

Issues with Outcomes in Workplace ESL Programs

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Background

In 2000, according to data from the U.S. Census, 12% of the U.S. labor force was foreign born. Over one fifth of these worker (22%) held jobs in the service industry, 18.3% worked in factories or as laborers, 21.1 % worked in service occupations, and 12.6% worked in construction or as mechanics and repairers. However, immigrants were under-represented in managerial and high-level sales jobs, and their salaries remained lower than those of native born: More than half, 54% of foreign-born with full-time jobs held low-income jobs, compared to 38% of the U.S. born with full-time jobs (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Literacy and fluency in English seem to be related to economic self-sufficiency. Immigrants who are literate only in a language other than English are more likely to have non-continuous employment and to earn less than those literate in English (Greenberg, Macías, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001). An analysis of 2000 census data on immigrant earnings revealed a positive relation between earnings and English language ability (Chiswick & Miller, 2002). For this and many other reasons, immigrants want to learn English. Forty-two percent of the participants in federally funded adult education programs are studying English (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Yet barriers such as time, transportation, and childcare difficulties may keep many from accessing classes (Van Duzer, Moss, Burt, Peyton, & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

Offering workplace English as a second language (ESL) classes on the job is a way to provide instruction to those who have problems accessing programs outside of work. Learning in the context of work can improve work skills while improving language skills (See e.g., ABC Canada, 1999; Burt, 1997; Hayflich, 1995) and this learning may transfer to other facets of life (Mikulecky, Lloyd, Siementhal, & Masker 1997). Yet it appears that few employers provide this instruction (National Institute for Literacy, n. d.). Reasons that employers do not offer training include scheduling issues, cost, perceived lack of benefit to the company, and a sense that teaching their employees English is not their responsibility (Burt, 1997; Foucar-Szocki, 1992; Kavanaugh, 1999; Pierce, 2001).

Goal of the Paper

It is this perceived lack of benefit to the employer and possible reasons for this perception that will be explored in this paper. To address this issue, the author searched the literature for research studies and articles that spoke to the following questions:

- What outcomes do employers want to see from workplace ESL classes?
- How do employers know when the instruction has been successful?

Little research was found on outcomes for workplace ESL instruction. The author decided that, in order to meet the underlying goal of informing the field on how to best provide English language instruction to immigrant workers, the paper

needed to go beyond the original tasks of naming the desired outcomes of workplace ESL instructional programs and describing how they are assessed. Therefore, the paper is organized in the following way: After describing the research consulted, the paper lists the outcomes looked for in workplace ESL instruction. Next, it discusses five issues that arise in identifying, monitoring, and assessing the outcomes of English language instruction at the workplace. Then it provides suggestions for addressing these issues. Finally, it suggests areas for future research.

Research Consulted

Much of what has been written on workplace outcomes and ESL instruction is anecdotal and based on interviews with employers, educators, labor representatives (See e.g., Alamprese & Kay, 1992; Burt, 1997; Malicky & Norman, 1994). These articles were often program profiles or learner profiles. Similar to anecdotal summaries, were point of view articles, often written to encourage employers to offer instruction (See e.g., Affholter, 1999; Hayflich, 1997).

Another group of articles were summaries of research and practice. These were frequently ERIC digests or articles found in the ERIC database (See e.g., Rosenblum, 1996; Westerfield & Burt, 1996).

Some workplace instructional program evaluations were found (See e.g., Moore, Myers, Silva, & Alamprese, 1998; Waller, n. d.). Unfortunately, information contained in these evaluations was often less useful than it might have been; usually, when data on adult English learner participants were included, the data had not been disaggregated from the native speaker participants making it unclear whether the information was on the language learners, on the native speakers, or on both groups (See e.g., Foucar-Szocki, 1992).

Several reports are included in this paper. The reports were analyses of data from national studies such as the 2000 Census, or the National Adult Literacy Survey (See e.g., Greenberg, Macias, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001; Sum, et al., 2002). There were also white papers – educational reports, generally with a specific point of view, written to inform the industry on a particular issue (See e.g., Bassi, Harrison, Ludwig, & McMurrer, 2001; Bassi, Ludwig, McMurrer, & Van Buren, 2000).

The actual research studies found were generally case studies or qualitative research (See e.g., Goldstein, 1997; Katz, 2000; Malicky & Norman, 1994). The report of one experimental study (Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1997) is included. In the bibliography, each of the references is labeled as to the type of document it is, using the designations below:

- Point of view articles
- Program profiles
- Learner profiles
- Summaries of research and practice
- Program evaluations
- Reports
- White papers
- Case studies and other Qualitative research
- Experimental research

Sources consulted for this paper include refereed journals, non-refereed journals (including trade journals), the ERIC database, and the World Wide Web. Most of the articles were written about workplace ESL practice in the United States, although there were a few articles about programs in Canada, and one about those in Australia. These articles were included as these countries, like the United States, have large heterogeneous populations of English language learners in the workforce. The time frame for the research was for articles published between 1992 and 2003.

Outcomes

For all workers, both native and non-native English speakers, the outcomes most often cited as being the goals of workplace instruction were higher productivity on the job and improved safety (See e.g., ABC Canada, 1999; Bloom & Lafleur, 1999; Burt, 1997; Hayflich, 1997; Rosenblum, 1996; Sarmiento & Schurman, 1992; Westerfield & Burt, 1996). For foreign-born workers, or those for whom English is not the first language, two other outcomes were identified – an increased use of English on the job by the non-native English speaking workers, and more “American-like” behavior on the job (See e.g., Burt, 1995; Hull, 2000; Katz, 2000; Kavanaugh, 1999; King, 1997; Li, 2000; Pierce, 2001). Because these last two outcomes are peculiar to instruction for English language learners, it is the issues in achieving *these* outcomes that this paper will describe in the most detail.

Issue A: The length of time it takes to learn English

Both employers and their employees often have unrealistic ideas of the amount of time it takes to learn English (Burt, 1997; Kavanaugh, 1999; Mikulecky, 1997; Pierce, 2001). Research is limited regarding adults learning English (Van Duzer et al., 2003). However, studies with children reveal that it takes 2-5 years to become socially adept in the second language, and 5-8 years to become academically on a par with native speakers (Cummins, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Clearly a workplace ESL class of 40-60 hours is unlikely to result in great gains in language acquisition for the adults receiving this instruction. When workers continue to speak to one another in the native language during their breaks and when on the work floor, employers may become disillusioned. Then,

when the workplace classes are over or when the economic support for the classes is not longer there, employers may decline to continue the classes (ABC Canada, 1999; Burt, 1997; Kavanaugh, 1999; Pierce, 2001).

Issue B: Language use in the Workplace and elsewhere

Sometimes there is a naiveté about the use of language in general. Even if it were possible to learn enough English (or any language) in 50 hours to express themselves in that language and to understand everything that is said, it is unlikely that many workers would use the new language when speaking to other native speakers of their language. In order to choose to speak a language, there needs to be a need to speak that language (Burt, 2002; Hayflich, 1995). At the work place, code switching (i.e. shifting from one language to another language in the course of a conversation) can occur with bilingual workers. For example, in a conversation held in Spanish, workers may give names of workplace machines and procedures in English. Code-switching and choosing to speak one language with one person and another language with another person to facilitate ease and comprehensibility of communication, often function as demonstrations of bilingual proficiency, rather than indicators of linguistic deficiency (Milroy & Muysken, 1995).

Issue C: Language and Identity

The decision to use or not to use the target language and the accompanying (in this case, mainstream U.S.) workplace behaviors may also be affected by a desire to maintain one's identity. Some immigrant workers may feel empowered when they use English and try out new workplace behaviors on the job (See e.g., ABC Canada, 2000; Li, 2000). Others, however, may make a conscious decision not to use the new language or behaviors as a way of asserting their own social identity (Moore, 1999; Pierce, 2001). In her ethnographic study of a cable manufacturing company in California, Katz (2000) reported that even though workers were instructed in the U.S. workplace to speak up on the job and they understood that this was a value that could get them promoted, many chose to hold on to their behavior of not standing out in the crowd.

The decision not to use the new language and behaviors may be affected by the attitude displayed by employers and co-workers when immigrant workers use what they have learned. At one worksite, learners trying to speak English at team meetings reported being laughed at by native English-speaking co-workers for demonstrating non-native like pronunciation (Moore, 1999). Additionally, one's co-workers who speak the same native language may also apply pressure to continue to use the native language rather than English on the job (Goldstein, 1997).

Issue D: Relationship between Training and Worker Performance

Not all workplace misunderstandings are due to poor English skills of some workers. Problems may arise from diverse causes such as poor organization of

workflow; poor supervision; and poorly written workplace materials -- e.g., signs, manuals, and memos (Westerfield & Burt, 1996). On a larger level, worker productivity deficits may be due to the way the workplace itself is structured. For example, use of technology, labor-management relations, and compensation offered may also affect worker performance. Basic skills or English language training will not ameliorate these issues (Sarmiento & Schurman, 1992).

Even in situations where worker improvement is noticed, it may not necessarily be due solely to the workplace training, or at least it is difficult to prove this. An analysis of a database developed by the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) to explore the connection between employer investment in training and company performance concluded that, although firms that invested more in training seemed to be more productive than those that did not, it was difficult to tie this higher performance directly to the training offered (Bassi, et al., 2000; 2001). In any case, those involved in workplace training report that when there is little or no opportunity provided for the worker to use the new learning (whether related to language or behavior), it will not be retained (Kavanaugh, 1999; Pierce, 2001; Sarmiento & Schurman, 1992).

Issue E: Measuring Outcomes

Measuring training and instructional outcomes in general is problematic (Affholter, 1995). In workplace classes for immigrant workers, there can be a lack of clarity about the outcomes being sought, i.e., an uncertainty about whether the instructional goals are improved productivity or workers speaking English on the job (Kavanaugh, 1999). Often outcomes are not clearly stated at the outset of the course, monitored throughout the course, and then evaluated at the end (Affholter, 1995). In short, program providers may not know what to measure, how to measure, or when to measure outcomes of the training.

Suggestions

Educators and researchers offer the following suggestions for those providing English language instruction at the workplace:

Offer short, highly focused classes with clearly stated, measurable, and attainable objectives.

Providing short, targeted classes with limited goals can be effective in the workplace (Burt, 1997; Kavanaugh 1999). A six-week course on accent reduction, for example has been popular in Pima County, Arizona with both employers and immigrant workers who have at least an intermediate level of English. Similarly, a 3-week course for pre-literate Latino housekeepers with three goals – greeting residents, supervisors, and co-workers; expressing lack of comprehension; and asking for clarification – has been successful at a nursing home in Falls Church, Virginia (Burt, 2002).

When classes are focused and objectives are clearly stated and realistic as to what can be accomplished in a short time, it is easier to assess and monitor outcomes. Workers are more likely to complete a 6-week course than one that lasts 4 months. Furthermore, if the classes are carefully scheduled so as not to be held during rush times, there is less likelihood that workers will be pulled from the class to go back to work— further limiting the few hours of instruction offered them (Kavanaugh, 1999).

Educate everyone about the process of learning a second language.

Few people in this country appreciate the difficulty of learning and using a second language. More than 82% of the people in the United States speak only English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Employers, native-English-speaking workers, and immigrant workers all need to appreciate the challenges of learning to speak English on the job, or anyplace else.

Educators report the value of using “shock language” classes (a short lesson taught entirely in a language unknown to anyone in the room except the instructor) with employers to give them a brief introduction to what foreign-born workers face in an English-speaking environment (Schrage, 1997). Giving native-speaking co-workers a shock-language experience could also increase their understanding of the complexity of learning a new language and might make them more supportive of the immigrant workers’ attempts to try out new language and behaviors on the job. Such encouragement might also make the immigrant workers more willing to use their new learning on the job.

Use the native language.

Limited use of the native language in workplace instruction, particularly in worksites where much of workforce speaks the same native language, can help avoid miscommunication and can deepen learner comprehension of difficult concepts (Katz, 2000; Moore, 1999; Taggart & Martinez, 2003). Because bilingual instruction does not imply translation of all course content, but rather a judicious choice of which language to use for which purposes, bilingual teachers need explicit criteria concerning when to use the native language and when to use English (Taggart & Martinez, 2003). The workers’ language should be used to teach the difficult content that they need to know in order to do a task. Then the English vocabulary and structures they need to read, listen to, write, and talk about the tasks should be taught (Taggart & Martinez, 2003).

Huerta-Macías (2003) offers a linear model for using the two languages. The topic is introduced in the native language; key English vocabulary items are taught; hands-on activities (such as those involving workplace machines) are carried out in English and assessed in English; technology activities follow, with discussion in native language; and the final discussion and question and answer activity is held in whichever language each individual student prefers. When the

class has speakers of several different languages, Huerta-Macías suggests dividing the group into same-language small groups for discussion of the workplace issues in the native language. Each group then uses English to frame questions about the workplace issues for the teacher.

Get the leaders involved.

It is professional wisdom in workplace instruction that, before beginning the classes, the instructor needs to get all the support of all employer stakeholders including chief executive and operating officers, human resource personnel, and direct supervisors of the workers (Alamprese & Kay, 1993; Burt, 1997). However, worker leaders need to be involved as well – if not directly in the classes, at least as advocates to encourage others to attend (Pierce, 2001). They also need to be involved in planning the classes, setting the goals, and advising the educational service provider. The message that needs to be sent to the immigrant workers is that value is placed on learning English both by the employers and by fellow employees (ABC Canada, 1999; Hull, 2000).

Provide opportunities to use English on the job.

Pierce (2001) describes a workplace where the company established and publicized a process for achieving promotions or higher pay. One of the skills workers had to demonstrate was a certain level of English literacy and oral proficiency. There are other ways, however, to encourage use of English on the job that do not involve formal assessment of skills: Instructors can invite supervisors to visit classes and encourage them to speak with the learners in class and on the job--in English--about what they are learning and about their job tasks. Employers can promote discussion among native and non-native English speakers on the job through English language discussion tables at breaks (Burt, 2002) and mentoring or tutoring by the native speakers (Pierce, 2001). This tutoring should not be seen as a substitute for language instruction given by a trained instructor, but rather as ancillary support. Because merely speaking a language does not give one the skills to teach someone else to speak the language, native speakers who are tutoring co-workers in English should be given training. This training may be provided relatively cheaply through local literacy agencies or other English language service providers (Stuart, 1994).

View multilingual and multicultural workers as an asset.

After September 11, 2001, the U.S. government issued a report saying that due to “changing security environment and the increasing globalization of the U.S. economy, federal agencies’ needs for personnel with foreign language proficiency have grown significantly” (U. S. General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 1). Certainly, increasing globalization and the need for proficiency in languages other than English exists in non-federal U.S. workplaces as well.

Although it seems that there is value attached to the ability to speak a foreign language at the workplace, little attention has been paid to the fact that in this country there are thousands of people in the workforce who speak a language other than English, i. e, immigrant workers. What is more, the foreign-born population has spread throughout country to places that 10 – 15 years ago had few, if any, immigrant workers (Van Duzer et al., 2003). So even in rural areas of states such as Georgia and Arkansas, the strengths of these workers are available at the workplace.

Unfortunately, these workers have been considered most often for what they do not have– native-like proficiency and literacy in English and knowledge and adherence to mainstream U.S. workplace behaviors – rather than what they do have – proficiency and (often) literacy in another language and a different way of looking at the world. As Carreira and Aremengol note: “Employers who value workers able to see problems from multiple perspectives and communicate with clients and colleagues from other cultures” should view workers whose first language is not English as “an excellent source of skills not easily found in our society” (2001, p. 110).

Employers can show they value the skills of their workers – including those who come from other cultures and speak other languages – by seeking out and listening to their input. When classes are offered, employers can show the importance of the instruction by staying in contact with the instructors, attending the classes occasionally, speaking to the workers about the classes, and thinking hard before canceling classes in order to put workers back on the work floor (Kavanaugh, 1999; Moore, 1999; Malicky & Norman, 1994; Pierce, 2001).

Conclusion and Topics for Further Research

English language ability is related to higher wages and more stable employment, yet little training is currently offered immigrants at the workplace. Issues in providing this instruction include unrealistic expectations both of what can be learned in a short workplace class and how quickly language and cultural behaviors can and should be changed; difficulties in defining and assessing outcomes; a lack of value placed on the instruction; and a failure to see the value of another language and culture. Research is needed on the use of the native language in workplace instruction; on the efficacy of short-term classes; and on creative ways of providing, monitoring, and assessing English language instruction on the job.

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