

## **An ESL Program for a Local Factory**

*Notice the way Cindy starts with a specific example of what can happen when employees cannot read basic safety instructions. As she turned this letter into a final project, she worked on emphasizing not just the dangers to the employees but the legal responsibility of the factory to provide a safe working environment. At this point, she merely mentions the dangers of litigation because of employee ability to understand safety warnings. Students often make such progress through the revision process toward more fully integrating their reader's views into the project.*

[Address withheld]  
March 5, 2001

Ms. Alka Swanson  
General Manager, JDS Uniphase  
7 Graphics Drive  
West Trenton, NJ 08628

RE: ESL Program Implementation at JDS Uniphase

Dear Ms. Swanson,

I would like to take a moment of your time to explain a proposal I have concerning the health and safety of workers in your building. I currently work for JDS Uniphase as a Co-op student in the Environmental Health, Safety, and Security department under Gary Wimmer. I perform many tasks for Gary, which include keeping records for all incidents that occur in the building. I make sure the employees fill out incident reports and in turn, this helps me research ways in which to prevent these accidents from occurring. A few weeks ago, I encountered an incident with an employee who had bit her tongue and decided to go into the First Aid Kit to get something to stop the bleeding. This was not a work related incident, but soon became one. She went into the First Aid Kit, found blood clotting spray and sprayed it into her mouth. Awhile later she began to feel nauseous and was sent to the hospital. After investigation, we found that the employee was unable to speak or read English very well. She was unable to read the warning signs that specifically said "Harmful if swallowed" or "Avoid contact with eyes, ears, nose, or mouth." An injury as the one described would not have become a work related incident if she had been able to read the warning signs on the bottle. This is why I believe we should start a program within the company through which employees who are unable to read or speak English would be able to learn by taking classes offered by the company.

### *The Problem of Illiteracy*

Out of the American population, 29% of adults are functionally illiterate. In New Jersey alone, there are 3 million people who have English literacy problems ("Companies" B01). Many companies have already taken the initiative to start implementing English as

a Second Language [ESL] programs to help their employees adjust to work. The well-known Waldorf-Astoria in New York City is offering a company wide diversity training program which offers a wide range of programs, including ESL classes (Curan 53). These classes help the employees learn to speak proper English so they are able to interact with the guests. The most important aspect of hotel management is guest service. Learning English helps employees better accomplish this goal.

### *Why Should Companies Offer English as a Second Language Programs?*

Many companies today hire immigrants to fill the lower skilled positions within their departments. A director of Human Resources in a Long Island Mailing Company says that she has a problem finding employees, and her solution is immigrants. She states, "We know what the job market is and we've found a work force that is eager to work and eager to learn" (LeDuff 30). These laborious jobs, about 25% of the total jobs offered in the United States, are not desirable to those with higher education, yet require a huge workforce. They are usually filled by immigrants who have just come to this country. Companies say that even in lower paying, manual labor jobs, employees with English skills work more efficiently and are able to eventually fill the pool of higher paying jobs and make more money once they learn these skills (LeDuff 30).

Another reason companies should train employees is that it can boost the level of productivity in the company. Carole Richards, President of North Coastal Education Services says, "On average, 33 percent of the average work force reads below the ninth grade level" (Livingston H1). A study done by the Indiana Literacy Fund estimates that the cost to the nation is about \$225 billion because of accidents in the workplace, lower productivity, and lost tax revenues. They also state that workers who are unable to read or speak English are insecure, afraid of change, afraid of being found out, reluctant to give ideas, only work in teams, and do not take on added responsibility for fear of not doing it properly (Livingston H1). Many people who are unable to speak English properly take the first job that they are offered because they need the money. These people are afraid to admit they are unable to write or speak English for fear of losing their job and income. Completing the assigned task is the workers priority; they do not think of the safety issues involved if they are unable to read warning signs or chemicals they work with. Yet, as my boss, Gary Wimmer states at every safety training meeting he conducts, "No one should injure himself for a paycheck."

### *Effect of ESL Programs in Other Companies*

An example of the way I would like to run English as a Second Language classes the way Bergen Pines County hospital does. The hospital realized their need for better employee English skills. The Director of Volunteer Services at the hospital said, "The better educated the employees, the better they are going to serve the hospital" ("Companies" B01). They began an ESL class in which the employees were allowed an hour out of their regular work time to be tutored once a week. The classes are held in the workplace and are run by the groups Literacy Volunteers of America, Project Literacy U.S. Plus, and the Adult Learning Center at Bergen Community College. At Bergen Pines, which

employs 2,000 workers, community volunteers who are trained by the Adult Learning Center at Bergen Community College teach basic skills. Markay says, “From the employees point of view, they are getting the training they need, they don’t have to pay for it, don’t have to take it tutoring on their own time, and they don’t have to worry about transportation because it is right here at their workplace. We are getting better educated employees” (“Companies” B01). This program offers employees the ability to learn to read, write, and speak in English. They even offer a GED in ESL studies.

The hospital was able to find this group by calling the NJ Department of Labor, who put them in touch with the group and college. The NJ Department of Labor even provides funding for ESL training to companies that prove they will be able to be more productive and benefit from the program. The Department of Labor funds the people who teach the class, the textbooks, and the notebooks. The expense to the company is the lost worktime they give each employee who attends the class (“Companies” B01).

Ford Motor Company has opted to offer the classes before and after shifts instead of during scheduled work time. Employees are offered the ESL classes free of charge and are also allowed to bring their spouses (“Companies” B01). Another hospital, St. Mary’s, in Passaic, NJ has received a grant from the American Express Volunteer Action Fund, who has given out 76 grants in total to companies in which their employees volunteer. The volunteers are using the grant money to purchase educational material to teach ESL classes for the hospital. Their class will focus on vocabulary that would be helpfully to employees who work in the hospital atmosphere (“Volunteer” N4).

Marriott International offers free ESL classes as well as tuition reimbursement for employees who want to take more advanced courses at community college. They offer lessons of small talk that teach the employees about rules of fire safety, most importantly, and then also teach them key phrases and words to be able to greet all guests coming in and out of the hotel. One of Marriott’s directors of training stated, “And we share lesson plans with our managers on a weekly basis so they can reinforce learning in the work environment. The idea that we are developing our hourly work force is critical and gives us a real edge. It really does drive associate loyalty” (Oldham 4).

All of the companies mentioned above have implemented these programs and have been successful in improving their business. JDS Uniphase needs to look at these examples and realize the amount of money that will be saved and also the reduction of injuries that will occur. Employees want to be cared about by their employer. It is not fair to make people work in an unsafe environment. What is truly unfair is that many employees are unaware that they are not safe. JDS Uniphase **is required by law** to provide a safe working environment and to educate its employees adequately about safety issues.

### *Solutions*

As pointed out, one big solution to the problem of safety is to teach employees English writing, speaking, and reading skills. By doing this, we will be providing a safer workplace and also increasing our productivity. There are many volunteer organizations

that offer these classes to companies and will tailor what they teach to our needs. We should use volunteers rather than professional ESL instructors because in many parts of the United States, the demand for adult English as a Second Language instruction outstrips the supply (Fitzgerald). There is proposed and actual legislation at the state and federal levels that includes budget cuts and welfare immigration reform. This is going to result in a greater imbalance and put strain on adult ESL instructors. Volunteer teachers will take action and fill in the gap (Schlusberg, Mueller, 1995).

First, we can call the NJ Department of Labor to see what local groups in the area are able to volunteer time to teach classes for the employees of the company. This will be the cheapest and most effective way to find a solution to the problem. As long as we can prove our case to the NJ Department of Labor, they will be willing to fund the classes. To estimate our needs, we can look at all the examples described who have a similar number of employees as we have now. But, as we both know, this company grows by over 100 people every two weeks, so we need to also look at a plan that will work as we grow. The plan I propose we use is to get a volunteer organization such as Literacy Volunteers of America to come in once or twice a week and teach ESL classes. These classes will run for an hour each and there will be different time slots available so all three shifts will have the opportunity to take the classes. The classes will teach basic skills of fire and chemical safety needed for the job. Employees will be able to read an MSDS for the most important information of the chemical so they know the safety precautions of handling it. Also, we will stress the importance of trusting the supervisor and not being afraid to ask any questions. We will teach them that they should not be handling or using anything if they do not know what it is.

I propose we give an exam which all new and existing employees must take to evaluate their English skills and whether or not they need to attend these classes. Also, all who pass the exam, but would like to still take the class will be allowed to do so. We need to implement a reimbursement policy if an employee decides to take a class at a community college. We can run it very similar to our tuition reimbursement policy. He or she must bring in tuition and book bills and we will reimburse the full amount paid.

### *Conclusion*

By implementing these programs, we will see the amount we pay for work related incidents drop significantly and also be able to bridge the communication gap between employees and management. This will make JDS Uniphase more profitable and increase our level of productivity. I hope this information I have proposed to you can be put to good use within the company and that you see the reasons why we need to implement an ESL program right away. If you have any questions or would like a full copy of my proposal, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. I have also attached a list of references that you might find useful to research the topic I have discussed. Thank you for your time and I hope to speak to you in the future.

Sincerely,  
Cindy Bast

## Works Cited

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