

Syracuse University English Language Institute: Business Communication for Executives

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The Syracuse University English Language Institute (ELI), housed within University College, has been offering noncredit executive English courses on a contract basis for the past 12 years. Despite its small size and limited resources, the ELI, whose main mission is to prepare international students for academic study, also manages a successful Business English program, “Business Communication for Executives.” Cohorts of international executives in homogeneous language groups come to Syracuse for three weeks in the summer for an intensive course. At the end of the course, participants receive a certificate of completion, including comments from instructors as to their proficiency. Participants are junior and senior executives from a major international firm. The program’s design utilizes the firm’s stated values and services to address its personnel’s needs in business communication, which include negotiation, critical thinking, and dispute resolution. The firm’s lingua franca is English.

This article provides a description of the program to assist administrators who may be contemplating expanding the scope of their English language offerings to serve corporate clients.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of the program is to improve the English proficiency (.5 to 1 level) of executives who work with international clients. The amount of need for English depends on the individual's position within the firm. Some may have periodic contact with English speakers; others have more frequent contact. They communicate via e-mail, phone calls, video conferencing, or conference calls. A secondary goal is to build camaraderie and networking across the firm by enabling relationships to develop among personnel based in different cities and/or countries.

The three-week intensive executive English course has three daily classes that meet five days a week, each class lasting two hours. The class modules consist of small group instruction, a two-on-one session, and a one-on-one session. Participants work on oral and textual communication, emphasizing fluency and accuracy. Homestays enhance the immersion experience. Participants have spent four to eight years in the firm, are predominately males, and are in their late 20s or early 30s.

The course content is tailored to deal with participants' areas of expertise—e.g., risk management or mergers and acquisitions. However, although the client is the same, the group profiles change, as do the responses by the instructors to the needs analysis conducted at the beginning of the course. A major resource for curricular inspiration is the firm's frequently revised website, which provides a wealth of information about its priorities, employees, and services. This provides source material from which various language skills are addressed; further, annual curricular revisions reflect adjustments or changes in institutional culture.

Throughout the course, the content of the written and spoken tasks focuses on improving the language skills and uses the firm's public communications as context. The firm's priorities (ethics, business continuity, compliance, client services, quality assurance, and operational philosophy) are interwoven into the curriculum and addressed in the English-language classroom. Students are asked to draw from their own experience and to provide anecdotal evidence with a guarantee of confidentiality, which promotes openness and enriches interactions. Simulations and role-plays are built around typical transactions and communication tasks within the organization, such as working with clients in local, regional, and international settings. Negotiation skills focus on dealing with colleagues within the firm and with clients (negotiating fees, deliverables, etc.).

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

There is a wide range in the learners' profiles in the following areas:

- Experience—junior executives to senior executives
- Expertise—representing different specializations within the firm
- Language proficiency—from beginner to advanced

Instructors exploit those differences in experience and expertise by encouraging participants to use English to familiarize their colleagues with the breadth of the firm's capabilities. This process helps to build relationships among the participants that are based on understanding and respect, and also serves to break down barriers and stereotypes. Moreover, junior executives can learn to appreciate the challenges senior executives must face and gain insight into what will be required of them as they move up the career ladder. Extreme variation in language proficiency, however, must be carefully managed.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO COURSE CONTENT

To stimulate discussion, participant reports include two analytical tools: the STEP (social, technological, economic, and political factors) and the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). A focus on problems, concerns, issues, and trends encountered in the business world facilitates realistic discussions and activities. (Examples are ethical challenges, diversity, and corporate culture.) These analytical approaches are a novelty for junior executives and assist in broadening their perspective. Therefore, discussions dealing with the complexities brought about by adherence to US legislation and its impact upon international firms conducting business in the US are often enlightening. Course outcomes are clearly identified in terms of both linguistic and business communication skills.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

The program emphasizes native-English speaker input and is divided into three sessions: a group class and two tutorials, as described below.

Group class: Business Communication Skills for Executives

Small group instruction lays the groundwork for the oral and textual components. These include role-plays and simulations designed to increase participants' skills and confidence in using business English to communicate with colleagues in the firm, as well as with clients. Students practice the skill sets needed to lead or participate effectively in meetings, conference calls,

and negotiations. Participants describe the firm's services: defining client needs, making the sale, serving and keeping the client, making decisions and following through, leading a team, keeping others informed, facilitating change, and analyzing market trends and their strategic implications for the future. Instructors emphasize persuasion and debate, enabling participants to learn to think rapidly in fast-paced discussions. These are not exclusively oral exercises. Participants need to extract information from a number of sources requiring listening- and reading-comprehension skills. The information is then used to solve problems and to complete practical assignments.

Tutorial 1: Oral Communication for Executives

The goal is to develop the skills and confidence needed for clear, concise oral communication in a variety of business contexts. Instructors are systematic in their approach to vocabulary development of the functional business language needed for telephone calls, meetings, and presentations. Varied discourse strategies are discussed, and responding to input in a formal or informal style is practiced to encourage the development of culturally appropriate behavior. In terms of organizing information, participants become familiar with the directness favored by a US audience in the persuasion process.

This component should increase participants' fluency and accuracy in oral production, as well as listening comprehension of North American English and selected regional accents of World English. Accent reduction targets consonants and vowel sounds as well as pitch, stress, intonation, and rhythm. Participants receive daily feedback, and are encouraged to monitor their production and to self correct. Errors that interfere with communication are of primary import.

Tutorial 2: Business Writing for Executives

The goal is to write clearly and appropriately for a variety of business purposes. The tutorial reviews the grammar and structures most problematic for non-native speakers. Participants practice correct format of typical business texts by generating, revising, and editing short texts using varied styles. Examples include e-mails, reports, letters, and memos. By discussing articles of interest, the tutorial addresses the need for improved reading speed and comprehension of more complex and sophisticated discourse. Participants work on interpreting information, understanding nuance, identifying gov-

ernance issues, and analyzing trends. To improve their style, participants are given examples of texts that a US audience would consider unacceptable in order to learn about culturally sensitive issues and avoidance strategies. This component reinforces vocabulary expansion and enables participants to receive detailed comments on their writing.

PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENT

At the beginning and at the end of the course, we administer an oral interview and a writing sample. The results are used for pre- and post-assessment to have some measure of gains made. These scores are reported to the firm, as is a narrative on the participants' performance, including strengths, weaknesses, and progress. This is a summary of daily feedback given to participants by instructors and includes recommendations for continued progress. The firm and the participants, therefore, receive both quantitative and qualitative evaluations.

The ELI solicits program evaluations from the participants twice during the program: at the end of the first week (enabling programmatic adjustments) and at the end. The exit interview asks about their overall experience (e.g., course, instructors, homestay, etc.).

SWOT NARRATIVE

Strengths

The firm has continued to send its executives to Syracuse University because of its satisfaction with the program delivery and outcomes. The program is highly individualized and the participants stay with hosts. This provides a true immersion experience contributing significantly to increased English proficiency. Students travel together in the morning and at night and form strong bonds. We have found that through the years, even upon their return to the home offices, they have maintained contact; however, in Syracuse they are all in separate homes spending time with hosts at breakfast and dinner, gaining out-of-classroom language practice. The participants have three instructors daily, thereby strengthening their listening comprehension by exposing them to different teaching styles and accents. There is coordination among instructors to ensure engagement in social activities by limiting homework. Instructors are given weekly course plans but may, in consultation with the course director, adapt pace and content to fit individual needs. Instructors set goals for the week in tandem with the participants so that the purpose of the assignments and activities

is transparent. Weekly faculty and frequent ad hoc meetings ensure course coordination. In short, the program is very tightly planned and administered. This is important as in a three-week, intensive format there is little time for recovery if problems arise.

ELI support staff both assist with travel and hotel information and accompany the participants on trips (e.g., Niagara Falls, museums, local attractions). If additional transportation is needed (e.g., shopping trips), the office makes arrangements. The hosts are experienced; the majority of them have been involved with the program for 10 years or more. This provides a cadre of knowledgeable people who are aware of cultural conflicts and can be relied upon to notify administrators of any problems. Nevertheless, new hosts must be secured.

Because of the longevity of the program, the ELI has built an instructional "force" that teaches in the program every summer. This, too, helps with continuity and reliability of the offering. Familiarity with the student profile enables instructors to diagnose linguistic capabilities quickly and tweak the course as needed. The extensive ELI library is at their disposal for supplementary materials.

Instructors and participants set goals at the beginning of each week so that the entire week is planned and all know what is expected. These weekly reports prescribe strategies for improvement as well as success and are a roadmap for the week. They, in turn, are the basis for the final reports that participants see before they are submitted to the firm. The carefully worded and edited (as needed) documents are important because they become part of the personnel files. Personalization is further demonstrated in a collage that documents the three-week sojourn through photos of the various events. At the closing dinner, each participant receives a certificate of participation as well as a "gag" gift that reflects something about his/her personality. For example, one participant who played golf as often as possible received a child's plastic golf bag. Each gift is presented with an anecdote, done with gentle humor, creating a warm send-off and much laughter.

Weaknesses

The brevity of the course can be a drawback if there are problems (e.g., personality or cultural clashes between instructors or hosts and participants). Since there are only three weeks, "let's see how you feel tomorrow" is not an acceptable response. Usually swift remedies are required. This may mean

replacing a host or an instructor within 24 hours. Fortunately, this happens rarely; nevertheless, administrators must be prepared to manage change. Another difficulty is that the firm expects to see considerable proficiency gains in a very short period. For many participants, this is difficult to achieve since often there is still considerable adjustment to the immediate surroundings during the first week. The course and support services are highly labor-intensive. There are opportunity costs in utilizing many first-rate teachers for only one or two students. The firm conducts the candidate selection; therefore, at times, participants attend whose proficiency is lower than that for which the course was designed. Large gaps in proficiency are problematic for the group classes, for the fluency pairs in tutorials, as well as for the hosts who are not trained in applied linguistics. If communication is too unwieldy, both hosts and participants can become frustrated or impatient.

In Syracuse, there are many houses converted to boarding houses but there are few people who are interested in spending the time required to assist the participants in their need for language practice. New hosts are cultivated through personal connections rather than broad recruitment. Therefore, home-stay arrangements consume staff time both to manage and locate new hosts. Hosts must interact with their guests in the morning and at night and include them in social activities wherever possible. It is much more than a landlord relationship, although the amount paid to the host is attractive.

Logistical constraints include renting a van that must have a driver who is older than 25 (for insurance eligibility). City transportation is poor and participants are driven by hosts or staff to compensate. Classroom space limitations during the academic year restrict the course offering to the summer when instructional space is available.

Because the course is highly individualized, it utilizes many instructor for a short period. This strains the ELI instructor pool. Normally, classes have between 12 and 14 students. The executive English course has a one-to-one or one-to-two instructor-student ratio. There is some selectivity of instructors, with preference given to those with a business background and direct knowledge of the participants' mother tongue. Tuition compensates for the opportunity costs, but care is taken in deciding the price point so as to remain competitive. However, economic conditions vary by country, and there has been a demographic change in the client base as a result.

Opportunities

The firm has renewed the contract for some 12 years, and the ELI's reputation for excellence in course delivery is an asset. Recommendations from one HR manager to another would allow for broadening the scope to the firm's offices in other countries. Nevertheless, such expansion is highly dependent upon individual HR budgets. Another opportunity would be to offer the course to other companies in the same sector; however, this might compromise the sense of confidentiality the firm currently enjoys with Syracuse University, as the ELI has deliberately not worked with the firm's competitors. The course model is replicable and could lend itself to online delivery.

Threats

The fluctuations in the world economy affect the HR budgets of international companies and the amounts that corporations will expend on English courses. Less expensive solutions are often found in-country. Although proficiency gains are rarely as significant, the cost differentials make that an attractive option. We have also found that at times participants have home office commitments. This has an adverse impact on their studies as the priority is meeting work deadlines rather than concentrating fully on the English course. Another threat is the perceived inconsistency of mission within the ELI because its primary function is to service conditionally admitted undergraduate and graduate students. Lucrative business courses such as these may be viewed as tangential. Sometimes, the unrealistic expectations of proficiency gains from supervisors in the firm who do not understand the language acquisition process can also be a hindrance. We have worked for many years to mitigate these by focusing on error correction that can quickly be achieved. In that way, the results are seen as immediate. Finally, international crises, including SARS and pandemic flu occurrences, can cause unexpected cancellations or reductions in enrollment.

CONCLUSION

Because the majority of the ELI's offerings are directed at a more generic English for academic purposes audience, the short-term, high-level business courses are stimulating for both the instructors and the administrators. The participants are mature, motivated, and anxious to learn. They are excited by the prospect of being in the United States and are open to a range of new experiences. They are not concerned about finances or long-term adjust-

ment. They are ready and willing to work, to the great joy of the instructors. Because the course is so individualized, the pace of the work required to service these students is very challenging; however, it is a most appreciative population bringing rewards and consistently positive outcomes. 🌟

SWOT SUMMARY

In conducting a SWOT, one must be cognizant of what can be controlled and what cannot. In the descriptors listed below, the strengths can be controlled; however, the majority of the weaknesses tend to be beyond our administrative powers. The same is true for the opportunities (within our domain) and threats (outside our domain).

Strengths

- ELI program reputation
- Rigorous results-oriented program with flexible curriculum and reliable cadre of instructors
- Frequent faculty meetings / proactive
- Wide range of source materials
- Tasks designed to meet their needs
- Smart classrooms (excellent technology)
- Weekly progress reports / daily feedback
- Final reports (personal / professional / detailed)
- All skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)
- Detailed quantitative & qualitative final report (alumni testimonials)
- Alumni (testimonials)
- Good personal / professional relationship w / firm's HR
- Knowledge of firm's culture
- Experienced hosts
- Highly personalized services to participants
- Trips / entertainment / social functions
- Photo collage
- Final dinner (roast with gag gifts reflecting camaraderie)
- Airport transport provided
- Support staff (local info / travel / car rentals / hotel / maps, etc.)

Weaknesses (Constraints)

- Participant selection by firm
- Proficiency range can be extreme
- Tuition (OK for some economies not for others)
- Requires instructors with understanding of L1 communication style
- Labor intensive (e.g., requires much communication among instructors, staff, hosts, and participants)
- Multiple logistical challenges
- Recruiting / keeping hosts
- Local transportation (taxis costly)
- Summer only (classroom availability)
- Teaching pool overworked
- Van transport and SU regulations (driver over the age of 25)

Opportunities

- Market to international branches of firm
- Expand to other firms (same sector)
- Expand to other business sectors
- Incorporate technology (online, video-conferencing)

Threats

- Redefinition of ELI mission by central administration
- Firm's HR could contract in-country EFL course
- Some participants continue to do firm's work
- Unrealistic expectation of proficiency gains
- Changes in economy (e.g., South America)
- Flu pandemic scares