Poster Presentation

Assertiveness and Sensitivity Training through BELF Material Development

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This paper will describe Japanese chemical researchers' overseas English needs, such as catching what was said, verbalizing ideas, being assertive, understanding different working styles, and building relationships. These will be compared with a literature review of business English needs in Asia. Then, the main part of the paper will describe the development of pre-departure training materials for staff working overseas, using project-based learning methods, to address these needs. These materials will then be evaluated for both pedagogical effectiveness and transactional and relational discourse.

Needs Analysis

The author had ten years of experience working as an in-house language trainer for a large Japanese engineering company. Some of the engineers had ongoing English needs, depending on their business sector and strategy. For example, there was an electro-chemical subsidiary, which had manufacturing plants in China, Korea, Taiwan, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. Therefore, it was a common occurrence for engineers in specific roles, such as senior researchers, managers, and skilled maintenance operators (e.g., welders) to visit these plants and for foreign partners to visit their plant for meetings and manufacturing quality audits. Another example was a pharmaceutical company, which was trying to set-up collaborative production facilities in India and develop a distribution network through Taiwan into China.

The aim of this study was to better understand the trainees' needs so that training materials could be developed. Furthermore, this material development framework could be applied to other contexts. Fourteen Japanese chemical, pharmaceutical, and electro-chemical researchers were asked open-ended questions via email about their overseas work experience. They had varying experiences ranging from being based in India for over a year, to frequently visiting customers in China or Europe. Generally, when researchers reach over thirty years old, they gain more responsibility in their work and therefore have more opportunity to travel overseas to maintain and develop their company's markets. In this case, six researchers, or 43%, responded to the survey. The most difficult things for these researchers to function in overseas business are shown in Table 1.

These needs were then compared to some Asian-based English as a Business lingua franca (BELF)[1] studies, as summarized in Table 2.

By comparing the perceived needs of the Japanese researchers with other Asian BELF studies, the common needs realized included listening comprehension of various accents and monitoring understanding; being able to adapt written and spoken speech appropriateness for each situation; dynamic interaction skills; and cross-cultural awareness. These common needs were then used to develop specific skills through focused task- and project-based activities.

Table 1
Overseas Researcher Difficulties

Catching what was said because of speed, blending words, pronunciation, and changes in topic
Concerns over sentence construction and misunderstandings, so minutes and follow-up emails were often used
Different working styles, such as giving results first and then explaining things, or vice versa
Building relationships and trust
Being assertive
Managing unexpected events
Understanding expectations

Table 2
BELF Literature Review

Japanese construction workers in Hong Kong used pronouns, like 'we', backchannels, vagueness, hedges and modality (Handford & Matous, 2011). Japanese business people were indirect, shifted topics, used hedging, and were reactive to maintain harmony and group consensus, more so than being proactive or independent (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013).
Thai civil engineers and Taiwanese semi-conductor engineers had a higher priority on reading technical texts and writing reports but as careers progress there was more need for understanding accented English and oral communication (Kaewpet, 2009; Spence & Liu, 2013) .
Malaysian chemical engineers had a need for oral communication for teleconferences, networking, and presenting (Kassim & Ali, 2010).
Bangalore IT staff needed writing skills to clarify, structure, and summarize, but understanding accents and switching between direct and indirect language was more important (Nickerson, 2009).
Filipino call center staff had difficulty linking American callers' purpose to the service they needed because they had poor interaction skills and there were breakdowns in cultural understanding (Forey & Lockwood, 2007).
Hong Kong's finance, tourism, trading and professional service sector staff switched from direct to indirect speech, but needed more pragmatic interruption skills, mutually understandable accents, and to be able to monitor cultural understanding (Warren, 2014).

Material Development

The reason for using a project-based learning framework, for these specific students and any additional general future applications, is to utilize the 21st century skills of critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and cross-cultural fluency (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). There are two kinds of tasks employed: creative with post-task feedback, and explicit skill-based activities, such as phonetic listening comprehension to address accent comprehension weaknesses. In addition, the tasks encourage students to demonstrate discourse leadership by giving opinions before less capable peers, paraphrasing the context, and asking focused questions to build collaborative group talk. Furthermore, to become more sensitive to other people's interaction skills a small talk activity has been developed where students can monitor talk, prolonged silences, inappropriate responses, lack of uptake, and minimal responses (Kaur, 2015).

A holistic framework for evaluating business English materials has been used for measuring the effectiveness of the proposed needs analysis, learning objectives, methodology, naturalness of the language models, contextualization of the language, and learner autonomy (Chan, 2009). This framework has also been applied to evaluate discourse features, such as transactional and relational talk, strategies, formality, structure, and cultural differences.

Task-Based Simulations

This section will show how the steps or tasks build on each other and make a story for the trainees to follow into a complete project life cycle, from simulating the setting up of a meeting, to going and having the meeting and then after the meeting tasks, when trainees have returned back to their office. After this section, the evaluation will draw together the purpose of the tasks with the reasoning for integrating them.

Set-up

The scenario, which matches the students' work context, is to develop overseas pharmaceutical product distribution in China. The first task is for the students to take ownership of creating a storyboard for (a) scheduling, (b) meeting, and (c) follow-up activities. Then, they need to actually set up the meeting in China by email, with another student pretending to be the customer. However, after the arrangements have been made, the meeting has to be rescheduled for a much earlier date to coincide with another appointment in China (simulating realistic circumstances). After the task is completed, email structuring, modal verbs, and understanding imposition are taught.

Listening

The next activity is to improve the students' Chinese-English listening skills. An authentic listening sample was chosen from Badger (2011), featuring a Chinese-English voicemail about a problem with the airport pick-up, which matches the project theme. Next, the students have to identify Chinese-English pronunciation features, as shown in Table 3. Then, they have to practice using those features to make their own sentences and read them to a partner.

Effective repair techniques are taught post-task, focusing on repetition and paraphrasing, to develop discourse management skills.

Meetings

The students then prepare for the meeting with the simulated Chinese customer by reading Table 4.

Before the role play, the students are given time to create their characters, and after the role play the audience is encouraged to ask questions to further develop the characters. Examples of such question topics include finding out how long they have been with the company, what their position is, how they feel about this project, how they feel about working together, and what they like to do in their free time. The purpose is to realize what the role players' values are.

The next stage is to give a project update to the Chinese partner and persuade them to try a new idea, as shown in Table 5.

Table 3
Chinese L1 Influenced Phonetic Changes

An example Chinese sentence	Wha are-e yimpotan popetees ov contag rens?
Simplified	What are the important properties of a contact lens?
Patterns?	
Your basic sentence	
Your Chinese sentence	

Table 4
Meeting Role Play

You are a Japanese researcher. Your product is very good quality but expensive. You have some older products which are cheaper, but don't have as good functionality.	You are the Chinese customer. The Japanese product is good but too expensive, so you want a cheaper product. Chinese products are much cheaper.

Table 5
Persuasion Role Play

Your Japanese product is better. It will cut their manufacturing time. Even though it is more expensive, you only need half the quantity, because it is more efficient.	You are the Chinese manager, but you do not trust the Japanese product, or staff. Why should you change products?

The role players prepare and are told to take notes during the discussion, because they will need them later. The audience again participates by asking questions post-role play. This is not problem solving but rather trying to understand why the role players act in a certain way. This enables reflective learning for the audience as well as experiential learning for the role players.

Turn-Taking Dynamics

The next task is to raise awareness of turn-taking power dynamics by showing three transcripts. The transcripts are modelled on Angouri's (2010) authentic transcripts, taken from real samples. However, they have been adapted to exemplify the power dynamics in this particular context. The first shows the speakers are equals because there is overlap and lots backchanneling. The second shows the speakers have different statuses but all within the same company, so there is overlap but a lack of backchannels and hesitation devices, and there is no monopolizing conversation. The third shows equal status managers from different companies meeting for the first time. There is roundtable discussion but still some overlap showing natural turn taking interaction.

Socializing

The next simulation is going out for dinner with the customer. First, the students have to consider their status and whether it is appropriate to overlap and talk at the same time. Then, they have to conduct a short small talk conversation, helping each other to get involved in the discussion. After the task, explicit feedback is given on more active discourse skills, such as the following:

- Talking first, paraphrasing into easier, more specific questions, so that it is easier to make matched responses
- Making sure everyone has a turn to talk, and summarizing for group

comprehension (especially useful when someone joins the conversation later)

- Monitoring talk, prolonged silences, inappropriate responses, lack of uptake, and minimal responses, and then being able to respond to them
- Mimicking others' communicative styles

The task is repeated, encouraging students to also smoothly bridge to new topics.

Wrap-up

In the final task, the students have to use their notes to write a follow-up email to their customer. This involves summarizing and checking the meeting action points, with peer and instructor feedback on structural cohesion.

Material Evaluation

Using Chan's (2009) Business English textbook evaluation criteria for material pedagogy, it was found that the above tasks suit the learners' English level, their work need and interest, with relevant content. The tasks encourage generative grammar and vocabulary usage, supported by authentic audio samples and realistic transcripts. This results in a more integrated project, focusing on accent training, structured writing, and dynamic and effective interaction. At the same time, there is explicit pronunciation training and discourse management training in the small talk activity. Shared scenario building encourages task ownership, and audience participation supports critical thinking and experiential learning. However, there are no specific details of how to teach notetaking skills nor how to give discourse management feedback, and these ideas should be developed further.

Regarding material discourse, there is transactional and relational talk with scenarios encouraging adaptation of functional and situational language. Learners are sensitized to different levels of formality, although politeness, openings and closings, bridging topics, and topic management should also be explicitly taught. Similarly, cultural differences are only explored through accent variety awareness and role play character contrasts. However, to be able to accommodate and adapt to these differences, more extensive training is required.

Conclusion

There is a need for pedagogical materials which address real ESP needs. Therefore, it is important to further develop these materials, coach students using them, refine them, and then be able to adapt a similar training material template to other contexts.

Notes

1. The term English as a Business lingua franca (BELF), was first used by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta (2005) in their landmark study of how English was used as a lingua franca between members of staff involved in a Nordic corporate merger. Furthermore, they described how the language was shaped by the different business cultures.

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