“What happens when staff improve on a course but not at work? - Training Company Management to Assess Writing Skills”

by Mark Knight

Abstract

A common complaint from Human Resource Departments is that their staff often improve communication skills on courses but are not making any changes when they return to work.

For a variety reasons, staff can do well on an English course but not change their practices at work in line with what they have learnt during training. In such cases, it can be frustrating for Human Resource Departments to find a way of improving actual communication at work.

One innovative approach taken in Hong Kong has been to train the management of a company to assess the writing skills of their staff on a day-to-day basis. This required research into corporate identity and objectives in order to put together agreed descriptors for assessment of written communication.

This descriptive paper reviews three project, where the management of each company were then trained to assess writing skills using agreed corporate descriptors. Appropriate checks and balances were put in place. Now, three years on, the systems are still in place and still used by managers on a regular basis. By identifying the processes involved, it is hoped that organizations in the region can benefit and perhaps introduce similar projects.

Who can assess actual workplace writing?

Assessing writing can be a complicated affair. The following text was written in the Hong Kong branch of an international company.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There are issues on release: 32.3:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) /COPYSENT and AB450 will be Unmatch by Accord (12345678)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If a counter party is Accord subscriber, Accord project COPYSENT and COPYREC with B01 (87654321)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Both descriptions are not documented any of ACCORD 32.3 Manuals”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unless you are a member of the same discourse community as the writer you are unlikely to have any idea of its aim. Students are taught English to help them prepare for the workplace yet if the teachers were to read this piece of actual workplace writing it is unlikely that they would even understand it.

Ironically, whenever viewing writing of this kind, one would not have any embarrassment at all when explaining to Human Resource Managers that it was not understood. Problems occur when a company that is a part of discourse community that appears more accessible, where workplace writing uses vocabulary and terms that are known to teachers. Here, there is almost an expectation that the teacher will be able to say whether the writing achieves its aims just by reading it. However, this is a much more dangerous situation as the teacher may be fooled into thinking that s/he can assess it. In reality, the teacher still does not know:

- the reader;
- the relationship between the reader’s organisation and that of the writer; and
- the reader’s background knowledge (and therefore assess if there is enough content).
It would then seem impossible for language teachers to assess actual workplace writing. If this is the case, then teachers could not be involved in any assessment of how much staff are taking from language courses into their work.

We then need to look elsewhere for suitable Assessors. The possibilities might be:

- The writer. This would seem to be a useful exercise, at least from a learning perspective. It may not, however, solve all the problems. For example, if a company wish to use the system to help decide on promotion then asking an individual to assess themselves may not prove particularly objective.

- The reader. Their criterion may be different to that of language teachers though, they may concentrate on such realistic issues as Do I trust this Supplier? Do I want to do business with them at all?. In this sense, the writing may already have been assessed. In practice, of course, we would not be able to ask the reader of each email or letter to assess the writing for us.

- The line manager. In the end, line managers are the only group of people that could effectively assess this piece of writing.

This paper draws on the experiences gained setting up systems of this kind on three separate projects. One organisation was an international bank, the other was a consulate and the third was a technical support company. All three projects took place in Hong Kong.

**Background Issues**

There are numerous issues involved in this. This paper highlights a few of them. The research from the projects that led to this paper suggest that many line managers have differing views on what might constitute improvement. This brings about issues in curriculum design which will not be investigated in this paper.

Some line managers have expressed discomfort at there not being a centralized opinion of improvement or what might be determined as good writing. These particular projects did seem to surface differences in opinion between line managers and therefore a real lack of continuity in judgment. As mentioned above, language teachers are often not a part of the discourse community of a company that they may be teaching in. Even though this may be true, they are often expected to pass judgment anyway.

**T.E.D. G.E.T.S. Personal**

Mostly though trial-and-error, a process has been developed with the rather fortunate acronym TED GETS Personal to help remember it:

- Step 1 – Throw Away Your Ego
- Step 2 – Evaluate of Prepare a Corporate Writing Style Guide
- Step 3 – Draft LSP Descriptors
- Step 4 – Get Sample Scripts
- Step 5 – Establish Group of Expert Judges
- Step 6 – Train Line Managers in Assessment
- Step 7 – Standardise the Remainder of Staff
- Step 8 – Personal-ly Conduct Follow-Up Research
Step 1 – Throw Away Your Ego

Although posed in a satirical manner, this first step is crucial to the success of a project of this kind. As outlined above language teachers are often expected by customers to pass judgment on matters that they are unable to. Consequently, it is important that teachers ideas of what might constitute improvement are not imposed; instead an agreed opinion needs to be facilitated within a client organisation.

Step 2 – Evaluate or Prepare a Corporate Writing Style Guide

Anything that is in writing and agreed to by the directorate of a client organisation would seem safe ground for any consultant. If a customer already has an agreed writing style guide then this should be used as a basis for the assessment system. It would be difficult for any stake holder to complain after a project that you had not done what was asked if your materials directly relate to their style guide.

One issue that is important when drafting style guides is corporate image, although this is not easy to identify. Knight (2001) suggested a need for *language levels to be on a par with customer expectations*. Such expectations are also difficult to define but an agreed definition will help in writing guides. Some guides are not used and occasionally not well-known around an organisation. Consequently, questions should be raised as to its usage, its authorship and when it was last reviewed. Drew and Heritage (1992) explained that institutional talk was goal-oriented. However, it is also worth realising that different stakeholders may have different goals and so authorship is a key issue.

If no guide exists, then it is essential that one is produced. How this is produced is the subject of an upcoming paper but basically it involves the collection of sample scripts from senior management. A genre analysis is then made of the scripts with reference to rhetorical moves. Once this is done a draft writing style guide could be produced (Step 1 of this process should be referred to before drafting).

Step 3 – Draft LSP Descriptors

Drafting descriptors is a complicated task. The important point here is that everything needs to be defendable through the writing style guide. Line managers are not language teachers and so it is unlikely that you would have an analytical descriptor that referred to grammar. Instead the writing style guide should allude to what areas are considered important to the Directorate of a client organisation.

Step 4 – Get Sample Scripts

Sample scripts are necessary in order to make sense of the descriptors. Together with the descriptors they form a self-access re-standardization kit for line managers, and possibly staff, to use. Knight (2002) pointed out some of the dangers when line managers are not standardized.

You could use some scripts from style guide research, if they were collected in that step, but this could be politically sensitive as you would be unlikely be able to use any examples of lower levels. As with all standardization scripts it is important to have a range of levels.

Step 5 – Establish Group of Expert Judges

The purpose of the group of judges is to agree on grading for the sample scripts collected in Step 4. The make-up of the group can be political but there should be some decision makers above middle management level. The Human Resource or Training Manager should also be included. It is important here that judgments are facilitated from a group opinion – refer to Step 1.
Step 6 – Train Line Managers in Assessment

Once the standardization pack is ready, the line managers can be trained using scripts that have centrally-agreed grades. Assessment procedures can be negotiated at this point:

- will scripts be double marked?
- what types of scripts could not be assessed?
- how often will line managers need to be re-standardized?
- should the system be introduced to any current appraisal system?

Step 7 – Standardize the Remainder of Staff

Although staff are not the assessors, they will be assessed. In order to introduce transparency to the assessment system, it has been useful to train the staff in the same way that their line managers were. Knight (2005) alluded to the importance of involving staff in language research of this kind. Any subsequent conversation between staff and management about writing can then focus on the areas the Directorate want and not any ideas they may have as individuals.

Step 8 – Personally Conduct Follow-Up Research

Once a project is set up and running, there may be little need for the consultant to be involved, at least on a day-to-day basis. However, if the consultant can revisit a project, perhaps a year after completion, it can be useful to find out:

- if system is still used;
- how often it is used; and
- what areas may need improvement.

Conclusions

If these processes are followed, or even adapted to suit a particular environment, then it is likely that judgments about improvement in actual workplace communication can actually take place. However, the assessment of writing before and after training courses needs to be done by the same line managers with reference to an agreed writing style guide and subsequent descriptors.

There are other benefits to this approach. Staff and management may be able to discuss writing in the way that the Directorate have agreed on. Training needs may ultimately be more clearly defined which should lead to more appropriate courses. Recruitment tests could be written that at least have a basis of agreed needs. Above all, the processes identified help create an assessment system that has been approved from above and one that attempts to standardize opinion.

Many universities now have English Language Centres that help prepare students for the workplace. Projects of this kind can help identify what the workplace is actually demanding and so assist in the development of courses for university students.
References


