

Surrey Adult Learner's Awards 2003

English for Speakers of Other Languages Group Award: **London Property Maintenance**

Polishing Up English Improves Service Company

Service companies employing a multi-cultural workforce can sometimes be slow to realise the huge impact that language difficulties may have on the quality of key staff relationships – with management, co-workers, and customers (the public). And, even though it's very important to them, people often prefer to hide their problems, with low self-esteem, increased stress and more sickness the result. When London Property Maintenance Ltd won a new contract to clean the Peacocks Shopping Centre, the largest mall in Woking however, the manager involved jumped at the opportunity to tackle the particular communications difficulties that threatened to hold back his staff, reduce team effectiveness and raise management cost.

London Property Maintenance Ltd employs 15 staff at the Centre, two-thirds for whom English is a second language. Classes provided by Woking College, funded initially by the *Surrey Short Cuts to Skills* programme for basic skills in the workplace and continuing through the *Surrey Flagship Project*, focussed on the speaking and listening skills most necessary to equip the staff for their jobs. The needs of the chosen student group were particularly wide-ranging: they originated from a variety of countries including Nepal, Pakistan, Algeria, Afghanistan, Brazil and Portugal, and while some had had some education until their teens, one had had none at all. The employees were highly motivated: they readily acknowledged the importance of English to them in their jobs. Classes were held when the Centre was relatively quiet and some students attended outside their shift.

Progress was swift and could be seen clearly both by the tutor and the management of the Peacock Centre. Over the fifteen weeks it was noticeable that the class was functioning as a group rather than as individuals. Morale had improved, and back at the workplace, teamwork was much more effective. For example, the cleaners could more easily interact with other personnel at the Centre, such as security or staff from food outlets. And the radio system now seemed much less threatening for the newly skilled communicators. The cleaners were also likely to be more confident in their dealing with members of the public, for example when giving directions, handling complaints, or helping to report lost property. Their manager was able to pinpoint other benefits: the staff could understand their supervisors more easily and take better direction, and, although they had been trained in procedures, he could be more certain that they had appreciated the importance of health and safety guidelines.