



# Meeting the challenges of corporate language teaching

From (German) high school teacher to corporate language trainer

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After having done high school teaching and courses at several adult education centers, where I was supposed to teach the so-called “general English” – whatever that may be –, I found it highly interesting and exciting, but, at the same time, rather challenging and frightening when I was asked to hold English courses for secretaries, receptionists, engineers, IT managers, managing directors and the like at a German motor manufacturing company. It was a completely different world, with squirrel-cage motors (which have nothing to do with those cute animals whatsoever!), where I was asked to translate words like the German “Wiedervorlagemappe” (god knows what the English word for that is) or the “i. A.” and “i. V.” that go with German signatures in business letters.

During my studies at the university I had learnt about the interpretation of the early English novel, psycholinguistics and Chomsky. The units we had to teach at high schools were about smallpox, the discovery of America and the advantages and disadvantages of television.

I felt lost, left alone with my new task. The Human Resources Manager of that company gave me several files in German and in English covering their product range, company philosophy and so on. I spent hours on end teaching myself the new vocabulary, both in English and in German. I went on a guided tour of their production facilities and dreamt of sweet brown squirrels in cages.

And then I jumped into the cold water.

One sunny Monday morning at the beginning of a four-hour course called “English for service engineers” I gathered all my courage - acquired in the suggestopedic workshops with Gail Heidenhain – and did my first centering meditation with this „men-only“ class. I was just beginning to feel a bit less nervous and more confident about putting them into the so-called alpha state – they were all sitting there relaxed, with their eyes closed –, when suddenly the door opened and their boss burst into the room shouting “Wenzl, I need you immediately!”. (In the Bavarian original it sounded like “Wenzl, i brauch eana SOOOOofort!”) The comedy of the situation, which at the time seemed a tragedy to me, hit me much later: Mr. Wenzl wasn’t even in my course! So what to do after this? My thoughts were doing somersaults, my heart missing beats.

My first thought was to forget everything about suggestopedia and modern teaching methods. But then, I just asked the participants – with whom I had not yet really built up a good rapport –, „What shall we do now?” One of them said „Start again from the beginning.” And that’s exactly what I did. And – it worked! After the lesson they all said they would like a meditation at the beginning of every class because they could concentrate on English a lot better after it. Hurrah, we had all survived! This was a breakthrough for me. From then on I started to try out lots of different methods, developing more and more confidence. The students and I had fun in class, and they were motivated.

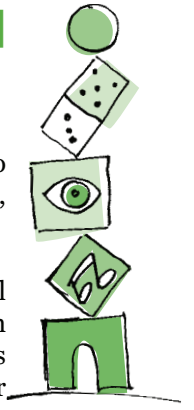
So, what about the specific requirements concerning the technical terminology in corporate language training – remember the „squirrel-cage motor”? Of course you need a certain basic knowledge of the particular area your students work in, but – and it took me quite a long time to realize this – you don’t need to be a dictionary! In my first years it was a disaster for me if a course participant asked me a particular technical term and I didn’t know the translation! Blushing, I would apologize two or three times. I made life really hard for myself! I thought I had to spoon-feed my students with thousands of technical terms. There was, however, one positive outcome: I ended up writing a very much appreciated dictionary of terms used in electrical engineering and electronics for my students!

Today I don’t put myself under such terrible stress any more. Today we work together, my students, the Internet and I, and it works for all the different areas of industry.

From experiences like the ones already mentioned, I have learnt that the focus should always be on the learners and not on the trainer.

Let’s have a look at them, the people who come to the English classes on a voluntary basis, or those poor creatures that are sent by their bosses.

I remember one young guy who had just joined the company. He was supposed to work in sales. Of course his boss expected him to speak two foreign languages. His French was excellent because he had some relatives in France, but his English pretty poor – he himself called it „lousy”. When he showed up in one of my classes, he said right away „I have nothing against you personally, but I hate English.” ❖



A completely new challenge for me, because in my unconditional love of the English language I thought everybody MUST have the same feelings. I thought he might drop out immediately, but he came again and stayed. And some weeks later the very same guy said he now preferred speaking English to French and even volunteered to go to England with a group of employees who I accompanied on a one-week trip to Brighton, including family accommodation, company visits, language training, and of course pub visits. And he loved it! What had happened? He had managed to erase bad memories of learning English at school, he had experienced learning in a small group/team, had learnt to switch off from work in meditations and was motivated by brain gym exercises, various activities, games and role plays. He had fun in class. His needs had been met, he had been opened up to the wonderful world of learning a language and was enjoying both the learning process and the resulting success, reflected in the acknowledgement from his boss, his colleagues, his clients.

What I had expected to be a problem was the different age groups in company courses. On the contrary! I have taught people ranging from 16-year-old apprentices to 65-year old participants close to retirement in the same group. The various age groups have always gained a great deal from each other, the team work has been of mutual benefit for them in a lot of ways. Their different language skills, the multitude of experiences both in their private and in their professional lives, their various interests and motivation have always complemented each other creating a very fascinating and specific „family structure“. This is particularly noticeable whenever it comes to integrating new, and, in some cases, foreign course participants, who are warmly welcomed on board.

The mixture of participants from different departments also makes a positive contribution. At first I thought I couldn't possibly imagine someone from the IT department, a sales manager, a dispatch clerk and someone from quality assurance in the same class, but then I soon realized how important cross-departmental communication is and how much the course participants can enrich each other's job experience and make processes in the company easier by talking to each other. The English lesson soon becomes a market place for cross-departmental information exchange and problem solving, which means in a lot of cases killing two birds with one stone, i. e. helping them to improve their English and

at the same time enabling them to find solutions to problems with products, data sheets, orders, clients, suppliers, etc.

Meeting the students' needs at their particular level – with the level to be determined by means of written and/or oral placement tests – can only work if it is done in close co-operation with them. Defining their specific needs, however, might turn out to be another challenge for the language trainer. Ask a new student what his or her expectations, needs and wishes concerning the course are, and you will, in a lot of cases, get a very clear answer: „I want to improve my English“! or „I want to learn technical English“. Thank goodness there are job descriptions, colleagues, and of course the conversations in the classes to help make those unspecific targets more precise.

To measure the students' success, to evaluate their progress, is another challenging task. Irregular attendance due to business trips, meetings, overtime, sometimes makes it difficult to actually achieve the specific target defined by the group at the beginning of the course. Home-study tasks (sounds better than „homework“) are often the answer, in other cases alternative block courses for those who had been absent prior to taking a progress check.

One more challenge I would like to mention is that of competition in language learner groups. Competition is wonderful, as long as it serves as a driving force. Then it can lead to fantastic results which will make the learners themselves, the management of the company and the clients happy. It can, however, also result in problems among the employees and their superiors. What happens if the secretary's English is actually much better than the boss's English? What happens if the boss's English is much better than that of the people in his division? Suppose they all end up in the same learner group for some reason or other. One way out of the dilemma is the creation of a dream company in which each learner can have a new job, in which the roles are totally different from real life; role plays, in which a real-life top manager suddenly turns out to be a trainee, the trainee acts as an IT manager and the secretary runs the company.

Any more challenges? - Yes, please!