

ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE LOWER MEKONG: AN ESP APPROACH

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LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE : LMI



The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) is a commitment between the United States and the five countries in the Lower Mekong Basin; namely Cambodia, Laos PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, to promote economic development and build human-resource capacity in the areas of health, connectivity, agriculture, environment, energy, and education through mutual cooperation and knowledge sharing.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR LEADERS : PCSL

The LMI English support project, titled Professional Communication Skills for Leaders (PCSL), was an intensive English training program designed to enable government officials and researchers of the Lower Mekong nations to conduct effective oral presentations on topics in their fields of expertise and to communicate effectively in international meetings.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES : ESP

Adopting an ESP approach, the design of PCSL training was able to focus specifically on the situated needs for language use, namely participating in a conference, and provide realistic simulations for language practice.

The content of PCSL training was conceptualized through an analysis of the communicative tasks embedded in the situation (Participation in a Conference). Following Hutchinson and Waters' Target Situation Analysis Framework (1987, pp. 59-60), the PCSL's target situation analysis is illustrated below.

WHY is English needed?	As a working language between LMI counterparts and a means of communication in international conferences
HOW will English be used?	Medium: speaking (oral presentations, discussions, conversations); listening (lectures and talks); reading (articles and documents); writing (biographies and abstracts) Channel: face-to-face, virtual (online)
WHAT will the content areas be?	Six LMI areas of cooperation: health, connectivity, agriculture, environment, energy, and education
WHO will the learners use English with?	Policy makers from LMI nations (non-native speakers); Regional colleagues within/across fields of expertise (non-native speakers); American specialists from various support agencies who are based in the region (native speakers); Other experts and researchers (non-native and native speakers)
WHERE will English be used?	Regional and international conferences
WHEN will English be used?	Concurrently and/or immediately after the training

Accordingly, the PCSL training aims to enhance the learners' professional communication skills within the scope of these language purposes:

- To participate actively in both formal (meetings and discussion panels) and informal exchanges (personal conversations);
- To understand information presented in both spoken (lectures and talks) and written forms (articles and documents);
- To establish and maintain professional networks;
- To give oral presentations on a field-specific topic; and
- To produce conference-related documents (a professional biography and a presentation abstract).

To enable the learners to carry out these defined communicative tasks successfully in real life, the PCSL training focuses on subordinate skills and knowledge necessary for the completion of the core tasks. For example, for the learners to participate actively in discussions, they must be equipped with language skills such as expressing opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, and offering and requesting clarification.

Another important aspect of the PCSL training is the opportunity for meaningful language use in the form of simulated practice. Unlike role-play activities, simulated practice tasks do not require learners to pretend to be someone else. Given a simulated environment that resembles their real-world target task, the learners can take part as themselves. Three main formats of the PCSL training were proposed to provide ample opportunities for simulated practice.

TRAINING FORMAT	PARTICIPANTS	SIMULATED PRACTICE OF LANGUAGE USE
1 FACE-TO-FACE SEMINAR In each of the five LMI countries, a 30-hour intensive seminar was conducted for each of the specific areas of cooperation.	HOMOGENEOUS • same mother tongue • same field of expertise	On the last day of the PCSL seminar, each learner must give an oral presentation on an expert topic. This simulation aims to prepare the learners for the target situation where they present their work at a conference.
2 DISTANCE LEARNING Upon completing the face-to-face seminar, each cohort enters the second stage of the training in a form of virtual-conferencing.	HETEROGENEOUS • different mother tongues • same field of expertise	In this synchronized online training, the learners not only solidify the skills learned in the seminars with real-time feedback, but they also use language authentically via online communication/networking among colleagues of different nationalities.
3 THE PCSL "FORUM" (OR A MOCK CONFERENCE) Of the 100 people in each field-specific cohort, 15 who performed exceptionally or improved markedly were offered the opportunities to join the event.	HETEROGENEOUS • different mother tongues • different fields of expertise	To participate successfully at the forum, the attendees must apply all skills learned previously to navigate various tasks in this mock conference. In particular, the learners must utilize both expertise and language ability to create a group poster presentation – a task resembles any collaborative projects in their professional lives.



PowerPoint Presentation



Poster Presentation



Face-to-face Seminar



Networking

Reference

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). English for Specific Purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



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