

Language Audits for Businesses – The Case for in the Japanese Context

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Poor language use can hurt a company. Good communication is key to successful conduct of business (Reeves & Wright; 1996: 1). This is true of companies conducting operations in their mother tongue as much as in a foreign language. A firm's lack of linguistic ability in foreign market dealings is likely to adversely impact upon how it is perceived by actual or potential business partners. For example, badly produced documents exist in the long-term, tarnishing a company's image long after the initial verbal transaction is over (ibid: 37). Indeed, studies by Reeves & Wright (ibid) have shown that effective foreign language use equates to export success (p.3), which self-evidently leads to greater profitability; the fundamental goal of any free market enterprise. It is in light of the increasingly integrated world economy within which Japanese companies find themselves operating that this essay champions the cause of implementing a language audit as the only truly accurate method by which the individual company's communicative resources and needs can be accurately ascertained. Secondly, in spite of confidentiality issues, I wish to assert that businesses are advised to alter their perceptions of foreign language training needs expenditure at all layers of management in favour of viewing it as a method of generating profit rather than as a cost to bear, thus increasing their receptiveness to sanctioning a language audit.

The term "language audit" was coined by Pilbeam (1979) and the concept was first introduced with the European Commission language program Lingua in 1991 (Huhta; 2009: 49). Broadly speaking, a language audit is a systematic method that employs a batch of both quantitative and qualitative tools in order to ascertain a company's current and

anticipated foreign language demands, its present linguistic resources, and, critically, how best to address any shortfall, thus illuminating training requirements. As Robinson (1991) points out, a combination of target and present situation analyses would serve the same purpose (p. 9), but only at the level of post holder in a department. A language audit goes beyond the scope of needs analysis in that it relates to the company as a whole rather than a collection of individuals (p. 51). Reeves & Wright's (1996) thorough seven-stage audit (p. 5) begins with a presentation to senior management of the audit procedure and agreement on its depth and scope. Analysis starts with pinpointing a company's current and future market opportunities and risks, which is then followed in turn by scrutiny of company-level operations, department responsibilities, individual post holders tasks, testing of staff's existing foreign language abilities in terms of the tasks that require foreign language skills, and finally, reporting the findings to management with the view to reaching agreement on staff training requirements. It is stages 2 & 3 (Strategic) and 4 (operational) which distinguish audits from a needs analysis. Reeves (1995) more basic ToolKit (p. 172) strategic level analysis seeks to pinpoint contexts and situations in which foreign language capabilities are required, and what effect existing and future plans will bring to bear on these capabilities in terms of the objectives and goals sought by foreign language use (p. 174). In order to obtain a clear picture of these requirements, Reeves & Wright (ibid) caution that realisation of this goal will be seriously hindered unless a company's communication environment is fully understood (p. 3).

Huhta (2009) asserts that a language audit is the first step in diagnosing language challenges and analyzing capabilities on a strategic level (p.14). According to Reeves and Wright (1996), an audit may be used when; a company reviews its entire operations, expands into a new market/new product or activity, is not satisfied with current performance and wants expert solutions, or wishes to upgrade existing training (p. 6). If this is so, what tools are employed that distinguish an

audit from needs analysis? One tool put forward by Reeves & Wright (ibid) to be carried out at strategic level is one which widely informs other strategic decision-making; SWOT (strengths & weaknesses, opportunities & threats) analysis (p. 17). A grid is employed into which SO, ST, WO and WT strategies are entered. In economic terminology, the “opportunity cost” of attending to, or neglecting to attend to language capability needs in pursuit of a business plan (or not) can be highlighted and acted upon. SWOT analysis firmly focuses businesses on their futures, thus enabling them to be better equipped to identify any potential foreign language capability issues before they arise rather than rely on “knee jerk” reactions (ibid: 4). While for the present, PASS (problem analysis and solving sequence) is a tool that can assist in identifying language performance difficulties of those involved in the different stages of executing a business plan. Managers are first asked to put forward their perceived reasons for the existence of a problem, these are then compared against facts gathered. Current and likely future consequences of the problem are identified, leading to a final decision on what measures will resolve it (ibid: 23). PASS forces managers to question held assumptions about the nature of problems and their causes (ibid: 23), thus offering solutions based on facts rather than opinion.

At the operational stage, the Reeves & Wright’s (1996) audit model offers a second point of entry to the audit process. Here, in terms of foreign language capabilities, the consequences of strategic level decisions are analysed at the departmental level. Here, “understanding the internal workings of the company” (ibid: 5) is the primary concern. This amounts to understanding an individual company’s culture, which, as Saruhashi (2008b) tells us, will vary, “according to its type, size, place, vision and management style”. In addition to the actual language used, through analysis of the lines of communication necessary to perform a business task, the Roadmap tool highlights socio-linguistic needs in the form of expected intercultural awareness levels practiced by the protagonists (ibid: 48) involved in each operational step. Issues

such as male to female contact, age differences, and relative seniority can also colour linguistic choices when communication in the foreign language takes place. In pursuance of a business goal that requires foreign language capabilities, the manner in which something is said is as important as the words employed, a concept often overlooked when making foreign language training decisions. In striving to uphold a favourable image, a business would want to avoid making any language gaffes. Thus, to this end, the Roadmap tool provides valuable insight, though as Reeves & Wright (*ibid*) lament, “use of language and the effectiveness of communication within organisations and between organisations is rarely scrutinised” (p. 26).

The concept of businesses operating in distinguishable manners referred to earlier brings us to a potential pitfall in establishing the credibility of conducting a language audit in the eyes of senior management. Huhta (2009) reminds us that a clear definition of what constitutes a language audit does not exist (p. 50), meaning no blueprint can be set before those with the authority to make budget decisions and sanction the audit. By calling for more audit case studies to help shape and hone existing theories and concepts, Saruhashi (2008b) would appear to point us towards the obvious method by which authentic data can be obtained. That a lack of literature still exists can mostly be attributed to the reluctance of audited businesses to sanction ready access to confidential material that published work would afford (Huhta; 2009: 51). Reeves & Wright (1996) tell us that the level of management responsible for budgetary decisions would be more receptive to presentations of a language audit proposal that make reference to specific real-world examples (p. 11), therefore it could be argued that it is the very systematic and thorough nature of a language audit that may encourage companies to err on the side of caution and opt for more limited, and consequently cheaper, foreign language needs assessment.

Encountered widely throughout the world, it is a lack of depth and systematicity that appears to characterize the overall approach to foreign language capability assessment in the Japanese context.

Typically, businesses turn their attention towards foreign language training only when an immediate need arises, a tendency which runs contrary to Reeves (1995) assertion that for language training to have maximum effect, it should precede the activities it wishes to train, “by a considerable period of time” (p. 173). When a foreign language need arises, companies will approach a language training provider and explain their expectations, upon which a course is offered, often without needs analysis (Saruhashi; 2008b). Though the situation has slowly improved, courses can be characterized as being general in nature, lacking specific purposes and applicability in the workplace, and with an absence of methods by which the progression of a course can be monitored (ibid). To this, the author can add his own accounts of numerous instances as an employee of a language training provider of being required to focus on listening and speaking skills when after introductory exchanges it soon became clear that learners were actually in need of reading and writing skills. Describing it as “misleading”, Saruhashi (ibid) is particularly critical of the prominent role TOEIC assessment plays in Japanese companies’ assessment of foreign language capabilities, particularly as a condition of employment. Indeed, of the 186 businesses Saruhashi surveyed, 53.9% referred to test scores as a condition of recruitment, while for 18.6% it was a prerequisite for promotion (ibid). Though TOEIC does offer a test for the two productive skills, scores attained from the test of declarative knowledge reflected in listening and reading skills are erroneously and yet stubbornly interpreted as a measure of language use capabilities. Another drawback to the concept of reliance on TOEIC scores is that post holders and prospective post holders, very aware of company minimum score requirements, face the strong temptation of reassessing their foreign language goals purely in terms of attaining a higher score rather than striving for language improvement (ibid).

Both the willingness to interpret TOEIC scores as foreign language ability and the lack of forward planning with regard to formulating a training programme leave the impression that Japanese companies are

assessing language needs and capabilities 'on the cheap', with potentially detrimental effects on profitability in foreign markets. Webber in Huhta (2009) wishes to elevate the role that foreign language plays in company commercial dealings in the eyes of business management to one which ranks it alongside regular business operations (p. 49). It is the aforementioned systemic and thorough nature of a language audit which can persuade companies to consider foreign language capabilities and needs at the boardroom level.

References

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