

CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING

Using Life to Teach Language

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Learning a new language, though a difficult task for some, can be an extremely valuable asset for an expatriate. Rhodes-Naughton and Rhodes explain the importance of gaining such knowledge and suggest teaching methods available to language learners.

In today's corporate world, where products, ideas, and employees frequently change, there is no place for the educational cliché, "You can't teach an old dog a new trick."

Chameleon-like characteristics, such as flexibility, multilingualism and cross-cultural sensitivity, are necessary and expected of employees at all levels in international corporations. To survive, "old dogs" have to learn many "new tricks," only one of which is the ability to become proficient and functional in new languages.

When watching small children, it quickly becomes apparent as to how they learn language. They imitate, play, and ask questions. They mimic what they hear, and they are not afraid to say what they hear over and over again or to use their words in a different way. They are open, flexible, and driven by the desire to communicate their needs and emotions. This is why they acquire sounds and vocabulary so easily. For example, the child who wants to eat a banana has a natural motivation to learn the words "eat" and "banana."

Many adults, on the other hand, believe that mastering a new language is close to impossible. Why? Because it is believed that adults somehow lack the flexibility and sponge-like ability that children demonstrate. Native languages and cultures have extensively conditioned adults. Contrary to these beliefs, adults can and do learn new languages. In reality, adults are conditioned by many forces, but they also share much in common with the child who wants to eat the banana: both have goals and both want to effectively communicate in order to achieve their goals. This motivation is the key to the level of success that anyone—child or adult—will have in learning language.

Like children and adults, corporations and corporate employees also have goals. One key to achieving these goals is good communication. In an international corporation, this means that corporate employees must be able to effectively communicate across borders, cultures, and languages. Therefore, when teaching language to corporate employees, these motivations and goals must be highlighted so they are understood by the employees.

How will the language be used? At work? Outside of work? What is needed to be able to say, write, or communicate in the language? What are the goals? For a corporate language program to be successful, it must be tailored to each individual employee.

This being true, it becomes obvious that many traditional formats for teaching language to adults might not be effective. For example, textbook grammar study, although valuable, would not be ideal for a native French speaker who needs to learn how to give effective, oral presentations in English.

Said a product manager who transferred from the United States to Chile, "I spoke reasonably well, but I couldn't even write an e-mail. My program targeted this exact need and kept me focused and interested." In addition, traditional language teaching methods may "bore" the employee/student. And no one will argue that boredom is the fastest way to eliminate the motivation to learn.

Using life to teach language may be a more successful method. In this method, corporate employees will hear, understand, and use what they are taught if the information is essential and relevant to daily life. It means that anything can be used to encourage language-learning experiences.

For example, how to deal with movers, real estate agents, a new boss, and worried children are all subjects that can be incorporated into the language learning process. Ove Storhoug, an engineer for Norwegian oil company Statoil, said his "language program focused on using the language in a day-to-day atmosphere, e.g., by going to shops with [his] wife and taking the children to playgrounds and horse shows. This method was helpful to learning the necessary vocabulary for daily life."

To do this, language teachers must pay close attention to the apparent and the expressed needs of corporate employees in their business and personal lives.

Teachers must get to know the corporate employees they are teaching: What do the corporate employees want to learn? How do they learn best? What are their professional situations? What are their concerns regarding their personal situations and families? What other concerns do they have? What are their hobbies and interests?

Asking these types of questions at the beginning and throughout the language learning process allows teachers to direct and redirect the language acquisition process on an employee-centered basis.

"The employee-centered basis of ...education is especially clear in working with relocation-related language and cultural communication issues," said Dr. Virginia K. Lawson, senior English as a second language (ESL) trainer, Atkins International, Raritan, NJ. "The comfort level of a student, as they go about their professional and personal life is the key to content selection and the approaches that lead to success.

"Therefore, corporate employees will be reminded daily of their motivations to learn the language, and they will not feel that the language learning process is separate from their lives or just another thing for them to do."

Said a pharmaceutical company's mid-level executive, "Even when I felt overwhelmed by all of the issues facing me and my family in the relocation, I still looked forward to my language class because I realized how important learning the language was to my new life."

"Life" language programs are established by having language program designers interview the corporate employees, assess their needs, and identify the stresses, goals, interests, and capacities of the employees.

They must ask:

- Why are the corporate employees learning the language?
- What other languages do they speak?
- What have their other language learning experiences been like?
- In what type of environment do they learn best?
- What is easy or difficult?

There are many successful methods to effectively teach language. What works for one corporate employee may not work for another. Some employees find comfort in routine tasks; others want fluid lesson plans and flexible instructors. Some have to sit at a table while the teacher writes vocabulary on a dry-erase board, while others are pleased to practice their language skills while dining at a restaurant or shopping at the grocery store.

"My instructor always made an effort to use new and relevant materials," said Karoline Chapin, a trailing spouse who transferred from Germany to the United States. "We used things such as the company's annual report, my son's report card, or even the local newspaper."

The accuracy and individualization of the initial assessment set the tone for the entire language learning experience and the ultimate success of the client in using and applying the language in the real world.

Selecting a teacher for each corporate employee also is important. Companies specializing in corporate language training must rely on a diverse and flexible network of resources and teachers. These must include people with wide-ranging specializations, interests, teaching styles, and personalities.

This provides great variety and, therefore, gives language program designers the ability to choose the right teacher for a specific corporate employee. This pairing of teachers and corporate employees can make or break corporate language programs.

Experience and qualifications are not necessarily paramount in pairing teachers with corporate employees. Teaching and learning styles may rank high, and personality may be as important as credentials.

For example, a highly qualified teacher who makes no effort to empathize with the stresses of relocation, might not be a good match for the executive who is worried about his three children adjusting to their new school. Conversely, a less-experienced teacher might have great success teaching a language because of the connection made with the employee.

Relocation-related language teachers differ from standard college professors. They are part teacher, part therapist, part planner, and part confidante. Using life to teach language in the corporate setting requires teachers to develop strong relationships with corporate employees and sometimes even with the employees' families. Furthermore, because of these relationships, language instructors often

become the first one called when troubleshooting potential problems associated with relocation. The language teacher's frequent and ongoing lessons help them keep in touch with the needs of the transferee.

In a casual conversation, corporate employees may mention that they do not like their long-distance telephone service.

The "life language" teacher will acknowledge this concern. This creates the opportunity to teach the corporate employee the vocabulary needed to talk on the phone with the long-distance companies.

The teacher uses the employee's life as the subject matter for learning the language and, therefore, the life of the corporate employee becomes the motivation for learning the language. Life and learning become integrated. And this is how the proverbial old dog learns a new trick.

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