



*Valuable Resource or Idealism?
Using Case Studies to Find Answers*

English as a second language (ESL) is becoming a hotbed of conflict. This seemingly simple approach to solving multi-ethnic communication barriers is being debated because the applications are as diverse as the various ethnic cultures—and the success rate of traditional ESL programs is anything but impressive in actual application.

By F. DAVID PIERCE

CASE 1: TEMPORARY WORKER

A temporary employee worked as a dayshift janitor in a mid-size manufacturing plant. He wanted to excel at this simple assignment because if he did, he would likely become a permanent employee at the plant.

One of his tasks was to make the after-

There is a hidden reason for this conflict. Successfully meeting the ESL challenge forces people to face a long-standing problem in this society—and in the societies of those melding into the workplace. The four case studies in this article identify this problem and examine its effect on today's workplace.

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noon paper-recycling run. This entailed visiting offices scattered throughout the facility, retrieving stacks of tractor-fed computer paper and taking them (on a pushcart) to the paper shredder. Typically, he performed this task near the end of the workday, so he rarely encountered work activity along his route—in fact, it was usually deserted.

One day, however, he was about an hour early. He took his normal route, cheerfully greeting people at each stop. As he wheeled the paper-stacked cart back through the shop toward the shredder, he was captivated by all the action and working machines. He stopped to wonder where he might work if he became a permanent employee.

As he pushed through a darkened doorway, an unexpected event suddenly occurred. Having just entered into the area where workers were testing the large fans manufactured at the plant, the interconnected computer paper stacked on his cart began to move about with the air flow—toward the whirling fan blades. This was quickly creating a mess—and he simply could not let this happen. What if his supervisor saw the mess? He lunged, grasping wildly at the flying paper.

Unfortunately, he was losing the battle—and he was moving closer and closer to the unguarded blades of the rapidly whirling fan. No one will ever forget what they found when they went looking for him; they cannot erase the images from their minds.

An accident investigation was conducted as was an OSHA inspection. A few serious violations were noted, including the need for improved area protection and fan guarding. Many warning signs were already displayed and the company had provided extensive training to all temporary workers. Yet, OSHA concluded that since this worker was Hispanic and did not speak English well, the plant should install Spanish signs and use Spanish-language instruction materials. The company agreed and implemented the new program.

Like many accident investigations and compliance inspections, however, this investigation focused on the trees that need to be felled and by doing so, missed the forest. In other words, the recommended “fix” would treat the symptoms, but not the disease. OSHA’s solution—warning signs and training materials in Spanish—would not have prevented this tragedy. What everyone had missed was the fact that this employee could not read—in English or Spanish.

TODAY’S SITUATION

The equation for success in the 21st century is different than ever before. It requires a significant paradigm shift that leaves business leaders facing an obvious

choice—as well as hidden issues and consequences. The choice is simple: Either embrace change or do not. A choice to change means more work, increased dedication, refusing to contract responsibilities, discovery, growth and eventually, business success. Saying no to change means maintaining the status quo, stubbornly holding on to antiquated paradigms, not taking on additional work, atrophy, and eventual conflict and failure.

Although the emerging equation is complex in total, it is strangely simple in its parts. When told that true team-based organizations are key to success, many would probably yawn and say, “What else is new?” In other words, this shift is readily accepted. Yet, two facets are often either overlooked or overly simplified (or perhaps ignored):

1) Effective internal communication is critical.

2) Ethnic/language diversity is at an all-time high—and expanding.

How these facts are acted upon either allows successful teams to develop and thrive or casts teams hopelessly adrift. The latter dooms team efforts, wastes resources and makes people ultra-myopic to the obvious. If these issues are not successfully confronted, an organization is sentenced to increased problems with controlling costs, quality, injuries, meeting customer needs and ultimately, being successful.

In many organizations, these two dynamics work against each other. Why do so few companies navigate these realities with ease and success? In the next two cases, the companies involved took traditional approaches (as many have) to this new challenge and failed. The company in Case 4, however, took a different approach and succeeded in building effective internal communication in an ultra-diverse workplace. At the same time, the company forged the organizational process that would continue to build a successful future and ensure employee safety.

CASE 2: TRADITIONAL ESL APPROACH

As with most companies, the workforce had significantly changed at this mid-size manufacturing facility. In less than three years, the percentage of non-English-speaking workers had grown from under 10 percent to more than 50 percent. Over time, simple work communication had begun to suffer, training was failing, and resulting injuries and quality errors had sharply increased. Things had to change.

Calling on resources from the community college, a simple answer was offered as the firm’s panacea: “You need to implement an ESL program immediately.” Like many companies, this facility did just that, launching a massive human resource/training effort. It hired instruc-

tors and established ESL classes. Each employee’s English communication ability was measured using a validatable tool; those who fell below an “acceptable” competency level were scheduled to attend a weekly ESL class.

Six months later, the company determined that the effort had failed. English skill levels were not significantly better, and injuries and quality errors remained high. The decision-makers concluded that thousands of dollars had been wasted and ordered that the ESL classes be stopped. The company returned to traditional American fixes: it began to discipline workers who made errors or were injured; mandated English as *the* language; and began to hire only English-speaking workers.

It would be nice to report that this case is unusual or that most ESL efforts are highly effective. Unfortunately, many ESL efforts fail or make such slow progress that they are perceived to be failures (which, at best, is merely settling for any progress as rationalization to continue). But ESL programs cannot live by different rules in today’s business world where performance measurement and program accountability rule. In today’s business world, if a program does not perform or does not add value, it must be eliminated.

Valuable lessons can be learned from this experience, however. What caused this all-too-common end result? Could things have been done differently to achieve a better result?

CASE 3: “OBVIOUS” MESSAGE MISSED

A company that had been successful for 100 years was reinventing itself. The CEO knew that to continue this trend, traditional ways had to change—drastically. A consultant was hired to assess what the firm was, what it needed to become and how to get there.

Change was not a small word to this company—it was huge. One manager likened the needed change to taking the radiator cap off a 1932 Ford and driving a Lamborghini under it. From management philosophy to the manufacturing floor, everything had to change.

The company prided itself on its “family” culture; it was integral to the firm’s identity. Workers representing 10 different ethnic cultures—many of whom were long-term employees—were members of this family. Any changes to workforce skills or expectations would have to transform these employees into the workforce of the future.

A plan was carefully crafted. Training began, and the vision and needed changes were heralded. Descriptions of where the firm had to go and what it would look like were displayed on banners throughout the company, visible everywhere. It was impossible to miss the message or under-

estimate its importance—or so management thought.

Just as the change effort was ready to accelerate, it came to a screeching halt. The workers simply would have nothing to do with it—they refused to change. The CEO was shocked. He was faced with choosing between a vision that would ensure future success and the firm's family values. Were these two dynamics at opposition to each other?

New tactics were tried. Larger banners, electric boards, signs and posted memos were used in attempts to persuade employees, and their input was actively solicited. Yet their collective message remained an emphatic "no."

Why did this happen? Everyone knew that without this change process, the company would eventually fail. What were the decision-makers missing? Was this simply resistance to change?

In reality, what occurred is reflected in the saying, "When you are up to your waist in water and the hungry alligators are snapping, it is a difficult time to remember that your original intent was to drain the swamp." Management was trying to keep the alligators at bay using old management paradigms, gross assumptions about the workplace (swamp) and traditional approaches. A crucial point about the work environment was missed. This was not a message, direction or strategy problem. Although English speaking and comprehension abilities were involved, the real problem was even more basic: Established leaders within the workforce did not understand the message that management thought was so clear, because many in the workforce were secretly English illiterate.

CASE 4: THIS ONE GETS IT

This company found that 81 percent of its production workers did not speak English as their primary language—up from 15 percent only four years earlier. The company pointed to this change as a primary reason for a measurable increase in quality errors (up 220 percent), injuries (185 percent of the comparable industry average), high turnover and increased conflict in the workplace.

The firm had always employed some non-English-speaking employees, but it recognized that the current group was different. Previously, most of these employees had lived in a split society where they spoke both English and their native language. Thus, the learning challenge was placed on the employee, who had to survive in an English-speaking environment. The predominant belief was that to succeed, one had to learn and speak English.

For the firm's current employees, however, their native language was also their primary language. As a result,

English was *not* necessary for their day-to-day survival. In many cases, they continued to speak their native language at home *and* in their accepted communities. Consequently, the challenge of learning English was passed from employee to employer because work was the only place where these employees needed to speak and understand English. In workplaces where a large segment of workers speak a common non-English language, this impact is further exacerbated.

CASE COMPARISON & ANALYSIS

Sadly, like the Case 2 company, some employers remain oblivious to the changes and problems. They simply do not see the trees or the forest until they get a face full of wood. Others see the changes and are either naive about the changing environment or choose "easier," less-effective paths:

Path 1: Ignore it and communicate minimally or with sign-type language. In today's workplace—where work is increasingly technical and where team structures are becoming critical—this approach stratifies the work environment and forms a lower caste, where no English is spoken, and the more-highly skilled/leader level, where English is spoken. This creates a "ceiling" above which those who cannot communicate with the "leaders" will not rise.

Path 2: Learn to speak a different language (such as Spanish) "adequately," then hire only workers who speak that language. This is an illegal hiring practice and forms an "accepted" caste system in the workplace. The true problem with this approach, however, is that communication becomes ineffective in that Spanish (in this example) is never truly mastered by the "leaders"; as a result, communication never rises above basic levels. Additionally, with the many different ethnic cultures and languages present in today's workplaces, this path is doomed from the start.

Path 3: Allow either turnover or "planned" attrition to rid the organization of non-English-speaking employees while hiring only English-speaking applicants. This is a shortsighted solution that ignores the problem, wastes employee investment, devalues diversity and places unrealistic expectations on the chosen future "fix."

Path 4: Implement a traditional ESL approach. As noted, these efforts often struggle to be effective.

All of these strategies fail to recognize one critical issue: Illiteracy is at an all-time high. Ignoring this problem or applying traditional solutions does not eliminate the roadblocks to communication. Furthermore, these approaches fail to face the new reality of today's world.

The Case 4 company understood this



Key Literacy Facts

In 1992, the U.S. Dept. of Education's National Center for Education Statistics conducted the National Adult Literacy Survey. Some 13,600 individuals age 16 and older were interviewed. Another survey is scheduled for 2002. The 1992 findings offer valuable insight into this problem.

- 21 to 23 percent—some 40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the U.S.—demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document and quantitative proficiencies.

- 25 percent of those who performed at this level were immigrants who may have been just learning to speak English.

- Literacy proficiencies of young adults (age 21 to 25) were somewhat lower, on average, than proficiencies of young adults who participated in a 1985 literacy survey. According to NCES, "these performance discrepancies are probably due in large part to changes in the demographic composition of the population—in particular the dramatic increase in the percentages of young Hispanic adults, many of whom were born in other countries and are learning English as a second language.

- Individuals demonstrating higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed, work more weeks per year and earn higher wages than those demonstrating lower proficiencies.

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new reality. Today more than ever, it is the employer's responsibility to help employees succeed and improve their abilities so they can function in this "melting pot" society in which English remains the primary language. This is truly an investment process that focuses on the key resource of any organization—its people.

This company also recognized that turnover constituted a loss of talent which crippled its advancement. Talent is too expensive to willingly replace and rebuild. Furthermore, to ensure employee acceptance, a company cannot approach turnover as "just the way things go."

This is not just fixing a safety problem (Case 1) or solving quality and internal communication problems (Case 2); nor is it a non-problem (Case 3).

This problem requires a more holistic approach. The first step the Case 4 company took was to acknowledge that it had to take action to meet its responsibilities to both society and its non-English-speaking employees. As dictated by today's market pressures, it is the only decision that makes sense.

The company passed through this critically important decision-point and changed the way it approached a "solution." It was not a "win some/lose some" issue; the solution was a critical component for future success. Passing through this important junction, the question simply became, how do we accomplish this responsibility?

Its first attempt was traditional—the firm offered ESL classes. Like most other companies, management was "surprised" when no one took advantage of them. It was clinging to an idealistic belief about learning English skills—in essence, "If you build it, they will come."

However, nothing was "driving" the firm's employees to learn English. In fact, everything in their individual world caused them to resist involvement. Their "community" supported them; they could communicate well in non-work settings; and accepting such a learning challenge was frightening (as it is for many adults due to factors such as age, experience and feelings of inability).

Many employers have experienced this "first wave" shock effect and in response, have abandoned the effort. In many ways, this is a natural response. In effect, the company says, "If you won't play the game by my rules, then I'm taking my ball and going home." It repre-

sents both a "head in the sand" and a frustration point. The company in Case 4, however, chose a different path.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO COMPETENCIES

The Case 4 company decided to overcome this seeming impasse—English skill need versus employee commitment—using a systems approach (Scholtes; Deming). Management examined all elements or parts of work and delivery that made up the system and impacted success. These parts fell into three areas: environment, culture and vehicle.

This approach was the primary reason the company's effort succeeded. Most companies focus solely on learning vehicles, but this is not a problem that a company can simply throw money and resources at. To succeed, the culture and environment must be changed, then the vehicle matched to that emerging workplace dynamic.

As noted, in attempts to prompt some English skill-building before addressing the environment and culture (much like large ships take time to turn), this company first tried several traditional ESL methods. Employees were paid to attend ESL classes, but they did not learn. The company stressed the need to learn English, but the employees did not embrace it. The company then sent employees to outside ESL classes, yet they either did not attend or did not learn.

Despite their failure, these preliminary efforts set the stage for—and in many ways fueled—the necessary changes in the work environment.

Changing the Environment

To augment success, the scope of ESL was expanded to include EFL (English as a first language) for those who had not mastered foundational skills (such as reading). To accomplish this, all personnel were involved in measuring English ability and learning the language. The company made six interactive and interdependent changes in the work "environment."

Initial English Skills

First, to be hired, an applicant had to have some English ability or be aggressively working (by documentable actions) to build such skills. The firm developed a subjective tool that divided English communication skill into a 0 to 5 scale where 0 equaled an inability to speak, read and understand the language, and 5 equaled

complete mastery. A 2 level was the minimum standard for applicant entry, and a 3 level was preferred.

Those who could not qualify or had a documentable history of individual English learning were encouraged to learn on their own and re-apply. It was believed that advancement in English skill or an active personal effort to learn showed that the applicant recognized the importance of mastering English and that s/he was committed to the process of learning.

Official Work Language

Second, English was established as the company's "official workplace communicating language." This did not mean use of other languages was banned; in fact, speaking one's native language in personal settings was encouraged. But, when dealing with work issues, English was the "official" language. To establish a baseline, all employees were surveyed using the 0 to 5 rating scale. It was determined that the average level of English mastery was less than 2 (1.27); this meant that on average, employees knew some English words (not many) but struggled to communicate and understand English, or could read some English, but not much.

Promotions

Third, the company established—and widely publicized—a new practice for promotions. Under this process, attaining a higher-paying job/promotion was tied to several "competencies," one of which was to develop written and verbal English communication skills.

Performance Appraisals

Fourth, a new performance appraisal system was developed. It was objective rather than subjective and not attached to pay increases. Semi-annual performance appraisals were dedicated to positively "building" employees and their skills (competencies).

Pay-For-Performance

Fifth, a true pay-for-performance process was devised. In this process, employees could choose to advance (or not) by how they welcomed and succeeded in job skill-building opportunities. Each job was carefully analyzed to identify the knowledge and skills required to successfully perform that job. Communication was one of those skills. Step-by-step expectations were established for work perfor-

mance that would constitute "full qualification" in the job and establish an objective measure of job mastery. These were then tied to the pay advancement structure—pay increases were tied to accomplishing agreed-upon actions and attaining established levels of job performance.

Competency Development

Sixth, the company provided opportunities for employees to develop competencies—including English communication skills—onsite, either before or after work hours. Often, these opportunities were tied to the mutually agreed-upon performance appraisal actions established between the employee and his/her supervisor. They were designed to respond to the level of employee interest. Employees were not paid for their time because this was viewed as a personal development issue—the employee needed to share in the investment. The company provided the resources and schedule convenience; employees provided their time, attention, effort and desire to learn.

It should be noted that it takes time to change the work environment. Only with time can programs be created, leadership skills developed and employee acceptance achieved. This company recognized that patience, consistency and drive were critical. This could not be a "program of the month."

Changing the Culture

Significant changes in culture were also required. Teams and team communications were implemented. Employees were barraged with English communications and challenged to contribute. Teams became supportive of team members learning and mastering the language, and openly celebrated accomplishment.

Internal communication—in both spoken and written English forms—about the company, markets, sales and economic performance increased and the company challenged employees to understand it. Upper management took daily walks through work areas, speaking socially with the employees in order to acknowledge—and encourage—their increasing abilities in English.

Most importantly, this company developed a learning culture among its workers (Senge; Garvin) that helped them build skills in many areas of interest. For example, an onsite computer lab was created and made available to employees for work, learning or personal use. Classes on how to pass the U.S. citizenship test were offered. Math, finance and retirement planning classes and information were provided. The message to employees was "learn everything you can so you can be successful here, in your community and in your life."

Changing the Learning Vehicle

The vehicle (how the company provided learning opportunities, especially in ESL) went through a significant metamorphosis. First, the firm learned that traditional classroom styles were not effective with this work population, and actually impeded the learning process.

The company then began to seek creative ways to immerse employees in the English language. In the resulting classes, employees read, discussed grammar, created sentences, conjugated verbs, and acted out the meaning of words in group sessions matched to attendees' skill levels and ethnic backgrounds. The company uses voluntary employee mentors to coach English learning (and currently hires no "professional" teachers or instructors). Mentors guide the learning process, and work with other mentors to create new learning strategies.

Each group meets weekly and each participant completes regular homework assignments. Each group steers its own curriculum to cover topics of interest to group members or to focus on problem areas. During group sessions, employees help others with reading or pronunciation and openly celebrate accomplishment. Many different texts are used, including newspapers, the monthly company newsletter, elementary-level readers, chapters from books on special subjects such as irregular verbs and information from the Internet.

AN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

What this company discovered is that learning is a continuum—not just a single event. Most who started the process continue along the path of learning each week. Individual students may shift from one group to another (depending on skill advancement or work schedule), but they stay in the program.

Currently, all of the firm's production workers are voluntarily participating. In addition, many native English speakers have joined the classes to improve their communication skills.

Performance measurement is a key component of all processes in this company (Grief)—and English mastery is included as a measure. The mastery level in English rose from 1.27 to almost 3 (2.78) in the first year of this program and increased to 3.65 in year two.

Additionally, both turnover and absenteeism rates are at an all-time company low—and well under industry and area averages. This translates to increased job security and better pay, excellent quality and production performance, increased process dependability and higher profits.

Furthermore, according to the company's workers' compensation insurance carrier, the company's safety perfor-

mance is "impressive" as well. Injury rates are at an all-time low—0.15 percent of industry average—and direct and indirect injury- and illness-related costs are much lower than ever before.

Where does this company see English skill development in the future? Since the firm has embraced team-based continuous improvement as part of its organizational culture, it believes that the future rests in the hands of the team and the dynamics of continuous improvement. For example, the company is expanding its computer lab and reference library to meet employee needs.

ESL, or this company's version of it, is now part of the culture—a measurable action toward meeting the company's responsibilities to employees and society. The process is no longer referred to as ESL because that label places the program in a "box" defined by traditional approaches. As the company explains, "We don't have ESL. We have a learning culture and many forms of skill and competency enhancement dedicated to our employees. English is only one part of the whole system." ■

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