

Selecting Your Language Training Provider - Part One

With so many providers in the market touting their business, who should you decide on. They may all sound similar, so is it the price that is the determining factor, or their experience conducting similar courses, the quality of materials and trainers or a combination.

Whatever your decision is based on, cost should not be the only and overriding issue. Like any quality service, the cheapest is usually not the best and although total budget and cost per head are important to consider, maximizing a return on your training investment should take into account a whole variety of issues.

In the past few years, we have come across a number of companies who have fallen foul of untrustworthy training organizations. What was promised has never been delivered. Examples include trainers who are not experienced or lack knowledge and who leave half way through programs, materials that are supposed to be tailored yet are generic and course and admin support which is non-existent and creates additional burdens on your HR staff. The list goes on.

So, what can you do about this in order to make sure you and your staff receive the most effective training possible? Read on to find out more.

As stated, in Hong Kong and now in China, the supply of language providers is endless, although their approach to supplying quality in-company language training can vary greatly.

As a HR or Training professional, you should have possible answers to the following aspects of a program. Your training provider can also help you with these points and provide various options based on your requirements.

- Company requirements;
- Department head/Line manager expectations;
- Target audience – current English proficiency;
- Time-scale;
- Course structure and learning objectives;
- Class size;
- Quality control measures and evaluation procedures;
- Motivation of staff; and
- Budget.

Remember that you are the client, therefore if you are looking for a tailored program, the provider should be able to realistically flexible to meet your needs

When selecting a provider, consider the following:

Client lists and references – these mean very little unless questioned and checked. In my experience, we have come across competitors using our client names, yet we have signed confidentiality agreements with those companies prohibiting us from using their name.

Check with the provider – find out what training they conducted, when was it, who their contact person is/was, do they still do training for them etc. You should have the choice to select which companies you want to obtain a reference from.

Trainers – qualifications and experience – all competent trainers should at least have a teaching qualification such as a TEFL or CELTA and at least three years HK in-house corporate English training experience.

Ask for a trainer resume as well as a list of corporate clients they have worked for in Hong Kong. Some companies like to meet the trainer beforehand or arrange a demo class. However, a reputable training provider will only employ competent and effective trainers.

The idea that first impressions work from a short interview or that a 30-minute demo class works is limited. The demo class is such a false environment usually consisting of staff who will not participate or who are completely different levels. In addition, I have heard that some providers select their best trainers to do the demo class, and when selected, turn round to the company and state the trainer is unavailable due to other work commitments.

The best solution is requesting at least THREE references with companies that the trainer has recently conducted training for and follow them up confidentially.

Program management – here I mean that the provider basically covers all aspects of the program and keeps you up to date.

Any training program should consist of at least four stages; Pre-Course Analysis, Production, Presentation and Post-Course Analysis.

The Pre-Course Analysis stage is the most important as it helps to level check the potential participants but may also give additional insights to the language provider as to the exact needs of the participants.

At the same stage, it is sometimes useful for companies to issue a feedback form (usually designed by the language provider) outlining possible areas of course content to line managers so that their thoughts can be taken into consideration when determining course content.

The pre-course assessment may consist of a standardized test such as a BULATS test or a more workplace related task such as a writing exercise, multiple choice grammar assessment and/or an oral interview/role-play depending on whether the course content is written or spoken focused. It is at this stage that further examples of participant's own written work or examples of spoken activities in their work can be collected to be possibly used as real-life examples on the course. Once the pre-course is completed, results are submitted and the course outline is finalised.

The Production stage is the materials development stage in which real-life examples of participants written work and/or role-plays/dialogues associated with the participants daily work should be incorporated along with the other aspects of the

course such as grammatical content, style and tone of language, sentence construction etc. The material should also reflect the level of the participants.

Note that if you are requesting a tailored program, request to view sample of the providers tailoring ability and preferably view the first couple of sessions created for your program. Relevancy is the key to any program.

The presentation stage of any English language training should follow a productive approach with emphasis on practice in the classroom. Focus should be placed on the participants rather than the trainer as the class progresses. Initially, the trainer should present the focus language or aim of each class either through lecturing or the use of multi-media.

This should be followed with some controlled practice exercises, allowing participants to work in pairs or small groups in a controlled environment under supervision of the trainer. Peer learning can be extremely useful at this stage as well as error correction and feedback.

Finally, depending on the duration of the class/workshop, the latter part of the class should consist of a free writing/speaking exercise such as a writing task or role-play scenario which allows participants to put into practice what they have learnt in the lesson with minimum interference from the trainer. These free tasks should ideally be work related and feedback should be given to remove any common errors.

This method of training should not only stimulate participants to learn but also makes for an enjoyable and interactive classroom environment.

The last phase is the post-course and the support, if required for your company's application to the Workplace English Campaign.

Selecting Your Language Training Provider – Part Two.

In this article, we will look at other factors that you should take into account – Flexibility and the understanding of your company’s needs and objectives, quality control and support services.

Flexibility & understanding of needs and objectives – A good training consultant is open to change and offers options to companies in order to achieve the company’s training objectives within the budget. It is important to have a consultant which is flexible and is really there to listen rather than force a course onto a company.

Tailored training requires a lot of research and understanding of the language needs of the target group. This is all part of developing a program that is relevant to your staff and from the standpoint of the company, even in the short run, see significant improvements in their use of English in their workplace.

Therefore, it should not be uncommon for outlines to be altered to reflect changes in needs, levels and objectives before the course is finally designed. If you are looking for a tailored program, your consultant should be asking you as many questions as possible to understand more about your business and the target audience.

One of the biggest problems is providers running programs that they say are tailored, and which are in fact generic with one or two samples added. This defeats the object of any tailored training and becomes irrelevant to your staff.

Quality control – This is one of the key areas you should ask a training provider. ‘What measures do they have in place to guarantee that the program will be a success?’

I am afraid that I am not going to divulge Language Key’s answer to this question and the systems we have implemented to make sure that programs run as smoothly as possible. If we do experience any problem, we nip it in the bud as soon as we see it and keep the training coordinator in the loop at all times.

However, there are a few points I would like to share with you.

1. **End of course evaluations.** These can either come from the consultant or be the company’s own evaluation and are the most common tool for assessing the quality of the training program. However, these mean nothing if the consultant insists or you ask the consultant to circulate and collect the forms in the final lesson. Since the trainer is present and it is he/she who collects the forms, this may have an influence on the feedback given by participants.

The best option is for your training coordinator to send out by e-mail and collect once the program is completed. Alternatively, like some companies, they have a built in system through their intranet that automatically correlates all the feedback.

2. **Mid course evaluations.** Some companies like these for longer programs to get an idea of how the program is running, and they can be used to make changes to the outline if necessary.
3. **Regular communication with the Training Consultant.** A provider should clearly inform you who is the project manager and it is the responsibility to make sure they are in regular contact with your training coordinator about the course progress.
4. **Trainer observations.** Every trainer should be observed at least once during a program by the training consultant.

Support services – Another important question to ask a training provider is ‘What support do they provide the participants and you?’

Good providers should have the administration support in order to help a client with any of the paperwork such as an application for the Workplace English Campaign, or sending necessary materials in advance of a course.

In addition, some providers offer additional services such as on-line libraries, dictionary access through certain publishers and e-magazines. These all sound like useful tools, but question the training provider on how they interlink these support services with the program being conducted and what is the access period to such a resource. It would be nice if your staff were to have access for at least a certain period after the course, as language learning is a long-term process.

In the past two newsletters, I have given you advice and tips on selecting the right language training provider. I hope that you will listen to this advice when making your decisions in future.

On a final note, please remember that the role of the language provider is not simply just to provide a standard course. Their role is to provide the whole logistical framework for the English language needs of a company. Thorough research, needs analysis, tailored design, quality control, constant feedback, admin support and course follow-up, these are all-important roles that the training provider should play.