English Language LEARN Workshop

(July 22 & 23, 2014)

White Paper

Table of Contents:

INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM

PARTICIPANTS

WORKSHOP BREAKDOWN

CONCLUSION AND OVERARCHING

RECOMMENDATION

INTRODUCTION

(U) Clear English language communication is an essential skill requirement within all governmental agencies, particularly those of the intelligence community. Accurate written reporting and oral briefing proficiency are both indispensable towards accomplishing the goal of preserving national security. When English is used imprecisely, important mission information can be lost or misconstrued, possibly with dire consequences. In a post 9/11 world, the ability to convey critical intelligence in precise English is vital. In order to better understand the challenges of English language communication across the government and IC, the first-ever English Language LEARN Workshop was held on July 22 & 23, 2014.

PROBLEM

(U) The English Language LEARN Workshop, "English Communication Across Our Diverse Community," had as its goal an understanding of current concerns related to English language issues within the government. These included, but were not limited to, difficulties government employees have in the areas of written clarity, reading comprehension, grammatical usage, pronunciation, and overall language facility. These deficiencies represent a very broad problem that impacts job performance at all levels. The aim of the LEARN was to bring together representatives across the US government to focus on how these issues relate to personnel with native (ENGL), non-native (ESL), and Heritage English language backgrounds. (Heritage Speakers are those who receive secondary educations in the U.S.). The Workshop goals were to delineate agency-specific problems, receive perspectives from academic and governmental Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and, ultimately to highlight possible solutions or action items that agencies could potentially implement.

PARTICIPANTS

(U) Participation at the English LEARN cut a broad swath and included the following agencies and universities. (* asterisk denotes conference presenter)

1. Center for the Advanced Study of Languages (CASL)

2. Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) *

3. Defense Language and National Security Education Office (DLNSEO) *

4. Defense Language Institute/English Language Center (DLIELC) *

5. Department of Defense (DOD) *

6. Department of Education (DOE) *

7. Department of State (DOS) *

8. Department of the Army (DOA) *

9. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) *

10 Foreign Service Institute (FSI) *

11 Georgetown University *

12 Library of Congress

13 Montgomery College *

14 National Cryptologic School (NCS) *

15 National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA)

16 National Security Agency (NSA) *

17 National Virtual Translation Center (NVTC)

18 Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) *

19 University of Maryland, Baltimore Campus (UMBC) *

WORKSHOP BREAKDOWN

Day 1 of the English Language LEARN consisted, for the most part, of briefings by representatives from a wide variety of government entities. These presenters highlighted problem areas within their organizations and indicated how their institutions were, internally, trying to ameliorate these challenges. Examples of subjects raised in the briefs were:

- Large number of non-native English speakers (ESL) hired post 9/11

- English language tests for hiring purposes

- Use of external training courses to improve writing/pronunciation

- Use of Interns to work with ESL personnel

- Need for improved English skills among native speakers, especially recent hires

- Impact of employees' English language ability on agencies' missions

- Impact of employees' English language ability on personal employee career advancement

During the final two hours of the afternoon, participants worked in break-out groups to identify specific challenges that agencies were facing. The groups were delineated by topic: writing or speaking. Below are samples of the challenges that were identified by each group:

- Mechanics: Writing (technical vocabulary, use of prepositions); Speaking (use of good grammar, register/tone of speech)

- Skills and Capabilities: Writing (critical thinking, ability to edit self/others); Speaking (intelligibility, fear of speaking)

- Cultural/Language Challenges: Writing (direct vs. indirect language cultures, linear vs. cyclical thinking); Speaking (nuances of language, non-prestigious accents)

- Institutional Management: Writing (performance support, clear expectation during hiring process); Speaking (need for practical diagnostics, lack of understanding by management of potential return on investment for training to improve writing skills)

- Resource Gaps: Writing (effectively utilizing available resources, time away from formal education); Speaking (availability of speech practice technologies, funding vis-à-vis competing priorities)

Day 2 of the English Language LEARN consisted of briefings by government and academic SMEs, whose presentations concentrated upon available online educational resources and academic programs. Examples of subjects raised in the briefs were:

- Online resources for ESL teachers and available community of practice sites

- Approaches and working aids to improve clarity and fluency in workplace writing

- Outcomes for intensive English language programs

- Successes and challenges for an effective online writing course for multi-level non-native English speakers

The afternoon of Day 2 was given over to brainstorming solutions to the challenges that had been presented on the afternoon of Day 1. The participants were again divided into two groups, writing and speaking. Some of their recommendations are listed below:

- Mechanics: Writing (writing centers); Speaking (expand toastmaster concept, diagnostic assessment with interactive recording)

- Skills and Capabilities: Writing (determine the scope of the problem, set goals for end results); Speaking (provide models to represent different speaking registers, speaking centers)

- Cultural/Language Challenges: Writing (foster a workplace culture to mentor each other, objective measure of English level); Speaking (cross-cultural training at all levels, encourage multi-cultural interest groups)

- Institutional Management: Writing (develop a roadmap of existing resources with links to related areas, pool resources across agencies to purchase commercial licenses); Speaking (prioritize needs, encourage life-long learning)

- Resource Gaps: Writing (train the trainer, avoid duplication of effort); Speaking (sponsor research on the topic, investigate outside opportunities for funding)

CONCLUSION AND OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATION

The English Language LEARN Workshop was successful in that it highlighted government-wide English language issues. It also raised awareness among attendees of already existing programs and resources in various agencies and facilitated networking between representatives of those agencies. It further emphasized that simply ignoring the shortfalls of English language capability will neither alleviate the problem, nor make it disappear. Likewise, the use of technology, in and of itself, is not the solution.

The English LEARN Steering Committee recommends the establishment of an English Language Working Group under the auspices of the Education and Instructional Technology Expert Group. This Working Group would continue the momentum from the LEARN and provide a forum for a concentrated, IC-wide (and perhaps government-wide) focus on improving the level of English communication, thereby enhancing both agency mission, as well as employee career satisfaction.