



Case Study September 2009

English-Language Training at Robinson Paperboard Packaging Learning for Safety

NAME OF PROGRAM

English as a Second Language Training

DATE ESTABLISHED

2005

SKILLS DEVELOPED

Oral communication
Written communication
Reading and comprehension

CONTACT

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OVERVIEW

Robinson Paperboard Packaging, located in Mississauga, Ontario, is a division of Robinson Packaging PLC, a leading provider of innovative packaging solutions with headquarters in Chesterfield, United Kingdom. The company has been operating since 1986 and was purchased by Robinson Group in 1999. It produces a wide range of paperboard tubes, cans, and boxes used in the cosmetics, confectionary, personal care, wine and spirits, and other industries. Its production facility currently employs 35 people. Cultural diversity is a distinct feature of Robinson Packaging's workforce—over 90 per cent of the employees are recent immigrants from South Asia and Eastern Europe. The plant is non-unionized, and women make up 60 per cent of the staff.

When Steve Wilkie joined the company in May 2005 as the new president, he was alarmed by the high accident rates and poor hazard awareness at the plant. After spending time on the shop floor, he realized that the cause of the problem was a lack of English-language skills among the plant workers. Many employees had difficulty understanding machine operation instructions and hazard warnings. Determined to improve the situation, Wilkie sought a certified instructor to hold English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on the company's premises. ESL training at Robinson Packaging began in July 2005 and continued until April 2006. The program played an essential role in transforming the workplace environment and improving the safety record at the company's plant.

“When I look at a company and see a [poor] safety record, I know there is a problem. As the president of the company, it's my responsibility to address the root cause.”

—Steve Wilkie, President, Robinson Paperboard Packaging

OBJECTIVES

Management's rising concerns about its poor employee safety record led to the introduction of an ESL program at Robinson Packaging. The objectives of the Robinson Packaging ESL program were to:

- ♦ increase the English-language verbal and written skills of employees;
- ♦ reduce time lost due to accidents and increase hazard awareness by raising employees' ability to understand hazard warnings, safety manuals, and other workplace documents;
- ♦ improve employees' morale and confidence;

- ♦ develop employees' problem-solving skills; and
- ♦ help immigrant employees to better function in the larger society by improving their ability to communicate in English.

TARGET GROUPS

The ESL training program was open to all new and current employees of Robinson Packaging. Participation in the program was entirely voluntary for employees.

ACTIVITIES

The ESL program at Robinson Packaging began with an assessment of employees' proficiency in spoken English. This was accomplished through individual conversations with the instructor. Based on the results of the assessment and expressions of interest from individual employees, approximately one-third of all employees were enrolled. They were then assigned to one of two groups. Group 1 consisted of employees with a basic knowledge of English, while Group 2 was made up of those with more advanced English-language skills.

The two groups eliminated situations in which students with basic language skills would have to speak in front of their more advanced classmates.

Assigning the employees to different groups allowed the instructor to differentiate program content and teaching methods according to the learners' skill levels. It also contributed to a more psychologically comfortable atmosphere in the classroom by eliminating situations in which students with basic language skills would have to speak in front of their more advanced classmates. Each group participated in two one-hour classes per week, which were held during working hours. One group met on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the other on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“If you need to address safety issues, start with the basic principles—reading and writing.”

—Steve Wilkie, President, Robinson Paperboard Packaging

ESL training at Robinson Packaging involved a variety of classroom activities, including the use of worksheets, conversation cards, role play, games, and small-group work to encourage dialogue. The instructor was able to actively engage the students in the learning process by making it enjoyable and closely related to concrete situations encountered in their daily lives. In keeping with the program’s main objective, safety documents—such as Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) manuals, the company’s safety procedures, safety data sheets, and accident forms—were frequently used as teaching aids. During conversation exercises, students were encouraged to discuss workplace accidents or equipment-related issues they had experienced in the past.

Shortly after initiating ESL training, Robinson Packaging also launched the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which gave employees 24/7 access to anonymous counselling via a telephone helpline. In addition to helping employees resolve their workplace or personal issues, the EAP was also devised with a view to providing them with an opportunity to practice their conversational skills.

RESOURCES

As a small business, Robinson Packaging had no facilities of its own that could be dedicated exclusively to ESL training. Instead, classes were held during regular working hours in the company’s cafeteria, which was temporarily transformed into a classroom through the addition of a whiteboard and stationery supplies. The company fully covered the instructor’s salary and the costs of teaching materials. For each two-hour class, employees donated one hour of their time and were paid by Robinson Packaging for the other.

INNOVATIONS

Innovative learning approaches used at Robinson Packaging included:

- ◆ close collaboration between management and the instructor in setting program objectives;
- ◆ flexible teaching methods, activities, and evaluation tools;
- ◆ individual assessment of employees’ language skills and learning needs by the instructor;
- ◆ program content linked to practical needs and objectives, such as building a safer and healthier work environment; and
- ◆ use of an EAP to complement ESL training.

The greatest challenge to the English-language program was lack of funding.

CHALLENGES

Although the majority of employees were enthusiastic about the opportunity to improve their English skills, some were hesitant to participate in the program. Male shop-floor supervisors were especially reluctant to acknowledge their lack of English skills and take part in the training. The program also had a relatively high dropout rate—approximately 30 per cent of the students withdrew from the course at different stages. Most of those who left the program early attributed their decision to the difficulty in adjusting their schedules to accommodate the time spent on learning and homework. Other employees stopped attending classes because they felt that they had reached their desired skill level. In addition, cultural factors, along with the added difficulty of speaking English on the telephone, limited some employees’ ability to take full advantage of the EAP.

The greatest challenge to the program was the lack of funding. As a small business, Robinson Packaging had limited financial resources to devote to language training—for example, it could not afford to provide each individual student with an ESL textbook. Attempts to secure financial assistance from external agencies were not successful, in part because the company did

not have the time or personnel to engage in what it found to be drawn-out and overly complex application processes.

SOLUTIONS

Internal interest in the program was increased by engaging employees in its design and planning. An Employee Council was formed to represent employee interests and to provide input into the design and management of the training program. Training program participation was encouraged and supported from the President's office on down. Participants' efforts to improve their skills were recognized by management through class attendance rewards of gift certificates and small souvenirs.

Having to rely solely on its own financial resources, Robinson Packaging created a corporate training fund to finance its ESL program. Cost savings came through holding classes on-site in the company's cafeteria and through employee sharing of some training materials. The company was able to recoup some of the training costs through Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board rebates earned by achieving a higher level of safe operation.

OUTCOMES

ESL training allowed Robinson Packaging to raise the level of English-language proficiency at its Mississauga facility. The following are the main outcomes of the company's ESL program:

- ◆ Employees who completed all or part of the program were perceived by their supervisors to have considerably improved their oral and written English skills.
- ◆ The program played an essential role in increasing employees' ability to understand the content and meaning of safety documents, fill out accident forms, and perform other routine workplace operations.

- ◆ Employees acquired greater confidence in speaking up in front of others and speaking to managers.
- ◆ ESL training became the cornerstone for job-specific skill development among employees.
- ◆ More employees were able to receive promotions as a result of improved literacy and better ability to learn more advanced skills.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The greatest accomplishment of the ESL training program at Robinson Packaging was a much safer and healthier workplace, resulting from:

- ◆ a significant reduction in accident rates (the company went nearly a year without a single accident and became eligible to receive rebates on its Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums);
- ◆ less equipment downtime as a result of the decrease in accidents and a better understanding of general and industry-specific safety procedures;
- ◆ increased productivity thanks to fewer accident-related work stoppages;
- ◆ improved employee morale and self-confidence; and
- ◆ an improved relationship and better communications between employees and management.

USE AS A MODEL

Robinson Packaging is a rare example of a small business that implemented a successful workplace literacy program based almost entirely on its own resources. The success of the program demonstrates the decisive role that dedicated management with a commitment to lifelong learning can play in upgrading workers' literacy skills. Management at this company recognized the seriousness of the issues immediately and gave priority to addressing them. The results provide a model of the benefits an organization reaps when it goes beyond its comfort zone and extends its resources to cover workplace education efforts.

Due to changing markets and organizational needs, the English as a Second Language Program is not currently operating at Robinson Paperboard Packaging. However, its past initiative offers a solid model of literacy and basic skills upgrading in a small business.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Organizational Effectiveness and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses the impact of workplace literacy and essential skills on employee safety and health.

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English-Language Training at Robinson Paperboard Packaging: Learning for Safety

by *Vadim Kukushkin*

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