

ESOL in the Workplace for Hotel Staff

The Workbase unit at Tower Hamlets College in east London has recently completed a successful series of six short ESOL courses for staff at the Four Seasons Hotel at Canary Wharf. Following these courses, the sister hotel in Park Lane became interested in ESOL courses for staff, contacted the City of Westminster College, and now two six-week courses are due to start at the Park Lane Hotel at the end of April 2005.

Sakina Edo, coordinator of Workbase until April 2004, was initially contacted by Chetna Patel, the Four Seasons training manager at Canary Wharf. Chetna was looking for inhouse ESOL training, after an unsatisfactory previous experience with another training provider, and had noticed the College's Workbase publicity. The first course started up in January 2004 and was followed by a further five, thanks to Chetna's outstanding support and commitment, and to Philly Kafeero, who took over from Sakina as Workbase coordinator in May 2004.

Each course provided a total of thirty hours' teaching altogether, divided into ten lessons of three hours each. The lessons took place once a week in the hotel's training room, from 3 – 6 pm. Usually the lesson came at the end of a learner's shift, and occasionally in the middle of a split shift. Sometimes the lesson was on a learner's day off, but the learner would come in specially for the class.

Initial assessment of the hotel's needs

The Four Seasons is an international chain of five-star hotels, a fact that provides the opportunity for employees to work abroad in other hotels in the chain. Staff at the Four Seasons in Canary Wharf come from 38 different countries and from a very wide range of language backgrounds indeed – some 88% of all staff have English as a second language. New employees regularly arrive who urgently need to acquire English for work, while on the other hand, there are employees who live in Britain but whose English needs developing. There is also a regular turnover of staff, currently 25.5% pa, although it must be said that this is a rate which compares very favourably with the rest of the hotel world.

Principally the need is for speaking and listening, with reading and writing less significant. However, all employees go through the Four Seasons staff training programme, which requires all four language skills. The training programme is important to the hotel in maintaining its standards of service, and consequently in retaining its five star status, which is monitored annually. Language problems may be highlighted during staff training.

The following table provides a breakdown of learners' numbers and levels on the six courses.

COURSES	1. Jan- Mar 2004	2. June-July 04	3. June-July 04	4. Sept- Dec 04	5. Sept- Dec 04	6. Jan-Mar 2005
Level	E1 – E3	E2 – E3	E3 – L1	E1 – E2	E3 – L1	E2 – L1
Interviewed	15	6	6	7	7	4 (+ 4 returners)
Enrolled	10	5	5	7	6	8
Completed a THC Cert.	3	5 weeks only, no certificate.	5 weeks only, no certificate.	4	4	3

Initial Assessment of learners

Learners' levels in the four language skills were assessed with a Training Needs Analysis, consisting of the following tasks:

1. Fill in personal details on a form.
2. Understand and respond to questions about educational background, experience of learning English, any other interests.
3. A free piece of writing in response to a picture.
4. A reading text with six comprehension questions, graded from simple to more difficult.
5. A multiple-choice set of 25 graded grammar questions.

The free piece of writing showed up the strengths and weaknesses in the learner's knowledge of how English works. When this was taken in conjunction with the tutor's impression of the learner's understanding and speaking at interview, levels of the four skills according to the ESOL National Curriculum could be approximated for each learner.

Individual Learning Plans

Part of the first or second lesson was devoted to getting learners to think as objectively as possible about what they needed. The question "What do you need to practise / learn?" usually gets the answer "Grammar, speaking, more vocabulary, spelling". The problem is to arrive at more specific requirements. Some suggested examples were:

- *Take a phone message and check for correct understanding.*
- *Read a glitsch (a fault in service standards), posted on the noticeboard.*
- *Teach the class a recipe.*
- *Report to a supervisor at the end of a shift.*
- *Book your holiday dates.*

Course Outline

A course outline, intended for the learners and for the employer, was constructed from the findings in the Training Needs Analysis (TNA), from what learners listed in their ILPs, and from the tutor's observations made during the training needs analysis. The course outline also had to reflect the language needs for the learners' jobs. A few examples are:

- an employee may have to take spoken instructions given in a hurry in an unfamiliar accent, such as cockney;
- a waiter needs to be able to explain the menu to guests, and to understand about allergies;
- staff are expected to use polite forms when addressing guests, eg *I do hope...*, *May I bring you...*
- staff want to be able to chat informally to colleagues in the staff restaurant.

Scheme of Work

This was for the tutor's use in constructing each lesson. The SoW was built up from the course outline, and contained the overall aims and specific objectives of the teaching programme.

Accreditation

Learners who completed written classwork were able to submit their work to Tower Hamlets College for moderation and accreditation against the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum. Learners then received an internal College certificate.

Trips out at the end of a course

Three of the courses ended with a trip out, instead of class, with goody bags thoughtfully provided by the hotel. We visited two exhibitions at the Museum of London – *1920s London* and *Twentieth Century Fashion*. We also visited the museum of the Old Operating Theatre of St Thomas' Hospital.

Funding

The College policy is fee exemption for EU citizens, and for non-EU learners who have been in the country for a minimum of three years.

Poland and Lithuania joined the EU in May 2004, and their nationals were exempted. Up till May 2004 the cost to the College of Workbase courses was met by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). Additional sources of external funding are currently being identified and employers may be asked to contribute to, or cover, the costs of training.

Employers have also been able to receive funding for ESL and Basic Skills courses under the Employer Training Pilot (ETP). This national programme provides free training to employees aged over 19 without level 2 qualifications and offers wage compensation, enabling cover to be provided while the employee attends training. However, forthcoming changes to the ETP programme may rule out wage compensation.

Who were the learners?

Learners attending the courses were employed in different sections of the hotel, and represented a very wide range of nationalities and backgrounds. Second-language speakers outnumber native speakers of English in the hotel.

The following table shows where the learners work in the hotel and the requirements of their work.

Kitchen	The cuisine is Italian, and so are most of the chefs. The rule is English only in the kitchen, but how far this is followed I don't know. Chefs are career professionals on an international promotion ladder. Higher-ranking chefs coming from Italy may initially accept a lower position, due to language problems, because of the career value of a job in a 5-star hotel in London.
Restaurant waiter	Waiters need to be able to explain dishes to the guests, and there is a daily viewing of the evening's dishes before service begins so that they can do this. Waiters are professionals, like the chefs.
Bus person	A bus person liaises with the kitchen staff and with the restaurant waiters. A bus person does not communicate directly with guests. Promotion to waiter is the next step.
Room service	Room Service staff are in contact with guests, usually one-to-one, in their rooms. There is a strict code of how to speak and to behave towards guests, a code which is maintained by inservice training.
Housekeeping	Mainly women who want a job with clearly defined hours and duties. Little contact with guests or with colleagues while at work, so ability in English is not so important, and the chance to improve is restricted. But employees often have a good educational background.

Concierge	Mainly men, on duty to welcome guests at the main door, replenish minibars in rooms, see to guests' needs. Consequently a good level of spoken English is needed.
Banqueting	Employees prepare rooms for special functions and serve the guests, so they need to be able to welcome guests and to communicate readily.
Bar	The language for serving is quite specific to the job. Bar work requires specialist knowledge of drinks and of cocktails.
Deliveries	The employee communicates with drivers, and deals with paperwork. There is no contact with guests.

Why do staff join the hotel?

There seem to be two groups of staff with different reasons for joining the hotel.

The first group want to build a career as a chef, or in hotel management. They also want to acquire better English, which is essential for a hotel career. There are staff in reception, concierge and in the kitchen and restaurant, for whom employment at the Four Seasons in London is a planned career move.

The second group includes employees who want a reliable job in a prestige business. They want to be able to complete their work and go home to the family at the end of the shift. Hotel work is regarded as a means of earning a living, and supporting family back home, but not as a career prospect.

Whatever their circumstances, however, all employees realise the need to acquire better English, whether it is for their job at the hotel, for their future careers, for their lives in Britain, or for the prospects of their children who are growing up in Britain.

What are the problems for an ESOL tutor in the workplace?

1. The tutor has to work between the needs of the employer, of the learners, and of the College. The employer wants better communication with employees and a smoothly-run workplace; the learners want better communication at work and outside work; and the College requires certain levels of enrolments, of attendance and of accreditation.

2. Mixed levels in a workplace course are common, because numbers may not justify graded groups. The problem of mixed levels is eased by

the fact that the learners share a common workplace culture, inhouse training and standards, and the same language needs for the job. When there are too many levels in a group, it becomes unstable, in spite of the tutor's efforts, and learners are likely to vote with their feet.

3. At busy times, if there is no cover, staff will miss classes. Shift times may change, and a learner will find it impossible to continue. The class may happen to be on a learner's day off, and attendance may mean making a special journey to the workplace in the learner's own time. When a learner does this, the tutor is entitled to take it as a compliment.

To conclude, constructing and teaching ESOL courses at the Four Seasons meant identifying language used for work in the hotel, and also for life outside the hotel. Identifying the language for work in the hotel, as in any workplace, involved practical research:

- visiting workplaces, watching work in progress, asking for names of equipment and of methods;
- listening to exchanges between staff at work and off duty, picking up workplace jokes and clichés;
- reading general noticeboards and staff training materials;
- reading specific noticeboards, such as the ones in Room Service, with descriptions of *glitches* in service, details of what went wrong, and of what should have been done;
- asking questions, listening, and developing awareness of hotel language;
- and finally, beginning to understand how a big hotel functions.

It was a totally fascinating process.

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