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Influences From Beyond The Workplace ESL Classroom: The Relationship Between Traditional, Transitional, and High Performance Organizations and Workplace ESL Teachers

In California and the rest of the country, increased education, particularly in the area of basic skills, is a necessity for today's workforce. Jobs which once required only the use of a person's hands to complete routine tasks with assembly line efficiency are disappearing quickly. In the past, "the only prerequisites for most jobs were an ability to comprehend simple oral and written directives and sufficient self-control to implement them" (Reich, 1992, p. 59). The fluid demands of today's workplace require that individuals have the ability to communicate successfully. Employees must be able to interact with one another to convey basic information and use critical thinking skills in order to troubleshoot and problem solve together. Teamwork is valued, and members of teams, who come from all areas of the organization, must feel comfortable communicating within their group and being active contributors to the process.

Twenty years ago, immigrants wanting to enter the job market had access to vocational ESL and basic skills training in preemployment training programs, adult schools, and community colleges. These local, state, and federally funded programs suffered a severe blow during the 1980s. The need for this kind of education, however, did not diminish but, in fact, has grown in tandem with the continued influx of immigrants. Due to insufficient government funding and the lack of a cohesive national policy on workplace education, some businesses began to look for their own solutions to providing basic skills training for their immigrant employees (Chisman, 1992).

Businesses in the United States have traditionally offered in-house training programs and opportunities for continuing education, most often directed at managers rather than employees in nonmanagerial positions.

"Each year, American employers spend an estimated \$30 billion on formal training. At most, however, only one third of this amount is spent on our noncollege educated workforce, affecting no more than 8% of our front-line workers" (National Center on Education & the Economy's Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990). Our experience shows that many on-site ESL programs, on the other hand, are directed toward these very employees who have not benefitted from workplace education in the past.

Today both the government and the business community recognize the need for increased attention to and funding for workplace education to keep the U.S. globally competitive. Over the last several years, driven by economic necessity and California's increasingly diverse demographics, proactive California businesses have begun initiating workplace education programs either on their own or in partnership with other organizations. Frequently, these programs have included an ESL component.

Sondra Stein (1991) and her colleague, Laura Sperazi, have developed a framework that describes two kinds of organizations: traditional and high performance. We see this framework as one means to inform the perspectives of current and future worksite ESL teachers and provide them with a tool to better understand the volatile nature of today's workplace.

Stein and Sperazi describe traditional and high performance work organizations in the manufacturing industry according to their views of the production process and work organization, the role of workplace education, and the development and implementation of workplace education programs. Though created with the manufacturing industry in mind, these categorizations, with some adjustment, can also be used to examine service-oriented organizations.

In summary, traditional organizations use a scientific management approach, in which complex jobs are broken into simple, rote tasks which workers can repeat with machine-like efficiency. Work is performed on production or assembly lines by individuals working alone on discrete tasks. Because cost is the driving factor, workers fear that improvements will lead to elimination of jobs.

The traditional company does not have a long-term strategy that integrates a comprehensive education and training program into the overall business plan. Often, training is task oriented and job specific. The presumed conflict between education and production is reflected in the fact that workers are not given release time for participation. If a workplace education program does exist on-site, neither workers, supervisors, nor unions are involved in the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating the program. Finally, the company makes no plans to institutionalize the program.

The Stein/Sperazi framework also describes high performance organizations. These organizations prefer a total quality approach to management in which a key goal is to involve every member of the workforce in the processes of improving quality, efficiency, and customer satisfaction. Work is done in self-managing groups, by individuals working in teams. Because incremental improvement is the driving factor, workers are rewarded for innovations.

Unlike traditional companies, high performance organizations view education and training as part of their long-term strategic plan for continuous improvement. No conflict is perceived between production and education, and education takes place on work time. Top management is invested in setting goals and outcomes for workplace education programs, and participatory planning, implementation and evaluation processes involve all stakeholders in the workplace education program. Companies plan to not only institutionalize programs but also integrate education into on-the-job practices (Stein & Sperazi, 1991).

In these changing times, most organizations fall somewhere in between the traditional and high performance categories, with some striving to become high performance organizations and others struggling to make the shift with great difficulty if not reluctance. Still other organizations find that traditional business practices work for them, and they continue to run their businesses in a way that has proved successful for years.

We believe Stein and Sperazi's (1991) characterizations of traditional and high performance organizations can provide ESL teachers with a framework in which to understand and discuss the influences that affect their workplace teaching. We also see this framework as a tool that can help ESL teachers adjust their curricula and expectations to a particular workplace situation.

Conversations With Workplace Teachers

We shared Stein and Sperazi's framework with seven workplace ESL educators. Because we wanted to learn from the experiences of a cross-section of teachers who had taught in workplaces, we first identified educators or organizations that we knew to have good reputations in this field. We then invited two independent contractors, one teacher employed by a community based organization, one employed by a community college, and three from a state university extended education program to participate in focus groups or individual interviews. During these meetings, we asked them to consider the various workplaces in which they had taught and then respond to a set of questions.

Of this group, four had MA degrees in TES/FL, and one had gone on to get a PhD in linguistics. The other three teachers had masters degrees in

related fields. The least experienced of the group had been involved in language teaching for five years while the most experienced had taught for 22 years. Among them, they had taught at 37 large, mid-sized, or small companies (three had experience within the same organization) over the last five years and had been teaching ESL in workplaces from 2 to 15 years.

We asked the teachers to view the Stein/Sperazi framework as if it represented two poles on a continuum. As workplace program administrators, while we have both been involved with companies that are on the way to becoming high performance organizations, we had yet to work with one that had truly achieved that goal. Thus, we modified the high performance category calling it *approaching high performance*. In addition we created a third category called *transitional* to represent those organizations with developing awareness about the need for change but limited or no resources to alter how work gets done at this time.

Our use of the terms traditional, transitional, and high performance should not be viewed as indicators of how successful a particular business may or may not be. While high performance organizations, by their nature, are far more conducive to workplace ESL programs, on-site teachers who recognize the confines and needs of traditional and transitional organizations have run successful courses in these contexts. As one informant told us:

Regardless of whether a company is traditional or high performance, I always think of myself as a consultant to the company, asking the question, 'What do they need?' ... Companies don't always see themselves as moving toward high performance when they contact me to do this work, but when they make the connection, their eyes light up.

For the purpose of this paper, we will refer to 12 of the workplaces our informants discussed. The way they grouped these workplaces is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Workplace Groupings

| TRADITIONAL | TRANSITIONAL | APPROACHING HIGH PERFORMANCE |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Hotel Group 1 | Hotel Group 2 | Hotel Group 3 |
| Insurance Company 1 | Government Agency 1 | Insurance Company 2 |
| High Tech Company | Government Agency 2 | Bakery |
| Garment Manufacturer | Computer Manufacturer | Medical Equipment |

Previous literature on workplace ESL (Alamprese, 1993; Andrews, 1990; Ford, 1992; Hayflich & Lomperis, 1992; Sarmiento, 1991; Spruck Wrigley, 1991) tells us that the following elements are key to successful on-site ESL programs: (a) company (and union where appropriate) buy in for the program; (b) use of a needs assessment; (c) customized and flexible curricula; (d) on-going program evaluation; (e) voluntary employee participation; and (f) instructor flexibility. These elements, when considered alone, exist as generic categories that mask how profoundly the workplace context (traditional, transitional, approaching high performance) can alter the experience of the teacher, the design of the course, and the development of the program.

By asking ESL providers to identify where their workplace clients fit into the traditional to high performance continuum, we were able to highlight common influences on the teachers' experiences that emerged from outside of their workplace classrooms. The characterizations of traditional and transitional organizations as well as those for organizations approaching high performance override many differences due to company size and the nature of the industry. Key points from our conversations with these teachers are summarized below.

Traditional Organizations

Attitudes toward workplace programs in the traditional organizations were varied. Insurance Company 1 took an exceedingly long time to decide to conduct an on-site ESL program and to select a provider. The company wanted the provider to conduct a 45-minute lunch hour [sic] customized course in oral communication skills. The provider indicated that this would not be adequate for teaching a pronunciation and conversation class, especially if employees were expected to eat during that time. When senior management refused to provide employees with an additional 45 minutes of company time for each class meeting, the provider and human resources representatives concurred that it would be inappropriate to run the course at all. By not having executive buy in for a sound educational program from the start, this company demonstrated its lack of readiness to engage in on-site ESL training.

As in the case of Insurance Company 1, lack of buy in at Hotel Group 1 was a problem. The teacher was expected to meet company goals without getting company support for the program. Because there were many levels of hierarchy and only one supervisor who championed the program, the instructor felt stymied at every step of the way. By only providing materials specific to the employees' current jobs and not geared toward enhancing their promotability, hotel management further demonstrated its traditional

view of workplace education. Because workers were not viewed as whole people and the emphasis was on cost cutting rather than true employee development, employees didn't always show up for class and often felt depressed, tired, and overworked when they did. In addition, the amount of time allocated for this program was limited.

Stein and Sperazi (1991) note that in a traditional organization, "management treats employees as 'hands.' The worker is not a whole person (check your brains at the door)." The relationship between employees and management at the garment manufacturer was challenged as employees in the ESL program began to understand more about their rights as workers. In fact, workers' rights was the intended topic for the sixth module of the training. In the instructor's opinion, management cancelled this module because they felt the curriculum to be too threatening. The instructor believed that management preferred to view their employees as "programmed little sewing machines" and not as confident, thinking adults.

At the High Tech Company, the instructor reported,

I worked in fear because I didn't know if I was giving them what they wanted because they didn't know what they wanted. ... I was supposed to be able to read their minds and have all the answers. It took a long time to figure out needs because there was not only no support, but also no awareness. The attitude was, 'You're the teacher; you should know what to teach.'

Transitional Organizations

Many transitional organizations revealed an inconsistency between their philosophy and their actions. This was usually reflected throughout the organization and particularly in the inconsistent goals for and attitudes toward workplace ESL programs.

In the case of Hotel Group 2, management had begun to view itself as moving toward high performance. The intention to bring in an on-site ESL program was a reflection of this shift. This view, however, had not filtered through to the employees, who still saw management as traditional and, as a result, continued to view their own work in a job-specific, less team-oriented manner. Thus, management and employees had differing goals for the outcome of the program.

A similar discrepancy existed in Government Agencies (GA) 1 and 2. In both situations, employees viewed themselves and management as traditional in regard to their notions of ESL as a job training tool. Management in GA 1 knew they needed to change, but felt bound by the endless bureaucracy and preexisting hierarchy of the organization. In GA 2, a human resource representative was the beacon for change. Senior manage-

ment, however, was not tapped to participate in the on-site ESL program, and while employees and their supervisors all bought into the program, they had different expectations about what the outcomes might be.

In this situation, supervisors estimated their nonnative English-speaking employees to have far less skill using English than observed by the instructor. They also had very specific goals and expectations for their employees, among them to improve pronunciation and better manage telephone calls. The employees, on the other hand, felt demoralized by their own perceptions of how they used English and how coworkers and supervisors related to them.

The instructor often felt like a therapist, helping employees to overcome feelings of inferiority because they had received so much negative feedback from internal and external clients. So, while supervisors felt the problems grew out of specific language issues, the instructor saw the over-riding issue to be one of confidence. At the end of the course, employees reported being more assertive and comfortable with their use of English, and many of their supervisors acknowledged progress had been made. As in many on-site classes, the first round of improvement grew out of an increase in confidence rather than a dramatic change in language use.

In one department of GA 1, where traditional forces were evident, the instructor felt the need to be very results-oriented, always having to validate her presence in the organization. In addition, she felt the need to constantly promote the program, "to explain the process, not the training" because ESL differs from other types of training with which the organization was more familiar.

At the Computer Manufacturer, the instructor summed up her feelings this way:

Trust is not total. I had to perform a balancing act, working with a very controlling management at their level, while trying to be true to what is best for the students. You have to try to help management grow in how they view the class; play on their strong points; keep your boundaries clear, know your objectives and be able to clearly state them ... and, the teacher needs to work on not getting mad.

Approaching High Performance

The organizations in this category had gone through perceptual shifts about how to do business which were clear throughout all levels of their organizations. Employees understood that the company had a mission that involved their personal development as part of the organizational strategy for growth and change. The instructors who taught at these sites each

acknowledged that these organizations allowed them to focus on not only job-specific language, but also higher order thinking skills that ultimately would increase employees' potential for promotion and their ability to contribute more fully to the company.

Hotel Group 3, for example, moved toward a high performance model because they understood they needed to view training as an investment rather than as a cost. This perception grew out of their ability to view themselves as internationally competitive, competing for business with not only other hotels in the city but also other cities around the world. The instructor who worked with this hotel explained that management had a long range view of workplace education and was more interested in having ESL classes focus on the teaching of processes and procedures rather than simply job-specific, formulaic language.

One of the instructors for Insurance Company 2 reported how well informed employees and their supervisors were about the value of the ESL classes. Information about the ESL program had been integrated into the company's larger restructuring process; this created a real awareness of the company's commitment to long-term training and, as a result, fostered company support throughout all levels of the organization. Another instructor at this company noted that because the attitude of management toward the ESL program was such an open one, employees didn't view language issues as so closely connected to their self-esteem; she stated, "I felt freer to ask questions, to explore and try new things because the goals weren't so narrowly focused."

The Bakery's attitude toward the on-site program came from a different source – viewing themselves as "being on the cutting edge of social awareness." They wanted employees to be "better workers and people." Their company philosophy included seeing workers holistically, with training viewed as a return on investment and not a lost cost. The Medical Equipment Firm echoed these views as well, in particular, "seeing people as resources not liabilities." This attitude was reflected through support for the ESL program and within the organization as a whole.

The instructor who worked at the Medical Equipment Firm commented, "These companies are visionary. Dreamers work here. But how realistically can we ESL teachers affect or reach this vision through our work?" Then she raised a point that was validated by three of the other teachers, "[At high performance companies] they trust you too much, and this can be scary."

These companies gave instructors lots of access to the organization and its people as well as significant freedom in determining what was taught. As instructors worked toward developing more and more customized mate-

rials, shaping their classes to mirror employee and company goals, some voiced concern that as their programs became more established, management and supervisors became increasingly "hands off."

Said one instructor:

Management has a certain passivity because they see teachers as experts; if we know what we're doing, they don't understand why we have to keep going back. They wonder, "Wasn't the needs assessment long enough?" My job is to go back and educate them, to make them realize their continuous involvement is needed [Without their regular input,] I find out half way through a module other things that could have been included. Their passivity results both from their lack of involvement and respect for our professional space.

The reality is that to keep these programs vital and relevant, instructors need to maintain their relationships outside of the classroom. Thus, ironically, the teacher-as-mind-reader syndrome, which afflicted instructors in the most traditional companies – where they had no access – can return for different reasons in the most forward thinking of organizations.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are numerous influences affecting workplace teachers that come from beyond their classroom walls. Understanding where an organization fits into the traditional-high performance continuum can provide workplace ESL educators with a framework to help them learn how to approach individual contracts. By knowing the broader goals and aspirations of the business, instructors can better plan how their courses will fit into the larger organizational structure they will temporarily join while teaching on-site.

Thus, when a company decides to set up an on-site ESL program, the teacher and the business need to understand how that program will be related to the organization as a whole. Regardless of where the company falls on the traditional-high performance continuum, the provider will probably need to make a consistent effort to educate all levels of the organization about the nature of language learning, the relative slowness of the process, and the need for support from the native English speaking population. In addition, the teacher will often need to reframe the language "problems" of nonnative speakers as an organizational need for improved communication among all employees.

In traditional companies, the teacher is likely to be bound by more definitive goals (i.e., improving pronunciation, refining telephone skills, etc.) than those identified for high performance organizations. Providers in

this type of organization can expect to conduct a limited needs assessment with a narrow focus that can be correlated to measurable gains or changes in how an employee communicates. The traditional company is less likely to spend resources on a full scale assessment; however, if the program is being funded through outside sources (i.e., a federal workplace literacy grant), the company may have to comply with the terms of the grant by participating in a thorough assessment process. As stated previously in this paper, ESL courses in these organizations are unlikely to be institutionalized, and, in general, will focus on helping employees to do their current jobs more effectively.

Because transitional organizations are in a state of flux, they are the least predictable, and for this reason, while they are very commonplace, they may also be the most difficult to work with. Organizations of this type may have an individual, a department, or representatives in upper level management that support workplace education in general and ESL in particular for their employees. At the same time, however, other large pockets of the organization may not share or even be aware of their views, and the teacher may therefore be met with lots of contradictory information about the need and support for teaching ESL on-site.

Consequently, teachers in transitional organizations need to search out those managers and supervisors who can help champion the program to not only give them greater insight into the workings of the organization but also advocate for the educational process and its long-term benefits to all employees.

Organizations approaching high performance already understand the intrinsic value of becoming *learning organizations*, places where on-going education is valued for all employees because these companies recognize the relationship between continuous learning and their ability to improve continuously as a result. ESL educators in companies such as these have fewer challenges in regard to helping organizations acknowledge the benefits of providing educational opportunities for all employees.

Here, however, teachers need to remember that while the company may have a philosophy that supports on-going learning, many individuals within the organization will not have an understanding about the ways in which language learning differs from other types of training. Though the environment may be favorable to running an ESL program, the teacher needs to be responsible for clarifying what results can realistically be achieved through on-site classes. This is true for on-site ESL programs within any organization. In addition, these organizations may not readily understand why the teacher has an on-going need to maintain relationships with managers and supervisors once the program is established.

To keep classes current and to stay abreast of the company's often changing internal dynamics, teachers should not allow themselves to become isolated once a program is underway even though the organization may assume the program is ready to run itself at this point. By staying in touch, instructors will be able to demonstrate how the teaching of English is one piece in the larger education and development process that fosters organizational change. Through this process, the organization will be better able to tap their nonnative English speaking employees as resources and value the contributions of this population.

By coming to understand how an organization perceives itself, by having a lens through which to view that organization, and by helping to educate the business about language learning and the complexities of communication, the workplace ESL teacher can produce positive results within that organization. Unlike teachers in other settings, a teacher in the workplace needs to develop and maintain rapport with supervisors and managers who will be measuring the program's success not only by observing changes in the communication skills of their employees, but also through their sense of the instructor's credibility outside of the classroom.

Finally, it is not enough to ask about the outside influences affecting workplace teachers. While this information is vitally important, it has a necessary corollary that quality educators will not ignore. Workplace teachers must not only be respondents to company and employee needs. They must also be advocates for the multicultural employees they serve, educating the people around them about ways in which they can extend and refine their own communication skills so that the burden of change does not fall unduly on a single segment of the workplace population – nonnative English speakers. ■

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