

PAE Newsletter

ESP Notes from the Field: Technology and the Corporate Training Room

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English for Specific Purposes (ESP) trainers in corporate settings often deliver language and communication training in state-of-the-art conference rooms that include sophisticated conference calling systems and excellent projection capabilities. Many ESP program participants use such technology on a daily basis in their work. ESP trainers, however, may struggle use such technology in pedagogically meaningful and innovative ways during training.

My colleague, Margaret Lyman, and I have developed several effective training modules that capitalize on the technology tools available – particularly conference call systems. Here is one example of what we do:

At a recent set of onsite classes for a client with teams of market analysts in India, China, Taiwan and Korea, we used the company's conference call system to record conference calls during class sessions among training participants and their managers. We then used the recording of that call for 'training purposes' – just like the recorded message says sometimes when you first call a company for help!

The activity works well with advanced level NNSs – or virtually fluent native-like speakers (see India), but we have also done this with intermediate level speakers in corporate settings and they have found it helpful as well.

Here are some pointers if you want to try such an activity in your training situation.

As a lead up to the conference call activity...

Introduce language and communication behaviors over several training sessions.

Since so much communication among our global teams occurs via conference call, we spent a significant amount of training time before the conference call activity working on what we call 'conference call communication behaviors'. This included a series of short activities (about an hour each) that focused on:

- Demonstrating interest in others on the conference call
- Formulating 'analytical' questions that deepen discussions
- Responding to questions by
 - Clarifying the question (if necessary)
 - Acknowledging the question and demonstrating understanding
 - Responding succinctly and
 - Finishing with a 'toss back'

- Active listening
- Speaking succinctly when making points or presenting information

Set up the call with a manager. In companies with global teams, managers or colleagues regularly hold conference calls in which they:

- share information with colleagues (using a ‘deck’ of slides) about new products or company services
- get or give updates on clients
- get or give information about ongoing projects or business processes

Before the course began, we contacted managers of our course participants and asked them if they would be willing to conduct a 15-30 minute conference call with the group on a topic of their choosing. While some managers were too busy, most were delighted to participate. It helped that we had already established credibility and trust by asking for manager input during the assessment process.

Arrange to record the call. Corporate conference calls are set up on internal conferencing systems that usually allow the call to be recorded. We asked the person setting up the call to check a box on their internal system that allowed the call to be recorded. The system allowed us to receive a temporary password so that we could download the .mp3 file of the recorded call within 72 hours of the call being completed. We were then able to play highlights from the call in the next class using free software like Audacity to edit it into smaller, usable chunks.

The Conference Call

Manager role. Managers were asked to provide a simple rationale for the call. One manager pulled together 11 slides that showed the features of a new product the company had developed. He wanted input on the product from the team (the class) in Beijing, since their clients would be using the product.

Course participants. The class was divided into two groups of four people (with less than six people, we would just have one group). The first group was on the call for the first ten minutes while the second group observed and took notes on communication behaviors. Then, the two groups switched roles. For the group on the call, one person was the facilitator, responsible for managing time, involving others as needed and staying on agenda. This scenario does not mimic exactly the typical call for the participants, but it is often the first time they have been responsible for anything other than responding to questions during a call. The learning from that experience alone can be significant. The trainer also took notes on all behaviors AND had the authority to jump in and address communication issues if a teachable moment presented itself during the call.

After the call ended, we first asked the participants to reflect on their experience. This reinforces for them that their own assessment of their communication is valued. Then we asked the manager (who had called in) to comment on his or her perception of the call.

Finally, the trainer provided feedback and the class reviewed their notes as observers of each other. Language learning can be significant in this activity, though often, participants are more concerned with questions about behaviors, such as these:

- How do I jump into the conversation?
- How do I stop myself from speaking in long chunks?
- What do I do when I get lost in the conversation?
- How do I respond to jokes?
- Is it impolite to ... say my manager's name or a client's name? To disagree? To correct a factual error by my manager?

Follow up activities. Reviewing the audio of a 20-30 minute conference call can take several hours. However, the material generated can fill the entire next class and beyond. Tools like Audacity allow one to create short clips that provide excellent, real examples of communication behaviors you want participants to correct or emulate. As a teacher preparing the audio, listen to the recording once through and write down the time in the conversation of examples you want to share with the class. Select no more than ten examples, using the editing function of Audacity but use only five in the follow up class session.

Final thoughts. Language and communication training in corporate settings is most effective when the chosen activities allow program participants to recognize the immediate, practical applications of what was learned or practiced during a class session.

The activity described above allows participants to communicate in class using the same technology tools they use every day at work. The activity allows trainers to provide much needed feedback that participants don't get otherwise from colleagues and supervisors. But most importantly, the activity allows program participants to listen to themselves – most often for the first time, reflect on how they engage in conference calls and, with the support of the trainer, function more effectively the next time they have to do it 'for real' at work.

For more information on this activity and other ways to approach training in an onsite corporate setting, contact David Kertzner – 503-231-2906 or dkertzner@proactive-english.com

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