

ESL Instruction in the Workplace¹

- The teaching of English to foreign-born vocational and professional workers at their place of work is an unexplored possibility for many ESL instructors in California. Yet the increasing number of these workers and their need for advanced language skills on the job combine to create a viable market for instructor services. This paper explores what it is like to teach in the workplace based on interviews with 10 San Francisco Bay Area ESL professionals. Class structure, learner needs, instructional considerations, and the need for relevant, flexible materials are discussed. Practical recommendations are made to interested instructors: network, establish a reputation in the field, know compensation norms, focus on professional workers, use a business approach with companies, project a professional image, be aware of company attitude toward instruction, involve management, adapt teaching theory to meet specific needs, encourage learner independence, and stay current.

I began exploring ESL in the workplace out of pragmatic interest. I was an ESL instructor considering employment possibilities. My initial questions were, "What is it like to teach ESL in the workplace?" and "Is there a market for my services in this field?" In seeking answers to these questions for myself, it became apparent that other ESL instructors were equally interested. Those not yet in the field wanted to know if it held potential for them. Those already in the field wanted to compare their experience with that of others.

My exploration consisted of (a) reading literature on the topic and (b) interviewing either in person or by telephone ESL professionals actively involved in workplace instruction. The literature, however, proved limited. Occasionally the information in literature proved contrary to the experience of my informants. It is the experience and insights of the 10 ESL professionals I interviewed that give substance to this paper and validity to the literature. All informants were generous with their time and frank with their insights, some on the condition that their comments go unattributed.

My interviews were unscripted rather than based on a formal questionnaire. I tried to draw personal insights from each informant. The very process of interviewing created many questions beyond my initial ones: How does ESL workplace instruction differ from ESL instruc-

tion in general? How do you go about needs assessment? What teaching methods do you use? Are pertinent materials readily available? What are the satisfactions and frustrations? Are learners and their companies satisfied? How do you enter the field? What financial compensation can be expected? Such, then are the aspects of ESL workplace instruction that this paper addresses.

Overview

ESL workplace instruction falls into two broad areas—vocational English as a second language (VESL) and professional. VESL classes are made up of hourly workers who comprise part of the workforce in manufacturing industries or service industries such as restaurants, hotels, and hospitals. VESL courses focus on the linguistic skills and functions workers need to perform their jobs.

The teaching of professionals takes place in a more formal business atmosphere than does VESL instruction, and trainer and trainees are professional peers. Instruction focuses on high-level speaking, listening, and literacy skills and on business customs. Courses are goal oriented, targeting particular needs such as accent reduction, effective communication in meetings, oral presentations, workplace idioms and vocabulary, and technical and business writing.

California's Increasing Need for ESL Workplace Instruction

Several factors contribute to an increasing need in California for ESL instruction in the workplace: (a) California's increasing number of foreign-born workers, (b) the escalating level of language skills needed on the job, and (c) U.S. government legislation. An estimated 5.3 million people, 20% of California's population, is foreign born. California is the destination of one in four U.S. immigrants and the influx is projected to continue (Olsen, 1988).

Furthermore, the United States is increasingly becoming an information-based society that requires higher language skills in the workplace. In California new and/or replacement jobs requiring more advanced language skills will climb from the 1982 figure of 35% to 46% by 1995 (Casanova, 1989). Many of these jobs will be filled by foreign-born vocational and professional workers.

In an April 16, 1990 decision that directly impacts these workers, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it is not a violation of federal bias laws to deny a job applicant work because of a foreign accent if that accent would interfere with job performance (*Fragante v. City of Honolulu*). One informant, who offers classes at a California financial institution, said that the institution routinely administers English assessment tests to incoming employees as a basis for denying employment or restricting job promotion.

Most foreign-born workers cannot financially afford to wait to begin work until they have attained the English language competencies requisite to their jobs. Nor should they. Research indicates that vocational language learning is effective when paired with vocational education (Friedenberg & Bradley, 1984). By logical implication, on-the-job language training in the professional fields should also be effective. With the increase in foreign-born workers and the requirement for more advanced language skills on the job, the need for ESL instruction in the workplace continues to grow. Thus, a viable market for the services of ESL instructors does exist. The balance of this paper addresses in more detail the structure of existing classes, gives practical teaching information, and concludes with recommendations for instructors who wish to teach in the workplace.

Class Structure

Location and Costs

A unique aspect of ESL workplace instruction is its setting, instruction typically taking place in company conference rooms. Such an arrangement is convenient for employees and eliminates overhead costs for dedicated classroom space. In general, the only cost to the employee is time. While in some companies the employee pays a token fee, most companies pay all costs involved, even books, from departmental budgets. Occasionally, government grants may cover some costs. In other cases, employees initially pay tuition but are reimbursed if they have a passing grade or attend regularly.

Scheduling

Typical VESL classes meet once or twice a week for two hours, on employee time, company time, or half and half. In the latter case, a class might be scheduled at the shift change, and the employee would be released from work an hour early. Classes are ongoing, assuming availability of funding. For professionals, courses are short-term, from two to eight weeks, and meet once or twice weekly with occasional weekend seminars scheduled.

Size

The typical workplace class enrollment is 8 to 15 students, fewer than half the number in the average adult education class. Of concern to instructors is the difficulty of organizing classes of learners with comparable English skills and competencies. For example, workers with low-level English reading skills may be grouped with workers with intermediate and advanced reading skills. Since the source of students is limited to a particular worksite rather than to a city or a county, there are simply fewer class groupings possible.

Ethnic Composition

Fewer nationalities may be represented in a workplace class than in other ESL classes. For example, in one adult education class an informant had students from 13 countries, mainly European and Middle Eastern. However, in one informant's VESL class, only Asian ethnic groups were represented: Burmese, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Other informants reported VESL workplace classes that included Cambodians, Laotians, Japanese, Koreans, Philipinos, other Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics. At another company, a class of business professionals was all of the same ethnic background: Korean.

Attendance

Classes are usually voluntary, and employees give priority to demands of work and family. Irregular class attendance by both vocational and professional workers is a concern. Some hourly employees stay for the company-paid class hour then leave during their own time. "Don't expect employees to come in on Saturday," cautioned one informant. Department meetings may be scheduled during class hours while management-level learners wander in and out of class as their work schedules permit. Immediate supervisors can be reluctant to release employees from their duties to attend class.

Learner Needs

Assessment Techniques

VESL needs assessment (West, 1984) involves on-site visitation and extensive observation. Managers and workers are interviewed. Manager/worker and worker/worker interactions are tape recorded or noted. In reality, this is an expensive undertaking often viewed with skepticism by both employer and employees. Informants stated that not all companies were responsive to having an outsider wandering around with a tape recorder and camera. Not all managers were cooperative, and many employees were uneasy about being observed.

Coleman (1988) recommends a two-stage approach to assessing learner needs in large organizations. Stage 1 involves surveying to reveal organizational patterns of language use. Stage 2 involves analyzing the needs of particular target groups. Informants, however, pointed out that the turn-around time for setting up a class is usually too short to allow for thorough preassessment. Also, companies are reluctant to pay for the time involved in needs assessment of any scope. "Build assessment into the course," informants advised. In-class testing and learner interviews were the most commonly cited techniques.

Differing Company and Worker Perceptions

Instructors often found that company and worker perceptions about communicative needs differed. For example, production and

assembly companies expressed concern that employees did not understand supervisors and vice versa. However, informants pointed out that after initial training, many employees in routine jobs perform independently and have limited need to converse with their supervisors, a situation also noted by Svendsen and Krebs (1984).

"Their main need is to communicate with each other in English," said one informant. Workers at the same level need to break their personal isolation and talk with one another as they work, during breaks, and during their lunch hour. Learners at one company, representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds, told an informant that they were happy because their co-workers understood them better than before they took ESL instruction.

Instructional Considerations

Class Focus

For both VESL and professional workplace instruction, classes are usually goal oriented and focus on mastering the linguistic skills and functions needed to perform particular jobs. Other possibilities exist, however. A process approach, for example, focuses on methods rather than on end goals, emphasizing developing strategies to activate the learning process (Widdowson, 1981).

Advice to teach the language skills and functions needed in a special field, not the special field itself, comes from Crofts (1981). Crofts recommends that an instructor uninformed in a field should avoid it. Otherwise, the instructor risks presenting misinformation. If simplified rather than authentic subject matter is used, the instructor risks boring well-informed students.

Grosse (1988) reports success using the case study approach in teaching business English, but cautions that using it requires an understanding of business by the instructor. An informant who teaches business people concurs: "You need to know the business world. Read all the time so you can address timely issues during the discussion periods." Overall, informants reported using an eclectic mixture of approaches and techniques to work toward well-defined class goals.

Student-centered Learning

Informants emphasized the need to encourage and enable learners to take responsibility for their own progress. "We have students set their own personal objectives," said one informant. Also, learners are taught independent study habits and are encouraged to find resources other than the instructor so that learning can continue after class. "Self-correction comes first. Then peer correction. Instructor correction is last." However, learner autonomy must be nurtured; many learners are used to an authoritarian, teacher-centered classroom. Learners may be wary of group work. "It was hard to sell it,"

said one informant. "At first the students didn't trust that it would work. But eventually they came to accept it. Keep the goals of group work clear and purposeful."

Informants also underscored the importance of a nonthreatening classroom atmosphere. "Adults are afraid to make mistakes in front of their colleagues," stated one. "Don't embarrass a learner by pointing out a mistake. Correct by modeling."

Class Activities

Once learners are used to taking the initiative, self-designated projects are worthwhile learning activities. One group of workers decided to publish its own company newsletter. The newsletter proved an effective medium of self-expression, enabling workers to share their thoughts and feelings with co-workers and management. Also, the newsletter was impressive to management and gave students a sense of positive accomplishment.

Typical activities include discussions, role plays, information gap exercises, and audio or videotaping of student presentations for analysis. Homework if assigned at all is kept to a minimum.

Instructional Materials

Materials are more readily available for VESL than for professional instruction. Informants concur that appropriate texts are few; thus materials preparation is time consuming. An informant who supplements existing materials estimates that it takes about an hour per 2-hour class to organize materials. It takes twice as long for an informant who creates her own lessons entirely. Several write their own materials by choice as well as by need. "That way I present lessons in a fresh way," stated one.

Important design considerations include flexibility and transferability. Instructors need materials that can be adapted to the evolving needs of various classes. The materials might emphasize general language functions or competencies. For example, both the assembly worker and the manager need to know appropriate language for asking for clarification or making a refusal. Also, materials that allow autonomous learning would benefit learners who attend class irregularly or have short-term classes. Jones (1990) advocates indexed materials packages, more like files than texts.

For the present, "it . . . seems to be an unavoidable fact of the ESP teacher/course director that he should be materials writer as well" (Robinson, 1980, p. 34). The prevailing attitude of informants is that "it's exhausting to have to write materials and at the same time organize and teach a course."

Summary

Overall, my informants find ESL instruction in the workplace to be a stimulating change of pace from academia. "You really have to like challenge. It's extremely challenging," cautioned one informant who instructs engineers, managers, and scientists. "Life is more relaxed at the college or university."

Compared with instructors in academic institutions and adult education programs, instructors in the workplace enjoy smaller classes, less paperwork, and more independence in arranging schedules. "I love the small classes," said one. Some informants like interacting with business people who are their professional peers. "But it's a cooler relationship," one commented. "VESL and adult ed students are more dependent on you." A VESL instructor enjoys following student progress over the long haul rather than for just a semester: "It's tremendously rewarding to work with the same people for a long time, to see growth and continue relationships."

On the other hand, potential frustrations include mixed levels of language learners in classes, irregular attendance, and limited management support. Companies focus on results and profits. Commitment may be short term and demanding. "It can be feast or famine," said one informant. "It's extremely competitive. Don't be disappointed if you're not rehired." Several were impatient with business formality and protocol: "It's a nuisance." Overall, however, ESL instruction in the midst of the working world offers an experienced instructor independence, challenge, and variety.

Recommendations for Interested Instructors

Instructors interested in teaching ESL in the workplace might consider the following suggestions:

1. *Network.* Let your professional colleagues, business acquaintances, and friends know of your interest in teaching in business and industry. If they have experience in this area, they will have practical insights to share with you, perhaps even job leads and materials. If your contacts are not involved, they may know those who are. Follow up all leads. Informants referred to me were as helpful as those I knew.

Furthermore, you need not feel you are imposing. Your contact will prove mutually beneficial. My informants were pleased that their insights would be helpful to others. They were stimulated to reflect. Five months after initial interviewing, one commented, "I'm still thinking about something you said." Another regarded our interview as an opportunity for extending her own contacts. "I'm always looking for well-qualified instructors," she said. I gave her my business card and my assurance that I would pass on her need to my colleagues. Follow up your interviews with thank you notes to show your appreciation and to keep open the channels of communication.

2. *Get experience and establish your reputation.* One informant no longer solicits business; she found it to be an unproductive use of her time. "Companies come to me," she stated. "My colleagues refer them. It's extremely important to build up a good reputation among friends and colleagues." Also, one company will refer another company to a consultant with an established reputation. "Word of mouth is most important," advised another.

The prudent advice is to start out by working through an established consulting firm or language school. Once you gain experience and are known, you can more easily branch out on your own if you wish. "You need lots of experience in every area of ESL," was other advice. "This area is not for a beginning teacher."

3. *Know compensation norms.* To establish a fair wage, you need to know the going rates. Though some informants were reluctant to discuss pay, representative hourly rates paid to instructors by consulting firms, employment centers, and private schools were quoted as \$35 and up (unspecified), \$18, and \$15, respectively. Occasionally some preparation time is paid, though it may be at a lesser rate. No benefits are paid. Some consulting firms offer a percentage commission and the option to teach the class for new business leads that prove fruitful. Most firms give assistance with class setup.

You may be weighing the advantages of approaching a company directly with your offer of service as opposed to working through a consulting firm. The financial compensation is greater if you eliminate the middle person; however, hour workload expands. An independent consultant wears three hats, that of business developer and consultant, of materials writer, and of instructor. Charge accordingly. One informant new to direct consulting charged \$20 per instruction hour for her extensive services, "Never again," she said.

Suggested hourly fees for an instructor negotiating directly with a company range from \$35-\$75, depending on variables such as the instructor's experience and expertise, the course length, the number of students, and the company's budget. One instructor suggested teaching in the European workplace, because "the pay is better than in the United States. Language is more important in Europe."

4. *Focus your efforts on professional instruction.* For some Bay Area informants, the professional market is growing faster than the VESL market. One stated that at a large San Jose corporation, 60% of the professionals are foreign born. Of those at that corporation with PhDs, 80% are foreign born. Since the 1985 downturn in the local semiconductor industry and resulting layoffs of production workers, this informant's business has shifted from vocational workers to professionals and has grown 24%.

5. *Use business tactics and terms.* If you approach a company, first research it and make contacts. Use business terms in dealing with the company. Students are called *participants* or *trainees* and teachers are *trainers*. Discuss meeting business needs, not educational or humanitarian goals. Talk results in terms of reduced turnover, increased cost effectiveness, increased productivity, better quality control, improved employee morale, increased company loyalty, maintenance of workplace safety, better understanding of job policies and procedures, and so forth. "Speak businessese and remember the bottom line," is typical advice. Be aware that companies value a trainer's experience with people outside the academic environment, particularly people from other cultures.

6. *Project a professional image.* Maintain a suitable business appearance and deportment. "Dress up. Be sharp. Dress as well as the best dressed person in the class," stated consultants. "Even if teaching blue-jeaned factory workers, you must maintain a business image," said another. "Look confident and professional."

7. *Be aware of company attitude towards instruction.* Though the need for ESL instruction is acknowledged, most companies still must be convinced to bring the instruction into the workplace and to pay the cost. "That's [the employees'] problem" and "I did it on my own, why can't they?" were company representatives' comments. Companies typically seek ESL instruction as a corrective rather than as a preventive measure. Even though companies are satisfied with class results, in lean times ESL instruction is the first item slashed from budgets.

On the other hand, some companies offer English classes as a drawing card to attract workers. Others find it cost effective to upgrade the literacy skills of experienced workers rather than to try and find qualified new workers when job language requirements escalate. For example, the introduction of the computer into the workplace necessitates that employees learn advanced reading and writing skills.

8. *Involve management.* Management cooperation is critical to the overall success of classes and cannot be assumed. It is necessary to foster it. "Collaborate with supervisors. They are key people," said one informant. "Try to get the managers involved. They're the ones who can do the most good," said another. However, frequent supervisor turnover at some companies makes maintaining rapport a challenge.

9. *Adapt teaching theories and methods to meet specific needs.* For example, companies are impatient with costly needs analyses and curricula development. They require that an instructor expedite the

job within the constraints of the bottom line. So you should expect to incorporate needs assessment as an ongoing part of the class.

"Business wants quick results," said one informant. "As an educator I have a problem with that. Good things do take time to mature." However, in the workplace, as elsewhere, sound educational theory may require practical adaptation. As Widdowson (1984) suggests, theory and practice must be partners.

10. *Be pragmatic and encourage learner independence.* Except in the case of a seminar, avoid scheduling weekend classes. Anticipate irregular class attendance. Organize each class to provide a language learning experience that is complete in itself and independent of other class sessions. Encourage learning strategies that are effective outside the classroom. Nurture learner-designated goal setting and activities that foster cross-cultural interaction.

11. *Stay current.* Once involved in ESL workplace instruction, keep abreast of developments. To this end, networking continues to be of value, particularly for "Freeway Flyers," the many part-time instructors who scurry from job to job with little opportunity for interaction with colleagues. Membership in professional organizations such as CATESOL and TESOL offers further networking opportunities and insures that you receive pertinent professional publications. Subscribe or have access to ones such as *English for Specific Purposes*, formerly *The ESP Journal*. Review publishers' catalogues. ■

Footnote

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