Teaching workplace communication skills to AMEP learners
Shirley Good
AMES

As we know, the majority of our AMEP learners are job seekers who are developing their English skills. As job seekers, our learners need to gain knowledge of the Australian workplace. If we can introduce our learners to the workplace communication skills they are going to need on completion of their AMEP studies, then we are giving them a start for any:

- vocational courses they may take,
- any practical placement or work experience
- or possible employment.

Just as we teach more than content, so too are our students learning more than content. To prepare our students for the workplace, we need to help them to gain an awareness of the attitudes, behaviour and values of the workplace, together with the relevant communication skills.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia undertook a research project on *Employability Skills for the Future*, to provide DEST with a detailed understanding of the employability skills needs of industry.

The outcome is seen in the development of the Employability Skills Framework that has strong industry support from a representative sample of stakeholders.

Our task as teachers, is in the implementation – within the course of study, of skills and attributes considered necessary in the workplace. Attributes such as:

- honesty
- commitment
- loyalty
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- balanced attitude to work and home
- motivation

as listed in the Employability Skills Framework.
When teaching on attributes: we are teaching about these attributes – not teaching that learners must behave in a certain way.
- merely drawing attention to various types of behaviour valued in the Australian workplace.
- but, careful delivery can contribute effectively to eliciting the behaviour for which we are looking.
- Behaviour is adapted and adopted, not learnt.
- It is discussed and compared, not taught.

In a multicultural classroom, it is necessary to provide learners with the opportunity to compare and contrast the many different forms of nonverbal language that might be misconstrued and considered confrontational in the workplace.
- ........ consider the learners’ sense of identity, attitude and self-esteem.

Learners bring a wealth of cultural and social knowledge and experience.

CALD workers may often seem awkward when their impressions – so accurately assumed in their native workplace – may cause untold embarrassment and insecurity when assumed in the English-speaking workplace.

**Theory**

Presenting content theoretically is beneficial when facilitating workplace communication skills such as:

- negotiation
- conflict management
- body language
- teamwork
- instructions
- active listening.

By teaching through theory, we give the learners a reason for wanting to learn these workplace skills - by explaining the purpose and advantages of the skills under study.

The theory must then be followed up with practice, because:

*Theory and practice must be constantly interactive because theory without practice is empty, and practice without theory is blind (1981 – Cross).*
It is important that our students learn by doing. Workplace communication includes casual conversation with workmates. This is also a requirement of the CSWE 3.

- In Book 2 of the new AMES resource, *At work in Australia - Getting on with the job*, casual conversation is given equal weight with other employability skills.
- It’s a skill that, once understood, will help make our students far more relaxed in the workplace.

ESL students often appreciate learning about workplace issues – they consider it brings status and purpose to their English learning. They talk about it with their families and friends. Comments from students on completion of an employability course I taught this year, when asked which course topics they had enjoyed the most:

- **Negotiating**, because I like to talk and I like to think what I have to say and do at the right time and the right place to negotiate. I really enjoy doing the play here in class.

- **Negotiation** – because I get confident. Now I can communicate with people freely. I can solve problems and how can to be soft on the person and it involves very good communication.

- I have enjoy negotiation the most. It show me how to communicate n my workplace, and how to understand by qualities – decide will take responsibility for a particular task.

**Negotiation**

Workplace communication skills are beneficial when dealing with workers from any industry.

- As consumers, it is often necessary to communicate with service providers.
- Jobseekers – negotiate interview times with Centrelink – for outside class times.
- Teach to instil best practice in the hope that the learners may transfer their classroom behaviour to their workplace, and their consumer transactions.
- Consider the experiences of the students
- Determine the possible success or failure of their negotiation attempts.
Negative reaction could be due to negative body language, lack of true commitment, or perhaps insufficient language skills caused by a lack of English, or a lack of knowledge of workplace language.

Focus on students’ characteristics, rather than focusing totally on the content.

Introduce topic gradually and thoroughly.

Active Listening
Listening is often taken for granted.

An instruction is given, and it is assumed that it has been understood and that it will be carried out as required. Not always so!

Our students are used to us explaining in full detail, etc.

But – Workplace is different.

Active listening:
- ability to ignore distractions,
- concentrate on speaker and message conveyed;
- see beyond words to purpose of the utterance.

Need to show that you want more than surface comprehension.

Share class discussion on theory, student experience, your own experience re topic.

Following instructions
Purpose: to support students in following instructions.

Requires active listening.

Activity:

- Chairs placed in two straight lines.
- Handouts of irregular verbs.
- Students facing each other.
- Explain direct instructions: ‘Sit over there, please.’
- Must start with a verb from their handout.
- Dispense with ‘Can you..?’ or ‘Will you ..?’
- Nominate a particular workplace. Instructions relate to that industry.
- Purpose to train ear to hear a direct instruction, to hear the main action required.
• Listening: each verb to be used only once.

This task raises:
- word order
- use of prepositions

Because listening is an everyday activity, the students need to consider the content to be worth listening to. It needs effective lesson design.

Written feedback showed: (quotes)
- learnt how to use the verbs in the correct way;
- learnt how to use the right verb to give the instruction or order;
- how to pronounce some words;
- how to give the instruction in a nice way;
- make sure that person listening what you are saying and understand what you want from him or her to make or do for you.

Instructions – seeking clarification.

Understanding can vary according to the manner of delivery.

In class, our manner is generally supportive, and our speech clear and precise.

In the workplace, the delivery might sometimes
- be brusque,
- orders barked,
- be given in slang, expressions – idiom, jargon
thereby causing barriers to communication in a multicultural workplace.

The language used in seeking clarification is required.

Teamwork

Acknowledge the group diversity.

Don’t ignore the cultural issues and mixed experiences of the learners.

Begin with group work: seemingly casual, relaxed. Working as a group, but still as individuals.

Challenge is to transfer skills in group work, to effective teamwork.

• Elicit definition of team. To relate meaning to experience.

• E.g. football team
• To structure thinking.
• Stress benefits of teamwork.
• Difficulties of working in a team??
• Importance of teamwork in the workplace. In job ads, interviews.

Elicit discussion to get response to:
- possible conflict,
- personality clashes,
- poor time management
- personal attributes
- individual gain/purpose of working in a team.

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Learners require training in linguistic skills – for support with attitudinal change, to assist workers to successfully communicate in workplace discourse.

They also need to comprehend interpersonal skills, such as the values listed in the Employability Skills Framework:
- personal presentation
- common sense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- ability to deal with pressure
- adaptability.

Linguistic skills include an ability:
- to ask questions to determine workplace requirements;
- to seek clarification when following instructions.

Questioning – a vital aspect of workplace communication, and one often assumed to be readily accessible.

Familiar with: What is your country of origin? etc.

Need for facilitation in the art of questioning – posing and responding adequately to questions seeking a more detailed response, i.e. workplace.

c:/Shirley Good/AMES Footscray/AMEP Conference paper/Sydney 2005
References