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Rosemary C. Henze

San Jose State University, rosemary.henze@sjsu.edu

Anne Katz

ACR Associates, Inc.

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What is the Relationship Between Workplace Literacy and Content-Based Instruction?

ROSEMARY HENZE AND ANNE KATZ

ARC Associates, Inc., Oakland, CA

Workplace literacy has been defined as

... more than just knowing how to read. It's also more than having the narrow skills for a specific job. When we use the term "literacy" we include the full array of basic skills that enable an individual to "use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1985, cited in Sarmiento & Kay, 1990, p. 3)

In this general definition, the authors conceive of workplace literacy as a benefit to both native speakers and nonnative speakers of English. In this short article, we focus on workplace literacy as it applies to the ESL population. The vignettes that follow give the flavor of two such situations.

The room contains long tables placed end to end. Large tinted windows look down over Market Street where tiny pedestrians and cars speed on their way. At 10 minutes before the hour, a few students have already arrived for class, dressed for the work day that will begin at the end of their two-hour block of English for the workplace. The students come from a myriad of language backgrounds and represent a variety of departments and employment positions within this large bank; the one thing they share is a common need to improve their English language skills. By doing so, employees believe they will improve their current job performance and increase their opportunities for advancement. During the class, they will focus on increasing their proficiency using content drawn from the workplace environment—the company newspaper, interactions among employees and between employees and managers, telephone protocols, computer mail. Les-

sons are based on these real-life uses of language. The two instructors are independent contractors hired by the bank to provide 10 week-long blocks of instruction.

In another part of the city, a small but growing bakery known for its rich desserts made with fresh ingredients employs a production workforce that is Hispanic, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Chinese. While most of the time employees are involved in actions—weighing, mixing, baking, decorating—they also need to be able to use English language skills. They need, among other things, to understand instructions, acquire the ability to read a work order, and follow safety instructions and maintenance work procedures. In worksite-based classes designed on the basis of a “literacy audit,” workers develop English language proficiency in areas directly related to the needs of their jobs. Classes are offered in six-week segments, provided by Project EXCEL, a workplace literacy program funded by the U.S. Department of Education as a training program offered by the Career Resources Development Center.

Though a great deal of variation exists among workplace literacy programs, these two serve to illustrate some of the points which we make about the relationship between workplace literacy and content-based approaches. In order to clarify this relationship, we compare the two approaches in terms of several key dimensions: audience, location, purpose, content, and teachers.

Dimensions

Who Is It For? Workplace literacy programs such as the EXCEL program are designed for adults who are working. As we mentioned, the participants may be native speakers of English or they may be in various stages of acquiring English as a second language. Content-based ESL instruction, on the other hand, can be designed for any age group all the way from elementary school children through college students. The participants are by definition acquiring English as a second language.

However, the differences in the two audiences go beyond age and native language. Though rarely articulated, there is an essential class difference in that workplace literacy programs are most often geared for workers such as those in the dessert company example, while content-based instruction is typically designed for students pursuing an academic program. When and if these students eventually join the workforce, they will probably not be working at the lowest levels of the production force. In this sense, the distinction between the two types of programs reflects the vocational/academic split which runs through so much of our educational system. (This is not limited to the U.S. Many if not most other countries make a similar or stronger separation.)

Where Does It Take Place? Workplace literacy programs may take place at a worksite or at a site near the workplace. Content-based ESL programs generally take place in a school or university setting.

What Is the Purpose and Content? Both types of programs make the same basic assumption—that it is better to teach language-related skills in context than in isolation (Mohan, 1986). Thus the purpose of both is to integrate language development with content so that language and/or literacy will be learned in a more meaningful context. In the case of content-based approaches, the content is usually math, science, history, or other academic disciplines. In the case of workplace literacy, the content is the knowledge and skills needed for particular jobs. For example, some of the bank employees needed to learn how to write more effective memoranda. Others needed to improve their skills at decoding and sending computer mail. Still others, customer service representatives, needed to work on telephone protocols for handling customer complaints. All of these employees were working on language set within specific workplace contexts.

How Is the Content Determined? In content-based ESL, academic needs and state frameworks determine the content to be taught, though individual teachers do usually have some flexibility in adapting these frameworks to the proficiency levels and needs of individual classes. In workplace literacy programs, on the other hand, the determination of content depends on two major variables. One of these is the linguistic demands of the particular workplace. To determine these linguistic demands, an instructor or curriculum specialist studies the particular job to find out what kinds of language employees need in order to function effectively in that environment. For example, in the second job situation described above, EXCEL curriculum developers conducted a literacy audit to determine what reading, computation, and communicative skills were required for workers to perform job tasks effectively. EXCEL staff collected all printed materials and observed the working environment on several occasions. They also videotaped and audiotaped the working environment, including workers' performance and communication. These data provided an exhaustive inventory of language functions in the workplace. The other major variable is the level of participants' communicative skills, usually determined through some form of needs assessment at the beginning of the program. The literacy audit, then, provides a specific description of the communicative demands of the workplace, while the needs assessment looks at students' skills in relation to those workplace demands.

Who Teaches It? Both content-based ESL and workplace literacy programs use similar teaching configurations. In some cases, a language teacher teams with a content or skills instructor in either the same classroom or separate ones. In other cases, a content or skills instructor who has been trained in language and literacy development assumes responsibility for both content and language. In a third configuration, a language teacher who has a background in a skill or content area assumes full responsibility. No matter what configuration is used, both types of programs require some cross-fertilization of teachers who are skilled in language development and teachers who are skilled in the particular work or content area.

Conclusion

ESL professionals need to consider the relationship between content-based ESL and workplace literacy because the ESL workplace is itself changing. Older students are coming into programs, the numbers of immigrants and refugees are increasing, and employers are beginning in some cases to take over the responsibility for training their workers in language skills. We need to be aware that opportunities exist to work with employers as ESL professionals and to consider the role we as ESL professionals want to play in workplace literacy. Is there a place for us outside of schools and colleges? This brief foray into the world of workplace literacy suggests that there is. ■

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