

Instructional and Training Action Plan For an English Language Level Assessment Program

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英語評価プログラムの為の教授と トレーニングの行動プラン

ラッセル デービス

Needs Assessment Introduction

This section will identify the problems associated with the current testing process utilized at a major adult education business focusing on English language instruction located in Tokyo, Japan. The performance gap will be indicated as well as any relevant information regarding the audience and data.

The Problem(s)

The first indication that something might be wrong with the testing process occurred as a result of a bulletin board posting intended to alert the instructional staff of increasing complaints by learners directed at the administration. Most of the complaints centered round the structure of the testing process. In an effort to relieve some of the pressure and create a sense of concern, the management decided to change the waiting time involved in re-taking a test if the learner was not initially successful. However, data retrieved through interviews and observations indicate a larger problem with respect to inter-rater reliability and dissatisfaction with level integrity. This dissatisfaction extends to both the instructional staff and learners. Specifically, the testing process tends to vary with the instructor. Furthermore, there appears to be no general consensus as to the function of the test. In terms of level integrity, expectations and performance are not viewed as commensurate with the reality in the classroom.

Performance Gap

Instructors at the facility have received one 50 minute block of instruction on testing that occurs at the company. There is no follow-up training provided by the company. This has led to an inability at present for the company to address issues with respect to differences in approach by individual instructors during the testing process. Specifically, observations have revealed a marked difference with regard to time allotted to learners to respond to questions. This is significant in that learners may lose points depending on how the instructor handles the issue of time. Currently, no guidelines are available mandating performance in this area.

Another performance issue is related to providing a sense among the learners of a safe environment in which the test will occur. During one interview a learner relayed an experience in which owing in part to a perceived adversarial relationship with the instructor, the learner upon failing opted not to retry. The test was taken over two years ago.

Beyond the issues with the instructors, there is the further disconnect between the test and level integrity. Interviews have revealed a general consensus among the staff and the learners that the performance of the learner in the level does not match the definition of level ability as determined by the company. The test does not seem to support integrity of levels. This problem is largely structural but includes a failure within the test to determine learner functional ability. The test largely is a narrow measure of learner performance with respect to target grammar but does not account for a larger range of dimensions appropriate for a conversation. Structurally, learners can opt to take the test at any time and can repeat the test within a week upon receiving an unsatisfactory score. Moreover, the test is the only mechanism the company provides to the learner by way of measuring ability. There are no self-assessments, counseling, or remedial study programs in place at present.

Audience

The audience can be separated into instructional staff and learners. The staff has a generally high motivation in terms of wanting to be successful in the classroom. Interviews conclude a consensus among the staff that the test system at present is flawed. There are five mother-tongue English nationalities represented within the instructional staff and all instructors have more than three years of experience. All instructors have undergraduate degrees with four instructors possessing graduate degrees as well.

The learners are primarily Japanese. As such, they can be assumed to have had six years of English instruction at the junior and senior high school level. Motivation is

mixed and representative of functional, personal and practical reasons for becoming adult learners. However, this is problematic in that within the personal reasons for learning English is the cultural dynamic of social learning that is prevalent in Japan. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that among Japanese learners there is no such thing as a true beginner studying English at a language facility.

Data

Initially, there were intended three sources for information collection: interviews, observations and surveys. Unfortunately, the data from the survey were insufficient owing to poor response. However, 14 instructors were interviewed with respect to the testing process as well as 25 learners. Interviews were conducted at random in a variety of settings. The intent was to make the interview open and as informal as possible. While the questioning was free flowing, the interview focused on the areas of testing process, purpose and expectations.

Much of the information revealed in the interviews has already been relayed above. It appears that nine of the instructors interviewed preferred some sort of structural fix to the testing problem. For example, several held that some number should be established with respect to the lessons a learner must take in level before eligibility to take the test. The figures ranged from 15 to 25. One instructor advocated a stronger relationship between the grades learners received from lessons and eligibility. All instructors believed that counseling should take place before and after the test.

The interviews with the learners revealed a general dissatisfaction with the integrity of the levels. However, none of the learners articulated a connection between the test and level integrity. Important to the learners was the notion of being able to relax during the test. Each learner interviewed claimed that nervousness was the most difficult thing about the testing process. All claimed that the instructor was an essential factor in either mitigating or exacerbating the feeling.

Four tests were observed utilizing a camera mounted in the upper corner of the room near the ceiling. This did hamper the process in that visual, non-verbal cues were difficult to impossible to ascertain. During the observation, it was noteworthy to regard the extent to which instructors accounted for method error in the test. This is a reflection of the quality of training that instructors currently receive. As mentioned above, observations revealed the degree of difference with respect to how each instructor handled the timeliness of learner responses and creating a safe testing environment.

Needs Assessment Conclusion

It is the fundamental conclusion from the needs assessment that the company must address in a more comprehensive way the testing process. The information gathered for the purposes of this action plan has revealed a strong desire that testing be restructured. It is the opinion of this writer that any change should involve improved initial training for instructors augmented by continuing professional development. This training would establish a baseline for conduct with respect to administering the test. Furthermore, the test should better reflect an assessment of the functional ability of learners. This latter point may involve redefining levels as well as changing the testing instrument.

Recommendations Introduction

The purpose of this section is to provide recommendations based on the results from data collection accomplished during the needs assessment conducted with respect to the level testing program at the company. The recommendations will be based on analysis and interpretation of the data. Specifically, this section will address narrowing the performance gap, provide the instructional goal for the training regime, explore the implications of target audience characteristics and the work environment, lay out the instructional strategies and discuss the rationale for the media choices.

Analysis/Interpretation of Data

As was established in the needs assessment, data collected from interviews and observations indicate a variance in understanding among the staff as to the purpose of level testing at the company. Essentially, the two competing views hold that the test is either designed to assess the level of learner proficiency in the English language at the particular level being assessed or an assessment of learner readiness at the subsequent level. In particular, the latter view holds that a learner should be assessed in terms of readiness at the next level rather than assessed in terms of proficiency at the current level.

There is further a consensus indicated by the data which supports structural relief for problems associated with the testing process. This likewise breaks into two competing approaches. One direction holds for changing the testing instrument in such a method as to create an instrument which better reflects an assessment of the functional ability of the learner. This, however, leads to a larger issue with respect to level definitions and the relationship of the assessment instrument to that definition. While this issue cannot be addressed specifically in terms of training, it is of paramount importance that the issue be

resolved so as to coincide with any training regime that is established. The second approach advocates a change in the procedures within the process. Three different ideas emerge centered on the main premise of establishing a threshold for test eligibility. In turn, the first holds for establishing a learner grade threshold, the second holds for a lesson number threshold and the third holds for an instructor endorsement threshold. Again, this issue is structural and as such not necessarily directly affected through training. However, it is important that any decision regarding this particular issue be made known so as to be incorporated within subsequent training.

The data also reveal a need to account for instructor performance while administering the assessment. This includes a thorough understanding of learner attitudes particularly with respect to how the instructor is viewed by the learner. There is the additional issue of inter-rater reliability especially with respect to timeliness of response and accounting for method error in the current assessment instrument. Some of this may be removed through structural changes but can also be part of subsequent training.

Narrowing the Performance Gap

There are two main areas of concentration for the training regime. To begin with, the testing process must be standardized with clear guidelines. Next, there must be a clearer explanation of the purpose and processes involved with the assessment. In conjunction with this, training must consist of follow-up efforts which should be seen as part of a larger staff evaluation process intended to create an atmosphere of professional development in the workplace.

Contained within the training which addresses standardization of the process will be the areas of instructor conduct during the administration of the assessment. These have been identified above and include sensitivity to learner attitudes, inter-rater reliability on grading specifically with respect to timeliness of response.

The training will likewise address the overall ability of the instructor to understand the role of the testing process and purpose. Any structural changes would be a part of this area of the training.

Instructional Goal for the Training Regime

In conjunction with narrowing the performance gap, training for the level testing process will focus on the enhancing the instructors' performance and understanding. Specifically, instructors will be able to define the purpose of the test. They will be able to identify and order the steps involved in the testing process. Instructors will be able to define learner concerns and identify those concerns within the administration portion of

the process. They will identify method error and be able to provide examples of how to account for it.

Implications of Instructor Characteristics and Work Environment

By way of quickly summarizing from the needs assessment, the instructors come from across the English speaking world. All instructors are experienced in the EFL field with several possessing advanced degrees in Linguistics. There are no presumed negative implications which might be rooted in any cultural predispositions. The staff shares a common language with only minor variances with respect to pronunciation and spelling. In terms of experience, it may be the case that members of the staff have developed habits and assumptions in the course of building experience in the EFL field which might be challenged. These predispositions could be manifested in views toward the purpose of the exam, attitudes about Japanese learners in general and an outlook with regard to change. This may be especially acute among the staff members with an extended perspective at the company who might relate any change to how things were once done at the company. Attention to this possibility should be made evident to any of the training staff.

Instructional Strategies

The assumption made for any instructional strategy is that the information to be presented and the training conducted be part of an e-Education effort. Therefore, reinforcement activities within the training will occur and be shaped in part by the technology available for supporting the training. The instructors will utilize the delivery platform in a manner which allows for interaction with the content, other instructors and with the trainers. Content will be engaged through the use of video, text and audio. In this way, the instructors can meet the requirements of the instructional goals from above. Through the effective use of peer evaluations along side self evaluations, the instructors will interact with each other. The trainers will be able to view the progress of individual instructors through the course of the training and give feedback to which the instructors will have an opportunity to respond. In this manner, along with supporting follow-up training, the instructors will have the opportunity to interact directly and indirectly with the trainer. This might result in a blended approach which takes advantage of proximity in order to afford more flexibility in the training program (Kovaleski, 2004).

Media Choices and Available Resources

Currently, the company has the resources available to produce self-paced training on CD-ROM. There is further access to a Course Management System which could facilitate training in an asynchronous platform. The capacity to conduct training through a synchronous platform is also available, but owing to technical limitations should be disregarded as an alternative.

CD-ROM is a cheap reusable delivery platform (Benzuly, 2004). For these reasons it is still the most popular way to deliver e-Education programs (Research Digest, 2005). Because of its widespread usage, technology continues to be developed and improved around CD-ROM which increases the kind of things that can be done using this delivery method (Benzuly, 2004). Video editing can be done in-house and incorporated onto the CD-ROM. This would allow for a training regime which has opportunities for trainees to view and critique video segments from actual tests being administered. Text can likewise be placed onto the CD-ROM which can support identifying explanations which are sufficient as related to key concepts within the testing process. Additionally, the technology can support exercises in which the trainees must place in order the procedures in the testing process and provide an explanation of each step in that process. The video also provides an opportunity for visual tutorials which can be utilized to facilitate exposure to information needed in the training regime.

The asynchronous platform would allow the trainee to interact with other trainees and with the trainer. Because of the nature of asynchronous delivery platforms, more collaborative effort could be incorporated into the training regime (Fisher, 2004). This would allow for peer review and exposure to varying approaches and ideas among the staff. It would also facilitate dialogue between the trainer and the trainee. The trainer can utilize the platform for follow-up training which could address particular points in the training which are still outstanding in the mind of the trainee. In fact, the asynchronous system may stimulate this continuing effort to improve on the part of the trainee (Online Classroom, 2005). Additionally, the company may wish to utilize a blended approach to the training regime. In this case, the asynchronous platform would enhance the flexibility of the training regime to meet issues of time and distance as well as any predispositions among the staff about how to participate in the training regime (Kovaleski, 2004).

Recommendations Conclusion

This section has analyzed the data collected from the needs assessment and attempted to posit recommendations concerning the training regime to be developed. In particular, this paper recommends using CD-ROM and an asynchronous platform to

deliver the training. It is further recommended that the company make structural changes to the testing process and these changes become part of the informational exchange within the training regime.

Action Plan Introduction

The purpose of this section is to outline the instructional and training plan to be used to address the problems identified from the needs assessment regarding the level assessment process at the company. The topics and objectives for the training will be identified. The materials to be developed for the training will be discussed as well as the rationale supporting the usage of any materials. The cost of the program and time needed to bring the training online will be discussed. The assessment utilized for the trainees and the method to be used to evaluate the training regime will also be covered.

Topics and Objectives

The areas to be considered in the training regime are three in number. First, the training will deal with inter-rater reliability. Second, the training will focus on the assessment procedures. Third, instructors will be exposed to learner attitudes and preconceptions about the assessment and the role of the instructor in the process.

Inter-rater reliability was identified as problematic from the information garnered from the earlier needs assessment. Instructors need to have the same information about how the grading process should occur. In particular, they need to apply the same standards while grading.

The procedures within the current level assessment program at the company are misunderstood at best and in some cases unknown. Instructors need to be able to identify the steps in the assessment process, the order in which they occur and the importance of each step as it relates to the overall process.

Integral to the success of the assessment program and ultimately the company, is the notion of customer satisfaction. As it relates to the assessment program, instructors need to be aware of the issues that learners hold as important within the process.

Instructional Materials

The Materials Development Department in the company will produce the items supporting this training regime. Specifically, a CD-ROM will be developed to be utilized as part of a self-study approach to the training program. Within the CD-ROM will be video and audio as well as text portions which focus on the three objectives outlined

above. CD-ROM is the preferred delivery platform. It is easy and cheap to produce in house and allows for re-usage (Research Digest, 2005). It also supports the blended nature of the overall training regime (Kovaleski, 2004). Specifically, the CD-ROM will be used to provide training through the use of video segments of actual assessments. Attention will be given to individual items related to inter-rater reliability and observed instructor/learner interaction. The CD-ROM will provide a video tutorial which explains the procedures within the overall assessment program. Following the tutorial there will be text exercises which can be utilized to provide a self-assessment by the instructor.

Supporting the training regime will be the asynchronous platform already online at the company as part of the current Course Management System. This will be utilized to facilitate dialogue among staff and the trainer in charge (Fisher, 2004). Largely, this will be accomplished through threaded conversations which can be generated by the instructors or trainer. This system can also be utilized as a backup to any intended face to face portions of the training should those portions become untenable due to scheduling or proximity.

Cost and Time

Cost can be calculated as related to actual materials needed, time necessary to develop the materials and time necessary to accomplish the training. The material needed amounts to nothing more than blank CDs. These can be purchased in any electronic store in Tokyo. Given the sheer number of stores, it can be reasonably assumed that this cost will be minimal. The cost related to producing the actual training CD will be a function of normal scheduling. The only possible issue would be prioritizing the workload. As such, there is no way to give a definitive time table since that decision is made by management. However, once work on this project is underway, it is anticipated that the CD can be completed within 10 working days.

There is no issue with respect to cost or time associated with the asynchronous platform since it is already online and being utilized at present. Instructors need only be provided with password information to access the system.

Time associated with actual training would be set by the trainers in the company. It is the opinion of the writer that this training could be accomplished within five working days. One possible issue has to do with the contractual obligations of individual instructors. At present there is no requirement to do work out of hours. It may be necessary to provide time during working hours to support this training. However, if structural changes are made in the contract arrangements, it may be possible to support self-paced training at home to be supported by the CD-ROM.

Assessing Instructors

Assessments will consist of self-evaluations, peer evaluations and trainer evaluations. The self-evaluations will give the instructors an opportunity to gauge their learning during exposure to training on the CD-ROM. In this way, particular segments can be reviewed as often as necessary. There is also opportunity to conduct self-evaluations utilizing the asynchronous platform. Through threads which are generated by the trainer, questions can be posited to instructors which require self-reflection about the training or their performance. These comments can then become part of the permanent record of the process to be utilized later if necessary.

Peer evaluations would be facilitated through the asynchronous platform. During the course of training questions can be generated by the trainer to which instructors can respond. These questions can be based on the video segments in the CD-ROM or other areas viewed as important by the trainer. These responses can in turn be evaluated by other instructors in the training program. At the culmination of training, there will be an opportunity to conduct a mock level assessment. This will be viewed by the other instructors in the course and evaluated.

This mock level assessment will be conducted between the instructor and a Japanese member of the administration staff. The trainer can use this occasion to provide a trainer assessment of the instructor. The trainer can also generate quizzes or other test instruments to assessment particular segments in the training.

It is recommended that all three assessments occur in the training. This is so the trainer can gauge learning based on his/her expertise in the area. It is also important that the instructors have a sense of being engaged in the process. The self-evaluation can support the notion of self-improvement in keeping the instructor motivated throughout the training (Jansen, 2005). In this respect it is recommended that the trainer meet with the instructors at the beginning of training to establish some of the criteria and standards to be utilized in the assessment. The key is instructor involvement in the process. The peer evaluations can keep the instructors engaged with each other to enhance the learning experience in the training regime (Reuse-Durham, 2005). The trainer evaluations provide guidance based on expertise which rounds out the training experience and insures quality.

Evaluating the Training

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the training, it is important that preconceptions be identified at the beginning of training. This provides a baseline for comparisons to be made at the end of training. Instructor attitudes about the training

with respect to the things that should be covered and the possibility of being successful will be identified. Then, through the self-assessments and peer evaluations during the course of instruction, progress can be measured, attitudes readdressed and a record established. Finally, the results of the mock level assessment will be measured against the information and standards presented earlier in the training as well as the initial and progressive attitudes of the instructors. At this point, the trainer and the training can be evaluated by the instructors. Baseline preconceptions and criteria for what constitutes individual hopes for the training can be explored in relationship to what actually occurred. This is important so that the focus does not become either the trainer or personalities (Bostrom, 1980).

Beyond the actual training, it will be necessary to perform observations of actual level assessments and have those reviewed by trainers. The trainers will look for consistencies in instructor performance with respect to the training regime. It would also be helpful to conduct surveys with the learners and instructors to gauge how they view the level assessment. The information from this process could be utilized to support adjustments in the training regime should they be appear warranted (Eisenberg, 2005).

Action Plan Conclusion

This section has outlined the instructional plan for the training regime associated with the level assessment program at the company. The topics center on inter-rater reliability, procedures and attitudes. Inexpensive and versatile CD-ROM will be used to support training as well as the asynchronous platform. The overall approach will be blended. The training will attempt to involve the instructor as fully as possible in the process. This includes establishing standards for assessing the program and effectiveness of the training. Naturally, the level assessment program will be gauged and the effectiveness of the training in improving associated customer satisfaction.

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