
The Nature of the Relationship Between Customers and Suppliers of Language Teaching Services in the Business Community: A Case Study of MNMC

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1. INTRODUCTION

“...the ESP practitioner must be creatively engaged in all aspects of the notion of learner-centredness and not disengage the moment this pursuit leads him into terrains that are face-threatening or hostile or inaccessible. The research journey – the blowing away of “the dust of custom” and the rigorous re-examination of old concepts with new tools – is valuable in itself, whatever the destination the journey takes us to. ”

(Chitravelu, 1993: 38)

It is very much with the pioneering spirit hinted at above that the present study has been undertaken. ESP in Malaysia today is forging ahead in the quest for new trails that will help create paths of access into an area of language teaching that is still proving to be difficult terrain for ESP practitioners - difficult because much of this area has not been subjected to the “rigorous re-examination” that is so crucial to sound understanding.

One of the more notable of these murky areas is that which lies at the core of language-learning theory – the notion of learner-centredness. Although most language teachers and researchers have “piously” (Chitravelu’s adjective) paid homage to it, the notion, nevertheless needs “rigorous re-examination”, especially with regard to the role of ESP in Malaysia today.

In its “vibrant 20’s” (Tickoo’s terminology), ESP is facing its greatest challenges in the realm of the business community in Malaysia today. Catapulted into a state of unprecedented activity

by the Prime Minister's "Vision 2020", this community is now making relentless demands on the scant supply of ESP practitioners here (Sargunan and Chelliah-Tham, 1992). And, given that today's market-oriented society has made it necessary for those who offer services to cater to the demands of their customers, the extension of this practice into the language teaching profession was only to have been expected.

However, what is significant here is that the business community too has its own "fundamental pillar" of behaviour, labelled "Total Customer Satisfaction" (TCS). They strive to provide their customers with total satisfaction, and in return they demand total satisfaction from their suppliers. The suppliers of language teaching services are not exempted from this expectation of the business community. The issue that complicates the efforts of the suppliers here is the question of WHO their actual customers are. Are they learners in the "classroom"? Are they the paymasters or sponsors of the language course? Or are they the end users of the learners' services, i.e. their Heads of Department, Managers, Directors of the company, etc.? Whose needs do the suppliers use as a yardstick, and whose directives do they follow? How do they provide "Total Customer Satisfaction" when they have difficulty identifying the customer? And how can they place the learner at the centre of the learning experience (achieve learner-centredness) when there are so many stakeholders in the business transaction?

This dilemma of the suppliers of language teaching services has been identified as being at the root of the failure of many ESP programmes. Remedies have been suggested (Roe, 1993, Chitravelu, 1993), but there has been no adequate analysis of the suggested solutions, and ESP practitioners find it difficult to apply them. Roe advises that the discrepancies between the customers should be resolved in a "learning contract" before the language course is implemented. Chitravelu suggests that the learners' views regarding goals, content, methodology and evaluation should be taken into account before the course is designed.

These solutions, though they sound quite feasible, need to be more thoroughly examined before they are adopted. Many practical considerations have to be borne in mind during this rigorous investigation

Who are the actual customers, and what are the factors that influence their demand?

What is the nature of the interaction between these factors?

Are the customers able to identify and express exactly what

they want from the suppliers?

If not, why is it that they are unable to do so?

What are the options available to the supplier at this juncture?

If the customers are able to stipulate what they want, can the suppliers satisfy their demands? To what extent?

The above questions are just a few of the many more that need to be considered by ESP practitioners before they can attempt to make their courses truly learner-centred, and provide TCS to their customers.

This study makes no attempt to answer all the questions stated above. What it does try to do, however, is to make a preliminary investigation into the nature of the relationship between both partners in the business transaction, that is, the customers and suppliers of language teaching services with the aim of identifying some of the problems that face ESP practitioners today. This is done by means of a case study carried out at a leading multi-national manufacturing concern in Malaysia, MNMC. (This is a fictitious name. The organization prefers to remain anonymous for reasons of its own.)

A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Succinctly stated, the problem appears to be that the Technical Report Writing (TRW) programme in MNMC was being implemented with less than optimum efficiency. It is important to note at this point that both the Management and the course instructor, using different criteria for judgement, did not share their views.

In discussions with her, I hypothesized that the root of the problem lay in the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the partners in the language learning encounter. (Please refer to the diagram below).

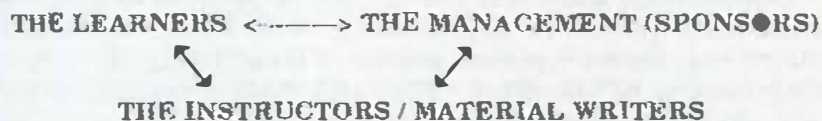


Fig. 1 Partners in the Language Learning Course in MNMC

At present, there is virtually no branch of industry that operates without a written contract, or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). These documents serve to define the roles and responsibilities of the various business partners, and regulate their relationship by serving as Terms of Reference. However, the suppliers of language teaching services at MNMC have been exempted from this rule. Why is this so? And what are the implications of this move (or is it the lack of a move) for both parties?

This study has sought to throw some light on the issues stated above by seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. Who were the participants in the TRW programme, and what were their roles and responsibilities?
2. What was the nature of the relationship between the customers and suppliers of language teaching services in the TRW programme? How did it affect the programme?

FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE

English in the workplace has come to be recognized as one of the "key competencies" for personal and professional development (Candlin, 1993). However, learner needs are complicated by the tensions that exist among the "spider's web of variables" that characterize the ESP situation, such as the demands of numerous clients, customers and institutionalized pressure groups who are the main 'stakeholders', the societies they form part of, and the ESP practitioners themselves with their various motivations, abilities and backgrounds (Tickoo, 1993). According to Tickoo, "the road to ESP's professionalism lies in making it a situated educational enterprise (SEE) built on a studied understanding of the ecosystem - existing human and material resources, networks of human relationships, and established ways of teaching and learning"

Instructional goals and efforts need to respond to differing institutional pressures and demands with their established conventions, hidden agendas and other more intangible factors which need to be identified. They also need to respond to the goals, skills and attitudes of the direct learners in the classroom which may not be in tandem with the goals of the institution.

The roles of both, that is, the Management and the learner, have to be seen in relation to that of a third participant, the

instructor, who now assumes new responsibilities and tasks, such as being the intermediary between both sets of customers, negotiator, and facilitator of learning.

The roles of all three participants have to be seen against the backdrop of a new and dynamic teaching/learning context which considers the interactions of forces that operate within a market-oriented society which follows the laws of supply and demand (Sargunan and Chelliah Tam, 1993).

The following are some of the main issues they need to address:

(a) The need to make ESP a viable entity in society

Any practice or entity (including ESP) can only be viable if it adapts to its environment and works amicably with all the forces that affect it. This, I believe is the principle adhered to by Holliday and Cooke (1983) when they advocated their ecological approach to ESP. Even then they had identified a "multitude of participants" such as organisers, teachers, sponsors and students, materials writers, subject specialists/consultants, and a host of others, all with differing attitudes, goals and expectations. They realized that there is a need to see the course as "a dynamic mesh of negotiated purposes, methods and evaluation" (Holliday and Cooke, 1983). This view has been endorsed by other researchers such as Robinson (1991), and Roe (1993), and closer to home, by Chittravolu (1993).

This study goes with the tide in this respect. I believe that this is the only way in which any teaching encounter, especially within ESP, can be made relevant and meaningful to the learner. Only then can it become deeply entrenched in the local soil, and have a good chance of surviving, and even flourishing.

(b) The notion of "learner-centredness"

Acknowledged as being one of the fundamental pillars of language teaching for more than a quarter of a century, this notion has perhaps been taken for granted, and needs "rigorous questioning" (Chittravolu, 1993). There cannot be any doubt that it should retain its position at centre-stage, because, as Roe (1993) rightly points out, it is the learners who decide upon the "p" in ESP. There has been much urging on the part of language researchers to allow the learners to choose the goals, content, methodology, and even the manner of evaluation in ESP courses to make them truly learner-centred (Chittravolu, 1993, Roe, 1993), but I

think that there is a need to be wary about this move. Though given the freedom and the opportunity to make these decisions, learners may sometimes not have the necessary motivation, attitude, knowledge, or skills to do so. I have frequently encountered situations where this has taken place. It is my suspicion that learners' culture, too, could be a variable affecting but this observation needs verification. Sarjit Singh, in her study of the language needs of consultants at NCVC (a leading productivity centre in Malaysia) discovered that her respondents, though they were executives holding University degrees, were not very clear as to what they required from the course. They needed the help and guidance of the researcher in order to discover what it was they really wanted (Singh, 1993).

(c) **The Teacher as Facilitator**

The notion is not new (See Breen and Candlin, 1980). It has often been (and still is) the teacher's job to help learners identify and define their learning goals and objectives. It is also his job to create an environment that is conducive to learning, to provide the means by which the learner can acquire the necessary skills for himself, and guide him towards a realization of his (the learner's) own potential. Thus the label of "facilitator" is a much more apt term to describe his function/role in the learning encounter.

Now, with the dominant role of the business community in ESP programmes, and the advent of the rules and values adhered to by this community, the role of the facilitator has been extended, and has become even more challenging. He has had to develop an understanding of the value systems and rules of conduct of the target community so that he can better help his students work within these rules vis-a-vis their use of language to achieve their purpose. He has also taken on the role of negotiator in helping his learners match their learning goals to those set by the paymasters or the end users (if these should be different). The skills that the facilitator needs to possess are thus many and varied as he plays a crucial role in determining the nature of the relationship between the customers and suppliers of language teaching services.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case-study approach was adopted in order to explore the nature

of the relationship between the customers and suppliers of English language teaching services in the business community as this would enable a more in-depth study of the subject.

MNMC was chosen for the following reasons

- they were representative of the business community, being one of the largest multi-national manufacturers of export-oriented products (semi-conductors) in the country. (For a brief profile of MNMC, see p below).
- they have a language training programme (Technical Report Writing) for their staff. The programme was started about three years ago, thus there has been just the right amount of time for the course to have matured sufficiently, so that the necessary data can be made available for the present research
- I have worked both as materials writer and instructor on their TRW programmes, thus I am familiar with both the course, and the circumstances that surround it. I am also familiar with the staff in MNMC who were responsible for setting up and maintaining the programme.
- the staff of MNMC have expressed their willingness to cooperate in this study, and have in fact been extremely helpful in making available all the corporate literature that has helped me understand the philosophy that they adhere to.

Profile of MNMC

MNMC is one of the world's leading producers of electronic equipment, systems, components and services for worldwide markets. It has more than 100,000 employees worldwide, with about 10% of them stationed in Malaysia alone

The Company has obtained many prestigious awards for commitment to Total Quality Management, and Total Customer Satisfaction, among them being the 1991 Prime Minister's Total Quality Award, and ISO 9002.

It has a well-developed Training Programme, with its own Training Centre, amply equipped with the latest facilities for learning and teaching, including areas for break-out sessions, libraries and computers. It also has several English language

programmes, the latest of which is Technical Report Writing (TRW).

Profile of the Technical Report Writing Programme (TRW)

This programme, launched in 1990, was designed to train the Company's engineers and technicians to write effective technical reports in order to document and share information. The Company also has a staff promotion scheme, entitled the Technical Ladder, which technical staff could scale to be on par with administrative staff who had obtained positions of rank based on their academic and professional qualifications.

In order to participate in this scheme, technicians had to submit technical reports that testified to their prowess in technical knowledge and skills. The TRW programme was meant to be a support system for the Technical Ladder scheme, as it would impart the necessary report writing skills to interested participants.

The TRW programme would also enable the engineering and technical staff to participate in competitions organized by Management to promote technical discoveries and innovations. These competitions carry hefty prizes in terms of cash and other benefits.

To date, there have been 12 21-hour programmes, each lasting three consecutive days. MNMC has been satisfied with the running of the courses, and are in fact considering developing other "Professional English" programmes.

THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Both the questionnaire and the structured interview were used to obtain the necessary data. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews.

The questionnaire was chosen as it could be administered simultaneously to a large group of people, thus making it possible to obtain the necessary information quickly and effectively. Wherever possible, this was followed up with a structured interview to obtain more in-depth information.

SUBJECTS

The following people were selected for the structured interview, and for the administration of the questionnaire

- Management of MNMC. the Training Manager
the Section Head (in charge of TRW)
the Manager of the R & D section

These people were selected as they represented the Management. They were also the ones who conceptualized, realized and maintained the programme on behalf of MNMC

- the material writer/course instructors (MNMC terminology)
- the learners, both past and present.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

The findings will be discussed with reference to the two research questions mentioned earlier.

Research Question 1

Who were the participants in the TRW programme, and what were their roles and responsibilities?

The major participants in the programme were.

the representatives of the Management in MNMC,
the materials writers/instructors (facilitators), and
the learners.

The Representatives of the Management

These comprised the Manager of the R & D Section, the Manager of the Training Division, and the Section Head in the Training Department who was in charge of the TRW programme.

The Manager of the R & D Section was the person who saw the need for a TRW course, and requested the Manager of the Training Division to organize it. According to him, the engineers in his division did not know how to write good technical reports, and this in turn resulted in loss of efficiency. There was excessive duplication of work, which was unnecessary and avoidable. Secondly, inter-departmental communication had become an indispensable corollary of group projects, and there was an urgent need for quick and effective information sharing. These were the issues that concerned the R & D Manager directly; they were instrumental in inducing him to conceive the idea of having a technical report writing programme for engineers and senior technicians.

The Manager of the Training Division was responsible for translating the idea into reality. He worked out the objectives of the programme, obtained materials writers and instructors and liased with them (during the initial stages), worked out the costing and scheduling, and determined who the learners should be.

The Section Head was responsible for maintaining the programme, and seeing that it was effectively run. He liased with the other Heads of Department (where the learners would come from), and continued the liasons set up by his Manager.

The Materials Writers/Instructors comprised three lecturers (holding double degrees in English Language teaching) from a well-established local university. They were responsible for drawing up a manual for teaching TRW, and worked on instructions received from the Manager of the Training Division. The manual was vetted by him, the Section Head, and the Manager of the R & D Divison before it was tried out on the learners. Revisions were made after one 3-day session, and the revised version was also vetted by the same people.

The Learners' role in the TRW programme was to attend the course, and learn the necessary skills and strategies of writing effective

Research Question 2

What was the nature of the relationship between the customers and suppliers of language teaching services in the TRW programme? How did this affect the programme?

The major components of the customer-supplier relationship were the Management and the Learners, who comprised the customers, and the instructors/materials writers, who constituted the suppliers.

The nature of the relationship between the participants in this particular educational mix they had created would be moulded by their expectations of each other, their assumptions/perceptions of each others' roles, attitudes and abilities, the actual behaviour of the participants, and their evaluation of and response to this behaviour. Problems arise when there is less than a perfect match in these aspects of their relationship.

(a) The Management/Learners Conflict

The Management expected the learners to attend the whole course, and participate actively in the programme. They were

to acquire sufficient knowledge of report writing skills so that there can be both qualitative and quantitative improvement in their written submissions. According to the Training Manager, they expected at least 20 reports to be submitted by the end of each quarter (3 months), each following an acceptable format, and being reasonably clear in terms of language. An abstract was compulsory.

The Management assumed that all the participants were keen on attending the TRW programme, and would abide by the decisions made by them (the Management) with regard to the learning objectives, course curriculum, and teaching methodology. Thus they did not invite them (the learners) to participate in the decision-making process.

The Management also assumed that the methods of obtaining feedback (using evaluation forms) had the support of the course participants.

However, the most important of all their assumptions was that the participants did not need or wish to know the aims and objectives of the TRW course which they were about to attend. Another assumption that the Management made was that the participants fully realized the importance and implications of being proficient in the English Language, leading them (the Management) to expect that they (the learners) would collaborate actively with the instructor in attaining the goals of the programme.

The course participants (learners), on the other hand, expected the Management to provide a training programme that would reflect their needs exactly. They expected to be consulted during the formulation of course objectives, course design and evaluation so that they could help to tailor the course more closely to their requirements. The least they expected was to be informed of the pertinent details of the course prior to their attending it.

They assumed that the Management would obtain feedback from them as a part of the course evaluation, if necessary. They also assumed that the Management would provide the support system that was necessary for them to make full use of the skills acquired during the TRW programme, such as opportunities to participate in company projects, and job-related competitions.

However, the actual behaviour of both the Management and the learners did not entirely meet each other's expectations.

There was an average of 95 per cent attendance at all the training sessions, but this can probably be attributed to attendance being made compulsory for all. This is especially borne out by

the fact that 90 per cent of the learners stated that they were attending the course because they had to attend 40 hours of training a year, and "TRW might as well contribute to 24 of these". They expected to learn something from it. However, they neither knew what it was that they were going to learn, nor did they take the trouble to find out.

The Management's assumption that the learners realized the importance of being proficient in English was proved to be true when all of them admitted that it was important, the main reason given being that it was necessary during communication (both oral and written) with supervisors and Management. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that they fully realized the implications of what they were saying, especially when it came to translating it into active participation in the classroom.

However, the Management assumed wrongly when they thought that the learners did not want to be part of the decision-making process. All the learners stated that they would have liked to be consulted during the formulation of learning objectives, and when methods of evaluation were determined, as neither of these had their full approval and support. They also would have appreciated receiving a brief description of the course prior to its commencement, as they could then be better prepared.

However, the quantitative and qualitative improvements in the technical reports more than met the Management's expectations; more than 150 reports were submitted during a period of one year, all with abstracts attached. There was clear improvement in terms of organization and format/layout, although there was still a lack of proficiency in terms of linguistic competence. (This statement is borne out by the written assignments of the learners, as well as feedback from the Management).

The learners, on the other hand, felt that the Management did not live up to their expectations, especially with regard to the support system. They felt that there was not enough opportunity for all of them to get involved in projects, which would in turn allow them to participate actively in promotion exercises and cash-reward carrying competitions, thus bringing about a general disinclination to take the TRW course seriously. Most of the learners felt that they would have no chance to use the skills that they had acquired. This feeling was especially prevalent among the technicians who felt that they should be placed on a track that was different from that of the engineers. This should contain a different, less stringent set of criteria for promotion

and competition, thus allowing them at least a fighting chance.

The learners also felt that more computers should be made available to them, equipped with the necessary software, so that they could write reports more easily.

The learners also expected to receive an opportunity whereby they could obtain and provide feedback regarding the course that they had attended, but this was not provided for in the programme. The only feedback they obtained was a written assignment that had been assessed by the instructor, which normally reached them two weeks after it had been submitted on the last day of the course, by which time they had lost the necessary momentum.

When the Management was presented with the learners' views, they did acknowledge that they did not take the learners' views into account when planning the courses as they did not think that it was necessary. They cited practical difficulties as being the main reason for this: it was impossible to consult all the learners, and if they were to be selective, it was difficult to decide who should be chosen. However, they did think that it was a good idea to discuss with the learners different, and more effective methods of evaluation whereby they (the learner) could obtain and provide useful feedback. They were also willing to give them adequate prior notice of details pertinent to the course if these could be drawn up. (However, they did not appear too keen on setting the process in motion).

The Management completely refuted all complaints of inadequate projects, claiming that it was possible for all their staff to find ample opportunities for deploying report-writing skills acquired during the course. They also claimed that engineers and technicians were given equal and fair treatment, thus there was no necessity to put the latter on a different track. The existing computers, they stated, were actually being underused, so there was no need to obtain any more.

(b) **The Conflict Between the Management and Materials Writers (MW)/Course Instructors**

The Management assumed that the MW/Instructors were fully qualified ESP/EST practitioners who could effectively produce a 3-day TRW programme for their staff in less than 2 months, based on general guidelines provided by the Heads of the Training and R & D Division. There was no written contract between the customers and suppliers of language teaching services that

outlined the roles, responsibilities and relationships of any of the parties involved in the educational mix, and no guidelines were given or requested for in writing.

The Management explained to the MW/Instructors what was desired and why, and gave them a free hand to plan an appropriate course. However, they could not provide sufficient in-house reports that illustrated what they considered to be good or bad technical reports, they claimed that they could not spare the time that would need to be expended for selecting these. The instructors, too, admitted to not pursuing the issue.

Methods of monitoring the effective implementation of the course, or providing the learners with effective not discussed by both parties, the customers were content so long as there was an improvement in the quantity and general quality of the reports, and the instructors did not feel compelled to liaise with them under their own initiative.

However, when the nature of the learners changed from being mainly engineers (with adequate proficiency in the English Language) to mainly technicians (who had little proficiency in English), the course ran into troubled waters. The materials prepared for the earlier group were no longer appropriate for the new group of learners, and the Instructors had to get back to the Management to ask for a new mandate, which required renewed collaboration to prepare not only different materials, but a different methodology. Since nothing was mentioned in writing about the roles and responsibilities of either party, neither had thought of calling for a review of the course at an earlier point in time. At this juncture, the Management had already changed, with different people occupying all three key positions. The absence of any written contract between the suppliers and customers assumed greater significance under the circumstances.

(c) The Conflict between the MW/Instructors and the Learners

According to the questionnaires, 95% of the learners expected the instructors to diagnose their learning problems/needs, and advise on ways of overcoming them, prepare a learning schedule that was appropriate to them (the learners), prepare all the instructional materials that were necessary for effective use a methodology that was interesting, that accommodated the lifestyle of the learner, vis-a-vis his learning environment, provide feedback as often as possible, and adopt a flexible attitude to teaching that was mutually beneficial

On their part, they were willing to participate in the diagnosis of their learning difficulties, and provide feedback when it was required. They were also willing to participate in the evaluation of their own performance in the course. However, they were not willing to provide samples of authentic materials, or participate actively in negotiating learning objectives and schedules, both of which the instructors expected them to do.

The learners had a different agenda, compared to the Management. They expected the instructors to heed their (the learners') agenda, for example, their desire to master the semantic and syntactic structures to become more proficient in the English Language per se. They felt that it was less important to learn oral presentation of reports, and how to write a research paper, which is what the Management had specified as part of the learning agenda. It was the role of the instructor at this juncture to decide what was most appropriate for the learners and negotiate a set of workable objectives towards which both parties could strive. They did not consult the Management before taking this liberty; the Management also did not appear to be unduly troubled by this, as they felt that their criteria for the success of the course were being met.

The situation at present poses a number of difficulties for all the parties in the educational mix. The instructors especially are very concerned that they will not be able to help the learners effectively because they need access to current, authentic in-house models which can direct the learners' effort. They also need to liaise frequently with representatives of the Management on issues related to materials and methodology, and obtain their collaboration during the evaluation/assessment of learners' performance. The instructors think that this will bring about greater involvement in the course on the part of the Management. The learners too would appreciate this attempt on the part of their employers, and have greater confidence in the feedback given to them as it would exhibit greater validity (since it contained the responses of two relevant, well-qualified parties).

The instructors also feel that there is a need for a written contract between suppliers and customers that will define the roles, responsibilities and relationships of the various participants. It should document the teaching/learning objectives, and specify when and how the course should be reviewed, and who should comprise the review board.

The learners, too, think that the existence of such a contract would help to clarify the course objectives and design, and ensure the continuity and smooth implementation of the course.

The Management, however, have divided opinions. The Manager of R and D agrees with the instructors and learners that it would be beneficial to have a written contract between both parties, but the others feel that since the course had been proceeding smoothly for two years, there is no necessity to draw up a written contract at this juncture. It would not only use up much of the limited resources (time and manpower), but also act against the interests of the course participants. For instance, there would be less flexibility and mobility as changes would have to wait for more formal approval and action, this would slow down activity and reduce efficiency.

This lack of consensus among the parties has resulted in an unhealthy tension which is creating dissatisfaction especially among the instructors and learners, which they feel can only be resolved by greater commitment to action on the part of the Management. Efforts have to be made to document objectives, methodology and evaluation/assessment procedure that have been negotiated by all the parties involved.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The language classroom is the domain of the learner and the facilitator (instructor), and the transactions conducted here are highly dependent on the roles, responsibilities and relationships that exist between both parties. These determine the nature and outcome of the negotiations between them with regard to the goals and objectives of the course, and the manner in which these should be realized. This being so, it is imperative that both parties enter the classroom with clearly defined aims and attitudes, and, more importantly, the power/authority to negotiate a feasible strategy to achieve their goals.

In the case of MNMC, the relationship between both parties is significantly affected by the role played by the co-customer, the Management.

suppliers	customer 1	customer 2
INSTRUCTORS/ MATERIALS WRITERS	LEARNERS	MANAGEMENT

Although it is the learner who is the direct recipient of the language services, the Management plays a dominant role in determining the nature of these services as it is they who are the sponsors, and it is they who are the end users of the learners' services. Their specifications of the goals and objectives of the course do not tally entirely with those of the learners. Moreover, there is no provision for liaison of any kind between both parties regarding the TRW programme, and the instructor often has to play the role of intermediary.

The case of MNMC is illustrative of the general situation with regard to customer-supplier relationship vis-a-vis the language teaching services in the business community. The amorphousness which characterises it is at the root of most problems here. Thus it is imperative that both the Management and the learners arrive at some kind of consensus as to the learning goals and objectives, and other pertinent issues such as course schedules, and manner of evaluation. It would then be an easier matter to present this joint tabloid to the instructor for further negotiation as to the feasibility of the objectives, and the manner in which these should be attained and evaluated. Once agreed upon, the decisions should be captured in writing so that they serve as reference for anyone who assumes the role of customer and supplier.

The written document could also define the roles and responsibilities of the three participants in terms of their commitment to the achievement of the goals/objectives agreed upon earlier, and minute the kind of participation engaged in by each party throughout the duration of the course.

Given below are suggestions as to the roles and responsibilities of the three participants (Management, Instructors and Learners) that could be incorporated in the document.

Management

The following are some of the options available to the Management:

- 1 Undertake to help instructors become familiar with the characteristics/features of communication, and all factors pertinent to it in the target community. This would enable the instructors to better understand the language setting of that particular discourse community.*

The Management can do this by:

- * facilitating workplace observations, where the instructors can observe the learners at work,
 - * delegating certain qualified personnel to act as "consultants" The instructors can turn to them for information or advice regarding course content and materials,
 - * allowing instructors sufficient time for course preparation
2. *Provide other support facilities for instructors that can help them to conduct the course more effectively.*

They can do this by:

- * providing models of target performance for the learners that can be used as teaching models. (These should preferably be drawn from the Organization's own records; the course can then be tailored to more exactly meet the customer's demands)
 - * greater involvement in the course, such as by helping in monitoring progress, presenting guest lectures, formulating course assignments and assisting in their assessment, and joining learners and instructors occasionally during lunch and tea-breaks,
3. *Provide support facilities for learners that would help to increase motivation and commitment.*

The Management can do this by:

- * inviting participation of the learners in the formulation of course objectives, schedules, methodology and methods of evaluation (Instructors' participation at these sessions is also important);
- * informing learners early to give them adequate time for preparation, for example, recovering previous reports that they might want to work on, thinking of topics for projects that they could work on in class;
- * providing opportunities for them to practise their skills on completion of the course, such as organizing projects and competitions.

4. *Provide the necessary facilities such as a conducive learning environment (air-conditioned, sound-proof rooms, space for break-out sessions), overhead projectors and any other equipment that the instructor thinks is necessary for effective learning*

The Instructors

The following are some options available to instructors

- 1 *Facilitate learning rather than just impart information.*

They can do this by

- * creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and rapport between learners and instructors; the former should be treated as adult learners, and they should be encouraged to share their views in class, and participate in learning and assessment,
- * negotiating learning objectives and schedules with learners in order to induce optimum cooperation and commitment,
- * teaching learners how to be independent of the teacher; focus should be on learning how to learn, and to acquire the necessary information for themselves. They should also be taught self-evaluation

2. *Translate the objectives of the Management in organizing the course into specific course objectives that are applicable to the classroom.*

3. *Liase between Management and Learners in their (the instructors') capacity as language experts and trainers in order to ensure that both parties work together to attain the objectives of the course*

They can do this by

- * advising the Management on the feasibility of their aims, and negotiating a set of objectives that is workable,
- * obtaining the consensus of the learners regarding the above;
- * negotiating with the Management on behalf of the learners to ensure that they have the necessary support system to

carry learning beyond the classroom, into the domain of the workplace (refer to p.).

4. *Work with Management in drawing up **checkpoints** and **guidelines** for review of the course*
5. *Undertake to acquire sufficient knowledge of the communicative features peculiar to the target discourse community so that they can be more effective ESP practitioners. This would mean knowing the communicative needs and problems of the learners when using the English language, and all the factors that would affect their learning behaviour*
6. *Have adequate knowledge of the technical and sub-technical language (English) of the target community in order to cope efficiently with their English Language needs in the classroom,*
7. *Provide feedback that is valid and effective to both Management and the learners.*

The Learners

The following are some of the suggested responsibilities of the learners

1. *Come to the learning experience with sufficient understanding of the objectives and expectations of the course, as well as sufficient motivation.*
2. *Participate actively in the learning process, and cooperate with the facilitator to achieve the aims of the course. For example, they should bring the necessary learning materials, and be prepared to put in work outside the classroom so that contact hours can be maximally exploited.*
3. *Practise skills acquired in the classroom in the workplace.*
4. *Provide feedback to the instructors and the Management that can help both parties improve the course, and tailor it such that all three participants can work towards common goals.*

All the above are suggestions as to what could form the contents, and regulate the tone of a “contract” or “memorandum of

understanding" that customers and suppliers of language teaching services in the business community could adhere to. However, this does not imply that such a document should be a legally binding contract between all the participants, it should rather be a guideline, a point of reference which all could use if and when necessary. It should be made amenable to change and adaptation as the occasion arises. A healthy, well-founded flexibility should be its hallmark, rather than a rigidity which would undermine its very purpose.

CONCLUSION

An exploration of the nature of the relationship between suppliers and consumers of language teaching services in the business community is a logical outcome of the current view of ESP as being an ecosystem comprised of an interacting set of variables (Holliday and Cooke, 1983; Tickoo, M L., 1993), or as a "cultural entity with its own brand of thought and behaviour" (Sargunan and Chelliah-Tam, 1993). This study shows that it (the nature of the relationship) is dictated by the goals, expectations, assumptions and attitudes of the various participants within the ecosystem with regard to each other.

This study also shows that the relationship is characterized by vagueness and uncertainty. In order for any learning to be effective, it is necessary that the participants in the learning encounter come to it with clearly defined goals and attitudes so that an effective strategy can be devised to attain these goals. A lack of such definition will result not only in confusion of learning objectives, but also in unnecessary constraints and obstacles being placed in the way of obtaining these objectives. A clear, well-defined relationship between supplier and customer forms the very foundation of a successful ESP programme.

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