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## IN-HOUSE CORPORATE LANGUAGE TRAINING IN JAPAN : A MODEL FOR THAILAND?

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### **Abstract**

Thailand's rapid industrial development and foreign investment increase the need for English training designed to meet the particular requirements of businesses and industries. Of interest to curriculum developers should be training programs developed in Japanese companies long concerned with the foreign language needs of employees. In particular, "in-house" programs, which operate entirely within an organization, may serve as a model for programs in Thai conglomerates, financial services firms, hotels, and foreign multinationals.

In Japan, in-house programs are gaining in popularity because language teaching can reflect and be integrated into a company's operations. In-house programs are able to develop materials based on real needs, to offer tuition in specialized areas such as public speaking, negotiating, or cross-cultural awareness; and to provide related services such as proofreading or copy writing. More importantly, by starting an in-house program, a company signifies a serious commitment to improving communication skills.

This paper will describe the history, organization, and roles of corporate language programs in Japanese companies. It will also discuss the content-based, communicative methods and materials that are most effective. Finally, the corporate environments in each

country will be compared in order to suggest which forms of corporate English training are most appropriate in Thailand.

### **English in the corporate world**

Outside special interest groups or specialized journals, research in the field of English for Special Purposes (ESP) receives relatively little attention. Research relating to the offshoot of ESP, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), is published frequently, but an ESP teacher would have difficulty finding articles that address the issues of concern to the mainstream of TESOL, such as learning strategies, communicative task design and classroom research, in the context of teaching people in business, science or engineering. Although the field may attract little attention from applied linguists,

global trade (and, hence, communication among the actors involved) is growing. In Europe, Asia and the Americas, governments are opening markets that have long been protected, and companies are seizing new opportunities presented in exporting far from home. In this changing world, English is the lingua franca that enables business professionals to communicate with each other. While the emergence of English as an international language is not a new phenomenon, the dramatic increase in the numbers of people who are required to use it speaks to us as language teachers to better understand the communicative and learning processes of students in business.

Despite improvements in telecommunications often touted as lessening the need to travel, face to face contact among business professionals appears to be growing. In Japan, the past ten years have seen immeasurable changes in the way its companies do business with the rest of the world. Traditionally, although large Japanese companies purchased raw materials from foreign countries and aimed production at export markets, their personnel tended to travel and meet little with foreign suppliers or customers. This was because most companies in the manufacturing industries relied on large trading companies to do all their purchasing and selling for them. Hence, the manufacturers could focus their energies and financial resources on designing and making products and leave the traveling, meeting and negotiating to those who were sophisticated to the ways of the world. To the dismay of the trading houses perhaps, this tradition may be on its way out. Globalization is now the rallying cry, and companies are moving manufacturing, sales, and even design and engineering operations to other countries.

Since the yen soared in value in the mid-80s, Japanese companies have rushed to acquire foreign companies and property, form joint-ventures and strategic alliances, enter into technical exchanges and build new factories and

plants. These companies are expanding around the world and localizing production not only in the countries, like Thailand, that have long served as sources of cheap labor, but also in wealthy countries in order to circumvent tariffs and other trade restrictions. As a result, the number of Japanese traveling or living abroad has reached an all-time high.

In Thailand, too, the character of the business world is changing, and increasing numbers of Thai people are working and communicating closely with foreigners. The country's traditional role of serving as a source of either raw material or cheap labor is changing as more Thai companies become active throughout S.E. Asia and the world, and as more foreign companies are drawn here because of the location, financial services and the growing power of the Thai consumer market. It is common to hear fears expressed that inflation and rising salaries will drive out the manufacturers who need cheap labor, but the real concern for the future should be whether a critical mass of Thai workers will gain the education and communicative skills to work in advanced industries.

The globalization of business and the proliferation of world trade suggest that our profession pay attention to the communicative needs of working professionals. Unfortunately many students in countries like Thailand and Japan, where English is a foreign language, do not graduate from university with the proficiency required to communicate clearly and effectively in the world of their careers. This is especially true of students in the fields most likely to lead to jobs in an international business such as law, engineering, finance and economics. Too often English is regarded as either a welcome diversion from the "serious" classes or a bothersome requirement.

### **Corporate language training**

In Japan, as in Thailand, most who feel the need to improve their English probably initiate

language school. This is not difficult; Tokyo, for example, is home to hundreds of language schools. While some schools are driven purely by the profit motive-- one recently resorted to advertising that equated English proficiency with the ability to date blonde women in bikinis--there are many schools that offer methodologically sound programs for professional people. For motivated individuals with time to spare, many of these programs might be effective and would offer the bonus of allowing the student to practice communicating with students from other careers or backgrounds. But precisely because language schools tend to offer a broad-based curriculum designed to accommodate students with a wide range of needs, they cannot serve the specialized language training needs of large companies.

Corporations may have large numbers of employees in need of language training, but the contexts in which they use English may vary greatly. Administrators at corporate headquarters may need to meet and negotiate with foreign visitors while factory workers may only require the ability to read technical manuals. An engineer sent to an international conference needs to present material using discourse that differs from that used by a sales person describing new products to a foreign customer. Because a company's needs are so diverse, effective language training can best be provided following the formation of a carefully conceived, comprehensive corporate language policy. Language training should be integrated with the operations of a company so that a curriculum of language training, designed to improve employee job performance, will emerge.

When language teaching professionals work in a company, they can devise a curriculum that reflects the environment, history and culture of the company and responds to the needs of the employees. A good company-focused curriculum will be able to deal with individual needs as well as prepare groups of younger employees for future work involving

English. Another advantage to an in-house language program is that when language learning is sanctioned by corporate management, language may be considered as important for the employee as training in accounting, marketing or computers.

Corporate in-house language training is not new. According to Pilbeam (1991), many companies in Japan, Europe and the US have, since the early 1970's, implemented large-scale language training programs. In Japan, in-house training programs are generally found in the large steel, chemicals, electronics and motor companies, which not only export much of their product but also operate subsidiary companies in many parts of the world. In-house language programs are also found in some of the Japan branches of foreign firms, such as Goldman-Sachs, or joint-ventures between Japanese and foreign companies.

### **Trends in in-house corporate language training**

Another way to classify different types of language training programs is to define them in terms of changes over time. Pilbeam (1991) describes three broad tendencies in corporate language training he terms Past Trends, Current Trends, and Future Trends. It is important to note, however, that in corporate language training, the past is not necessarily over nor is the future waiting to happen. Whether a program resembles the past or future is more a consequence of how long it has been in the business of training. The longer a company has provided in-house language training, the more highly evolved its program will be. As Pilbeam puts it, Past Trends involve:

- Large Scale Training**
- General Focus**
- Extensive ongoing teaching during nonworking hours**
- Unclear objectives**
- External teachers**
- Poor results**

When a company begins to provide language classes for employees, too often the guiding metaphor is "school." Teachers are hired and classes are formed but without careful planning or formation of objectives. Not surprisingly, employees soon lose interest in classes that fail to address their needs and drop out. Eventually the goals of language learning may be reassessed and regarded as a form of "training." Teachers may be hired to work inside the company. Pilbeam notes that the changes often evolve into a scenario he calls Current Trends. These are:

- Smaller scale training**
- Intensive courses**
- Job-specific focus**
- Extensive teaching during working hours**
- Clear objectives**
- Internal trainers.**

Courses that are designed with the objective of improving a person's ability to perform his or her job naturally achieve better results. Interestingly, according to Pilbeam, many companies are now finding ways of improving their programs even more. These improvements may reflect an unease at having gone too far in the direction of a job-specific focus, since many employees at early stages in their careers are not exactly sure what their jobs will entail 5 or 10 years down the road. But it is also likely that the changes reflect broader trends in international business, where companies must operate in a variety of environments, cultures and countries and must transfer personnel in and out of new jobs or offices. In response to these changes, corporate language training is moving toward a skills-based focus, in which skills that are useful to a variety of employees in differing contexts, such as giving presentations or using the telephone, are emphasized. Because of the globalization of business, many in-house programs are also incorporating a strong component of cross-cultural training. The Future Trends as described by Pilbeam are:

- Medium scale training**
- Development of skills**
- Cross-cultural training**
- Intensive and extensive courses**
- Internal and external trainers**
- Training in foreign countries.**

As noted above, these trends do not imply a steady, upward evolution. In Japan, some companies now have language programs that are really highly-evolved versions of the "past trends" scenario. Reluctant to hire foreign trainers permanently, many companies prefer classes taught after working hours by part-time teachers. Because hiring teachers is difficult for the Japanese personnel manager more familiar with the resumes of Japanese university graduates than those of foreigners, language-service companies have sprung up to occupy a clever niche in the market. Like pizza delivery services that have only a kitchen, but no restaurant, these companies operate with only offices but no classrooms. These services will send teachers to companies and take care of their salaries, taxes, supervision and all the other duties a corporation may wish not to perform. Some of these companies obtain exclusive contracts to provide all the language training at some large corporations. Thus, in-company training continues along the first, "past trends" scenario, but in a much-improved version. Indeed, some of these outside training companies offer services that resemble and even rival in-house programs. They teach not only on-going classes, but also intensive seminars on presentations, cross-cultural awareness and negotiating. Sometimes these are swank affairs, held in remote inns on the slopes of Mt. Fuji. However, many companies may eventually find these programs lacking in substance. For although some of these services offer training that is well-designed and professional, the companies that are their clients are often reluctant to divulge information related to the employees' work. Denied the content required to build interest, the classes result in being too

general and conversational and too far-removed from the work the employees do. They also perpetuate the notion among corporate language learners (and more problematically, their managers) that language learning is "ei-kaiwa" or conversation, an activity that is pleasant for some but not for others, a skill acquired by some talented individuals but not by the average guy. Eventually, a company must either start an in-house program or employ one or two language training professionals to coordinate language teaching.

### **Language training in Kobe Steel**

Looking closely at how language training is carried out by one company may provide a better picture of in-house corporate training in general. Kobe Steel is the fifth largest steel producer in Japan, though it is highly active in such other areas as aluminum, copper, engineering, machinery and electronics. Kobe Steel is the largest producer of aluminum for cans in Japan and the largest producer of the aluminum substrate for computer disks in the world. The company also has a far-reaching, highly-funded program of research and development, with labs in Japan, the U.S. and Britain that conduct research in new materials, biotechnology and electronics. Like most Japanese steelmakers, it used to rely on trading companies for purchasing raw materials and exporting finished steel products, but in the 80s, the company began to pursue policies of diversification and globalization, relocating manufacturing, starting new companies and forming joint-ventures. Among other important international collaborations are a joint venture with US Steel to make steel bar in Lorain, Ohio, and tie-ups with Texas Instruments and Aluminum Corporation of America to make semiconductors and aluminum can stock in Japan respectively. Additionally, over 30 subsidiary companies are involved in either manufacturing or sales in North America, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and S.E. Asia. There is even a factory in nearby Samut Prakan, Thailand.

Many employees have jobs that require a highly proficient ability in English. Researchers attend international conferences and work with foreign researchers in Japan and abroad. Sales staff in the export departments communicate frequently with customers by phone or fax or travel to their factories. Plant engineers are packed off to sites in countries like Algeria, Iran, Venezuela and China. Technicians are dispatched to foreign subsidiaries to train local workers. Managers are relocated to run subsidiary companies. Fortunately, the company did begin to implement a language training program over 15 years ago. Over time, the staff grew to include both full-time and part-time teachers, and students included both blue collar and white collar workers. Following a company-wide needs assessment, carried out in 1984, courses also became more skill-oriented and often suited to the needs of a particular site. A solid program is now in place that can provide ongoing, extensive language classes, ranging from general English for those at the lower levels to business-related or technical English at the intermediate and advanced levels. The program can also respond to various individual needs such as pre-departure training, cross-cultural training, and preparing for academic study abroad.

Today, language training is primarily conducted at three Language Centers, which are located at corporate headquarters in Tokyo and Kobe, and at the Seishin Research Laboratory - our newest language center. One manager is in charge of all the language centers, each of which also has its own coordinator. Officially all three Language Centers belong to the International Communication Program of the Personnel Department. The personnel department budgets all our activities, and everything we do is coordinated very carefully with their managers.

### **Courses and services offered by the Language Centers**

Our year is divided into three trimesters. During two trimesters we teach ongoing classes

at the low-intermediate, intermediate and advanced levels. The Spring/Summer trimester is used for offering two - or three-day "mini-intensive" courses that focus on special skills such as writing business letters, giving plant/site tours and negotiating.

All three centers follow the same trimester schedule, but the classes offered differ in order to fit the individual needs of their employees. For example, many courses taught at the Kobe Language Center, where a high number of engineers and technical people are based, follow a syllabus based on technical English. On the other hand, as Tokyo is where many of the company's export, sales and planning departments are located, language courses stress business content and skills. Ongoing classes for lower levels or at sites in outlying areas are provided by outside companies with coordination from the Language Centers.

Being organized as an in-house program allows us to respond to a variety of language training needs that might be expensive or difficult to locate from outside the company. For example, in addition to language classes and intensives, we provide a range of special services throughout the year. For two years we have had an MBA preparation program in place. In 1990, the company selected eight employees to apply to Master of Business Administration programs in the United States. We worked closely with them, providing counseling and advice, and coordinating their preparation from taking the GMAT and TOEFL tests to writing application essays and practicing interviews. Happily, all eight were accepted into good programs. Before leaving Japan, these students were given a course that covered academic writing, reading and case study. This year, we have six new candidates preparing MBA applications.

Another service we provide is pre-departure training for employees who must move overseas. Generally, we can arrange for any kind of training that best fits the time

constraints of the employee. With enough lead time, we can arrange for tutoring sessions that blend language learning with information about the country and culture the person will be working in. Beginning in 1989, the Centers began to pay special attention to cross-cultural training. A group of men and their wives, who were to be sent to Lorain, Ohio, the site of the joint-venture with US, were given a class of English and cross-cultural training. In 1990, teachers began to visit other sites around the world to carry out follow-up interviews with former students as well as needs assessment. Now the Language Centers are finding they may have a role to play in training not only the Japanese working at overseas sites, but also the local workers. In the US, cross-cultural training has been given to both Japanese and American workers. It is now thought that Language Center staff can help workers from different cultures get along better and also help the subsidiary companies develop relations with their respective communities.

Back at the home office, one additional need we respond to is to help researchers or other professionals prepare for attending or delivering papers at international conferences. Ideally one trainer will work with the employee through all stages of the process, from helping edit the abstract to writing the paper and practicing the speech. Finally, we also edit and proofread manuals, advertising and publicity materials and correspondence.

### **Teaching methods**

Our goal is to help our students improve their ability to communicate in English so that they can perform their jobs effectively and become true participants in the world of international business.

A typical student in our program is a young man, a graduate of a top Japanese university, who has been with the company less than six years. Classes for managers are offered occasionally but must be carefully organized to suit

their particular time constraints. Our classes are, of course, open to women, but like so many other large Japanese firms, Kobe Steel hires few women into positions that are not clerical or secretarial. This unfortunate state of affairs, however, may be changing slowly. Every year a few more female researchers and engineers and even businesswomen are brought into the company as lifetime employees.

Most students come into our program having studied English grammar for anywhere between six and ten years. Unfortunately their high schools and universities taught "English through an exam-based system that keeps the language on an abstract plane--almost like mathematics" (Beers & Rittmaster, 1989). Our courses, therefore, aim at promoting communicative competence, especially the competence required to communicate clearly and effectively in business and social situations. Communicative competence, according to the classification suggested by Canale and Swain (1980), comprises the ability to use the grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic components of a language. The methods used in our courses are communicative, task-based, learner-centered and emphasize content as much as language structure. Because our students give up valuable time to take our classes and quickly tire of material outside their interests, the choice of content and skills taught is critical; students want to learn language that will help them in their work. Course syllabi may be based on language functions (eg. requesting information or describing a process); business or social situations (eg. attending a conference, taking a colleague to lunch); or business skills (eg. using the telephone, giving a presentation.) However, content related to the students' work, the company, the industries it operates in and business in Japan and the world is woven into the learning at every level. As in most language programs, the lower level courses may provide more practice in structure and vocabulary and follow a more controlled format, while those at higher levels promote greater use of the

language, requiring active student participation and eliciting freer communication. Using the language creatively and skillfully--doing things in the language-- is an important aspect of the program at the higher levels. Students may become engaged in projects, participate in discussions and negotiations, and give speeches and presentations.

As in most programs that teach ESP, needs analysis suggests the language, skills and content to be covered in course syllabi, but in some courses needs are addressed more explicitly than in others. Whereas ongoing trimester-long courses follow a syllabus that emphasizes the discourse and communicative functions required in business situations, the two-day "mini-intensive" courses we offer in the Spring and Summer are geared toward teaching business or communication skills. Topics for intensive courses have included leading plant or site tours, negotiating and attending meetings, and using learning strategies. Additionally, much of the teaching we do for the MBA candidates is done through mini-intensives.

One of the challenges we face is in deciding how specific to get in terms of skill, content, language and vocabulary. If a student left our program with the ability to deliver a presentation but not to start a conversation in a bar with another researcher, our program would not be adequately serving the needs of the students. Hence, in our teaching we must demonstrate how to extend structures and functions into a variety of situations and contexts so that the student's overall ability and fluency will grow.

## **Materials**

As mentioned earlier, one advantage to teaching in an in-house program is that one can easily integrate anecdotes, history and culture of the company and its business into the lessons. To do this effectively, one needs to create materials in which the company and / or the students' work serve as the context for language

learning.

Some of the best materials for language learning in a corporate environment are the authentic English-language documents used every day in the company. Some excellent sources of material are annual reports, catalogs and product brochures, and also real letters, telexes and commercial documents. A disadvantage to using authentic materials exclusively, however, is that they do not necessarily contain examples of the points one wishes to teach in a lesson. Additionally, real business letters and faxes may serve as poor sources of input. Writers of business letters often dispense with clear introductions, use words incorrectly, rely on too much jargon, or otherwise break many of the rules and guidelines teachers stress in good writing. (Of course, for these very reasons we may argue that such materials are essential for preparing students to function in the real world.) Better still would be to find a good balance between authentic materials and those adapted for the purposes of language teaching.

Another way to incorporate information about a company into course materials is to write or create entire courses. Language Center teachers maintain relatively light teaching loads to allow time for materials development. Materials written in the company include most of the intensive courses and also intermediate-level texts that follow the visit of a foreign businessman to Kobe Steel or a business trip of a Japanese to a site in Venezuela.

Course materials should weave content and language learning so tightly that students may focus more attention and interest on content than on linguistic structure. An example of this is a course written for high intermediate students, called *A Survey of Kobe Steel's Subsidiaries in the United States*. Each unit presents information about one subsidiary company and the state it is located in and teaches a particular language or communication skill such as describing an organization, a process or trends, giving a sales presentation, or suggesting marketing strategies.

Using the subsidiary companies as content allows the students to learn about the activities of their company and to use this information as the context for language learning and creative language use. In the unit about a company that manufactures steel bar and pipe, students listen to a tour of the pipe mill and practice asking questions to a tour guide. In the unit on a company that manufactures air compressors, the students use product brochures to practice the reading skills of skimming and scanning. And in the unit on a steel powder plant, the students consider environmental issues and engage in a negotiating session with the town's leaders on the building of the plant and the inclusion of environmental safeguards. The real information that is contained in exercises, graphs and readings, and exploited in communicative tasks and discussions creates material that is interesting, motivational and useful to the students.

In writing such material, however, one must take care not to present content that is too new in language that is too difficult. Theories of cognitive processing hold that the brain's processing capacity is limited; hence, new knowledge is learned most efficiently when presented in the context of what is already known (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). A rule of thumb I learned in graduate school is that if language is difficult, then the context should be kept easy to understand in order to leave more room for processing. By the same token, if one is teaching new information, then it should be taught using structures and vocabulary already familiar to the students.

While a company's own material is generally more stimulating for students in an in-house program, a great many textbooks for ESP classes have been published. We do use commercially published materials for some courses. The difficulty in using commercial texts is that they rarely succeed when divorced too far from the context of the company or work of the students. Some teachers supplement commercial texts with stimulating content as well as exercises, tasks and communicative

activities, but they sometimes hand out more supplemented pages than exist in the text. The best texts are those that use real information rather than those based on imaginary businesses or countries. Fortunately, it appears that the latest generation of ESP textbooks are dispensing with their scenarios of fictitious candy bar makers and incorporating information on real companies like Sony, Phillips or ICI. Language lessons that serve as a source of interesting information appear to increase student satisfaction.

### **A model for Thailand?**

I have argued that in-house training is a more effective way for a company to respond to its English training needs than sending employees to a school or hiring temporary private teachers. Though hiring foreign language teaching professionals to work full-time is expensive and troublesome since foreigners need work visas and may require special benefits and incentives denied to local employees, only full-time teachers can devise a program and curriculum of language training that best reflects the environment of a company. Language professionals hired to work in a company can:

- \*respond best to the actual needs of a company's employees.

- \*teach large classes or provide individual tutoring.

- \*teach a variety of courses, covering general functions and use of language on in-depth practice in business communication skills.

- \*write or adapt materials that use the company or its business as the context for language learning.

- \*provide other language-related services.

- \*be flexible in terms of time and teach either intensive courses or long-term classes.

- \*coordinate the language learning provided by outside services.

The question is, however, how realistic or necessary is in-house training in the Thai

business context? The companies that would benefit most by starting an in-house language training program are those that send large numbers of employees to foreign countries for training or business, or those that deal with large numbers of foreigners in the country. Hotels and other tourist-related service companies are obvious candidates, but so are some of the large private companies now expanding rapidly in the region and state enterprises such as Thai International or the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. Many banks or financial services firms may soon begin to expand beyond the country's borders and may also be ready for in-house training programs.

In many cases, however, companies that would seem to have high English needs in fact do not. Like Japanese companies, many Thai manufacturers focus their production toward export markets, but there the similarities end. Japanese companies usually comprise or belong to wealthy conglomerates that not only ship products abroad, but also manufacture, design and market their goods in other countries. In contrast, Thai manufacturers and exporters of shoes, textiles or food products are really small - or medium-sized family businesses, which may have some employees taking frequent trips abroad, but would not require the services of a full-time language trainer.

Likewise, Thai branches of foreign multinationals would seem to require comprehensive language training services; however, as these companies typically seek to enter into the Thai market exclusively rather than expand throughout the region, only small numbers of employees are required to speak English frequently. Typically these companies are managed by a few foreign nationals at the top, who work closely with the higher levels of Thai middle management. While certain individuals may require language training, most companies would be reluctant to create a language training department. These companies have no choice but to buy in language services. Therefore, to

provide the most effective language training, the teachers contracted must insist on performing comprehensive needs analysis. In addition to determining the vocabulary, structures, and discourse functions used most frequently by students, the teacher must strive to understand the company, its business, and the industry it operates in, for this is the information needed to weave useful and interesting content into the language classes. Teachers may not have time or be paid to write custom-designed materials, but they should supplement a textbook with communicative and learner-centered tasks that

relate to the world the students operate in.

The best way for teaching in companies to improve is for the trainers and program administrators to meet regularly and exchange information. In Tokyo, an organization called the International Business Communicators (IBC), meets once a month to share ideas, discuss common problems, and lend its members support. Such an organization could easily be formed in Bangkok. No doubt there are many teachers who teach in corporate environments but feel they are all alone.

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