

On-the-Job English for Corporate Customers

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Abstract-The article dwells on the basic principles of delivering corporate English language training programs on the job by the Institute of Facultative Education of the Samara State Technical University. The article gives a comparison of two case studies to demonstrate the different approaches taken by the customers of the program and the impact of those approaches on the learning curve and final results. The authors arrive at the conclusion that less formal approaches without compromising the quality of teaching tend to yield better results.

Keywords-English language for corporate customers, custom courses, on-the-job learning, classroom strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of a foreign language is a must for a contemporary specialist and a means of improvement of their competitive capacity in the labor market. Due to the integration of our country in the international trade, economic, political and cultural context and advent to Russia of many international companies there appears a natural demand in the expansion of international contacts and, following that, in the highly qualified specialists with a proper command of a foreign language complimenting their in-depth professional knowledge, who become especially needed. The program “On-the-Job English for Corporate Customers” developed by the Institute of Facultative Education of the Samara State Technical University [2] has been developed with a focus on the training of such specialists.

The program has been developed recently but has proven to be an efficient business project.

II. PROGRAM DESIGN

The design of the program is modular. The modules may be easily added to one another to suit the level of knowledge of the language and specific needs of the learners.

The topical plan is developed individually for each level and is tailored to meet the demands of the group.

Below follows a sample topical plan of the modules for the Intermediate learners:

Module 1: English for Specific Purposes (Technical English) + Grammar Patterns

- Technology in Use
- Materials Technology
- Components and Assemblies
- Engineering Design
- Breaking Point
- Monitoring and Control

Module 2: Business Correspondence

- Simple commercial letters
- Enquiries
- Correspondence relating to orders
- Accepting or declining offers and orders
- Correspondence relating to agency
- Correspondence relating to sales contracts
- Transportation and packing
- Discussing problems arising out of contractual
- Obligations
- Claims and replies to claims

Module 3: Effective Presentation Skills

- Effectively conduct question-and-answer sessions
- Feel confident and self-assured during your presentation
- Leave a lasting impression on your audience
- Satisfied customers are more compelled to be repeat customers
- Employees learn skills necessary to create a positive customer experience
- Customers feel they are the most important part of your business

Module 4: Everyday English

- On Board
- Baggage
- Hotel
- An Appointment
- City Guide
- A Taxi Ride
- Food

- Gift Store
- Small Talk

The training program is oriented on various levels of initial knowledge of the language and aims at achievement of a high level of knowledge in the end of the program. It is focused on practical classroom learning.

The tutors in the program are teachers from the Samara State Technical University and engaged specialists since the latter have a professional education and have amassed considerable knowledge in specific professional areas. One of the leading third-party specialists is a simultaneous interpreter with 11 years of experience of working with the Samara Region government participating in international exhibitions and representing the region in large-scale forums. Such specialists are capable of helping the learners achieve the required level of skills and knowledge in the sphere of translating of texts and delivering spoken statements in the foreign language with specific purposes, and that is especially important for the performance of professionally oriented communication in practical areas related to economy and production.

Upon successful completion of the program the learners are expected to

- enrich their vocabulary with technical and business terms;
- improve their communication skills;
- become more confident in communication with foreign partners;
- improve their skill of perceiving and understanding spoken foreign language;
- be able to apply knowledge of practices of international companies in their business;
- actively participate in the business meetings, negotiations and presentations;
- efficiently use the terminology in spoken and written communication;
- deliver spoken communication in business topics;
- make interviews in English with candidates for a job;
- compile and draft informational materials, reports, documents, and presentations;
- participate in professional trainings and seminars delivered in English to improve their qualification.

Alongside the existing forms of training it is also planned to deliver webinars with native speakers within the framework of inclusive education which will not only enable the learners to learn the language but to get immersed in the language and specifics of the life of the target-language country: it is an open secret that knowledge of the language per se is but halfway to success, for it is much more important to understand the specifics of its use to perform a certain task.

III. CASE STUDIES

The authors will now look into two practical cases of implementation of corporate English training programs delivered to two companies operating in the Samara Region, Russia. The programs are similar in the following ways: both customers (Company A is working in the food industry and Company B in the light industry) have implemented English courses in the framework of complex programs aimed at improvement of production processes (collectively commonly referred to as ‘Lean Management’) to assist creation of added business value inside the organizations. One of the ways (‘pillars’) in which these programs work (despite the differences in the terminology their conceptual framework is similar) is ‘personnel development’. Since Company A and Company B both belong to structures of international corporations, one of the aspects of personnel development chosen by each Customer was improvement of the level of the English language among employees and managers involved in the project. The final goal stated by the top management of both companies was to eliminate (or minimize) the need to engage third-party interpreters for routine activities involving foreign specialists (e.g. consultations and technical audits) and, respectively, to decrease related costs. We suggest that in the context of these two cases we may regard this indicator as a key performance indicator of the completed program of corporate training.

In both cases the tutors were employees of the Samara State Technical University. The native speakers of English were not engaged in the training. Groups were formed in compliance with the customers’ requirements. Those requirements were different, and so was the approach towards selection of the learners.

Company A ran a survey among its employees with the objective of identifying persons willing to study the foreign language. However, due to the fact that the training was to be delivered in the end of the working day and that the work load on the employees was rather high, the number of willing candidates turned out to be much lower than expected by the Customer. The top management therefore instructed middle management to ‘recruit’ the necessary number of learners in the form of an order. The company then chose the conventional way of dividing the learners (N=30) based on the initial level of knowledge. Following the initial placement test it was identified that 11 learners were on the Pre-Intermediate level, 16 — on the Intermediate (three of whom expressed the wish to go to the group of a lower level), and 3 learners demonstrated a level well above Upper Intermediate which could be explained by the ‘freshness’ of their background knowledge: those employees had completed their course of study fairly recently (2-3 years before) at a higher education institution (Samara State Technical University) where they had had additional education in the field of foreign languages. The demographic composition of the group was as follows: age from 25 to 40, predominantly male learners (22 persons).

Based on that, two groups were formed, of Pre-Intermediate (N=14) and Intermediate (N=16) levels respectively; curricula were compiled and the training process started. Some special features of its progress and outcome will be dealt with below.

Company B also started the corporate training program with an employee survey. The results revealed a somewhat higher motivation of the employees to be engaged in the program: there were 45 respondents. A placement testing was organized and delivered and showed the following: 5 learners demonstrated knowledge below the Pre-Intermediate level, 24 learners — Intermediate, 10 — Upper Intermediate. The remaining 6 candidates showed a high level of command of the language (2 graduates of the Faculty of Distance and Additional Learning of the Samara State Technical University, specialization “Translator in the Sphere of Professional Communication”, 1 graduate of Togliatti State University, 3 graduates of the S.P. Korolev Samara National Research University who had been also trained in similar programs), but reported lack of practice of English and therefore insisted in being included in the groups. It was suggested to the Customer that the learners be divided in the groups according to the levels of knowledge, but there was a counter-suggestion: form groups of similar size (N=22 and N=23) of mixed levels. The suggestion came from the learners themselves and was justified in the following way: the implementation of ‘personnel development’ strategy included active mentorship (informal consultations and/or training from more experienced employees). The assistance in learning the foreign language was regarded as one of the aspects of mentorship. The provider of educational services agreed to the decision of running an experiment and made respectful adjustments to the curricula. The demographic composition of the group was as follows: age from 24 to 49, 26 male and 19 female learners.

The training in the Company A was delivered in rooms equipped as classrooms (e.g. they were used to deliver trainings in health and safety, occupational safety, etc.) with smart boards, computers and audiovisual equipment. The classes started at 16:30, lasted for 120 minutes (3 academic hours) and were delivered twice a week. The duration of the course was 16 weeks (96 academic hours), at the end the learners were asked to take complex testing (reading and translation, speaking on general and specific topics, and a lexical and grammatical test).

Company B suggested the premises of a non-working canteen for employees (the existing classrooms were too small to accommodate groups of 22-23 people). For the duration of the class the tutor brought a computer. The classes started at 16:00 (the management allowed the learners leave for classes one hour before the end of the working day provided that the learners delegate their tasks to colleagues and/or their subordinates), lasted for 120 minutes (3 academic hours), and were delivered twice a week. At the end of the course the learners also took a complex testing.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We see that both corporate training programs were delivered in practically the same conditions. The difference was in the level of motivation of learners (B > A) and the source for that motivation (direct order from top management in Company A and learners’ own intent in Company B), in the conditions of the classroom and in the principle of formation of the group. The progress and the result of the program are also of interest.

The initially low motivation of learners in the Company A was successfully surmounted only as late as in the middle of the course, when the standard textbook and learning materials began to be appended with terminology and situations directly relating to production processes and technological equipment used in the plant. The learners themselves suggested spending some time learning more about such questions as ‘restoration of basic condition of equipment’, ‘breakdown analysis’, ‘root cause analysis’, ‘5 why method’ and so on. In each of those topics vocabulary networks and sets of clichés were compiled and suggested for studying. Unfortunately, due to specifics of the technological process in food industry it was not possible to deliver at least some parts of classes in specific working places; the tutor compensated for this by using electronic visual aids.

The learners in Company B demonstrated much independence in mastering the program. Since the classes took place in the premises initially not suited for a classroom (a canteen), the learners brought in flip charts and boards on which new words and clichés were written down every class, and very often that was done not at the tutor’s suggestion but at the initiative of learners with higher levels of knowledge of the language. The decision to rely on mentorship was a feasible one: the learners tried to discuss some working questions in the foreign language and suggested having some classes ‘in the field’, i.e. on the shop floor during the time when the technological lines were stopped; and this improved the level of command of specialized vocabulary and the skill of quickly reacting to a working situation in a substantial degree.

In the four months of the program the Company A was twice visited by groups of foreign specialists (start-up and commissioning jobs and a food safety audit). In both cases the company used the services of a hired interpreter who was engaged fully. The employees attending the program could generally maintain a conversation on general topics and answer the simplest questions from the specialists in their specific field of work, but there was no indication that the amount of service delivered by the third-party interpreter was any lower (therefore decrease of related expenses was also not achieved). The Customer made the decision of continuing with the program delivered in two levels (one group for beginners and one for advanced learners), and the “Personnel Development” pillar was instructed to develop new methods of motivating employees for a more active participation in the training programs.

Company B accommodated three visits from foreign partners (one audit for occupational safety, one audit for the new product development processes and a cost deployment audit). A professional interpreter was hired in two cases out of three, and his function was rather to give ‘supporting action’ to the employees responsible for the audit; translation in full amount was performed during reporting activities and summary reports to top management. The program participants could maintain a conversation on general topics, provided satisfactory answers to questions from specialists that demanded simple or moderately complicated terminology. Complicated questions (mostly concerning economic and financial aspects of the company’s activities) required the engagement of the interpreter. The Customer made the decision of continuing the education and set a rather ambitious goal of not hiring third-party interpreters for the first half-year of 2019 for routing events.

Was the key performance indicator of delivering corporate learning achieved so far as the two cases reviewed by us are concerned? As of the end of 2018, the answer would rather be a negative one, and we shall yet have to see the results in a long term perspective. What we can say even today is that the less conventional approach chosen by Company B yielded some results: the employees did indeed feel more confident in communication with foreign specialists and did run one audit completely independently. Company A started thinking of changing its classical ‘command-and-administration’ approach towards implementation of the training program.

The authors believe the following could be listed as the preliminary conclusions: the success of implementation of corporate training programs depends on a range of factors that include the position taken by the top management, level of engagement of employees in the development of the company and their motivation, reliance on the employees’ own competences and mentorship. A skillful way of manipulating these factors (as well as close cooperation between the provider of educational services and the customer) may contribute a lot towards reaching high results and, in the long run, towards growth of added business value in the economic processes of the customers.

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