



MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

As New Zealand gradually builds its homegrown skills across the building and construction sector, our industry continues to rely on offshore talent pools for specialist skills. While highly accomplished in their various fields of expertise, having a migrant labour force does present challenges, not least communication.

Some fabricators have met this challenge head on and implemented voluntary English language classes for staff. Grayson Engineering, Auckland, and John Jones Steel, Christchurch, share their experiences of running on-site classes for staff.

GRAYSON ENGINEERING

Grayson Engineering is one of a number of fabricators nationwide that has tapped into China's recruitment market for qualified welders and tradespeople.

Many of those employed are from North China, says Grayson Engineering managing director David Moore. "It's very remote compared to Shanghai or Guangzhou, they don't see many Westerners. When I've visited the region they've looked at me like I was from outer space."

The region is a hub for heavy industry and it's home to a particular range of skills Grayson struggles to find in New Zealand. But, while their skills were good, there was a language barrier.

"Of those that joined us directly from China, only one or two had sufficient English skills to follow verbal instructions and hold a conversation," says Moore. "Our workshop team was having to spend more time explaining things to them."

Something needed to change.

At a picnic the Chinese team had invited him to, Moore had a chance encounter with a Chinese English teacher. Before long, he had added the teacher to Grayson's payroll to conduct English language classes on site at the fabrication facility.

"It was quite fortuitous," he says. Moore says the ultimate aim was to

help newly arrived migrant workers to better integrate by arming them with conversational English so they could interact with their co-workers. Grayson runs two separate weekly sessions on a Friday afternoon, with about eight staff in each.

Over the 11 years the programme has been operating, there has been a steady stream of young Chinese employees that have embraced the opportunity and committed to the sessions. To date, approximately 50 people have successfully completed the programme.

While some give up, others persist with the one-hour lessons and, by the end, they're good English speakers.

"Most of them can now not only have a conversation in English, but they can write English as well, which is quite an achievement," says Moore. "Their handwriting is neater than mine, I can tell you that."

The informal lessons focus on conversational English with some technical workshop terms "thrown in for good measure". Grayson doesn't set any expectations in terms of what they'd like participants to achieve. That said, Moore does promote an incentive.

"I tell them that if they make an effort with learning their English, they can earn more money because they'll be more efficient at their jobs," says Moore.

Results can begin to show in as little as six months but, typically, Grayson has noted a genuine difference at between nine and 12 months.

Grayson has noticed a real benefit to the business. Production has increased thanks to their quicker grasp of instructions and they're able to communicate more readily with the rest of the team.

The impact on the participants has also been positive. "They take great pride in being able to have a conversation with their co-workers and management," says Moore.

"IT'S ALSO IMPROVED OUR CULTURE. THERE IS MORE FRIENDLY INTERACTION WITH CO-WORKERS, AND THEY CAN JOKE WITH OTHER STAFF MEMBERS."

DAVID MOORE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, GRAYSON ENGINEERING

Moore's advice to other fabricators?

"If you see a need, go for it, you won't regret it," he says. "It costs us about \$30k per year to have a teacher deliver two hours' worth of training each week."

Moore notes another unexpected benefit. "Our English teacher's mother tongue is actually Chinese. She doubles as a conduit for staff who don't yet have the confidence in their own English skills to approach management with any issues; she speaks to us on their behalf. So, she's not only a teacher but she's a little bit of a social worker, for want of a better word."



STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: FENG PU ZHANG

Feng Pu Zhang, roll shop manager at Grayson Engineering, had limited English when he arrived in New Zealand and he wanted to be able to express himself better. After two years of studying, his language skills have improved, particularly orally.

"We are a technical profession, and it is easier to communicate with English improving," says Zhang.

Feng Pu Zhang (R) talks shop with David Moore, managing director, Grayson Engineering.



JOHN JONES STEEL

“Embrace it, I guarantee the company will see the benefits throughout their business,” says Lisa Frost, health and safety manager, John Jones Steel (JJS). Frost is referring to JJS’s experience of providing English language classes for its ethnically diverse team.

JJS boasts representatives from Russia, The Netherlands, India, Philippines, South Africa and Brazil.

The driver to establish the classes first began with JJS’s drafting department. Out of 13 staff, only two ticked the

‘English as a first language’ box. JJS was keen to improve verbal communication in the team, and to provide them with the skills to compose informative, succinct written content, such as emails.

“Kiwis tend to speak quickly and we found that those on our team struggling with English would often miss out small words, which could change the meaning of what was written,” says Frost.

So, there was a focus on developing both their written language and their understanding of the Kiwi parlance.

“We achieved that and so much more,” says Frost. “Inclusivity improved exponentially.”

There was more chatter in the lunchroom, a welcome change from everyone being buried in their phones.

“Add in a new pool table and the change in culture has been massive,” she says.

Frost is convinced that much of the change has occurred thanks to the team’s increased confidence in both speaking and understanding conversations. There was marked improvement in completing incident forms, general paperwork, emails, and

● LEARNING ON THE JOB: ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

in both internal and external dialogue.

“Feedback from our clients and engineers is that our English graduates are better able to understand what is being communicated to them,” says Frost. “It means less time is spent on emailing back and forth to clarify details.”

JJS ran the programme for close to 18 months. Weekly, two-hour classes were divided into three tiers: beginner, intermediate and advanced. There were about six to 10 staff in each class, but the numbers changed as staff moved up through the levels and ‘graduated’. In all, approximately 30 staff completed the English language course.

Wilkinson’s Workplace Literacy Services delivered the programme for JJS. It is a Tertiary Education Commission-funded initiative and classes are fee-free to any

New Zealand resident or citizen, up to 80 hours per person.

The content of each class depended on the level but included speaking, reading, writing and spelling. It also covered the skill of tailoring language to the audience, and Kiwi slang and nuance.

“Staff loved attending the classes and it gave them a real sense of pride with their work,” says Frost.

Many also said it improved their lives outside of work, giving them more confidence to converse in social settings, with neighbours and when dealing with institutions such as banks and service providers.

“The benefits of the classes far exceeded our expectations and were well worth the downtime of attending, we have been repaid tenfold,” says Frost.

“GREAT COMMUNICATION AND CONFIDENCE IN CARRYING OUT YOUR WORK IS PART OF THE BACKBONE OF ANY COMPANY, AND BY GIVING EVERY EMPLOYEE THIS OPPORTUNITY YOU WILL SOON SEE THEM FLOURISH. WE WILL DEFINITELY RUN THESE CLASSES AGAIN.”

LISA FROST, HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGER,
JOHN JONES STEEL



**STUDENT PERSPECTIVE:
CESAR ALMEIDA**

John Jones Steel CNC operator Cesar Almeida studied English for about 12 months.

“For me, communication is key for a better social life. Not speaking English makes days hard, so improving my English definitely made my days better,” says Almeida. “I [now] feel so much more confident to express myself and communicate with my colleagues.”

Almeida’s goal is to become fluent in English.

Cesar Almeida (2nd row, middle) with some of his English language classmates.