

Improving English Proficiency in Professional and Vocational Training

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the professional development of teacher-trainers worldwide, with practical applications for instructors and curriculum developers who work to improve English proficiency in the professional/vocational training realm. The goal is to address situational language use during professional training so that trainees can interact with the language, understand “why,” learn professional content, and develop English proficiency concurrently. Integrating language use into training is important because research on teaching multilinguals shows that learning content and learning language occur simultaneously (e.g., de Oliveira 2023).

The sections below offer suggestions for making English language visible during professional training to improve *proficiency*—defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL 2024, 4) as “the ability to use language to accomplish communication objectives.” The final section of the article is a call to action with first steps for practitioners to take.

PROFICIENCY

Proficiency at professional levels requires precision and formal language competence (Leaver and Shekhtman 2002) in the receptive and comprehending (i.e., listening and reading) modes and the productive and composing (i.e., speaking and writing) modes. The term “professional levels” is not clearly defined in the literature, but definitions include Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) 3, which is similar to the ACTFL

“superior” level, or ILR 4, which can be compared to the ACTFL “distinguished” level.

The ACTFL’s proficiency guidelines also distinguish between “proficiency” and “performance.” The latter refers “to what an individual is able to do within familiar contexts and content areas, using task-oriented language functions, structures, and vocabulary,” with customized language training determining the contexts, content areas, and performance tasks that are taught and assessed (ACTFL 2024, 7). Performance criteria lay the foundation for proficiency, which is developed through language use over time. Language learners need to know what these performance criteria are in order to improve proficiency.

Practical uses of language can be made explicit by embedding specialist language use into professional training for English learning

that is relevant, accessible, and instrumental for workplace competence. Case studies in English for specific purposes (ESP) course development show how “on the job” language needs can be quite different from academic language and specialist training (Basturkmen 2010). Specialist discourse in police reports, for example, needs to be specific and accurate so that senior officers and prosecutors can follow the series of events and facts involved (Basturkmen 2010). In professional/vocational training, specialist discourse needs to be magnified because novice writers, whether in academia or in the professions, might otherwise use vague language and insufficient detail in written communication.

The need for specificity and accuracy in professional discourse is why professional proficiency cannot develop through tangential English grammar instruction. Such instruction takes a traditional view of language without making the content–language connection clear to trainees. Traditional grammar instruction, even at the advanced level, cannot meet the needs of any specialist learner group.

AMERICAN ENGLISH CONTEXT

After immigrating to the United States, I worked as an English language specialist with international lawyers from 52 countries in American University’s Washington College of Law (2000–2015). Law schools in the United States require their domestic *Juris Doctor* (JD) students to take one or two years of legal writing. International students are now admitted into these programs. U.S. law-school instructors may assume a traditional view of language by teaching at the sentence level, emphasizing grammatical accuracy, prioritizing vocabulary, and teaching structures exclusive of function—that is, out of context. Like professional trainers in other disciplines, they may rely on traditional grammar instruction and error correction as a remedy for nonnative English writers. They may not fully grasp that language is a system used to communicate meaning and that cultivating English communication skills in a professional program requires targeted

language instruction relevant to content and to learner needs.

In my experience, working professionals generally are not exposed to advanced writing skills or techniques for English communication at professional levels of proficiency. Even in U.S. law schools where legal-writing courses are mandatory at the graduate level, legal-writing professionals may rely on disciplinary texts without sufficient linguistic knowledge that could be gleaned from collaboration with an English specialist or applied linguist.

As a result, international students in an advanced U.S. program such as Master of Laws (LLM), Doctor of Juridical Science (SJD), or Master of Business Administration (MBA) may not get informed instruction when taught by professionals who have only their native-speaker status to recommend them. Dual-language learners and trained English teachers may know more about language use—the basis for proficiency development—than writing instructors and trainers in a professional program.

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH CONTEXT

The international lawyers (LLM and SJD students and visiting scholars) I taught over the years were eager for legal English training that helped them develop proficiency. They needed competence in written discourse that differs from spoken discourse in three ways: grammatical intricacy, lexical density, and nominalizations that use nouns rather than verbs (Paltridge 2021). Professionals working in education, law, and business, for example, must be able to express themselves in writing with accuracy, brevity, and clarity. The quality of their professional communication depends on the writer’s ability to express meaning clearly, not on the reader’s ability to edit for grammatical correctness.

To help advanced learners develop English proficiency, teacher-trainers and curriculum developers can tailor instruction to professional settings by putting learner needs first: that is,

with specific language goals related to content training. A task-based instructional approach, which emphasizes focus on function over focus on form, empowers learners to do more with English than produce grammatically correct sentences.

Teacher-trainers can begin at the discourse (communication) level, showing how language (structures and vocabulary) is a system of choices in a particular context. They can teach that correctness is related to context, which is multilayered, not just sentence-level. The implication for teachers, trainers, and program administrators is a systematic approach for developing proficiency in professional-language use with self-regulation or control in nonnative English writing (Bain Butler 2015).

TEACHER-TRAINERS

Teacher-trainers in U.S. education, law, and business schools, however, may have international graduate students focus on genre and prescriptive (as opposed to descriptive) grammar, bureaucratic English, legalese, and other types of jargon that can obscure communication. Similarly, teacher-trainers and curriculum developers outside the United States might assume that written English communication is more about an individual's command of grammar than about genre and register, declarative knowledge of language use, and procedural application.

Senior officials, administrators, and teacher-trainers might not consider incorporating English language instruction into professional-training curricula, opting to keep language use and grammar separate as a course or learning module, perhaps because of their own language training, knowledge, or competency. They may not understand that professional skills and the acquisition of language skills merge to develop proficiency at professional levels, and they may not understand that both are developmental for acculturated and nonacculturated program participants (Bain Butler 2013). They may need to consider how content and language

learning can occur simultaneously in a vocational setting or professional program to improve English proficiency.

The goal is not to turn trainers and teaching professionals into English teachers. The goal is to give them knowledge, tools, and language awareness that qualify them as learner-centered educators who address situational language use during training, with opportunities to interact with English in professional/vocational contexts so that trainees can understand why certain language choices and technical terms work better than others. This—experientially—is how professional content and English proficiency can be learned concurrently.

GRAMMAR

Throughout my career, I have worked with highly educated senior officials, program administrators, and professional trainers who assume that proficient writing means good grammar. In 2023, I was asked to add textbook grammar to professional training in the Philippines for frontline police officers who have had English language instruction since primary school. I realized that the last thing these officers would want or need from me is more grammar. Rather, their interest would be dimensions of language related to their jobs through contextualized language instruction at the discourse, sentence, and word/phrase levels.

In my experience, however, professional-skills trainers and program administrators—whether in the United States or elsewhere—continue to focus on grammar and error correction, preferring to implement a product-editing approach (e.g., of a police report) instead of a writing-process approach for translingual writers in a professional/vocational setting.

Even with today's research-based teaching methods, professional trainers and program administrators can ignore English learner needs at advanced levels. Institution-oriented preferences were evidenced in my

Washington, D.C., law school, for example, where research librarians were tasked with editing international-student SJD dissertations (Bain Butler 2015). In my recent English Language Specialist project in the Philippines, senior officers told me that they spent vast amounts of time editing police reports for correct grammar before sending them on to other departments and to the courts. In my current institution of higher education, native-English thesis and dissertation writers have been encouraged to rely on editors rather than deal with the intricacies of academic language use for scholarly writing and publishing.

The point is that language use is deeper than sentence-level grammar and furthermore that grammar correction and uncontextualized grammar instruction do little to improve English proficiency or workplace competence.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

My formal needs assessment in the Philippines provides insights into the design of professional training for dual-language users who may be fluent in daily communications but who need to develop English writing proficiency for police work, especially reports.

The teacher-researcher diagram in Figure 1 (Bain Butler 2023) shows how training in a task-oriented language function like police-report writing, within the context of a professional-training program, can contribute to clear meaning through word choice, grammar choice, and punctuation choice. Rank-and-file officers may have to write

reports in second-language (L2) English that can start out as a first-language (L1) English text message.

Language training from an experiential or backward-design view could incorporate the following stages:

Stage 1: Identify desired results.

Overarching goal: Officers will write clear, accurate reports in a cultural police context.

Develop specific language-learning objectives for a training session:

1. Officers will inform in an accurate text message that initiates a police report (L1 or L2).
2. Officers will be confident describing details in an L2 English written report.

Stage 2: Determine acceptable evidence.

Assess language-specific objectives by using a research-based checklist that can be modified for different kinds of writers and writing contexts. See Bain Butler (2015) for a ready-to-use checklist.

Stage 3: Plan the learning activities with contextualized language use.

1. Provide experiences with role play in professional context(s) and mock reports in vocational English. Prompts are contextualized and tailored to the vocational training and cultural setting.
2. Use materials and resources that build on those used in professional/vocational training.



Figure 1. Training in a specific task-oriented language function, leading to clear meaning (Bain Butler 2023)

The planning in Stage 1 highlights specific language-use objectives in the professional-training context. Whatever the instructional design, proficient report writing within the context of police work is important because it can keep people from being wrongly jailed or falsely accused, prevent mistranslations in court, and prevent interpretative editing by senior officers.

In other words, tailoring English language instruction to professional needs and needs assessment is the only sustainable option for improving English proficiency and professional-skills performance in a vocational training program. Consider the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a key construct in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning and development, which is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with guidance or in collaboration with more-capable peers. English teachers work in that space, often with collaboration from other experts in a professional-training program.

For example, a lieutenant colonel in the Philippine National Police Training Service shared that his frontline officers need “confidence building” in using police language. He suggested that I conduct discourse analysis because “seeing actual work helps gauge level [of needs].” He wanted me to analyze station-level work product and create a vocabulary guide that could “standardize” words [and phrases] that he considers “meat” for report writing. Training would “correct the way they answer” (personal communication, January 16, 2023).

PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

There is a problem with training in the professions when (a) trainees experience competing demands of learning professional content and language use and (b) teacher-trainers expect to fill that gap with conventional grammar lessons, rules, or editing instead of language-use goals for training with scaffolding, such as core vocabulary. There is also a problem with

institutional editing in a professional setting that may introduce errors or lose key facts or context.

To develop professional levels of English proficiency and written communication, teacher-trainers and curriculum developers need to move beyond communicative language teaching with a content-based, learner-centered approach for achieving elevated levels of proficiency (Campbell 2020). Communication activities that working professionals must manage need to be part of professional-skills training to make the content–language connection clear for learners. Collaborating can make this happen by pairing English language-learning objectives with content-driven learning objectives for a professional training or learning module. Complementing professional content with language use is a hallmark of content-based language instruction: a practical solution to an institution's practice of editing.

Learning goals and communication activities can align with performance and assessment in a professional-training program. Cheng and Fox (2017) emphasize that alignment centers on student learning and suggest that learning goals, teaching, and assessment form a cyclical process with questions teachers should be asking themselves (30–31):

Question 1—Learning goals:

What do I want my students/trainees to be able to do as an outcome of my teaching/training?

Question 2—Assessment:

What will my students/trainees do to show what they have learned?

Question 3—Communication activity:

What will I do as a teacher-trainer, and what will my students/trainees do as learners?

Workplace assessment rubrics can be created as benchmarks and standards to (a) gauge and monitor workplace competence, and

(b) foster language development for accuracy, brevity, and clarity in writing: e.g., low (baseline performance), midrange (solid performance), and high (quantity and quality of performance).

SCAFFOLDING

Just as “instruction is a process of providing support to learners through assessment and teaching” (Cheng and Fox 2017, 31), so is scaffolding. The term *scaffolding* means support that helps learners complete a given performance task, such as drafting a report. Supporting professional-communication activities with assessment rubrics has the potential to increase the accuracy of what multilingual learners know and can do, with types and techniques for scaffolding varying according to context (Wolf and Lopez 2014).

Verbal scaffolding includes paraphrasing and developing questions that lead to language development. This is important because trainees have to be able to conduct a language task in a manner that satisfies the performance expectations of their sociocultural and professional context—e.g., senior officers. Procedural scaffolding may include modeling and role-playing, for example. Instructional scaffolding, tools that support learning, may include graphic organizers and cognitive maps with key words and phrases (adapted from Wolf and Lopez 2014).

English teachers can design scaffolding that supports teaching, learning, and assessing professional use of content language by asking the following questions:

1. What are the embedded linguistic (grammatical), semantic (meanings), and pragmatic (social/cultural usage) elements in the content that I will teach and assess?
2. What are the language skills—i.e., productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading)—required of the content that I will teach and assess?

Scaffolding training for dual-language professionals promotes high-level learning without simplifying instruction. It reinforces key concepts and structures, and it extends vocabulary. Scaffolding can show how a technical term is influenced by context and how technical terms can change their meaning and function within a professional context or vocational setting.

MATERIALS

Specific graphic organizers, such as templates for report writers and rubrics for senior officers who assess police reports, can be adapted and modified over time to improve proficiency and workplace competence.

Regarding language development, teacher-trainers and curriculum developers can use graphic organizers to show how

- each purpose for workplace writing requires a different genre or type of writing;
- each genre for writing requires a separate set of language resources; and
- awareness of professional-language use develops ability for trainees.

Teacher-trainers can amplify elements of genre, language, and assessment in multiple ways:

Genre: They can use discourse analysis to consider how social-cultural aspects overlap, as described in Paltridge (2021).

Language: They can be explicit about issues such as these:

- distinct aspects of language development, language use, or embedded genres—for example, a memo that *asks* for information, *explains* or *requests* some action, and/or *reports* back to requests for information or action;
- relationships between reader expectations and writer ability;

- precision with technical vocabulary and parts of speech;
- formal language with technical words that can change their meaning and function within a context; and
- dimensions of language use that exist on multiple levels, including discourse level (as in reports and memos), sentence level (language forms and cultural conventions), and word/phrase level (professional vocabulary usage).

Assessment: They can design genre-based rubrics for both trainer-directed instruction and self-directed study. Self-directed study is important because learner development is a natural process, not a product. For both the learner and for those who need to assess learners' work product, explicit performance criteria build competence in a professional workplace or vocational setting.

In sum, there is a lot English teachers and curriculum developers can do for working professionals in a training program to make embedded grammar visible, core vocabulary explicit, and English language use part of training that develops proficiency and builds confidence.

BEST PRACTICES

Best-practice considerations integrate professional-level proficiency training, teacher-trainer collaboration, professional content materials, and program credit for participation in a vocational training or professional school program.

An integrated content-language design—whether partial immersion, professional content plus language instruction, or frequent use of professional content for professional practice—is a call to action that forefronts English teachers training trainers in professions and workplaces that use English as an additional language and who struggle with developing English proficiency.

Call to action

Decision-makers and program managers need to be better informed. English teachers do not have to work in the target program or learn the profession to make English language visible in a training. The aim is simply to put the language learner first by articulating both content and language-use goals. Teachers can help teaching professionals and vocational trainers do that.

In other words, teacher-trainers can expand and deepen lesson planning by (a) using professional-level material, even with low-proficiency learners, and (b) naming specific objectives for both content and language-use for each lesson or training session.

By providing targeted instruction with feedback for language development and assessment, English teachers can make a critical difference in professional-content training and English language learner development.

First steps

This article should help teachers address grammar as a possible entry point to a professional school program or vocational training. To improve proficiency and build confidence, start by adding language-use objectives to a training session. Those interested can view a recording of a webinar on this topic (Bain Butler 2023; a link to the recording is provided in the References section).

VALUES AND ATTITUDES

It is important to address grammar and other concerns voiced by program administrators and employers because they may be gatekeepers rather than door-openers (Bachman and Purpura 2008). Also, teachers should question prevailing assumptions about expertise, language use, and proficiency at the outset because cultural values and attitudes matter.

Different perspectives can affect professional communication and collaboration. All may need to consider that the real expert in any training program is the developing English user who, at this stage, is a professional.

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