

## Strategic Planning for an L2 Program

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article outlines the background and practices that oriented the strategic planning conducted in a language program aimed at different audiences. The plan served as the backbone of professional development to grow with quality at an educational institution, a challenge faced constantly by many programs.

The author aims at sharing an experience and at providing insight on how to meet the needs and expectations commonly encountered in managing language programs. The content of this paper hopes to make a contribution on how to build quality from the essence of its operation i.e., the teaching staff.

### **Introduction**

The paper first provides a description of the setting. Second, it presents in general terms, the theoretical framework on which the Matrix for the strategic planning (SP) is based. Third, the Matrix is discussed in detail using the headings of the "results" column. The shortcomings of the SP follow and a general discussion closes the paper. The present document describes an experience and hopes to provide a model

that may be valuable for similar institutions and for individuals responsible for building up and maintaining quality educational programs. The writer and the staff conducted an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities known in Spanish with the acronym DOFA, which stands for the identification of "debilidades, oportunidades, fortalezas y amenazas".

The problem that planning tried to solve at the time was that the teachers' background and the prevailing culture of the program staff made sustained quality difficult. Over 50% of the staff or of the applicants to positions as English teachers had not traveled abroad, a factor that affected their proficiency. Some who had high proficiency were not trained L2 teachers. Teacher turnover was another limitation, thus contract conditions had to be lobbied for with the corporation. When additional benefits were obtained and when the professional development plan was executed the turnover ceased to be a problem.

As Certo, (2001) argues planning, organizing and influencing help bring change. People are not loyal to companies, but to projects. This author defines

influencing as the ability to work with your staff to agree on what needs to be redefined, to set goals together and to evaluate what has been attained. Some of the ideas presented here may be appropriate to the culture of your institution; others may not apply. The teacher-manager needs to promote a favorable climate to work with others so as to bring about change.

### Description of the Setting

The author conducted the teacher development program described below for a language center administered by CAFAM, a social security corporation ranked as one of the top 100 companies of Colombia, which runs, among others: health, housing, recreation and education programs. As part of the educational operation, CAFAM runs a high school and a language center. The author would like to share what he found to have worked very well in that setting during his five year tenure.

CAFAM English teaching operation covered over fifty teachers in four Academic programs: The school, which serves over 4000 students; the Evening Program which runs 110 courses a year for 600 adults, a 60 hour vacation course for children and the Company Program which serves affiliate companies with over 50 courses a year. The profile of the 50 member teaching staff can be summarized as follows.

B.A. (Licenciatura) in TEFL.....	90%
No undergraduate degree in EFL.....	8%
M.A. in TEFL.....	2%

The school teachers enjoy regular updates

on topics of general education. Time available for teacher development in school programs: four weeks a year. Fine-tuning in weekly Department meetings. In the language center about 20 hours a year were available for teacher development. Fine-tuning was done in regular meetings. Those teaching the same course had a senior teacher as coordinator, met biweekly, planned and designed the course and the testing program and conducted their share of the program evaluation.

The SP Matrix, which appears at the end of the article, served as a guideline for the course of action: topics for the seminars, schedule and foci of visits, topics for program evaluation, etc.

### Theoretical Framework

When you are responsible for running a program, you are expected to put the knowledge of your discipline and your knowledge of management to work with your team for exploring solutions to the problems identified. Strategic planning is an opportunity to do it. Literature on strategic planning is abundant, see for example Certo, (2001) who argues for quality with social responsibility as a goal for any enterprise. The administrator's task consists, among others, in looking for a consensus on the plans of action that would guarantee sustained quality.

Teacher development is a continuous process of transforming human potential into human performance, a process that is never finished (Impey & Underhill, 1994:v). The transformation of teacher potential

into teacher performance was identified as a key to make the language program at CAFAM grow with quality. As Wallace (1991:1) argues it is necessary to have a coherent approach to language teacher education.

“All too often foreign language teacher education is a series of 'bright ideas' and/or isolated initiatives so that the resulting learning experience for the trainees, can be fragmented and even, in the broadest sense, incoherent.”

Students, teachers and administrative staff identified strengths and weaknesses by means of survey questionnaires, classroom observations, staff meetings and interviews. Once the phase of course and program evaluation had been conducted, long term goals and short term goals were outlined and a course of action was planned for. The Project Design Model known for its German acronym, ZOOP was used to formulate the Strategic Plan, which is summarized in the following pages. Following the terminology of Project Design, the matrix is composed of four columns.

The **RESULTS** column expresses the desired outcome of a program or project. The purpose of a project or program is to make use of a set of resources to obtain a desired **result**. Only one result should be placed in the matrix slot. The results must address a negative actual condition, not an expected problem. Results need to be phrased in positive terms. The importance of the result is not determined for its position in the matrix. In this particular case, the result is expressed in terms of the

personal and professional development of the staff. In a teacher development program there will be, more long-term goals than short term-goals and it is up to the institution, the managers and the beneficiaries to decide where to start depending on the budget and the time available.

The **INDICATORS** column refers to the evidence or signs that reflect in specific terms the content of the goals and results. Indicators allow you to measure the degree of achievement of the goals. In other words indicators describe how the project is faring and what is significant.

The **ACTIVITIES** column describes how the goals and results will be attained. The ensuing plan of action will detail the responsible person and the resources required.

The **LIMITATIONS** column refers to those external factors, not under the control of the project, which may affect its execution. The purpose of specifying limitations is to take into account the risks and monitor those risks during its execution.

Based on need analysis and program evaluation, the venues for teacher development are decided. Instruments such as surveys, interviews, classroom observation forms and feedback forms have been developed.

### Strategic Planning Matrix

As stated in the introduction once the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities have been identified a strategic plan can be formulated. Based on

the data gathered in surveys and other instruments, the staff discussed what would be desirable and feasible in a two year plan and it was put in a matrix. Other aspects of the program, such as the marketing plan, were worked in the same way involving people of the company administration, but for limitations of space this paper will center only on staff development.

Teacher development is the process of becoming the best teacher you can be. It means becoming a student of learning, your own as well as that of others. It represents a widening of the focus of teaching to include not only the subject matter, but also the people who are working with the subject and using the methods (Impey & Underhill, 1994:v).

To make this description brief and yet as useful as possible, the writer will refer to the matrices included in the following pages. They not only provide an overview of the teacher development program and its parameters but also may eventually serve as a framework for designing your own development program.

The goals of the SP labeled here as "results" address diverse aspects of the problems identified in the program. These aim at the improvement of job performance, the mastery of the discipline, an improvement in communication skills and in general of the overall and continuous education of teachers. The collective formulation of desired outcomes contributes to make the process more descriptive than prescriptive. In other words it provides a north to what the

group will strive for rather than the search for an ideal. In this paper, the column "Results" serves to organize the discussion of the components of the matrix.

### Result 1

**Teachers have a good command of the target language** was identified as an expected outcome since the degrees of proficiency and training among the current teacher staff varied greatly. It was not always feasible to find fully qualified teachers, even more so when course registration increased at a short notice. Then as a policy teachers would rotate from beginner to more advanced courses and vice versa so that they face a constant challenge to their degree of proficiency. A side benefit of this action was that teachers gained an overall picture of the proficiency level that learners attained from course to course and gained insight of the overall program.

In the setting, the teacher's fluency difficulties were found to be more pervasive than problems of accuracy; especially rhythm, stress, pronunciation and intonation; areas that were addressed in a pronunciation course directed by a qualified native speaker. On the other hand, to increase contact with the target language, the program subscribed to the local English newspaper, it expanded bibliographical resources, it obtained abundant teaching materials with audio and video, and all the staff and business meetings were conducted in English. Teachers were also encouraged to look for opportunities for either taking advanced courses, join graduate programs or travel

abroad. Speakers from international institutions such as the YMCA, the British Council and the Binational center were invited to talk and inform teachers and students about opportunities to work or study abroad.

## **Result 2**

**Teachers have updated knowledge of the field.** As specified in the introduction the training teachers had received varied. The new challenges in a language program demanded qualified professionals to serve the changing institutional needs. For going beyond teaching, teachers need to understand current trends and issues. They need to have access to professional journals, prepare lectures and presentations, first for their institution and then at large conferences. In the long term it was expected that teachers sent contributions to the local English newspaper as well as to professional journals, particularly to those devoted to classroom ideas.

As a policy, teachers were encouraged and sponsored to present and participate in local and national conferences. Also, universities, The British Council, Binational Centers and publishers were invited to lecture on topics identified as a priority in the programs. Teachers had easy access to a reference library and received support for their academic presentations and for their continued education.

## **Result 3**

**Teachers use a large repertoire of teaching techniques.** In order to solve problems of a different nature, teachers

need to be equipped with a large set of teaching techniques understanding the rationale behind each technique. Individual work, pair work, group and whole group activities were shared. They also needed to be able to confidently use technology, a video cassette recorder, a video camera, an overhead projector, a slide projector and multimedia.

Peer classroom observations and observation from the head of department or the program coordinator proved useful for the program. The focus of the observation was negotiated with the staff. At a certain point the focus was on the techniques used. Specific workshops conducted by the whole staff shared teaching techniques such as warm-ups, jigsaws, as well as the use of classroom aids.

The field trips that were regularly conducted for students offered another opportunity to have teachers observe colleagues at work. In those, teachers would also learn to conduct mingling activities, treasure hunts, competitions and other similar activities that were integrated into their regular teaching practice.

The limitation observed on this point was the initial anxiety to class visits. This was overcome by: holding a previous meeting, discussing the criteria for observation, agreeing on the focus of the observation, carrying out non-judgemental observations, and implementing peer observation.

## **Result 4**

**Teachers know the materials and use them appropriately.** It is expected that teachers know the regular and the

supplementary materials of the program. Often you find teachers, not well informed of the components of a series, who take materials from here and there without providing continuity. It goes without saying that other materials can be brought in to enrich a course; colleagues and supervisors need to know them so as to integrate them to the program. When this does not occur, learners may end up covering the same materials in diverse courses.

### Result 5

**Teachers deliver well.** This goal addresses the teacher's quality of communication. Classroom observations revealed, among other things, that poor voice projection, poor body language, inadequate use of visual aids, and a lack of sensitivity to the learners' reactions affected delivery. For instance, teachers whose experience was mainly with tutoring individuals or small groups needed orientation to adjust to larger audiences. Awareness and use of voice management techniques as well as a rationale for organizing desks according to the activity proved useful to overcome limitations. Teachers contributed to set their own goals in these and other aspects mentioned in this section.

### Result 6

**Teachers test what is taught.** Testing is an important element of a language program and it is crucial for program accountability. To have testing reflect teaching could be achieved with good teamwork. Test design, rubrics, ease of

administration, ease of scoring and item analysis needed to be integrated into the testing program.

Having several teachers propose tests that reflect the use of language and the balance of skills and grammar proved to be more effective than continued isolated efforts. Building a bank of tests for every course allowed the staff to gain from repeated applications. Agreeing on standards helped maintain the quality of the program. The criteria for promoting learners from one course to the next was agreed upon by the staff.

### Result 7

**Teachers are effective.** Effectiveness was measured according to the students' evaluation, to the supervisor's evaluation and by indirect means such as a record of requests to have the same teacher again. When students remain in the program it is more reliable to gather information from them. "Results 1-6" provide some indication of effectiveness. Being attentive to the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers, using them to the advantage of the PD program makes the dialog about quality very interesting.

### Result 8

**Teachers remain in the programs.** Language centers cannot always hire a full time teaching staff. The number of courses varies substantially from one term to the next; there are slow periods. It is desirable, however to have a regular team working

together. If you do not want to lose your teachers with the competition you must build an incentive program or a promotion system. Teachers need to feel that the employer offers more than a paycheck, that they are constantly learning and that they can see professional opportunities.

What worked in this case was to negotiate different types of contracts with the personnel office. A long contract with senior teachers, and a short contract for new teachers. The latter could be extended depending on factors such as the expected enrolment, and the teacher's overall performance.

Offering side benefits or incentives to teachers according to seniority and merits also helped maintain the teachers; for example, classroom teachers who know the program well and who demonstrate managerial capacity move in and out of managerial positions. This opportunity qualifies them, gives them a new perspective and increases the sense of belonging to the institution. Eventually some teachers who had benefited would not return; a fact, however that should not stop anyone from carrying out the improvement of the group of professionals involved.

### **Shortcomings of the Professional Development Program**

This institution faced the challenges that growth poses on quality. Sometimes standards for recruiting teachers have to be lowered, yet the Development Program has attempted to take those professionals to

higher standards.

Initially, resistance to change is expected. The teaching staff slowly understood the benefits of teamwork, of supervision and of continued dialog on the goals of the program and how they are or are not being achieved. Some teachers may claim they have been lectured at enough and have diverse expectations of teacher meetings or seminars. In such cases, it is advisable to consult with the teaching staff what they perceive as professional development needs and how they can contribute to the professional development. Experienced teachers need to be given the opportunity to move from the receiving end (of lectures and training) to the giving end (for instance, sharing with colleagues what works for them).

### ***Discussion***

A Strategic Planning Matrix helped formulate the policies to run a language teaching operation. Each program gained its own identity. Each coordinator needed to implement the policies agreed upon with the administration. Only the teachers, the coordinator, and the language center Director participated in the decisions of the respective program. Each program should use different materials in order to address the needs of the target population.

In five years the adult evening program enrollment grew from 60% to 100 % capacity. The Company program was started, and in four years it offered over 50 courses a year. The children program started and in three years it had served

about 400 students. The school program implemented tracking (grouping learners according to degree of proficiency) which showed significant gains in learners' attitude and achievement.

Job supervision, classroom visits, learners' feedback, and surveys provided useful information. Several factors of job performance (punctuality, attendance to meetings and training sessions, ability to work in a team) needed to be considered not as problems, but as areas of improvement.

Evaluating teacher development or change can be an elusive task, therefore the categories in the matrix must be revised periodically, and the managers of the language teaching operation need to weigh up the indicators, scrutinize the activities and carry out the necessary modifications.

Funding of a teacher development program is always an issue. It is important to share with the administration the figures that indicate retention of students, increase in registration, retention of teachers, expected results, actions taken, improvement of the standards, etc. The purpose is to 'sell' the TD program to those responsible for paying for it. Persuading the staff with 'check-writing power' that TD is first an investment and second a competitive advantage worked in the setting here described. When teachers receive along with their wages an opportunity to grow, a program can form a stable and motivated team.

As stated in the introduction, some of the ideas that worked in the setting described may be appropriate to the culture of your institution; others may not apply. A team spirit and a critical mind can help to make the right decisions.

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