

Original Research Article

Real English Language Test for ESL Speakers: The Case of the English Majors Employed as Call Center Agents

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Abstract

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The booming of the different BPO industries in the Philippines has provided ample job opportunities and brought real English environment for Filipinos to improve their English skills. This study investigated the lived experiences of the ten (10) call center agents, who were English majors and were recent graduates from three different universities in Cebu, Philippines. Using the phenomenological research design, performed through interviews and focused group discussion, the following themes merged: a) Challenges Encountered by the Agents in the Call Centers; and b) Advantages that Agents Get from their Call Center Job. The study revealed that the participants had challenges as call center agents caused by language barriers, irregular shifting of work schedules and health problems. In the lighter sense, the agents also enjoyed some advantages in the workplace. They improved their communication skills especially their accent and pronunciation, boosted their self-confidence, gained exposure to the culture and ways of their customers and earned a higher salary. In general, the agents considered the job as both beneficial and disadvantageous. Based on the gathered information, the researcher recommended that schools may expose students to the different accents, pronunciation and provide them with authentic English environment for the improvement of their English skills.

Keywords: Call center agents, real English language test, ESL speakers

INTRODUCTION

The BPO industry has been mushrooming all over the world and companies have also been expanding their reach in countries which do not utilize English as the native tongue, especially in the Philippines. According to Singh (2005), the Philippines is an emerging BPO hub due to the superior English language skills of the agents. In fact, the Philippines ranked as the third largest English-speaking country in the world. Approximately, majority or 72% of the Filipinos speak fluent English. Moreover, Yun and Chu (2011) added that the Philippines has more educated English-speaking population. The Philippines excels because agents have the most accent-neutral

language and the country has the most fantastic service culture. However, it is still not a guarantee that the Filipinos' skills in English would suffice specially in an actual conversation with native speakers. Kim (2008) pointed out that one of the barriers in the BPO outsourcing is cultural and language barriers. Some agents were unable to accommodate specific needs since English is not their first language (p.13). More specifically, cultural differences have also become a challenge because initiating a conversation with people coming from diverse language culture needs good communication skills and interpersonal skills (Teaching

Source, 2014).

Most clients became very particular with accents. In the case of the Filipino agents, they went through accent neutralization training as part of their employment in the BPO's. Despite the skills of the Filipinos in the use of English, Filipinos struggle in comprehending foreign accents (Franco et al. 2013; Khuo, 2011). Accent makes communication complicated for it contributes difficulty in understanding the words and phrases during the conversation. It is the accent, not the language that has caused the problem. The accent that one heard is different from where they lived and previously studied (Navak and Sitalakshmi, 2010).

In Cebu City, call centers namely Convergys, Qualfon, Teleperformance, Aegis, Author Solutions, E-Performax, Wiproand etc. have all established roots and have been operating successfully, giving job opportunities to many Cebuanos. Most companies employed bachelor's degree applicants and others required only at least two (2) years in college but with excellent communication skills and average computer operations literacy. Despite the high qualifications set by the different companies, it is still not a guarantee that all hired employees have a seamless experience inside the workplace. With these, this qualitative study was conducted aiming to investigate the lived experiences of the call center agents. Specifically, it sought to: a) discover the challenges that call center agents encounter in terms of language, work schedules and health; and b) advantages that the agents get from their call center job in terms of communication skills, confidence, exposure to other cultures and salary.

The study was anchored on the listening processes proposed by Andrew Ortony and David Rumelhart called bottom -up and top-down listening processes. They emphasized that one comprehends words, phrases and sentences being heard using their prior knowledge and their skills to interpret every piece of information. A person used bottom-up process of listening in decoding the messages heard by segmenting the speech being listened, not using the prior knowledge. This process made use of ones' linguistic ability in looking into the composition of words, phrases and sentences. In general, these two listening processes are completely opposite.

Review of Literature

As published in PR Newswire (2007), the development of the different BPO enterprises requires the number 1 skill which pertains to proficiency in using English as foreign or second language. This became the number requirement which needs to be paired with strong professional skills. On the other hand, Cohen and El-Sawad (2007) mentioned that one of the highlighted problems of offshoring is the differences in culture, especially in the barrier caused by language. This meant

that cultural differences lead to a negative thought that a non-native English speaker, though competent in the use of the language, is prone to committing mistakes in the workplace. In particular, Ambavat (2012) insisted that language has been considered as one of the hurdles in setting up BPO centers, for they still need training in dealing with the complexity of the English language in many aspects such as accent, pronunciation, and sounding close to native English speakers.

According to Cohen and El-Sawad (2007), in places in which English was only learned as second language, training on accent reduction was conducted in order to overcome bloody accents that were difficult to understand in order to bridge the credibility gap. The trainings aimed to refine the language to be able to blend to native speakers and appear less accented second language speaker. For Indian agents, they were directed to use Western names as they introduced themselves so that the clientele would feel that they were talking to someone with culture the same as theirs. As mentioned by Singh (2005), In some countries, the accent seemed too thick, making the speech incomprehensible, while the English accent in London was much easier to understand. Because of these, call centers conducted accent and voice training in order to distinguish accents by region. More often, many people feel quite ashamed of their own accent, dialect or command of Standard English and this brings the feeling of inferiority over the English language (Fleming, & Stevens, 2015). However, some agents found an easier and more practical solution to accent problems. They imitate accents of the customers they spoke with. Qui (2011) insisted that there was nothing wrong with some agents' imitation of the native speakers' accents, vocabulary and expressions. However, not all can perform such, since adult agents are no longer able to copy pronunciation. This resulted to unnecessary burdens in the part of the agents for it was harmful to their language confidence and would make them consider themselves as failed imitators of native speakers.

Since BPO's common goal is to market products and services to clients all over the world, experts agree that conversation should be intelligible in order to make successful transactions. Marks (2013) stressed that speakers need to make the conversation sounds intelligible. It is advised that learners use fixed American expressions to make their English sound natural as they add their feelings and opinions to make their speaking skill interesting, but improving the pronunciation still comes out as the best among others. For slang in particular, Alison (2013) explained that language forms which were not part of the standard language, like dialect and slang, are not anymore considered ungrammatical. However, this does not mean that anything goes, one must be able to use Standard English in formal situations. In addition, Langan and Johnson (2008) suggested that slang could only be used to add flavor in an informal

conversation but should strictly be avoided in formal writing.

For Meredith and Steele (2011), agents in the call centers should practice active listening – the kind of listening where judgments are momentarily suspended. Active listening also accommodates thinking to the message being communicated so that we can interact with it constructively. Agents need to focus before incompletely interpreting every chunk of information. In the study of Mendelsohn (2011), listening has a key role in transmission of messages heard. Moreover, it can never be denied that listening is the primary source of language interpretation. Listening helps the learning of English as both second and foreign language for it supplies the agents the needed messages from where the necessary knowledge is situated (Vandergrift, 2004). In general, call center jobs require the improvement of the listening skills in delivering excellent service and quality phone transactions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site and Respondents

The study was conducted within the city of Cebu, Philippines specifically in IT Park in Lahug, Cebu City. It was in IT Park where majority of the BPO call centers were situated. The respondents involved were the ten (10) graduates who earned the Education degree. They were specifically English majors who were graduates of the School Year 2017-2018. In addition, they were from the three (3) big universities in the city, four (4) from Cebu Normal University, three (3) from Cebu Technological University and three (3) from the University of Cebu. The respondents were asked of their free time before meeting them. They were purposively chosen because the respondents lived experiences could be an inspiration and a desirable example to many who also want to work and earn in the BPO industry.

Instruments and Procedure of Data Collection

The study employed a qualitative research design through the use of ten (10) interview questions and a focus group discussion including some necessary follow-up questions. Since the agents could not be gathered all at once due to differences in schedules, the researcher agreed to meet them in different sessions. Only during the focus group discussion that they were all gathered as one. The data collection started after the respondents signed the permission letter. They answered all the questions and agreed to have the conversations recorded for the purpose of information accuracy. The data and the result of the interview were all kept with utmost confidentiality.

Data Treatment

With the use qualitative design, the researcher specifically applied the phenomenological research approach using the Colizzi's data analysis method. This has seven steps which were conscientiously followed in order to get accurate and valid result. After which, the emerged themes were further explained by the researcher in the results and discussions section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: Challenges Encountered by the Agents in the Call Centers

The call center job was never a piece of cake like what many people thought. They looked at it as an ordinary job where agents would just report to their offices, answer calls and solve customers' problems overnight. What they have in mind, was the complete opposite of what was really happening as agents worked while the world was full asleep. It was more than just a job and a cross to bear especially to the employees who were still on the process of adapting to the nature of the work. The participants commented that in reality, they were having problems on the following:

A. Language barriers

The participants all answered that language barrier was very common in many call centers. This could be attributed to the fact that English in the Philippines was only the second language. Expectedly, the conversations between the customers who were native speakers of the language and the ESL speakers would not be as smooth as wanted. Since English has been heard and studied in the Philippines, the problem wasn't much on its use but on the accent that the customers were using. This still existed despite the fact, that in countries where English was only learned as a second language, training on accent reduction was conducted in order to overcome bloody accents that were difficult to understand in order to bridge the credibility gap. The trainings aimed to refine the language to be able to blend to native speakers and appear less accented second language speaker (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007).

Participants 1, 5, 7 and 8 said,

The accent of the customers from UK, particularly the Scottish accent was very thick and difficult to understand...

For Participants 3, 6, 9 and 10,

The American accent is what we always heard from TV, so it sounds familiar. When used in actual conversation, it was too fast and sometimes shortened. Difficult to understand...

Participants 2 and 4 added that,

The British accent was truly too hard to listen to. Their talking pace also was too fast.

It can be gleaned based on the answers of the participants that language, especially accent and the talking pace, made the conversation over the phone difficult to comprehend. The result coincided with what Singh (2005) said, In UK, the accent seemed too thick, making the speech incomprehensible. Mainly, the accent of the customers was giving them headache because not getting what the customers were saying upset them. Sometimes, it reached to the point that customers would shout at the agents with harsh and profane words. Moreover, not understanding the words because of the accent would result to failure in assisting the customers and prolonging the call time which many callers always complained. In the study conducted by Navak and Sitalakshmi (2010) they strongly withstood that it was the accent, not the language that has caused the problem. The accent that one heard was different from where they lived and previously studied.

However, the agents came up with salient solutions to the problems. They listened intently and made themselves used to how their customers sound no matter what accent they have. They imitated the accent of their customers so they would understand it more. The study of Qui (2011) supported that there was nothing wrong with some agents' imitation of the native speakers' accents, vocabulary and expressions. However, not all could perform such, since adult agents were no longer able to copy pronunciation. Some of the participants also insisted that they watched more English movies in order to become familiar to foreign English accents. In a separate study conducted by Ballard (2013), he stressed that given the nature of diversity at any university, it was best to expose students to a wide range of global Englishes. The study asserted that familiarity with the different accents could lead to greater comprehension and intelligibility of the language being spoken. This would be beneficial to students when they encounter English and non-English speakers throughout the span of their academic, personal, and professional lives.

With the problem on their customers' talking pace, agents wisely remembered keywords from what the customers were saying and clarify to the customer whether the information heard was right. Participants agreed that despite the difficulty, politeness in asking back some queries for clarifications was of great help.

More often, they paraphrased unclear sentences and clarified it with the customers.

B. Work Schedules

The work schedule of the agents was another fight to win over since they didn't have a permanent shift schedule. It changed from time to time commonly after two months or three. This would mean that the body has to adjust again to a new sleeping pattern. Agents identified two types of work days, the day shift that catered to Australian customers and the night shift that served customers from Canada and the United States. There was no problem spotted with the day shift, but more on the night shifts because of what they called closing and opening work schedules. The opening shift started at 7pm – 4am, while the closing started at 4am– 12noon. During peak seasons where bulk of demands from customers came in, agents were asked to go for paid overtime.

C. Health problems

Majority of the participants agreed that working in the call centers could result to health problems due several stressors such as lack of sleep, pressure from meeting targets, quotas and other job metrics and impatience due to demanding customers. It was never a hidden fact that lack of sleep could result to mood swings and fatigue hindering the body from performing well in the workplace. As per the participants, they found it hard to sleep in the morning because the world was up and their minds were conditioned to stay awake with the sunshine. On the other hand, meeting what are expected of the agents gave them too much worries and anxiety. This was because every agent has metrics to hit such as the number of calls, number of sales for sales accounts, average handling time (AHT) to reach, service satisfaction results from the surveys coming from the customers and etc. All these were necessary in perfecting the company's target. If they failed to perform, team managers would also burden them with pressures. In addition, demanding customer have also contributed to the injury, for they surely made the agents impatient with their shouting, cursing and scolding over the phone when the service they were asking took a little more time or when their favors were out of the agents' control and impossible to do. More often, the agents travel home downhearted.

The good thing was, as time passed too swiftly, agents learned to unload burdens and stresses which they thought unnecessary and damaging. As much as they wanted to forget everything, a part of it stayed especially that they cared about getting good survey results from customers which were beneficial for their promotions and goals of getting extra incentives.

Theme 2: Advantages that Agents Get from their Call Center Job

In the lighter side of the situation, agents proudly confessed that the job they were in was not at all a cross to bear, but also a fountain of blessing. In particular, they benefited more than what the company could give them. With the months they have been spending working for the company, they gained an improved communication skill, boosted self-confidence, enough exposure to their customer's culture and higher salary compared to jobs that only paid the minimum wage.

A. Improved communication skills

With their sweet smiles, agents jokingly boasted that they have intensely improved their communication skills. They were already able to speak in a neutralized accent which sounded better and more comprehensible to foreigners specially the native English speakers. They could already imitate foreign accents. In addition, they improved the way they enunciated the vowels and consonants far better than those who have not been employed in the call centers. They learned to exaggerate the way they pronounce words for the purpose of comprehensibility and emphasis. They uttered the following statements as quoted and recorded:

Participants 1, 3 and 9 mentioned,

I learned to exaggerate the way I pronounce words to be understood. I learned to pronounce words using a neutral accent...

Participant 5 and 7 also commented,

My accent improved...

Participant 8 said,

I improved my enunciation of the vowels and consonant sounds... I am not ashamed anymore with my pronunciation.

Obviously, the experience appeared to be a valuable milestone for the participants, not only on the advantage they have gained, but also of the learning which they could apply in their profession – the teaching.

B. Boosted self confidence

The participants of the study all insisted that their current job has boosted their confidence. They further explained that constant conversation with the native speakers made

them sound confident not only because the job required them to be, but also because they have proven how confidence has helped them provide excellent customer service and persuade clients to patronize their service.

C. Exposure to their customers' culture

The job wasn't only beneficial to the participants financially, but it has also brought them cultural awareness on the ways and lives of the Americans in general. Based on regular conversations with the American customers, they learned that in the US, most people did not carry a large amount of cash. They preferred online transactions using cards like, credit cards, debit cards, checks and even traveller's check. In addition, foreigners lived in a fast-paced world where no time was wasted and that time for them meant money. Moreover, American families were not so close together, but they showed thoughtfulness by ordering items to be sent as gifts.

With the months that the agents spent in the call centers, they almost memorize all the names and abbreviations of the 50 states comprising the United States of America. They also became familiar of the four (4) time zones as well as the standard and the daylight time.

D. Higher salary

The participants all said that the BPO industries paid higher compared to other local jobs especially those in private companies. In the BPO, agents received salaries ranging from P12,000.00–P35,000.00 including incentives. For those who were entrusted with positions, their salaries vary, but for sure higher than what agents are earning depending on the company size. In local private companies and other jobs, salaries only ranged from 7,500.00-10,000.00.

CONCLUSION

The call center job was both beneficial and disadvantageous. It was beneficial because the participants learned to improve their communication skills making their accents neutral and understandable, know the culture of their customers, boost their confidence and receive higher salary compared to other local jobs. On the other hand, it was disadvantageous because of the language barrier present between the agents and the customers, the irregular shifting of work schedules and the health problems suffered by the agents. In general, it was a job worth spending.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the facts that the researcher has discovered, the researcher suggests that schools may include a program that leads the students to become familiar and exposed to the different English accents all over the world. This will prepare the students for a work not only in the BPO's, but also abroad especially in countries where English is the primarily used language. The schools in the Philippines may also find an authentic English environment where students can practice their English skills, especially in real conversations with native or other ESL speakers showcasing their intelligible pronunciation and impressive language fluency.

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