



Effective Practices in Workplace Language Training

Guidelines for Providers of Workplace English Language Training Services

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Introduction

■ Definition of Effective Practices

The word *practices*, as used in this book, refers to the processes and strategies that a workplace English language training provider follows in developing, providing, and evaluating language programs and services. *Effective practices* in workplace English language training are those processes and strategies that lead to excellence, as documented in real training situations. Effective practices are not only better by comparison with other ways of operating; they stand on their own as models to be emulated.

Effective practices in workplace English language training lead to optimal outcomes for all stakeholders. For employees who participate in language training, those outcomes include improved language skills, increased job satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem, greater job mobility, and higher earning potential. For employers, optimal outcomes manifest themselves as return on investment, measured in terms of increases in productivity, work quality, and positive worker attitudes and decreases in employee turnover, errors and misunderstandings, accidents, and absenteeism. For language training providers, optimal outcomes include enhanced capability, broader professional recognition, and increased profitability.

As processes and strategies, effective practices illustrate the *how* of workplace English language training. Each effective practice describes the way in which a training provider behaves with respect to one aspect of the development, provision, and evaluation of its programs and services, and each is composed of a series of subprocesses or steps that characterize what a provider does and how it does it. These effective practices and their constituent steps thus can serve as benchmarks or points of reference against which workplace language training providers can compare their own ways of operating.

■ Audience and Purpose

This book is intended primarily for workplace language training providers, although corporations and organizations wishing to employ such providers' services will also find the discussion useful. The purpose of this book is to promote quality and accountability among providers of workplace English language training programs and thus enable providers and client organizations to

recognize the essential elements of workplace language training and develop realistic expectations for provider relationships and program outcomes.

This book enables new and experienced providers of workplace English language training programs to recognize and implement the processes that will result in optimal outcomes for all involved. The practices outlined in the text and illustrated with case studies drawn from successful English language training situations can serve as guidelines for workplace language trainers and program administrators as they plan, deliver, and evaluate workplace language training.

For corporations and organizations that currently use or intend to use the services of a workplace language training provider, this book provides insight into the necessary components of a quality workplace English language training program. The practices outlined in the text can help client organizations set realistic expectations and ensure that they are obtaining quality workplace language training for participating employees.

This book gives a coordinated, knowledgeable response at the international level to the design, delivery, and evaluation of workplace language training programs while, at the same time, recognizing that those programs exist in a wide variety of settings. It thus addresses the needs of English as a second language (ESL) situations, where employees must use English in most, if not all, contexts, and English as a foreign language (EFL) situations, where employees use English only for specific workplace or business purposes. Although the cases and examples in the text relate to English language training in the workplace, the practices may also be useful for training in languages other than English, that is, for the broader field of language for occupational purposes (LOP).

■ Myths and Facts About Workplace English Language Training

Workplace language training providers frequently encounter misconceptions about the nature of the profession. The four that follow are the most common of these.

Myth 1: Every English language course is really an English for specific purposes (ESP) training program.

Fact: Every well-designed language course takes into consideration the needs of the learners and has clear learning objectives and appropriate materials, methodology, and evaluation procedures. However, because learners in an ESP situation have more specific and definable needs, ESP programs need to be more focused than general English courses. English for occupational purposes (EOP) programs, in particular, need to be built on knowledge of the workplace because participants have clear, often urgent work-related needs and goals.

Myth 2: EOP is simply memorizing technical vocabulary.

Fact: EOP involves much more than memorizing long lists of technical terminology. It is not learning about a task, but learning how to do the task in the target language. This requires consideration of all areas of communicative competence, and is far more complex than just lists of technical vocabulary.

Myth 3: Just use this textbook, and you will have a great EOP program.

Fact: An EOP program does not start with the text and let that drive the course. EOP is based on a needs assessment that specifies exactly what the learner has to do in the target language and employs actual workplace texts and tasks to teach it. Published materials or parts thereof may or may not be appropriate, depending on the results of the needs assessment. EOP programs by definition are not off-the-shelf.

Myth 4: Anyone who teaches can develop and teach an EOP training program.

Fact: EOP is a training specialty. To develop and teach a workplace language program that effectively meets the needs of participating employees and their employers, a provider should be grounded in the theory and practice of adult language learning and teaching, including needs assessment, curriculum and materials development, and teaching and learning styles. The effective practices described in this book illustrate the provider qualifications that form the foundation for successful workplace language training.

■ Theoretical Basis of the Approach Profiled in This Volume

Needs assessment and authenticity in tasks and materials provide the theoretical foundation for workplace language training. The approach profiled in this volume is based, in addition, on three developments in the theory of second language learning and teaching: language acquisition, communicative competence, and task-based instruction. These are not the only theoretical bases for language instruction (see Peyton & Crandall, 1995), but they underlie many effective workplace language training programs.

Language Acquisition

Movements in foreign and second language teaching and research (including Krashen, 1982) have reinforced the ESP principle of designing language learning activities around real purposes that involve the exchange of information and moving away from activities that accomplish only the artificial purpose of producing the correct grammatical form. In workplace English language training programs, this means using real (or realistic) workplace materials and situations and emphasizing pair and small-group interaction rather than individual drilling and repetition. This approach allows learners to focus on learning the language instead of merely learning about it, and enables instructors to target error correction specifically to matters that may interfere with the performance of work-related communication.

Communicative Competence

The idea that the goal of language acquisition is *communicative competence*, that is, the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals, was first put forth by Hymes (1971) and has subsequently been refined and applied to a variety of teaching contexts (see, e.g., Savignon, 1983, 1991). In the communicative competence model, proficiency in a language goes beyond abstract knowledge about the language to encompass four types of competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic.

1. *Linguistic competence* is the basic ability to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence enables the speaker of a language to recognize words and the ways in which they can be used to form phrases and sentences.
2. *Sociolinguistic competence* is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, taking into account the social and cultural rules that govern the setting, the topic, and the role relationships of those involved in communication. Sociolinguistic competence tells the speaker of a language which words and phrases fit the setting and topic, how to express a particular attitude (e.g., courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect), and how to recognize the attitude another person is expressing.
3. *Discourse competence* is knowing how to interpret sentences within a larger linguistic context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Discourse competence tells the speaker of a language how words, phrases, and sentences are put together to create larger units, such as conversations, speeches, and written paragraphs.
4. *Strategic competence* is having strategies for recognizing and repairing communication breakdowns, for compensating for gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and for learning more about communication in the language and in the sociocultural context. Strategic competence informs the speaker of a language when misunderstanding has occurred and tells the speaker how to use language to remedy the situation.

In workplace English language training programs, the idea that communicative competence is the goal of language learning has led to a broadening of the content and types of activities that take place in language classrooms. Through observations, role plays, presentations, and other learner-centered activities, instructors encourage learners to develop their ability not only to produce language but to produce extended sequences of language that are appropriate to a specific context and accomplish defined communication goals.

Task-Based Instruction

In order to translate the language acquisition theory and communicative competence model outlined above into classroom practice, language instructors at many levels have turned to task-based instruction. A *task* in this context is defined as an action that is accomplished through the use of language. It involves a function, such as introducing oneself, making an activity report, or responding to a request for information, and the conditions connected with the function, such as length, people involved, and level of advance planning. Carrying out a task involves using some or all of the four language modalities together to comprehend and produce meaningful communication (Nunan, 1989).

Task-based instruction is effective in workplace settings because it allows a training program to address the language skills learners need for specific work situations and to structure the syllabus to reflect a series of such situations. The instructor acts as a model and guide, presenting task-related language and then providing support as learners work in pairs or small groups to complete activities using that language.

Task-based instruction is effective at all levels of language proficiency; the tasks are keyed to learners' workplace needs and skill levels (Oxford, 2001). For example, for the topic of workplace safety where English is the language of the workplace, learners at lower language skill levels might do pair role plays in which a longtime employee gives basic safety precautions (e.g., "Always wear your hardhat") to a new one, and then work in groups to create basic safety posters

for the workplace. Learners at more advanced levels might give individual or pair presentations on aspects of safety.

Adult Learning Theory and Learner-Centered Instruction

The approach profiled in this volume also builds on several principles of adult learning theory that have gained currency since the 1960s.

- Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
- Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives.
- Adult learning is problem centered rather than content oriented.
- Experience, including mistakes, provides the basis for learning.

These principles have led to the development of learner-centered instruction, an approach used by many effective training providers. In this approach, learners participate actively in every class session, developing and practicing language skills as they work together in teams or pairs on specific communication tasks and problems. The instructor models linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence at key points, then serves as a resource for learners as they practice the language themselves. Activities include role plays, group projects, and collaborative writing, and learners contribute to the curriculum by bringing communication challenges they have encountered in the workplace to class for discussion.

For example, in programs with a focus on oral communication, participants may role play interactions with coworkers and customers, practice turn-taking or initiating a topic in meetings, or make simulated sales presentations with videotaping for later review. In programs that focus on writing, participants may work in pairs to compare their writing styles to that of a model business document. All of these activities engage participants in authentic practice of work-related communication tasks.

Learner-centered instruction is effective because it enables participants to build on the knowledge and experience they already possess and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. By providing authentic opportunities for practice and problem solving, it simulates the real workplace, where employees must communicate and solve communication problems on their own. In this way, learner-centered instruction promotes the transfer of skills and knowledge from the classroom to the workplace.

■ The Role of Workplace Language Training in Human Resources Management and Public Policy

Executives and human resources managers who seek to make the most of available resources recognize employees as a company's human capital. The knowledge, skills, and other inherent qualities that employees possess are resources that contribute to the well-being of employees, the company for which they work, and their nation as a whole.

In assessing the economic impact of language skills, Chiswick (1996) notes that proficiency in the language of commerce, instruction, and government meets the three key requirements of human capital.

1. “It is embodied in the person” (p. 3): Language skills cannot be taken away from a person, unlike a tractor or tool.
2. “It is costly to create” (p. 3): Developing language skills requires an investment of time and (often) money.
3. “It is productive” (p. 3): Individuals, companies, and the national economy can see a return on this investment in the form of increased productivity in the labor market and improved quality of life.

Workplace language training gives companies a mechanism for increasing this essential form of human capital. Such training improves employment and earnings opportunities for employees as it increases their potential for contributing to the success of the company. Further, Chiswick (1996) notes, language training has a positive effect on “the aggregate human capital available to the economy” (p. 2).

This potential for high-level economic impact underscores the value of workplace language training programs. To achieve the greatest positive effect, however, workplace language training providers must continually strive to improve their services and programs. The effective practices described in this book illustrate approaches and methods that characterize such quality workplace language training providers.



Overview of Effective Practices in Workplace Language Training

The effective practices are organized into nine groups, with three to five subpractices under each major practice. Though necessary for topical reasons, this structure presents a potentially misleading sense of linearity. In fact, the process of establishing a relationship with a client, conducting needs assessments, designing and developing a training program, and evaluating outcomes is highly iterative. Provider and client often refine their understanding of needs as training, and the formative evaluation that accompanies it, proceed. In other words, the process of setting up and sustaining a workplace language training program is not linear, but overlapping and ongoing.

■ *Effective Practice 1: The workplace language training provider has an effective, current strategic plan*

Practice 1.1: articulate mission and values

Practice 1.2: identify internal strengths and weaknesses

Practice 1.3: analyze external opportunities and threats

Practice 1.4: set goals and create development and marketing strategies

■ *Effective Practice 2: The workplace language training provider conducts effective marketing activities*

Practice 2.1: understand the target market

Practice 2.2: educate the target market

Practice 2.3: develop effective, appropriate marketing materials and techniques

Practice 2.4: maintain a positive public image

■ **Effective Practice 3: The workplace language training provider builds a strong client relationship in conducting an organizational needs assessment and developing a proposed program and contract**

Practice 3.1: establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust

Practice 3.2: determine client needs, expectations, and goals

Practice 3.3: design a program

Practice 3.4: prepare and submit a proposal

Practice 3.5: negotiate the contract

■ **Effective Practice 4: The workplace language training provider provides quality program staff and appropriate staff support**

Practice 4.1: determine necessary staffing level and administrative structure of the program

Practice 4.2: recruit and select qualified staff

Practice 4.3: provide appropriate and effective staff support and development

■ **Effective Practice 5: The workplace language training provider conducts a comprehensive research-based instructional needs assessment**

Practice 5.1: define the rationale and framework for the assessment

Practice 5.2: involve all stakeholders in the assessment process

Practice 5.3: collect and analyze data on language use in the workplace

Practice 5.4: collect data on the oral and written language proficiency of (potential) participants

Practice 5.5: report the results of the instructional needs assessment to the client

■ **Effective Practice 6: The workplace language training provider creates a flexible, research-based instructional design**

Practice 6.1: translate program goals and instructional needs assessment into initial performance objectives

Practice 6.2: conduct a communication task/language analysis (CT/LA) for each task or topic area listed in the performance objectives

Practice 6.3: on the basis of principles of language learning and client priorities, develop an appropriate framework for sequencing topics and tasks

Practice 6.4: create an instructional schedule that accommodates participant and client needs

Practice 6.5: produce a written course document that allows for adjustment when necessary

■ **Effective Practice 7: The workplace language training provider develops and selects program-specific training materials and activities**

Practice 7.1: develop program-specific materials from those found in the workplace

Practice 7.2: augment developed materials with appropriate existing materials

Practice 7.3: plan activities that engage learners in the authentic practice of work-related language use

Practice 7.4: plan activities that engage learners in the authentic practice of work-related language use

Practice 7.5: plan for the appropriate use of available technology

■ **Effective Practice 8: The workplace language training provider delivers instruction that keeps participants involved and motivated**

Practice 8.1: use appropriate language teaching approaches

Practice 8.2: involve workplace supervisors and other staff appropriately

Practice 8.3: conduct formative evaluation and adjust curriculum as participant or client needs become clearer or change

Practice 8.4: monitor the training and maintain communication with the client

Practice 8.5: provide recognition of completion to participants and recognition of contributions to client representatives

■ **Effective Practice 9: The workplace language training provider conducts a program evaluation that relates program outcomes to program goals and serves as a guide for future training**

Practice 9.1: outline the reasons for evaluating the program

Practice 9.2: identify an effective evaluation model

Practice 9.3: define and implement appropriate evaluation mechanisms

Practice 9.4: provide a written report of evaluation results and recommendations for future training

Practice 9.5: conduct periodic follow-up