
Helping Honda: A Case of English for Industry

The Honda Project is an industrial English as a Second Language program for Japanese staff members at Honda of America, Mfg., Inc. It is staffed by faculty members from the Ohio Program of Intensive English, Ohio University. The author outlines the role of English instruction at Honda and the ways in which such instruction differs from academic English language teaching.

Ohio Program of Intensive English

“**W**hat is an English teacher doing at an auto plant?” ask the local people. As the Ohio University’s Intensive English faculty, we work not on campus but at Honda of America, Mfg., Inc., the Japanese automobile and motorcycle subsidiary located in Ohio. The university established the project in March, 1986, as an outreach of its Ohio Program of Intensive English. Now in its second year, the project’s *raison d’être* is the over 100 Honda of America Japanese staff members diagnosed as needing improved English to facilitate their job performance.

Esprit de Corps and Exchange of Ideas

Underlying English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction at Honda are, perhaps, two of the company’s top priorities. The first of these is to *foster esprit de corps*. This is manifested, for example, by the common white uniform (differentiated only by a first name patch) worn by everyone up to the company president; and by the practice of referring to employees, whether labor or management, American or Japanese, equally as associates. Reducing language barriers fosters *esprit de corps* by unifying Japanese associates—managers and technical specialists—with the company’s approximately 5,000

American associates, among them all of the bluecollar workers.

The second, related policy is to *promote an open exchange of ideas* among all associates. This can be seen, for example, in Honda’s active suggestion system, and in the company’s development of *quality circles*, in which employees together work out ways of bettering their company. Quality circles are part of an employee-centered approach to management common in Japan. The concept of quality circles is, in some respects, analogous to the learner-centered approach in the field of education. For more on quality circles, please see Ingle (1982). Boosting the English proficiency of Japanese associates promotes the cross-cultural exchange of ideas so central to quality circle problem solving.

Teaching Environment at Honda

The teaching environment at Honda of America differs from academe. In the academic setting, almost nothing has a higher priority than learning. In industry, however, learning is a tool, not an end in itself. At Honda, the number one priority is to efficiently turn out quality marketable products. All aspects of instruction—including time and place of classes, objectives, and materials—are subservient to this end.

The time and place of industrial ESL classes depend, as Belfiore and Burnaby (1984) recommend, on the availability of the learner. At Honda in particular, classes must not disrupt the learner’s work day. This is one reason why classes are conducted at the company instead of the university. This is also why class schedules accommodate the hours of each associate’s work shift. Consequently, instructors need to adapt to working at a distance from campus resources and at hours which differ from those they would probably work in a university setting.

Pedagogical Objectives

The objectives of industrial ESL are not those of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The EAP learner needs English language skills in order to read, write, listen, and take notes from academic discourse—objectives which are irrelevant to the language communication demands of automobile and motorcycle manufacturing. The Honda associate, unlike the EAP learner, needs English to obtain production data, report on progress or problems to date, explain occurrences in the plant, order parts...etc. These work-related language functions are not new to Japanese associates because as experts in their fields, they perform these functions easily in their native language. The goal of instruction, therefore, is to help Japanese associates exhibit the language competency of their work in English—a learning process known as *information transfer* (Widdowson, 1978).

Teaching Materials

As language learning objectives differ between academe and industry, so do some of the teaching materials used to achieve pedagogical goals. A general purpose grammar text, such as Azar (1984, 1985), serves to present language form and also satisfies Honda associates who see language instruction as rule-and-drill oriented. The grammar text, however, must be balanced by means of materials which present and elicit work-related usage, because the associate must be able to generalize from classroom communication to actual communicative task on the shop floor or in the office. Commercially available texts of English for Science and Technology (EST) are not adequate in promoting this needed generalization, primarily because they tend to treat content areas which are inappropriate to the

job experiences of the Japanese associates. Often times, many EST texts do not offer sufficient exercises and explanation nor do they cover enough of the needed language functions (Ewer and Boys, 1981). Our response at Honda has been to develop teacher-made materials from authentic sources such as company forms, Honda press releases, in-house publications, trade newsletters, manuals, graphs, and drawings.

By understanding the specific needs of Honda's Japanese staff and by helping them to function in English on their jobs, our work is ultimately no different from that of anyone else at Honda of America. All of us are working toward improving the productivity of a successful, bicultural, multinational company.

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