

English in the Philippine call centers and BPO operations: Issues, opportunities and research

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Introduction

In the context of the rapidly-expanding Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) industry in the Philippines, issues relating to diversity and convergence in the use of English are becoming strongly foregrounded. Essentially, the BPO industry comprises a variety of call centers, back office functions, and support services, which are outsourced to sites that are more economical to run than those at home. In the Philippine context, most of the call centers are the customer services departments of banks, insurance companies, retail outlets, IT support, and travel agencies, with head offices in the US, the UK, and Australia. Through telecommunications, speakers are brought into contact from diverse socio-economic, geographical, and ethnolinguistic backgrounds in this globalized workspace. Complex information and services are then negotiated within the constraints of the telephone and computer screen through English.

Language proficiency and standards of performance have increasingly become the focus of industry and government discussions in a site where English language capacity is seen by many as a key factor for future expansion and sustainability, and where customer satisfaction is closely dependent on the success of communication between participants (SGV and Co., 2006; Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming). While current market forces exert pressure on call center agents to use a standardized variety of English, the various stakeholders — be they overseas clients, their customers, or local staff — come to this situation with differing understandings and expectations of English as the working language.

To date, little research has been carried out to identify the language and communication issues in offshore call centers. The limited number of applied linguistic studies that have been published tend to focus on call centers based in the UK (Adolphs, et al., 2004; Cameron, 2000a, 2000b). Few, if any, studies have focused on the language training within the call center industry and the

need to develop a pedagogic approach based on authentic resources. Researchers have commented on the high stress and pressure experienced by the customer service representative (CSR) in call center work (see Cameron, 2000a; Taylor and Bain, 1999). However, workplace studies of the environment and Human Resource (HR) issues of call center work tend to be focused on call centers which are based onshore, where the CSR is more likely to be a speaker of the same variety of English (Mulholland, 2004; Rose and Wright 2005; Witt et al., 2004). Likewise, the research that is available on offshore call center destinations tends to focus on features not related to language. In offshore destinations, the language may be another added pressure, especially if the CSR is operating in a second or third language.

In terms of broader research on English language usage in the Philippines, a large body of work over the last three decades has been building up a picture of many of the features of Philippine English (PE), as a localized dialect of English realizing one of the 'outer circle' varieties of Asian Englishes (Kachru, 1997), where English has 'second' rather than 'first language' status. The descriptive focus of Philippine English has been on lexical and grammatical features (e.g. Llamzon, 1969; Gonzalez, 1985; Bautista, 1997, 2000, 2004a; Bolton and Butler, 2004), and distinct phonological features across various socio-economic groups (e.g. Llamzon, 1997; Tayao, 2004, this volume) — i.e. at phoneme, word, and sentence level, rather than the mapping of patterns across larger stretches of spoken text between interlocutors.

Tupas (2004) has noted that these studies of Philippine English have largely been concerned with English as it is spoken (or written) between educated Filipinos in localized, urban settings. The exception to this would be the published studies such as Bautista's in 1982 and 1996, identifying certain linguistic features of the 'sub-varieties' of English usage by Filipino maids and bar-girls, and the work of Llamzon (1997) and Tayao (2004) on variation in Philippine English phonology across socio-economic groups. In local speech communities, meanings tend to be commonly shared by all participants, and code-switching strategies are available to further extend the meaning potential through the use of Filipino or other shared dialects and languages — semantic resources that are unavailable in the call center interaction.

Hence, from an applied linguistic and social perspective, the expanding workplace of the BPO industry offers critical opportunities for research and intervention. First, we can study the dynamic interface between English as it functions in a localized context, i.e. in 'outer circle' multilingual Filipino speech communities; and as it functions in a trans-global context, i.e. with diverse interlocutors from predominantly 'inner circle' countries where English is spoken as a first language (Kachru, 1997). The acquisition of new registers and dialectal shifts by the CSR can also be researched through longitudinal studies and corpus-based analysis of call center discourse from novice through to seasoned agents. Second, the offshore customer service call,

as an emerging genre, can be analyzed to provide a better understanding of the discourse features of service interactions — ones that increasingly influence the way in which personal business is processed across the globe. Third, in terms of applied linguistics and workplace training, the apprenticeship of the novice CSR also creates many challenges for language teaching and assessment practices in a workplace that must perform under considerable pressure and time constraints. A survey of approaches to such training and assessment in the BPO industry can reveal the underlying attitudes and beliefs about the English language that are held by the various stakeholders. A clearer understanding of these perspectives and motivations can inform future initiatives and educational policy.

In this chapter, we will firstly provide an overview of some of the current practices and issues relating to English language and communication in this new context, based on our research in the BPO industry since 2004 (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming), and other studies in this area. Secondly, we will report on our study of call center discourse in the Philippines, describing preliminary findings relating to features of these interactions and communication problems commonly faced by CSRs. In doing so, we will start to consider what the language implications of this globalized movement offshore are, and what kind of research could inform the development of language support programs for its workforce, initiatives that can better respond to and accommodate the diversity and complexities of the BPO context.

An overview of language issues and trends in the Philippine BPO industry

Perceptions of language training needs

Cost is not the only factor when choosing a BPO destination. Excellent English language skills, post-high school qualifications, and a service culture are all drawing cards for this fast-developing outsourcing industry (see NeoIT, 2004). Outside perceptions of good levels of English and education, its service culture, and its large population (good scalability) have hence contributed to the Philippines becoming a favored site for relocation, especially for the North American client (SGV and Co., 2006). For such companies, the country's perceived affinity with American culture has also been used as a rationale to set up BPOs there, the assumption being that after a long history of American presence in the country, Filipino staff will already be familiar with the expectations and behavior of the stereotypical American client and their customer.

Such perceptions of association have led to misconceptions about the language background of the potential workforce. Certain US organizations that

were in the process of establishing an outsourced center reported that they believed English to be the mother tongue of the Philippines. While many sociolinguists would argue that Philippine English is now 'functionally native' to the Philippines due to its dispersion through all levels of society and wide range of uses in the country (Bautista, 2000), this variety of English not only differs linguistically from the Standard American English (SAE) of US organizations, but it is also spoken as a second or third language by the majority of its speakers. Another misconception relates to the Austronesian languages and dialects spoken in the Philippines, with Tagalog generally viewed from outside the Philippines as the mother tongue of all Filipino CSRs. This is clearly not the case for many who have moved in from the provinces to Metro Manila or those at sites in the Visayas or in the Ilocos region of Northern Luzon whose mother tongue is Cebuano or Ilokano, etc. As pointed out by Bautista (2004b: 199), the Philippines is a country where over 100 languages are spoken, where inhabitants typically speak two or more languages, where English as a colonial language was adopted as a second language within only a few generations, and where switching between languages is common.

Hence many US-based companies setting up call centers in the Philippines have been slow to appreciate that comprehensive English language training and support will be required to ensure that its agency workforce meet the service level requirements of US clients (Lockwood, 2006a; Lockwood and Forey, forthcoming). This lack of understanding of the language support needed for the offshore destination is reflected in the type of training programs offered by such organizations to new recruits. In our experience during consultancies undertaken in Manila with large third party call centers (2003–2006), only American accent training and ad hoc remedial work on points of English grammar tend to be provided, along with basic customer service skills (i.e. what is referred to as the 'soft skills' — for example, formulaic company greetings, empathy and rapport building with the customer, etc.). Following this brief communications training, a more substantial account-specific product training is given.

The 'soft skills' materials that are used have often been designed for American trainees, and hence they neither support the specific areas of language building that are usually required for new Filipino CSRs, nor do they provide an explicit description of culturally specific practices in the US context. 'Cross-cultural training' is often in the form of a lesson in American geography. In many cases during the recruitment or training process, language examples may be taken from literary texts and other unrelated written texts that involve very different discourse and lexico-grammatical patterns compared to a successful customer service encounter through the medium of the telephone. Re-recordings and transcripts of complete spoken texts taken from the workplace itself are rarely used as linguistic models, and the reinforcement of relevant listening skills is lacking in the curriculum. Generally speaking, in

the majority of call centers, we found that the language training did not appear to have been informed by applied linguistic research or practice, nor was it facilitated by individuals with a formal background in English language training.

Recruitment for an expanding industry

The rapid expansion of the call center industry in the Philippines, while providing attractive employment opportunities for graduates in their home country, is now placing huge demands on recruitment, with 100,000 jobs offered in the call center industry in 2005 and continued growth forecast (ECCP, EON, Inc., and PEP 2006). Cu (2006) has suggested that the revenue generated by call centers in the Philippines will grow from US\$ 1.2 to 3.1 billion from 2005 to 2008. Senator Mar Roxas, Chairman of the Senate committee on trade, commerce, and economic affairs, proposed that by 2009, over 300,000 Filipinos would be employed in call center companies operating in the country (Ramos, 2004). Recent figures from the Business Processing Association of the Philippines, as shown in Table 11.1, illustrate the present situation and the forecasted growth of a five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 38%. A major part of this growth will be in the call center industry (SGV and Co., 2006).

Table 11.1 Forecast revenues in ITES services 2006–2010 in US\$ million (SGV and Co., 2006: 1)

IT & IT Enabled Services	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	5yr CAGR%
Customer Care	1,024	1,792	2,688	3,488	4,192	4,816	5,296	24.2
Back Office	120	180	288	488	880	1,496	2,392	67.8
Medical Transcription	42	70	126	238	476	952	1,708	89.7
Legal Transcription	4	6	9	13	20	28	36	43.1
Other Data Transcription	26	39	52	78	104	130	169	34.1
Animation	52	74	111	185	315	500	759	59.3
Software Development	170	204	272	374	561	850	1275	44.3
Engineering Design	34	48	68	102	170	255	357	49.4
Digital Content	3	7	13	26	52	104	208	97.1
Total	1,474	2,419	3,627	4,992	6,769	9,130	12,199	38.0

Source: *Business Processing Association of the Philippines*

Service level agreements between the host company and the providing company (in this instance, an outsourcing organization in the Philippines) for the more complex, high-end accounts increasingly located in the Philippines require high quality customer service and skillful spoken communication. Recruiting enough staff to fill the seats in new and existing

sites is an ongoing problem for HR departments and agencies, and in 2005, recruitment rates in Manila call centers slumped to 1–1.5%, with the lack of English language competence being cited as the main reason for staff shortages (Greenleaf and Ferrer, 2006; Dominguez, 2006). Senator Roxas has also drawn attention to the lack of English language proficiency as a major threat to predicted levels of future expansion. In a recent paper by the European Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines (ECCP), Stakeholder Relations Firm EON, Inc., and PEP (2006: 8) it was stated that ‘250,000 jobs are to be provided in 5 years, an opportunity that will be lost if candidates can’t be found with a sufficient level of English Proficiency’.

In this paper, ECCP et al. (2006) highlight that the major problem for business development for the call center industry in the Philippines is the standard of English. They state that 95% of the 400,000 college students that graduate every year do not have a high enough standard of English to be employed by the call center industry. They add that there is a need to ‘create a sense of emergency and hope’ centered on English and to convince the Filipino youth that ‘English is their ticket to the future’ (ECCP et al., 2006: 11). Dominguez (2006) reinforces the message that the HR factor, specifically a lack of proficient English speakers, is ‘the single most pressing issue facing the Philippine e-service sector’ (p. 17). In an attempt to improve the standard of English, in April 2006 the ECCP and EON, Inc. spearheaded a five-year English advocacy campaign, ‘English is Cool!’, whose key message reads: ‘Be proud. Be bilingual. English is cool!’. This particular marketing strategy is based on their belief that ‘there is also a cultural hindrance to the practice of English among the youth: many lack the self-confidence to speak English because they are afraid to make mistakes, and English is now perceived as elitist. In other words: it is perceived as yet another obstacle to social success and integration rather than a means to achieve it’ (‘English is Cool’ Web site, 2006).

In response to the problem of matching jobs and language skills, in March 2006 President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo earmarked P500 million (\$9.8 million) for outsourcing industry training. Part of the scheme involves vouchers for tuition at government-accredited HR institutions. Third-party providers are increasingly implementing additional English language programs for ‘near-hires’, supported in part by the recent government funded scheme. Universities and colleges of continuing education are also slowly implementing the development of vocational training courses to support the industry.

Standards and varieties of English: The global politics of English in the workplace

In these industry discussions about language standards in the Philippine call center, performance is appraised in relation to external standards or norms

— typically Standard American English. From this perspective, localized patterns of communication in English in the call center might be characterized by the presence of a foreign accent, evidence of consistent grammatical errors, use of a restricted range of structures, the absence of certain lexical resources, the insertion of non-English terms, and problems of comprehensibility for ‘native speakers’ of English outside of the region. In other words, English is implicitly seen as a homogeneous and fixed system that is privileged by native speakers located elsewhere, an approach to language use that Kachru has attempted to debunk as ‘the native speaker idealization myth’ (1997: 10). The diversity of forms that English takes, and how these forms are put to use across the globe in different social settings by different speakers are rarely addressed in industry discussions.

Closely linked to the concept of language standards is the relationship between language use and perceptions of national identity. This is evidenced when a client decides that their Filipino CSRs must acquire a convincing American accent and invests in intensive American accent training to achieve this, rather than advocating a globally comprehensible accent as a more neutral position. However, in our experience, while the Philippine location will not be automatically signaled by the CSR in the greeting stage of the call, most companies have a policy of transparency and the CSR must state their offshore location if queried by the customer. On identifying an ‘Asian-sounding accent’, American customers will sometimes assume that they are calling India. Stories of racially abusive callers are not uncommon in interviews with CSRs, supporting press reports over the last few years in relation to the Indian call centers (Ahmed 2006; Gentleman, 2005; McPhate, 2005). This may be in the form of explicit racial slurs or may take the form of sarcasm and derogatory statements about the CSR’s competence, in a more insidious way. Certain callers will demand to speak with ‘an American’ not ‘a foreigner’. In contrast to this view of the privileged status of Standard American English is the notion of the inherent validity of localized varieties or dialects of English. Philippine English has been treated by many sociolinguists as a dialect in its own right (see Bautista, 2004b for a comprehensive review of Philippine English studies across three decades). Such Asian varieties are defined by their own habitual and widespread patterns of ‘indigenous’ usage that have developed over time from a complex array of socio-economic and historical factors (see accounts by Gonzalez, 1997, 2004; Bolton, 2000; and Tupas, 2004).

In a world Englishes paradigm, Philippine English is seen as a coherent, dynamic, and creative system that functions successfully to convey meaning in a range of social contexts from the everyday to the creation of literature, to the extent where Philippine English can be seen as ‘functionally native’ to the Philippines (see Kachru, 1997a; and Bautista, 2004a). What might count as a systematic error from the point of view of ‘standard English’ might be seen as a stabilized pattern in this variety that has its own form and/or

function. From this perspective, when communication breakdowns do occur over the phone in the offshore call center, rather than seeing these as the result of deficient language on the part of the CSR, this could be seen as a lack of correspondence across different varieties of English and the inexperience of both the CSR and the overseas customer to negotiate meanings together.

Taking a stronger ideological position, in his discussion of the politics of Philippine English, Tupas (2004) has argued that the majority of scholars of Philippine English have optimistically adopted a positivist approach for Philippine English, assuming linguistic and sociolinguistic equality for this variety as a post-colonial phenomenon that symbolizes independence and new beginnings. He counters this view at length, arguing that despite the polycentric rhetoric of globalization, with its notions of 'interconnectivity' and 'the global village', etc. — the reality is that the Philippines is experiencing a neo-colonial period. Notions of linguistic liberation and polycentricity are unrealistic in a country where most individuals are acting under 'conditions of severe restraint' and where the agenda of Philippine education is still to supply the world market economy with 'a cheap and docile labor force who are trained in English and the vocational and technical skills required by that economy' (Ordoñez, 1999: 20). Tupas adds: 'It is one thing to say that Filipinos are able to, and should, change the forms and meanings of English, and it is another thing to say that such appropriation is socially and politically accepted. In the words of Bautista (2000a: 17), "realistically speaking, for many Filipinos, there will still be a 'standard of standards' and that will be Standard American English"' (Tupas, 2004: 53).

Stakeholders' motivations and new initiatives

In many ways, the emerging BPO contexts in countries such as the Philippines and India strongly reflect the politics and tensions that are related to the speed and use of English as a global language. However, for most who are working to solve communication problems within the industry, the question of what kind of English should be spoken is largely a pragmatic one, with commercial rather than ideological motivations. The customers of their accounts tend to be American, British, or Australian speakers of English and the expectation is for consistent mutual intelligibility, and coherent and confident communication from the CSR. Practically speaking, without these things in place, customer service will inevitably be compromised, and costs will escalate for the third party providers who provide the local services for overseas clients. If standards are not met, then the outcome may well be that accounts, and hence jobs, will be lost to other operators, potentially outside of the Philippines.

For the hundreds of new applicants lining up each day across Manila and at provincial sites for interviews, many of whom are fresh graduates with no employment opportunities in their prior area of study, the CSR position signifies a highly-competitive local salary and the opportunity to gain product expertise and access to new technologies and to develop communication skills that may provide them with a competitive edge for an uncertain future. The BPO industry encourages a pathway of internal promotion and incentives to build on new expertise and retain staff. For some, the alternative to this may be a long separation from families and children for unskilled domestic work in Hong Kong, Brunei, and the Middle East. However, the current reality is that most individuals walking in off the street for their HR interview and language screening are falling short of the kind of advanced language competencies that are required to cope with the challenges of 'high-end' financial service and complex technical support. As will be discussed shortly in our study, the role of the Philippine CSR requires the acquisition of new skills and competencies that go beyond patterns of everyday spoken English language in a local context, and these need to be supported all the way through the process from pre-hire vocational training to coaching on the call center floor.

As noted earlier, clients, providers, and industry bodies alike are becoming aware of the need for more expertise and support in the critical area of language and communication, to develop their workforce and ensure sustainability. Educational institutions are also realizing the need to provide tertiary level support for their students in the area of English language training for the workplace. One well-known institute of technology has just spent two years revamping and extending its English language curriculum, retraining its English faculty in current communicative approaches to English language training and introducing a comprehensive language assessment tool to ensure their graduates leave with good enough levels of English for employment in the BPO industry. Other post-high school providers are also anxious to improve their English language teaching and teacher education programs in line with the needs of the BPO industry. Requests have been made by members of the industry for tertiary institutions to contribute to the development of English language in the students that graduate and the courses they offer at an undergraduate and graduate level (see Dominguez, 2006; NeoIT, 2005). In addition, pleas are also being made for colleges and universities, to participate in the research and training agendas that will improve levels of English communication for the BPO industry (Lockwood, 2006b). To date, there has been reluctance from some of the best universities to promote this industry within the ranks of their graduating students, as it is perceived to employ bright young people at a level below their capabilities regardless of their English language proficiency.

So from many perspectives, the BPO industry creates challenges, concerns and enormous opportunities, in theoretical, ideological, and the most pragmatic of terms. Underpinning the development of an English language communication training agenda for this industry is the need for more research into the spoken discourse of call center transactions. Such findings can inform approaches to language support for the industry, but they may also point to areas for future social research. To date, our experience of conducting research in the Philippines has shown a very positive response from both the educational institutions and industry members, with ongoing support for applied linguistic research. In our research in the Philippines, we are developing a forum for partnership and collaboration with an aim to improving educational and industry pedagogy, through the sharing of findings and good practices. Issues about access to sensitive data and the sharing of information need more consideration and development, but these problems can be overcome through non-disclosure agreements and the removal of identifying information prior to analysis. In the next section, we report briefly on some initial findings that have emerged from our data, focusing on aspects of communication breakdown that commonly occur in customer service calls.

A preliminary study of areas of communication breakdown in call center interactions

A study was undertaken in 2004 of the discourse structure and selected language features of over 500 authentic transactions that took place in a range of US call centers operating in Manila. The call centers in the study came from a range of industries such as insurance, information technology support, travel, banking and other financial services. Our research focused on inbound calls, i.e. where the customer initiates the call to get service or to make a complaint, etc.; rather than outbound calls, which tend to be sales or marketing-focused. These inbound centers are usually considered to be places of high stress and pressure for the CSR as there is no way of predicting the precise nature of the caller's problem (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Mulholland, 2004).

In this chapter, we will focus more specifically on the findings from one large US outsourced call center, and report on the general structure of the call flow and some areas of communication breakdown we identified in our data. For the study, over 100 selected calls were transcribed. All original names, dates, and sensitive details were removed from the data and made anonymous. While every call is unique, we found that a clear pattern emerged across the data in terms of core stages, as illustrated in Figure 11.1 below (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming).

This flow chart shows the typical stages found in our data and also indicates which stages tend to be obligatory and which tend to be optional in the majority of calls. As can be seen, the basic call flow involves six successive stages: (i) opening; (ii) purpose; (iii) gathering information; (iv) purpose; (v) service; (vi) closing. All stages appear to be obligatory and the feature we identified as being optional was the statement of a problem or complaint. Our findings also suggest that if problems occur during the call, these tend to happen during the purpose or service stages of the call.

Figure 11.1 The generic structure of call center transactions

CALLER (C)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaint • Frustration 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration • Vagueness • Clarification • 3rd party • Demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalization • Complaints (threat, sarcasm) • Reiteration • Silence 	Hot	
	Greeting & identification (ob)	Statement of the problem/complaint (o)	Explanation of problem/purpose of call (ob)	(Reiteration) statement of the problem (ob)	Accepts service; asks for further service (ob)	Closing (ob)	Cool
GENERIC STAGES	1 GREET & ID ob	2 PURPOSE ob	3 CLARIFICATION op	4 PURPOSE op	5 SERVICE ob	6 CLOSING ob	
Customer Service Rep (CSR)	Greeting & identification	Servicing response	Feedback; servicing response	Resolution offer	Offers information; offers service	Summarize service; Closing	Cool
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silence • Vagueness • No feedback • No apology 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulaic response • Silence • Vagueness • No feedback • No apology • Technical lang 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silence • Vagueness • Jargonistic • Personalization • No feedback • No apology • Technical lang 	Hot	

op = optional ob = obligatory
 (Adapted from Forey and Lockwood, 2007)

The framework for this kind of generic analysis was based on a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) model of language (see Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Martin and Rose, 2003). In recent years, within SFL a number of studies have identified texts as having a recognizable generic structure (e.g. Macken-Horarik, 2001; White et al., 1994; Eggins and Slade, 1997). Having established the basic components in a text, which can be used as a working model, the description can be further extended to show more delicacy within each of the stages. In terms of the call flow, the model can be further developed for different kinds of accounts by identifying the conversational 'moves' that typically make up each stage of the call or can be modified to map out a variant call flow for a non-typical account. It can also be used as the basis for profiling the typical linguistic patterns of each stage of the call flow to inform training. This is particularly relevant for the problematic stages of 'purpose' and 'service', as will now be described, in relation to difficulties with communication.

Areas of problematic communication

In terms of problematic communication, we were interested in finding out what was happening during the phases where there appears to be some type of breakdown. In addition, we aimed to investigate the key lexico-grammatical features that could be identified in these stages of the text. In the present study, the inbound calls are considered to be from a 'high end', complex account. Generally the data showed that the customers often had inquiries about complex products and, consequently, more sophisticated servicing needs. Newly-recruited CSRs were not only dealing with new product and systems knowledge, but also with the novelty and the demands of communicating with Americans, who were often elderly, from low socio-economic groups and/or spoke with the regional accents of the southern United States. It is not surprising, therefore, that feedback from the US regularly reported communication breakdown, especially in the early weeks of the CSR working on the phones. Although the product training was intensive, the language training tended to be limited to accent neutralization and discrete grammar items (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming).

In order to distinguish between different aspects of spoken communication, the discussion which follows considers four levels of language analysis: (i) phonological aspects of communication, (ii) language accuracy and range, (iii) discourse competence, and (iv) interactive and sociolinguistic competence. The last two categories are broadly based on Canale and Swain's (1980) descriptions of different areas of language competence that go beyond the limits of grammar, in its restricted sense. By 'discourse competence' we refer to the ability to connect messages in stretches of spoken language and

to form a meaningful whole out of the series of utterances. 'Interactive competence' refers to the ability to maintain ongoing, fluent communication with the other speaker and to build on relationships through language over the course of the interaction. Sociolinguistic competence involves an understanding of the socio-cultural conventions of language and discourse, such as the expression of politeness, humor, and appropriate turn-taking behavior.

As discussed earlier in relation to language diversity, for the Filipino CSR (as an 'outer circle' speaker of English) all of these aspects of spoken communication are potentially problematic in the context of the telephone interaction with an 'inner circle' American customer. And in each area, strong receptive skills (listening) as well as productive skills (speaking) are needed for successful communication by both the CSR and customer. The results of our research suggest the majority of communication problems occur in the stages of 'purpose' and 'service' of the call flow, i.e. the points where the CSR needs to exercise excellent listening skills to understand the purpose of the call; where the CSR needs to provide clear and logical servicing information; and where the CSR needs to interact and build relationships with the customer. Other stages in the text appear to be more straightforward, follow a standard pattern, and usually flow in a smooth manner, unless the caller is already irate before being connected with the CSR.

Phonological aspects of call center communication

Example 1 highlights one customer's response to a CSR, drawing attention to the phonological differences of a dialect.

Example 1

CSR: I'm explaining it to you Ma'am, it's for privacy purposes, it doesn't show here in my system but you do have a beneficiary it's just not showing in my system but I can request a letter indicating for you who your beneficiary is ...

Caller: *Well, you know you're not very plain. You have an accent, right? I'm having trouble understanding you, right.* Are you saying it does not show a beneficiary? Are you saying that? Are you saying that?

Tayao (2004) draws critical attention to the marked variation in phonological patterns across different Philippine English speakers, relating to social group membership, geographical location and first language background. In her study, Tayao distinguishes the use of Philippine English in three socio-economic groups, following Llamzon (1997) — the *acrolect* (whose speech style closely approximates formal General American English), the *mesolect* (whose speech exhibits divergences from American English but

this does not generally affect communication), and the *basilect* (whose speech is heavily affected by their native language).

The kind of distinctions that are made and the phonological characteristics of each 'sub-variety' described by Tayao are highly relevant to the call center context. In our experience, typically, new hires are in the 'mesolect' category, but many new applicants are at the lower end of this band and aspects of their speech style would affect communication in the challenging context of the call center. For the high-end accounts, however, speakers ideally need to be in the 'acrolect' category. As was discussed earlier, many call centers even require their Filipino CSRs to sound like native-speaker Americans. Our experience has shown that for many call center agents, a shift in dialect naturally occurs as they move from novice to seasoned CSR, through the process of listening to and mimicking their customers eight hours a day. This is to the extent where certain individuals may acquire the phonemic and prosodic features of a convincing American accent, including a marked nasal twang, reduced vowel sounds, stress-timed rhythm, etc.

For CSRs that display phonological features of the basilect and mesolect categories, there are, however, specific phonological problems encountered on the floor. Arguably, these are due to both the customer's lack of exposure to Filipino speakers and the distinct phonological features of Philippine English, and the unfamiliarity of the CSR with a customer's speech style. Requests for repetition are frequent and misunderstandings arise from a lack of comprehensibility, in both directions. Tayao (2004) has described in detail the phonemic system of Philippine English, with its reduced consonant and vowel system, increasingly noticeable in 'broader' varieties of Philippine English, for example the lack of consonants /f/ and /v/ and the persistent hardening of the *th* sounds to /t/ and /d/. Some phonemes that are still present in the system may be articulated differently, such as the /r/ and /t/ sounds. Vowels may be reduced from the 11 sounds of Standard American English to an approximation based on the five options in Filipino. Such features can create confusion for non-Filipino interlocutors as they struggle to place the words they hear in context, with the lack of other cues over the phone line.

Tayao (2004) has noted in her survey of Philippine English studies that most researchers would agree to the syllable-timed nature of Philippine English (where equal stress is given to all syllables and reduced syllables are absent), which contrasts with the stress-timed nature and distinct rhythm of Standard English. Coupled with the reduced range of phonemes described above, confusion may occur when words such as *reinstatement*, *recommendation*, *information*, *basically*, *procedural*, and *computer* are pronounced with equal stress on each syllable and the lack of a reduced vowel sound in weaker syllables.

Example 2

- Caller: I'm sorry, could you repeat Sir ... I'm sorry ... hello?
 CSR: I'm going to put this into our reinstatement department
 [pronounced as *rye* – as in rye bread – rye instatement]*
 Caller: Which department
 CSR: reinstatement [pronounced as *rye*] and check the record if they could
 put the policy back in force again.
 Caller: (laughs)
 CSR: so there's a letter here so there's a justification – we need to review
 the documents here to see if they are already sufficient.
 Caller: So it's going to which department?
 CSR: Reinstatement department [pronounced as *rye*]
 Caller: State department?
 CSR: Reinstatement [pronounced as *rye*]
 Caller: Statement?
 CSR: R-E-I-N-S-T-A-T-E-M-E-N-T [CSR spells out the word letter-by-letter]
 Caller: alright re – reinstatement?
 CSR: You've got it correctly now, Sir.
 Caller: Thank you ...
 [added explanation shown in square brackets]

In terms of prosodic features across utterances, Tayao (2004) makes reference to studies that suggest that no distinction is made in the final intonation pattern of *Wh*-questions and *Yes/No* questions in Philippine English. This appears to be supported by instances in our data, where the CSR may use a rising intonation pattern for *all* question types. In Standard American English, if this pattern of rising intonation is given to *Wh*-questions, it indicates the speaker's surprise or their need for clarification. This can hence lead to a misunderstanding of the speaker's intention and create confusion. Intonation and other paralinguistic features of speech play a crucial role in exchanging interpersonal meaning, and are part of the system for conveying attitude, nuance, intention, emotion, etc. There are frequent examples in our data where subtle shifts in the customer's intonation and stress patterns, conveying irony, puzzlement, etc., are lost on the CSR and communication breaks down. As noted by Tayao (2004), more work on the prosodic features of Philippine English still needs to be carried out to identify intonation patterns across whole utterances and to see which parts of the utterance are given extra emphasis and focus by pitch movement and volume, etc. This is another opportunity for extending our understanding of how these features work across varieties through corpus-based research from the call center context (see Tayao, this volume).

Language accuracy and range

In terms of lexical and grammatical aspects of language, the kinds of non-standard patterns identified in the literature for Philippine English (see Bautista, 2004a) can commonly be found in call center interactions in our data, for example: the lack of agreement between subject and verb, pronoun switching, non-standard use of prepositions in phrasal verbs, altered use of tense and aspect (e.g. use of past perfect for recent rather than distant past, overuse of the future continuous *will + ing* form), and most notably, the restricted use of modality.

An example of this is the tendency for the CSR to overuse *would*, as shown in Example 3 below. This provides further evidence to support Bautista's findings (2004a) on the use of *would* in place of *will* to refer to certain future, which she identifies as a stabilized pattern in Philippine English, echoing findings from Svalberg's research on Brunei English (1998, cited in Bautista, 2004a). When we queried CSRs on why they do this, the speakers say that they feel that *would* sounds more polite. This also supports Bautista's hypothesis for this pattern representing an example of the kind of 'simplification' that has taken place in Asian Englishes, as second languages, for areas of complex semantics such as English modality, tense, and aspect.

Example 3

- CSR: it **would** contain all ... it **would** containing all in that one form, sir.
 Caller: Ok ... um ... just for my edification then can you tell me what I have paid so far? Or I can put in my tax returns?
 CSR: Actually I can only access the ... um ... the interest paid and the um ... taxes paid would that be ok?
 Caller: ar ... well ... well ... I got those two already, they gave me that on the, the automated message, what I'm looking for is points paid.
 CSR: I see sir, well ... um ... I ... I ... I do apologize sir, but I cannot verify the ar ... amount for you, sir, but I **would** assure you that it **would** be indicated in the statement to you receive, sir.

What does appear to be the case though is that small 'errors' or differences in lexico-grammar, such as subject/verb agreement or the lack of past tense marking are rarely the cause of major breakdowns in communication. In our experience, pointing out the common differences in the grammar of Philippine English and that of Standard American English can be very useful during training. From interviewing the trainees, we have found that although such patterns are habitualized and systematic in their own speech patterns, trainees are usually able, on reflection, to explain the use of tense, aspect, and modality of Standard American English texts and to produce these structures in practice sessions. This kind of meta-awareness can help in the negotiation of meaning over the phone among diverse speakers. Again, there is huge potential in this context for future research into the lexico-grammar of

Philippine English in different social groups in the context of global exchanges, and this would benefit from case studies of language use and acquisition, and from a corpus-driven approach, which would reveal key tendencies across the industry.

Discourse and strategic competence

The novice CSR also needs to acquire communicative competence in terms of understanding: (i) the predictive stages of the call flow, (ii) how transitions are made across stages and moves in the text, and (iii) how to organize information in a way that is easy for the customer to follow over the phone without the benefits of face-to-face communication. Discourse capability is a hidden problem in the language use of the CSR, as evidenced by the absence of training in this area in the programs we reviewed. All CSRs go through 'product' training in order to understand the range of products that callers may be concerned about. Once the training is finished, the CSRs are tested to ensure they have understood the product information. However, understanding the information is one thing — being able to explain it to others requires different skills. While one would expect 'novice' CSRs to experience difficulty explaining product details at the beginning, it was interesting to note that even very experienced CSRs were having difficulty explaining their products clearly and unambiguously.

The problem with following a linear 'problem — solution' discourse structure may be related to potential differences in the rhetorical structure of Filipino communication that is influencing features of Philippine English at both the macro-level and at the clause level, features that create local cohesion and coherence across a spoken text. Thus, we suggest that there may be features in the discourse structure of Philippine English that are, at times, incompatible with conventional discourse patterns in Standard American English. This manifests in claims by customers and clients that the CSR sounds as if they are 'beating around the bush' or are 'long-winded' in their explanations.

This area requires further research to avoid the stereotypical characterization of Asian discourse as 'circular' in comparison with a 'linear' Western organization of ideas. As argued by Kubota and Lehner (2004), a critical position needs to be adopted concerning the relationship between discourse structures and cultural factors. Recent research, for example Brew and Cairns (2004), shows that the context of an interaction will greatly affect the choices made within a text. In the case of a call center interaction, the globalized context, i.e. a customer service interaction with an American customer concerning a product or service from an American organization, may override the inherent cultural norms of the Filipino context. An investigation of a corpus of call center discourse can reveal such diversity in

discourse level patterns and display how different expectations can cause confusion and frustration, as evidenced in the call sample below.

Example 4

CSR: Actually we don't have it in our system, the one you provided me, um when was the charges declared to you? When were the charges made?

Caller: What?

CSR: When was the charges were made?

Caller: I'm not calling about when was the charges were made, I want a different credit card bill, in the future, do you understand?

CSR: Yes I do understand, that's difficult however, we already have it in our system the one you just provided to me.

Caller: OK, GET IT OUT! God ... what do you have to do is to get it out?

CSR: it's already ... it's already err ... removed in our system, Mr. B ...

Caller: ok ...

CSR: So I think don't worry about this one. Would you mind give me again your telephone number please, so that I can double-check that one, Mr. B?

Caller: 1111 1111

CSR: I apologize but could you repeat that for me, please.

Caller: 1111 1111

CSR: Thank you. Actually it's already removed from our system for you Mr. B, let me um ... double check for you.
[on hold, 10 secs.]

CSR: When was the charges was made Mr. B? Because actually in our system you're already, we're already don't have an account that is provided for your XXX card the one that you've just mentioned to me.

Caller: Sir, I don't understand what you're asking me, I mean I'm just trying to change the credit card number, that's all I'm trying to do.

CSR: Actually, sir your credit card has already been updated to the one you provided to me, would you like to change your XXX card? Because your XXX card has already been updated with that, Mr. B ...

Caller: With what?

CSR: With the one that you've told me earlier the last 4 digits, the first credit card that you provided to me, are you going to change ... change to another card, sir?

Caller: Oh ... ok ... you're making this difficult, I ask you to cancel the credit card that 11111 111 and put my new credit card on 2222 2222 ...

CSR: I see ... ok, yes, I would be happy to do that for you, I'm going to update and change the new credit card, may I have the new credit card number again, I'm sorry I didn't get it err ... at first. I'm sorry ...

Caller: Sir, can I talk to somebody else? This is not working ... ok ... this is ... this is not working and it's taking too much of my time [...]

As shown in Example 4, the interaction between the CSR and caller appears to be problematic, due to a lack of call control, and direct responses and questions. It is difficult at this stage to say whether such features are habitual in Philippine English call center interactions, and further research is needed in this area.

Interactive and sociolinguistic competence

The interactive capability of the Filipino CSR appears to be highly problematic at times, especially in situations where the customer expresses anger or frustration. This appears to be both cultural and linguistic in nature. While Filipinos are very service-oriented and out to please, they have difficulty in diffusing the anger, irritation, and frustration of customers. The flip side of a service orientation can also be a reluctance to deal with confrontation, which often results in the CSR retreating into silence or resorting to formulaic responses to arrest the anger (see Forey and Hood, 2006).

In their analysis of interpersonal meanings of a call, Forey and Hood (2006) have been able to illustrate the prosodic patterns, i.e. peaks of frustration and intensity, and smooth, calm exchanges from both the CSR and caller. Appraisal analysis (Martin and White, 2005) was used to map interpersonal meaning in a sample of call service interaction texts. In their study, they found that, typically, the caller was not using language which explicitly expressed frustration and intensity, e.g. 'very crappy service'; rather, the caller tended to use far more implicit language to express their frustration, e.g. 'this is the twelfth person I've spoken to', 'they promised to get back to me in 24 hours'. In many cases, the caller would use dates, numbers, and other forms of what are called 'graduation' within Appraisal System (Martin and White, 2005) to imply that they were angry and unhappy. Another criticism of the Filipino CSR is that frequently they lack a strategic problem-solving ability in resolving problems raised by customers. This obviously relates to the amount of experience the CSR has, but may also be influenced by cultural issues of hierarchy and decision-making skills. Many CSRs do not feel it is their role to anticipate problems and to come up with creative solutions. This is a much-valued trait in Western cultures, but it requires confidence, a sense of authority and expertise, and very good language skills.

Conclusions

From an applied linguistics perspective, the Philippine BPO context is a site that provides a unique opportunity to investigate the nature of English language communication, as it occurs in a globalized context between diverse

speakers. However, as outlined in our earlier discussions, the study of authentic language in the workplace creates a number of theoretical, ideological, and pedagogical challenges for the applied linguist. From a theoretical and descriptive perspective, the industry offers complex sites for the investigation of World Englishes as they come into contact and transform in the global workplace. As we have noted, ideological issues concerning language use become foregrounded in this industry. In addition to adding to existing descriptions of Philippine English, the research discussed above provides insights into how businesses and their customers perceive and respond to this 'outer-circle variety'. A key task for the applied linguist is to educate such businesses to prioritize 'comprehensibility' and resourcefulness in the speech of the offshore CSR, rather than reinforcing their expectations of creating an 'on-shore' linguistic identity for their agents.

Pedagogically, the apprenticeship of the novice CSR creates challenges for curriculum design, methodology, and language assessment. New recruits must be provided with training that factors in the development of specific competencies for the CSR in the practice of customer service, while at the same time acknowledging the linguistic diversity of English in the global workplace. Applied research studies can also yield important contributions to all these areas. With the kind of figures for projected growth that have been forecast for this industry, there is a real need for further collaboration, research, and discussion between stakeholders, language practitioners, educationalists, and linguists to provide the basis for informed solutions that provide the space for innovation and the development of local potential. Future research into how English is adapting to these new functional requirements of the Philippine call center may assist the development of the BPO industry while also contributing to the development of language education nationwide.

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