

Case Study Three – Benefits of Small Group Training

Background

As a specialist language provider, we encourage organizations to look at the value of their training programs, rather than just the cost. As such, many companies are starting to realize the benefits of small group training for their staff. The case for small group training is strong, as it allows staff to fully benefit from the trainer's understanding and expertise.

The pitfalls of just taking cost into consideration when planning training are well known. For language training the consequences are often large classes with inappropriately grouped and poorly motivated participants because of the lack of interaction with the trainer. Training organized along these lines provides a limited return on investment and can negatively influence people's attitudes to future training.

To help illustrate the differences, we are going to look at two contrasting examples of recent programs run by The Language Key in Beijing. The first was a broad communication skills program for a large telecommunications corporation. The second is part of an ongoing series of programs The Language Key is providing to The World Bank. Interestingly, the number of participants in both cases is roughly equal, yet the small group case required a lower overall investment.

Case Study One – Large Group Training

Beijing is establishing itself as a major centre for the IT and Telecommunications Industries. As more and more multi-national corporations set up offices in the city there is a growing demand for language trainers to provide training for local staff who deal with their foreign colleagues on a daily basis.

The Language Key provided extensive oral and writing skills training for one such multinational in 2005. The program was large scale, with over 100 staff involved.

However, the results were not as good as had been hoped for. Why was this? One of the main factors in this was the size of the groups being trained. The company had requested that up to 25 staff be enrolled into each group. However, Language Key policy is that we recommend that no more than 12 staff be included in any one class, more than that and the effectiveness of the training drops dramatically.

The problems such a large class created included:

- Lack of space in the training room. Some staff had to sit at the back or sides of the training room as virtual observers.
- Too great a distance between the trainer and some trainees, which caused communication problems.
- Lack of time for the trainer to work with individuals. If the trainer worked with every individual in a class of 25 it would take up most of the lesson.
- Reduced staff motivation. Staff very quickly realized that they were getting little from lessons, which led to a drop in participation.

By the end of the course staff had clearly benefited from the training but results fell short of expectations, mainly as a result of this large group training format.

Case Study Two – Small Group Training

The Language Key is currently providing a number of oral and writing skills programs for World Bank staff in Beijing. The results of the program have been excellent. Participants have benefited greatly from the interactive and student focused approach to training The Language Key provides.

One of the pre-requisites of the training, as defined by The World Bank, was that group numbers were limited to four participants. The World Bank HR understands that large group training is ineffective for their staff, who require a great deal of personal assistance in improving their individual language skills.

The benefits this approach are:

- Extensive interaction between the trainer and trainee, which allows participants to get much more assistance with individual needs.
- More opportunities for the trainer to focus on participants' individual errors and provide positive criticism and suggestion for improved use.

The writing focus of the courses also benefited significantly from the incorporation of tailored self-study assignment into the program. This approach allowed participants to extend their application of what they were learning in class and maximised their interaction with the trainer. The increased interactivity during the face-to-face sessions and enhanced opportunities for personal attention from the trainer resulted in higher levels of improvement in less time.

Ultimately, if you are thinking of running a training course for your staff please consider your objectives from these perspectives:

- If you want you staff to improve their writing skills will it be effective if the trainer never has the opportunity to discuss their own writing with them face-to-face?
- If you want staff to improve their oral skills how is it possible if they rarely have the opportunity to speak?

If your company is considering business English programs, The Language Key will be happy to provide a free consultation and explain how we can help you improve the return on your investment.