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Does the customer *really* know best?

**Getting the most out of in-company training**

When teaching in-company, I’m often shocked by the stark differences between what the students say they want in class, and the brief I’m given from the company training manager. What’s more, I have my own ideas about what a particular group needs. How can we reconcile this triangle of differences?

In my experience, through research, and in talking to these people, a few salient themes have emerged. The company training manager inevitably needs to validate the expense of in-company language training: they expect ‘communicative’ classes, high levels of attendance, and, often, written test results. Students, however, invariably ask for grammar and accuracy, and want language to use at work: some say they are watched and need to prove themselves. This leaves the teacher: for many, a ‘good’ lesson is one where students are motivated and talkative, with focus on both social and work-related language; learner independence is also often a goal for the teacher.

My session at BESIG was an interactive session. The aim of this paper is to clarify the main issues we discussed, and their outcomes.

In a nutshell, my session aimed to demonstrate that, despite these differences, there is a workable compromise: effective communication is relevant to all three groups; and to demonstrate progress, focus on chunks of language that can be applied immediately in work also helps. Much of what we do in the classroom already addresses these: we nee, however, to make it more overt.

By way of illustration, we looked at three sections from *International Express* (2014) Pre- and Upper Intermediate, Oxford University Press.

We started by looking at email communication, asking how important accuracy is, and considered how other factors can be more relevant in producing an effective message: having a clear subject line, using phrases with a clear function, and structuring an email logically. Referring back to our criteria for meeting CTM, student and teacher needs, this example demonstrated focus on effective communication and skills: students would return to work armed with these strategies, and be able to put them to immediate use.

We then moved on to vocabulary. Here, we focused on words in context, collocations and lexical phrases, within one topic area, “working abroad”. We also looked at the wider context of “culture shock” and the four stages of acculturation. Participants were asked at various stages to match words for collocations, fill gaps, and choose words from a number of options, as well as exchange their ideas and experiences. Enabling students to work with and try out new language in this way within a personalised context is crucial for digesting meaning and form. This increases their confidence, and they then have a better chance of using this language successfully outside class. As vocabulary is an area where inaccuracies can play havoc with communication, focus here is on accurate use, but also on providing communicative opportunities for target language use in contexts students can easily relate to.

So far in the session, we had addressed both accuracy and fluency, as well as speaking practice and effective communication. We had also looked at language students can use immediately back at work. However, all three groups need to see progress. How can we do this?

It’s not easy to measure confidence, but we can show how students are developing. We discussed how target language can be put on paper, turned over, exchanged, ticked off, and so on, to help encourage students to use new words and phrases during discussions. We also discussed ways in which students can evaluate themselves and others. These all help demonstrate progress, and confidence, which then becomes evident when students use the language back at work.

The final stage in this session was a short video. One of the challenges of video is ensuring the topic will be motivating to a range of students. In this case, “cycling to work” can be approached from various angles (e.g. sports, team building, cycle routes). This helps students engage at their point of interest. In the session, participants were engaged in a number of activities to activate their schemata on this topic before watching the clip. When students are well-prepared for an audio or video, their listening is heightened, and follow-up discussions are more meaningful. This leads to increased confidence, and consequently ticks a few more boxes on our list of criteria: effective communication, speaking practice, and visible progress in listening.

Overall in this session, participants were shown that, through using motivating topics and texts, ensuring a clear focus on immediately usable language, providing communicative tasks, and giving consideration to both fluency and accuracy, the needs of CTM, students and teachers are largely met. And the poor student scrutinised by his boss might finally feel proud in showing off his new language and skills!

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