



EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING NON-TRADITIONAL CONTENT IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN CORPORATE TRAINING

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Given the importance of communicative competence in a corporate environment, an exploration of effective content that motivates the staff has been undertaken in this study. Though English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been viewed as the best approach, it has not been all encompassing as the specific needs of the work place, institutional needs and job requirements also need to be taken into consideration. Limited studies that analyse the efficacy of introducing English Literature in tertiary education do not give an insight into applying the same concept in work place setting. Hence, non-traditional content like business fables, movies and contemporary topics that reflect the social changes in the society have been utilized in this study. A mixed method study was conducted in three phases using presentations, social media posts and impromptu speeches as interventions. Data has been collected through online discussion forums and questionnaires from 28 employees and semi-structured interviews from the two partners of the management. The objectives of the study were to ascertain the level of success of non-traditional content in corporate training, the rate of improvement in critical thinking skills and the alignment of interests of the participants and the management. Results indicate that innovative ideas are welcome in corporate setting from both parties involved. The participants have expressed their satisfaction in improved soft skills necessary for work. In addition, they have shown increased acceptance of lifelong learning as part of their professional growth. The management has witnessed an increase in staff morale and motivation at work which has resulted in increased productivity.

Keywords: (Corporate Training, non-traditional content, critical thinking skills, training objectives)



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INTRODUCTION

Improving communicative competence is a vital part of succeeding in a corporate environment. Business organizations invest considerably in training their staff so that the industry/sector-specific skills required to perform well in the work environment are met. Though English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as recommended by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998 as cited in Chalikandy, 2013) can be viewed as a possible approach, due to its subject-specific content design, its rate of success in a work place setting has been questioned by Liton, Muhammed and Alom (2012 as cited in Chalikandy, 2013). This is because ESP cannot address the evolving training needs of the workplace. Rickheit et al., (2008 as cited in Qing, 2011) opine that in addition to communicative competence, key factors like institutional needs and job task requirements have to be taken into consideration as a justification for rethinking corporate training. Hence, an integrated approach (Flowerdew, 2005 as cited in Qing, 2011) to training that combines needs-based, skills-based, content-based and task-based approach can be seen as a possible solution. In order to equip employees working in rapidly developing fields, giving them communication techniques that can be used in the real world, allowing them to be self-aware, giving confidence and making them life-long learners can only be achieved by introducing non-traditional teaching material like literature and contemporary social issues .

While numerous studies have been conducted (Tomlinson, 1986); to understand the implication of using literature in secondary and tertiary educational settings, none of them have tried to introduce literature to the populace that are not considered as ‘students’ anymore yet continue to ‘learn’ new skills as employees. Lazar (1993 as cited in Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012) has been a proponent of using literature in ESL (English as Second Language) classrooms by listing the importance of literary content. She believes that literature brings in meaningful content that is enriched with a range of vocabulary. It aids in developing critical thinking skills and more importantly using literature in language teaching is in line with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); the most common style followed in adult workforce-based language classes. Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi (2012) further support Lazar’s view by explaining the specific advantages of using literature in the English classroom. It contains authentic text which can increase the motivation of the learners as it uses real language that might easily relate to them.

This study has attempted to use non-conventional material like business fables and movies in a corporate training setting named “Art of Language” to observe the impact it has on developing soft skills, to promote lifelong learning and to balance the learning objectives of both the employees and the management in corporate training. Use of authentic material from the contemporary and classic literature is aimed at arousing interest and motivation among the participants in the classroom; there by creating a conducive environment for engaging in meaningful discourse.

The objectives of the study are:

- To observe the level of success in using literary content in corporate training
- To improve critical thinking skills of the employees



- To align the interests of the management and the participants in enhancing language proficiency

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods study has been conducted to comprehend the views of 30 participants (28 employees and two heads of the company) through purposive sampling. Since the participants of the study are working in a high pressure environment and the sessions are conducted as part of their training schedule, data collection tools were chosen based on both the employees' and the management's preference. Out of the six options given to the participants (pre and post case analyses, peer group discussions, classroom observation, discussion forum, questionnaire and one-on-one interviews), the latter three were chosen since more than 70% of the participants opted for them.

Data Collection Tools:

The questionnaire elicited responses regarding prior experiences of learning literature, the employees' current learning experience, opinions about the choice of material, person and group specific skills they were expected to develop and their overall impression of the training. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the management to get their feedback on the training sessions in comparison to the conventional ones and their level of satisfaction in terms of alignment with management objectives. The discussion forum allowed the employees to respond to other's comments and critically analyse the viewpoints that were expressed.

Interventions:

Since the choice of material is closely related to the success of this training, they were carefully selected with the consent of the management. The discussions were conducted on the company's learning platform called 'TalentLMS'. Teaching sessions were conducted online where the employees were given opportunities to do presentations and impromptu speeches. Table 1 given below provides an overview of the material used and the types of interventions utilized to monitor participants' progress.

Table 1

Interventions Used

Phases	Content	Interventions
Phase 1 - Business fables	'Who moved my cheese' by Dr Spencer Johnson	Discussion Forum
Phase 2 - Movie literature	a) 'Inside out' b) 'Lion King', 'Pretty Woman', 'Bridget Jone's Diary' and 'Easy A'	a) Presentation analysing emotions in the movie and how it connects with the corporate world b) Presentation that elicited the social problems discussed in the movies
Phase 3 - Society and Change	a) News articles about current events b) A meaningful photo from their phones	a) Social media posts about people's appraisal and the change in the society b) Impromptu speeches

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the "Art of Language" project has produced promising results. The three areas under investigation namely the potential for enhancing soft skills, balancing the objectives of the



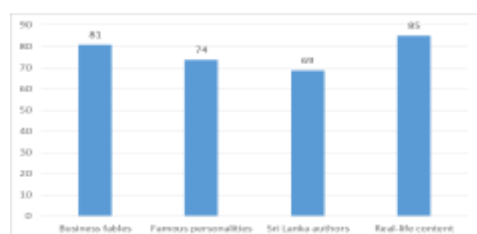
management and the participants and creating opportunities for life-long learning irrespective of age, sector and profession are presented in detail.

Correlation between content and skills development

The key expectation of using non-traditional content in work-place trainings is to see measurable results in skills improvement that is immediately applicable to the job duties while maintaining a high level of interest in the course material. Participants’ opinions about the material used in the training sessions are as given in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Interest in Content

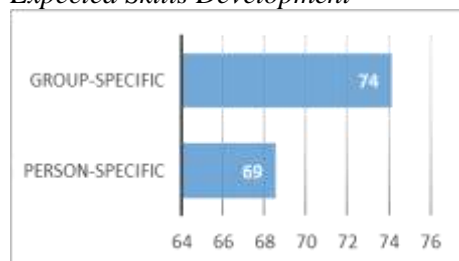


Based on the responses for questionnaires, it is evident that use of real-life content has been the most popular among the employees (85%) while the least interest is shown in reading material from Sri Lankan authors (69%). This can have strong implications in the choice of material in the future.

Development of Higher Order Thinking Skills is one of the expectations while focusing on upper level executives and staff who deal with research analysis and communicate with international clients as is the case of this organisation. However, the questionnaire provided mixed results in terms of skills development.

Figure 2

Expected Skills Development



According to Figure 2, person –specific skills like being able to guess the meanings of new words, using idiomatic expressions and being able to give public speeches have seen less than 70% improvement. However, satisfaction in group-specific skills like giving opinion, taking part in discussions, expressing complex information in simple terms, arguing about the pros & cons and

analysing a concept from different perspectives have been viewed with 70 to 75% success rate.

These results correlate with the data collected from the discussion forum. The employees were asked to comment on the statement ‘*change imposed is change opposed*’ which was the key message from the business fable. They displayed strong abilities in arguing both for and against the statement by giving personal anecdotes. They were able to respond to others’ opinions and build arguments by bringing in new perspectives and by incorporating contemporary real-world examples like the fertilizer ban and COVID-19 restrictions that led to major changes in Sri Lanka.

Alignment of Objectives

The challenge of meeting the requirements of both the management and the employees has successfully been met in this project. Though day-to-day operations gave greater flexibility for the staff in language use, the need for presenting results to the clients, paying attention to detail and challenging different perspectives within the organisation were expected from the



employees. Concomitant to their organisational objectives, 90% of the staff have mentioned that they were able to improve professional skills like negotiating, making impromptu speeches, critical thinking and working as a team.

Due to the intense nature of work with tight deadlines, the management was keen on developing programs that were not a burden to their staff. The same has been expressed by 86% of the staff. They have further mentioned that the course was enjoyable and aided them in learning effortlessly with intellectually stimulating and relatable content.

Life-long Learning

In accordance with Ornstein & Hunkins's (1997 as cited in Dechesne, 1998) call for life-long learning, this organisation also believes that continuous learning is necessary for continuous growth. They expect the staff to be intellectual individuals who can break the mental barriers that limit language ability and stay competent with the technological advancements and regulatory changes in the profession. The same attitude is reflected in the participants' responses as 80% liked the fact that the content challenged them and 87% agreed that it made them think critically. They have further commented that this course has made them recall previous knowledge, identify weaknesses in language, rectify errors and also motivated them to seek new knowledge. They have developed a positive attitude towards reading and have learnt to acknowledge multiple viewpoints that lead to healthy discussions. These attitudes are seen as essential in an organisation that works in tight knit groups.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the restricted movement due to COVID-19 pandemic and testing economic conditions, three phases of the study have yielded some encouraging results. It has shown that innovative ideas are welcome in corporate training by both the management and the employees. Use of literary content has proven to be a success. However, utilising real-life content that is relatable takes higher priority. Deviating from traditional language classes has been seen as stimulating because the employees and the management have seen marked changes in motivation, staff morale and efficiency at work.

However, the difficulties of predicting staff turnover which results in changing dynamics in the sessions, challenges in finding content that are acceptable in terms of organisational policies and retaining the same level of interest among the participants need to be taken into consideration.

In order to promote continuous and uniform growth, in the case of this organisation, local literature created by Sri Lankan authors as well as international literature that allows the participants to analyse and accept various viewpoints could be included. In addition, abstract and philosophical content like poetry could be added to the course material to encourage them to appreciate language.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the management of Wilshire Global for giving me consent to collect data and supporting me through the entire process with their constant encouragement. My sincere gratitude to the participants for having an open mind and taking part in all the tasks enthusiastically.