

TEACHING ENGLISH AT A CORPORATE LEVEL

Cătălin DRĂCȘINEANU¹

¹Univ. Lect. PhD, "Petre Andrei" University, Iași, Romania

Corresponding author: Cătălin Drăcșineanu; e-mail: catalindracsineanu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Teaching English at a corporate level raises a wide range of challenges due to the fast-paced rhythm of change in companies, market structure and dynamics. It differs in many ways from lessons held in an academic environment (schools or universities) due to a shifted authority/control balance and to different expectations regarding speedy outcomes. The business environment is much more agile and flexible than in schools and whereas teachers and professors have well-established curricula and a nation-based program, trainers should design their own courses, even if they are part of a larger team within a dedicated company that delivers language courses to businesses.

Keywords: *Business English, corporate training, language courses, continuous learning, micro-learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most conspicuous corollaries of globalization is the fact that citizens all around the world have turned to the English language as a universal means of communication, not only to share or exchange work-related information more efficiently but also to manage various social contexts, from holidays to international private visits. In this context, an increasing number of companies are offering English courses among other company perks to stimulate, train and motivate their employees, on the one hand, and to maximize the impact on the international markets, on the other hand. According to a Training Industry Report, only in US the total training expenditure (which includes the budget allocated by companies for training activities, spending on training-related technology, and the salaries paid to internal training staff) reached 83 billion dollars in 2019 (STATISTA, 2020), which means that more and more companies are actively seeking to increase the competence and productivity of the employees and to eliminate performance problems. This has invariably led to the issue of assessing the training effectiveness

(SCHAEFER, 2015) and trainers are expected to submit an accurate description of the performance and skill improvements to the company management. However, teaching English to adults varies significantly from teaching it to pupils or students due to a whole series of cognitive, behavioral and methodological factors that influence the process of teaching (PARRISH, 2004). The goal of this article is to provide certain insights on the array of factors that have an impact on corporate training as well as to suggest some practical steps to facilitate and improve the trainer's experience.

2. MAIN FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CORPORATE TRAINING

While there is no uniform opinion in the literature regarding the exact factors that influence the success rate of a training program in general (or of an English course for that matter), it is safe to say that both the trainer and the trainees play a significant role. It would be simplistic to assume that an expert trainer is the only ingredient in the success of a course or that the motivation and enthusiasm of the trainees can compensate for a lack on the trainer's experience. Regarding trainees, most professionals in the field point to motivation as a key ingredient in learning a new language; however, there is also a lack of consensus on the notion of motivation, as it has been argued that the complexity behind the concept of motivation lies in the attempts to elaborate persons' actions on behavior which cannot be explained by just one approach. On the other hand, other critics argue that the difficulty in grasping motivation is not the absence of theories, but on the contrary, the plenitude of theories and models (DORNYEI,

1996). Among other factors that have a direct impact on a trainee's successful assimilation of the subject matter are an intrinsic curiosity and desire to learn, their attitude, emotional intelligence or the support received from the management and their peers. It is the responsibility of each company to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each employee, to motivate or to find the right key to strike in order to optimize the development of its staff. This article will focus mainly on some of the main factors attributable to trainers: *open-mindedness, the training style, adaptability, positive reinforcement and continuous learning*.

3. WHAT CAN/SHOULD A TRAINER DO?

While arguably a prerequisite of any field and discipline, *open-mindedness* (defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as the "quality of being willing to consider ideas and opinions that are new or different to your own") is crucial in delivering trainings to corporations. Every new project should be approached with caution, openness and tolerance. Just as there are no two similar individuals, there are no two similar companies and the nature, structure, length and architecture of the entire course should be designed individually, to address the exact needs and to respond to the specificity of each company. A training company or a trainer with fixed, rigid ideas who tries to drill a certain structure into the client company, following the "I know better/I am a specialist in the field" pattern is unlikely to be successful on the long term. On the contrary, the advisable approach should be open communication with the company's representative, to identify the needs and achievable goals of each employee who takes part to the training process (HARE, 1981). Even if a trainer specializes in a certain field (such as banking or IT, for instance), the context, background, expectations and the employer-employee relationship vary greatly from one company to the other. Open mindedness is about avoiding stereotyping, prejudgment and overgeneralizations while developing a habit of seeking out multiple perspectives. It is more of an umbrella concept that a trainer builds in time

and that is reflected in every training session, in every response to the trainees' questions and opinion. It is the constant interaction between the trainer and the trainee that makes for the success of a course and being open to the suggestions, perspectives and comments of the others is a constitutive part of a high-quality training session.

One of the most striking differences between teaching in an academic environment and teaching in a commercial environment relates to the *teaching style*. Too many times English trainers simply replicate their regular behavior from class and position themselves as they would in front of pupils or students. Apart from the fact that adults adopt an entirely different attitude towards learning than students, using an academic style in corporate training leads to confusion, dullness and loss of concentration/motivation on the part of the trainees. Trainers need to detach themselves from the academic vision and take on a more practical, even ludic approach to teaching. Although far from the ideal attitude, it is not uncustomary for a teacher to sit down in front of the class and simply read a lecture or a lesson to their audience, which would be simply suicidal in corporate training. A trainer needs to show active involvement, dynamism and flexibility in their teaching; whereas in the academic world a teacher can rely on discipline and cursivity in their classes, at corporate level interruptions are frequent, disruptions are common and there can be a continuous tumult and murmur in the class due to impossible-to-reject calls or documents to be signed (it is worth mentioning that more than 60% of the target trainees belong to the middle to top management, according to a survey conducted among the members of the Training Magazine in US (FREIFELD, 2019)). Thus, the teaching style should be fluid, down to earth and to anticipate the trainees' future use of English inside their organization (focused more on written or oral English, for instance). In many cases, the accent on vocabulary should be counterintuitive; when teaching to lower intermediate employees, they show good command of the terms related to the business segment they are active in but show difficulties in maintaining a conversation on more mundane

topics, such as a diner at a restaurant, a visit to the doctor or a free discussion on various topics of geography, history or politics.

Another indispensable feature of trainers is *adaptability*, or the capacity to change to suit a specific set of circumstances. In the corporate world change is on everyone's agenda and there are always unexpected twists and turns that tamper with the regular teaching process. Group structure can change on the go, attendance is fluctuant, last-minute postponements or even cancellations are unavoidable. There may even appear modifications in the course goal and objectives, as companies are permanently adapting to the market requirements. Adaptability is not a mere change or adjustment to a situation; it also entails a smooth transition and a compliance with the deadlines without any major setbacks (MCKEOWN, 2012; CHAN, 2014). The word on the lips of every corporate professional is "deliver": one needs to do what needs to be done regardless of the changes in track or pitfalls on the way. The business environment is years apart in terms of rapid implementation and ongoing modification of processes and procedures compared to the public (even private) educational system. There is a certain sluggishness in any centralized systems which are less agile and flexible than private, individual companies that need to survive or strive on a day to day basis.

Positive reinforcement or active encouragement (FAVELL, 1977) is a key element in raising the trainees' level of confidence. A lack of trust in one's abilities to properly speak or otherwise communicate efficiently in English is widespread among those who resort to foreign language courses. Oral expression of any language is a real challenge for a lot of trainees and, as long as they can manage better in writing, it could be more of a mental block than a problem with their level. Continuous positive feedback is helpful in this regard and trainers should be able to level the trainees' expectations with the reality since most of the times they have unrealistic expectations from themselves and perhaps make undesirable comparisons with more advanced speakers or even natives. They need to set reasonable goals and gradually

increase their speaking abilities by constant practice, ideally without too many interruptions in rhythm. Progress is quantifiable and once they are aware of the assimilated knowledge, they become less reluctant to speak and more willing to try to put that knowledge to use.

Continuous learning. Teaching English at a corporate level involves dealing with many sectors of activity and being exposed to a larger number of new, completely and randomly novel environments than a typical foreign language graduate is. From agriculture to industry, from banking to the IT sector and from the retail sector to the world of private practices (lawyers, accountants, service providers), there is no limit to the challenges that await a typical trainer. Mastering the common and less common vocabulary in every niche is a daunting task for any trainer but this is what differentiates a good trainer from an excellent trainer. Although rather indulgent when it comes to technical terminology, companies nevertheless expect foreign language trainers to speak their lingo and to be knowledgeable in their industry, at least at a conversational level. As mentioned above, the business environment can be perceived sometimes as ruthless and questions related to specific terms and jargon can always pop up during a regular training session. Obviously, there is no crime in not knowing one or two words, but it raises doubts on the trainer's competence to respond with a shrug to all technical inquiries.

4. PRACTICAL STEPS TO IMPROVE CORPORATE ENGLISH TRAINING

Commonly referred to as "Business English Training", corporate English teaching can be both interesting and rewarding. Although teaching in-company employees requires a variety of skills and techniques, it mostly boils down to good preparation and a professional approach. Regardless of the challenges, a well-prepared trainer should be able to dodge all the pitfalls of this activity by *anticipating* what could go wrong, what difficulties they might run into and the type of changes that could occur in the

regular delivering of such trainings. A key factor in the success of a training session is therefore a thorough preparation of various back-up plans by the trainer, who can find themselves in unexpected situations (the number of trainees varies, the location may be different, without access to video projectors or whiteboards, etc.). As there is always room for improvement, a trainer should always keep an eye open to tips and best practices around the world and keep themselves up to date with the latest developments in the field. The tips below are intended to improve training effectiveness and the overall quality of the service provided and related to *public speaking* and providing *adequate assessment* for the trainee's progress.

It would be a wise idea for trainers to attend a *public speaking* course. Great teachers are usually great speakers who manage to get the message across to their students and make a memorable impression on them. We hear stories all the time about dedicated teachers who managed to influence their students' way of thinking, and ultimately their lives, in many subtle and profound ways. Perhaps one of the main advantages that come from a public speaking experience is that trainers learn to blend in emotion with knowledge: great teachers or trainers are those who can stimulate both the brain and the heart. There needs to be a balance between the two and what an audience perceives as a good trainer is often a subjective opinion based on the quality of communication and the ease of sharing both knowledge and positive feelings between the trainer and the trainee. Communication must be honest, open and it should allow a constant and *quantifiable assessment* of the trainees' progress. The efficiency of a course is dictated by reaching certain milestones and a practical way to prove progress (both to the eyes of the trainees and of the management) is to have two similar, customized tests, one at the beginning of the course and the other at the end, which is a powerful tool that increases the trainees' confidence in themselves and in the trainer. With constant assessment and positive reinforcement, the trainees feel more motivated and the level of their participation in the class raises exponentially.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching English at a corporate level varies in many ways from teaching it in an academic environment and it comes with an entire set of challenges and features that need to be paid appropriate consideration. Factors such as age, motivation, purpose or strict deadlines have a strong impact on the trainees' attitude towards learning, while a trainer's open mindedness, flexibility, adaptability and communication skills account for the success or failure of an English course taught for businesses. The economic environment plays according to its own rules and many traditional methodological methods that work in schools are not appropriate for the business world, forcing the trainer to acquire a new set of skills to respond to the market's needs. While in many countries foreign language courses have a long history and there is plenty of information on the subject, in Romania the practice of corporate teaching is still in its youth and more research is needed on the subject. New concepts appear on a regular basis, such as the concept of micro-learning, which involves short-term activities, small learning units and a lot of personal practice under the supervision of a trainer and these need to be understood and adapted to the specificity of the Romanian market.

References

- CHAN, D. (2014) *Individual Adaptability to Changes at Work*, Organization and Management Series, London: Routledge.
- DÖRNYEI, Z. (1996) *Moving language learning motivation to a larger platform for theory and practice*. In: Oxford, R. L., Ed., *Language learning motivation: Pathways to the new century*. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press. pp. 71-80.
- FAVELL, J.E. (1977) *The Power of Positive Reinforcement: A Handbook of Behavior Modification*, Thomas Publishing House, 1977, 51-57
- FREIFELD, L. (2019) 2019 Training Industry Report. Available from: <https://trainingmag.com/trgmag-article/2019-training-industry-report/> [29 April 2020].
- HARE, W. (1981) Open-Mindedness and Education. *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 15(1): 82-85.
- MCKEOWN, M. (2012) *Adaptability: The Art of Winning in an Age of Uncertainty*. London: Kogan Page.

PARISH, B. (2004) *Teaching Adult ESL: A Practical Introduction (Cambridge Handbooks for English Teachers)*. New York:McGraw-Hill Education.

SCHAEFER, L. (2015) Measuring the effectiveness of employee training. Available from: <http://www.skilledup.com/insights/measuring-effectiveness-employee-training> [22 March 2020].

STATISTA (2020) Total training expenditures in the United States from 2012 to 2019 (in billion U.S. dollars) Report. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/788521/training-expenditures-united-states/> [29 April 2020].