

Rethinking English language training

Corporations seeking to implement language training are often left to sort through an array of methods, tools, and providers that may or may not help them achieve even a portion of their goals. As a result, they may prefer to leave things as they are, offering English as a benefit in the hope that the company will benefit too (wishful thinking), or cancel English altogether (ostrich thinking). This article explores a third alternative: having a strategic plan for English training.

Such a strategic plan should be based on corporate goals of efficiency and productivity, with results subject to measurement. The upside down Kirkpatrick model does exactly that. It starts with the desired results and then works its way back to build the actual training program. It's upside down, but it makes perfect sense!

Here is the step-by-step process:

1. Determine what success looks like in the eyes of senior management.

Senior management defines the expectations which the training program needs to deliver on. This way success is defined as ROE (Return on Expectations).

2. Determine critical behaviors to achieve that success.

These are the sustainable changes in behavior that must be observed after training has been completed.

3. Determine the required knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) to perform the new on-the-job behaviors.

This sets the language proficiency expectations at entrance level as achieving this using in-company training would be too time-consuming and costly.

4. Determine the set-up of the training to ensure effectiveness, engagement

and enjoyment.

Training should take place at the company during working hours. The style must be practical, interactive and fun.

5. Design and build learning programs to achieve the targeted outcomes.

Ideally a joint effort of the language provider and the project's owner (preferably a training specialist). Lesson plans should be company specific.

6. Start of English training.

Teachers should clearly state the objective of each session, align the expectations of the participants with those of the company and collect feedback for evaluation.

If acquiring skills does not make individuals more valuable, training is not worth it.

Michael Schrage (2008)

Let's look at a concrete example to see how this works in practice:

Senior management has determined that a high number of escalations hinders productivity and places

unnecessary burdens on first-line managers.

The step-by-step process:

1. Success through the eyes of senior management: Reduce number of escalations.
2. Critical behavior: Employees resolve conflicts without escalating to their managers.
3. KSA's: active listening, finding common ground, assertive communication, firm but polite emails, agreeing/disagreeing, difficult phone calls.
4. Possible set-ups: 1-day training (escalation module) or set of separate skill lessons (skills are not limited to escalations only).
5. Lesson plans: Show where conflict arises, where it escalates and how it can be avoided by using the right language and form of communication. Introduce related language and practice through activities. Role-play frequently occurring situations. Monitor and provide feedback.
6. Delivery: "Today we are going to look at the language used in active listening." (objective) "What do you expect to take away from this lesson and how will this help you in your job? (expectations) What will you do different from now on? (evaluation)

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English training that is planned, designed, executed and evaluated to fulfill expectations will make your organization more competitive in the marketplace.

The current times of tightening budgets and competitive challenges calls for creative solutions and action. Companies should not wait until the market is ready, but take the initiative to improve their English training programs and then find a provider that can execute them. Or, as Wayne Gretzky put it: "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been." I suggest you do the same. And be sure to find a language provider that can skate with you.



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