialisms, and grammar.

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Seminar Information

Date: 24 November 2017
Time: 2 - 5pm
Place: HKMA, Causeway Bay

Speakers
Tom Crawford
Garrick Hedges

Agenda
13:30 – 14:00 Registration
14:00 – 15:00 Seminar
15:00 – 15:30 Refreshments
15:30 – 16:30 Seminar

Who Should Attend?
HR and/or L&D Professionals

For registration, please feel free to contact:
Fion Lee
2893-6134
fionlee@languagekey.com

THE Corporate Training Language Key

Questions
answers and tips with Dr English

If you have any questions that you would like to have answered by Dr English then email us:
editor@languagekey.com

Q I asked a friend if the test was hard and he said it was 'a piece of cake'. What does this strange expression mean?

A Yes, it is a strange-sounding idiom, yet it is also a very common one. If something is **a piece of cake**, it is very easy. So, your friend clearly had no difficulties with his test. Here's another example: **"Did you have any problems finding our office?" "None at all. It was a piece of cake."**

Q I am a little confused by the noun 'police.' Is it considered singular or plural or both?

A We consider **police** to be a plural noun, so we would say **police are**. It is only when you combine **police** with another singular noun, such as in **police officer** or **police department**, that a singular verb would follow: **The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) is particularly well-known because of television.**

Q Which of these sentences is correct: "Please advise Jack of the problem," or "Please inform Jack of the problem"?

A Both of these sentences are correct, but the usage of the verb **advise** in the first sentence is rather out-of-date. In the past, **advise** was used to mean inform. Nowadays, it just means to give advice. So, unless you are giving someone advice, use the verb **inform** when you want to give them new information. In less formal written texts, it's preferable to use **let someone know** instead of **inform**. So in an informal email, for example, your sentence would change to: **Please let Jack know about the problem.**

Q I keep making the same mistakes with my English writing. It's very frustrating. How can I avoid doing this?

A Yes, it must be frustrating and can you unlearn those mistakes? Don't try too much at a time. Instead, concentrate on just one typical mistake. Go through the explanations and exercises in a good grammar reference or textbook. Then when reading English texts, look out for that specific grammar aspect.

Also focus on the types of errors commonly made by Chinese learners of English. These errors often arise when your first language, Chinese, interferes with English.

Q Are the plural forms of the following words correct or acceptable: "arrear/arrears," "machinery/machineries," "equipment/equipments"?

A The idea of countable and uncountable nouns can be confusing. **Arrears** is always used in the plural. The expression **to be in arrears** means to be late with your payments and the expression **to be paid in arrears** means that you are paid for your work after you have done it.

Most uncountable nouns, such as **machinery** and **equipment** are not used in the plural. Other examples are **furniture**, **information**, and **rice**. **Machinery** is an uncountable noun, meaning a group of machines or the organisation of something and is never used with an 's' on the end. **Equipment** is also an uncountable noun and is never used in the plural.

Q Can we use "effect" as a verb as in this sentence: Please effect the payment according to the new circular?

A Although **effect** is usually used as a noun, it is also a transitive verb (i.e. it takes a direct object) and means 'to occur'. Your example is therefore correct. Please note, however, that this use is rather formal and only ever used in writing.

Business Greetings

Proper etiquette is important in business greetings. Ensure you use polite language such as "please" and "thank you.". Appropriate titles and gestures should also be used. Shaking hands is common in English-speaking countries. Here are some useful phrases.

Greeting Phrases:

Introduce yourself with your name and title:

May I introduce myself? I'm Roger Cook. I'm in charge of client accounts. Here's my card.
Hello Mr Williams. I'm Jane Seagrove, client relationship manager. Let me give you my card.

Shake hands, greet and express happiness to meet the other person.

How do you do?
I'm pleased to meet you.
Pleased to meet you too.

Other Useful Phrases:

If you're late for a meeting/appointment:

Sorry to keep you waiting.
I'm sorry for being late.
Did you get my message to say I'd be a few minutes late?

Introducing Colleagues:

This is Jeremy Benting, my associate.
I'd like to introduce Jo Long, my assistant.
I'd like you to meet Paul Wheeler, our training coordinator.
May I introduce Jason Isaacs, head of Sales?

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