The Benefits of Using a Second Language in Gaming

by Cris Aguilar

Casinos attract people from all walks of life. Our operations compel people from different cultural backgrounds and, with them, the use of another language or languages besides English. I recall visiting a casino restaurant that sounded more like an international airport lounge. I was fascinated listening to the languages being spoken around me by guests. However, I became even more excited when I listened to the language skills of the restaurant team. When I asked the restaurant manager if her team was bilingual prior to being hired, she said that they were not; they received basic language learning for the job on the job.

The level of language skills displayed by the restaurant team was sufficient for the tasks at hand: to greet guests, introduce themselves, take their food and beverage order, check on them during their meal, and thank them for their visit.

It is true that many gaming operations have marketing segments that cater to specific cultural groups, and that is very smart. Many gaming operations recruit employees with specific language skills that include not only verbal but also written skills in a second language (or more) besides English. The principal benefit of language skills is that guests whose primary language is not English can get a request taken care of, a question answered, and a concern addressed in less time instead of waiting for someone, on the phone or in person, to assist them in their primary language. But, should we go beyond the marketing department and capitalize on the language skills of current team members? And what about English-speakers who wish to learn and use another language or languages? How could we make it happen?

The following are four areas to focus on when implementing second language learning:

Language Learning Program

A good starting point when wanting to implement second language learning is to identify what it is you want employees to do in the target language. Language should be used in a precise and concise way with the goal of being able to interact with guests who feel more comfortable speaking other language(s) besides English. Find out the tasks team members do in your department that involve the use of language and obtain the assistance of a language instructor or coach to help you build a learning curriculum that meets your needs. That way you are not stuck learning language features that are nice to know but not needed for the job at hand. The more task-centered the language learning is, the better.

With the task-centered focus in mind, turn to define how the program will implemented. Would you make it a requirement for the position or a stepping stone towards a lead role? Would the program be in-house or would language trainees go to a specific place, outside the organization, to learn a second language? In the second case, would the employee share the cost or would you invest in the employee and pay for it from your training budget? Would you hire instructors from within the organization or hire instructors as vendors? What is your plan for transfer of learning onto the gaming floor once the training program is completed?

Once again, it all starts with what you want to achieve in the target language. The answers to these question are the foundation of the language learning program you want to implement and a very important step towards the selection of the best methods for it.

Language Learning Method

Now that you know what skills require the use of language, move to the next stage and identify what would be the best way or ways to acquire a second language. Language learning is a process that takes time, patience, and resilience. Nowadays there are many products that promise you will become fluent (and even bilingual) in a very short time. Be cautious with the method(s) you choose. As popular as many methods say they are, remember that adults learn differently, especially a second language. Also, not all methods are best for everyone. Perhaps a blended learning curriculum suits your needs best. For that, consult with your training and development team or contact your local adult education center for resources on putting together a learning program. Remember that there are not many turnkey language learning programs for Native American gaming properties. Most were built with the assistance of local or private language learning providers and for specific jobs such as housekeeping, food and beverage, or security.

Finally, if going the online route, make sure that prospective students are already competent in using language software and hardware first. At times you might run into prospective learners who are not literate in their primary language. If this is the case, your goal is not fluency or accuracy, but literacy – a whole different level

of learning and teaching. Literacy might be a phenomenal program to run, but perhaps not the one that would meet your immediate customer service needs.

Help Lines and Signage

A very common way to implement second language(s) in an organization is through the use of help lines and signage. For help lines, agree on the most used languages in your organization, decide which languages to make available and for what services, and compile a list of possible providers. However, be cautious with the provider selection. Remember that speaking a language is not the same as knowing the language; not everybody uses language the same way and most languages have more than one dialect. Search for bilinguals or polyglots who are able to perform job tasks in at least two languages (English and the target language), willing to staff the helpline around the clock, and clear their use of the other languages with the management team. The benefit of selecting in-house providers is that the work language that they use is already congruent with your operations, team dynamics and work challenges. Outsourcing has its advantages in specific cases, however providers might not know how a word or phrase is used in the gaming context.

For signage, ensure that the way a message or warning written in the target language reads and sounds what you intend for it to mean in English. As an example, sometimes safety signs in a second language do not say what the English version does. There is nothing wrong with copying and pasting from an online translator, but you will make a better impression (and actually keep people safer) if you test what you wish to post with speakers of the target language. Make sure that your message is clear and legible and contains all necessary characters and symbols. Recall that languages use different symbols and one symbol or mark can make the difference in what the word or phrase means. This is why is very important to test prior to publishing or posting.

Empowering and Rewarding

The use of a second language is empowering. You empower bilingual or multilingual team members to use their skills not only for your business needs but also for their needs to keep their language skills relevant and alive. Just think of the times you have traveled somewhere in the world and how lucky you were to find someone who speaks your language. Multiply that feeling by the number of people who visit your business and with whom you have only one shot at making a lasting positive impression; one that can make them return and bring more people with them. To build and sustain this competitive edge, you only had to empower your team to use their language skills.

Yes, you need to be careful in how you tread with language usage. After all, you do not want it to be distracting or make non-targeted language users feel any less because they do not speak another language. First, establish and communicate the reasons for the use of other languages besides English in your team, area, department, or division. Some tasks may need to be conducted English only for security reasons. That is why it is very important to first define what the target language will be used for and then think of language learning and its implementation.

A reward system is a consideration. At times the person whose language skills helped to assist a guest with directions, reading a menu, or understanding a game is not necessarily from the list of in-house interpreters or translators you compiled. It may be from someone who does not get anything extra from using what he or she knows and only the satisfaction of being hospitable and helping out someone in need. As much as you might believe that this is the minimum level of performance expected, in the majority of cases the use of another language is not listed in their job description. You are saving a lot of time and resources by having someone unofficial address and solve a service problem because he or she has knowledge that was readily available and they were willing to use it. Wouldn't it be fair that they get some type of reward?

The use of one language at work limits the chances of any organization to enrich themselves with life, cultural, and work experiences from people whose primary language is not English. With it, the use of one language also hinders an organization's ability to reach the disposable income of prospect guests who are willing to come and experience the uniqueness of Native American gaming. These two reasons are the most tangible benefits of second language learning in our industry. In order to make it work to our benefit, we need a plan. Said plan includes capitalizing from the language skills that we currently have and the ones we could have through a well-designed second language learning program that meets the service needs of the organization. Both ideas of any plan have team members at its core. The key to success lies within our organization. After all, people are our best asset. ♣

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