

## **Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Center Industry**



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**ABSTRACT:** Language training practices, in terms of management of training communication, are common to all call centers. Call center policies, requirements as well as activities are implemented and regularly observed. This descriptive research, which used qualitative analysis, investigated the language training practices employed by language trainers in developing the language skills of call center agents and the call center agents' perception of the effectiveness of language training provided by the call center. Data were drawn from interviews with language trainers and call center agents. Results revealed that language trainers had the same practices in their respective companies during the language training in terms of language training assessment, monitoring, and coaching. However, in terms of components or key areas in the criteria used for the training processes, and the manner of implementation of the activities or intervention conducted varies from one call center to another. Accent neutralization was taught and practiced to eliminate regional accents while using scripted language is for formats and call branding for first-timers. The findings of this study also showed that language training provided by call centers was perceived differently by call center agents. Call center agents found the training good enough for the job, while others did not. Findings of the study also revealed that the training was more focused on products and less on language aspects. Agents believed that not all knowledge and skills learned were applied in the actual job. Call centers may consider focusing the training on language, specifically on areas/aspects that agents found to have a deficiency.

**KEYWORDS:** Call Center Agents, Language Trainer, Language Training, Language Training Practices, BPO Industry

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The call center industry develops and executes training programs to inculcate required knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) in new hires that must result in the improvement of their performance (Rehmat et al., 2015).

Training is a leading strategy for human resource development, generating new skills in people and in achieving organizational objectives. Furthermore, training is the systematic acquisition of skills, concepts, or attitudes that must result in improved performance of the trainee (Goldstein & Ford, 2002; Aamdor, 2012, cited in Rehmat et al., 2015). According to Lorimer (1999, cited in White, 2003), the function of training is essential in promoting increased competence and skill levels.

Call center training programs use strategies such as accent neutralization and scripted call flow simulations to mold NNS call center agents into communicators able to interact with and understand NS callers (Downing, 2004, cited in Lombard, 2014). These training strategies are supplemented by written knowledge tools that agents can use to look up information with which to assist caller (Herndl & Lacona, 2007, cited in Lombard, 2014). Training effectiveness is to know about the characteristics of organization, training program itself and individuals, before training, during training, and after training (Rafiq, 2015).

However, training programs in call centers need to develop a pedagogic approach based on authentic resources, and few studies focus on this aspect and on the language needs of call centers in terms of English competency (Cameron 2000a; Taylor & Bain, 1999, cited in Lockwood et al., cited in Bautista and Bolton, 2008). Much of the research into call centers is in the field of business and management (Forey & Lockwood, 2007).

Based on their research in the Philippines, Lockwood et al. (2012), suggest that much of the English language training for the call center industry inappropriately focus on discrete grammar rules and accent neutralization which has little to do with the customer service interaction.

It is due to the aforementioned reasons that the researcher chose to examine the language training and the practices in call centers. The researcher aimed to determine whether call centers in Bacolod City have common practices and whether call center training programs still implement these practices. Furthermore, the researcher explored how the call center agents viewed their

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

language training experiences and the effectiveness of the training provided by the call centers. In addition, the researcher tried to find out whether these trainings and practices had effected changes on the language performance of the call center agents on the actual call processes.

### 2. METHODS

#### 2.1 Research Design

This study is descriptive in nature because it led to present facts, concerning the nature and status of a situation, as it exists at the time of the study and it describes present conditions, events or systems based on the impressions or reactions of the respondents of the research (Creswell, 1994, cited in Acosta, 2012). It employed the qualitative research method, through individual/face-to-face-interview with call center agents and language trainers about the language training and practices in language training programs.

#### 2.2 Participants of the Study

The participants directly involved in this study were the five language trainers and thirty call center agents of different call centers in Bacolod City whose lingua franca used in each of their communities is Hiligaynon. They were at least multilinguals, for they were able to speak and understand Tagalog, Hiligaynon, and English.

Snowball, purposive sampling was used in the selection of language trainers and call center agents to participate in the interview. According to Trochim (2006), snowball sampling (also known as chain sampling) is especially useful when you are trying to reach populations that are inaccessible or hard to find.

The language trainers who were selected as participants for interview were those who were assigned by Human Resource managements to coach, monitor, and train newly-hired call center agents. On the other hand, the call center agents who were interviewed were selected based on the following criteria: 1) with first few months up to 2 years of experience as call center agents; 2) have control of the conversations in the inbound calls; and 3) have transactions with American customers/clients. Language trainers and call center agents who did not meet the said criteria and those who meet the same but were not willing to be interviewed and refused to give informed consent forms are excluded as participants in the study.

#### 2.3 Research Instrument

The instrument in this research study was an unstructured interview, which included open-ended questions. Probing and clarification questions provided an opportunity to let the interview flow like natural conversation. Interview questions for call center agents were intended to gather data on their perception of the language training program provided by the call center industry. The interview questions for language trainers were focused on language training practices employed by trainers in developing the language skills of call center agents.

#### 2.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure reliability and validity, the researcher submitted the instruments to three validators/experts who specialize in Applied Linguistics. The validation resulted in the clarity of the interview questions and provided insight in choosing appropriate words and in formulating questions. Interview questions were reworked; and then the final interview questions were ready for use to interview the willing participants.

#### 2.5 Coding and Analysis of Data

The interview with call center agents and language trainers was transcribed verbatim in order to maintain the validity and reliability of data. Answers from the interview transcripts were organized and coded or categorized in grid form, were assigned with the predetermined codes or categories, and were then subjected to further analysis.

In terms of language training practices, the responses were coded or categorized based on the idea of different researchers who were able to observe and find out the practices in call centers here and abroad, such as that of Lockwood (2008, 2012; Friginal, 2013; Bolton, 2013; Dzuba, 2015). The language training practices that emerged during the interview were coded/categorized as follows: Language Training Assessment/Monitoring and Coaching (LA), Accent Neutralization (AN), and Use of Scripted language (SL).

In terms of call center agents' perception of the effectiveness of language training, the responses were coded/categorized, analyzed and described using Kirkpatrick's (1959, 1975, 1994, cited in Rehmat, et.al., 2015) *four levels of training evaluation model: Level 1: Reaction (L1), Level 2: Learning (L2), Level 3: Behavior/Application (L3), and Level 4: Results (L4)*.

Responses which were not assigned with predetermined categories were grouped or categorized according to themes; from the extracts thematic insights were formulated and were explained further by eidetic insights.

#### 2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher conducted interviews with language trainers and call center agents at an off-site venue because call center management disallowed interviews with their frontline employees for confidentiality purposes. The researcher used an audio/computer recorder to capture all the interviews for complete and accurate data transcription. To make sure that data collected from the interviews were valid and reliable, the researcher asked probing and follow-up questions to clarify the

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

responses from participants. Each interview lasted for 45 minutes to 1 hour. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim for accuracy, and data were categorized and analyzed.

### 2.7 Ethical Considerations

The language trainers and call center agents were given the choice to refuse to participate if they wanted to; once they confirmed their participation, they were given a detailed explanation about the study and briefing ethical issues. After which, they were asked to sign informed consent forms that state the consent of their voluntary participation, and at the same time, assured them of the confidentiality of their responses.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Language training practices employed by language trainers in call centers

As shown in Table 1, all the five language trainers had common practices in their respective companies during the language training in terms of language training assessment, monitoring, and coaching. It is also shown in the table that all the five language trainers practiced accent neutralization and only language trainers 2 and 5 did not practice the use of scripted language during the language training.

**Table. 1. Language training practices employed by language trainers in call centers**

Language trainer	Language training assessment/monitoring and coaching	Accent neutralization	Use of scripted language
LT1	Practiced	Practiced	Practiced
LT2	Practiced	Practiced	Not practiced
LT3	Practiced	Practiced	Practiced
LT4	Practiced	Practiced	Practiced
LT5	Practiced	Practiced	Not practiced

#### 3.1.1 Language training assessment/monitoring and coaching

The five (5) language trainers employed the same practice in terms of language assessment, monitoring, and coaching based on the program and policy of their companies, but differ on the components of criteria and are a little different on the manner of implementation and the activities or intervention made.

First language trainer (LT1) employed language assessment and monitoring as training practice through call listening, which is, listening to call center agents' telephone transactions with customers; if clients complained about the inability of the agents to communicate, the training department conducted one-on-one coaching. The extract below was the exact statement of language trainer 1.

Extract 1

LT1: *...the agents are being evaluated not only by the people here but also our clients from abroad. They are being monitored everyday...that's every day for the whole entire time that they are here...they are evaluated. They are coached...one-on-one coaching.*

The second language trainer (LT2) simultaneously conducted the language assessment and monitoring by letting call center agents present mock calls and then evaluate/rate agents using the scorecard which included the three components, grammar, pronunciation, and oral presentation. Coaching was done only to "red flag" trainees or trainees who have difficulty in these three areas or components.

Extract 2

LT2: *Of course, we do assess...we do monitor...in order to gauge their proficiency or their learning... Assessments are positioned in between the curriculum to gauge learning. We do have criteria...we call it a score card...so they are gauged based on a certain score card...score cards have components that mainly involve grammar, pronunciation, uh...oral presentation, and we also have the so-called mock calls.*

The third language trainer (LT3) practice pre-language assessment during the first day of training by listening to the call center agents speaking in front of them for three minutes, and the agents' communication skills are rated in terms of grammar, spontaneity, clarity of speech, pronunciation, and word connection. Coaching was done for enrichment the agents' skills.

Extract 3

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

LT3: *You have to give them three minutes to stand in front and speak and in speaking you're already evaluating them. We have the pre-assessment on the first day. We have the criteria...We have grammar, we have spontaneity, clarity of speech, pronunciation, we have word connection.*

The fourth language trainer's (LT4) implementation of language assessment and monitoring of call center agents was done using the methods such as mock calls, oral presentation and call listening. Failure of the agents to pass the criteria set such as friendliness, honesty, with no FLI or first language interference, and language accuracy resulted to mark down on scores and coaching on these four areas.

### Extract 4

LT4: *Well, we have activities...the agenda has activities, like for example mock calls, oral presentation, call listening....that's how we measure their comprehension...that's how we assess their proficiency...how...how they use the language in talking with the customers. We listen to calls of our agents, and if ever they were not able to display the behavior that we are expecting from them, then we coach them for that.*

### Extract 5

LT4: *It's the quality form that we're using. It contains the different behaviors, like friendliness, honesty. In Language, we mark them down if they are unable to construct very good sentence. Actually, if it's not really something impacted on the call, we don't really mark it down. But if the agent did it for multiple times already especially if the customer complains and says, "I'm sorry, I do not understand you". That's we're really mark them down.*

Lastly, for the fifth language trainer (LT5), although language assessment and monitoring were both observed or practiced, these were done separately by the two departments. Language assessment was done by trainers in the training department under the language department, first, in the form of a mock test or six-part test using different types of questions to test the fluency and spontaneity of agents in speaking within the given time limit; and second, in the form of oral reading to test their pace and fluency. For monitoring, the quality specialists filled out scorecards and evaluation forms, and together with the American customers' feedbacks, these were sent to the trainers in the training department, who determined the coaching to agents through enhancement activities.

### Extract 6

LT5: *We have this actually this language assessment...we have a language assessment prior to them being identified as possible students for our training...our language training... we do language assessments at recruitment level. The language assessment that they're taking is a six-part test and...yeah...umm... every time they finish one section they get feedback... "this is how you do the reading part, this is how fast you should read, this is the pace you should be in, you should be at least between a 120 – 160 words per minute to be considered as fluent...*

Hired applicants were not handled properly in terms of assessing their language proficiency, for the trainer did not know the criteria and detailed process in the assessment, coaching and monitoring. This is what the language department under the recruitment was lacking. According to Lockwood (2015), no matter how rigid the training and coaching of CSRs within the BPO industry, however, there is still a need for a performance measure to have a basis for coaching and training. It implies that language trainers did not involve themselves in the assessment and monitoring of agents in terms of their performance on the call despite the fact that the trainer in the language department was well aware of the existing monitoring processes.

There are call centers in Bacolod that do not develop good language training practices in the content of their scorecards used for assessment and monitoring. The scorecards do not include many areas or components; the emphasis was on language accuracy and phonological aspects.

In the issue of utilization of scorecards for monitoring process, Lockwood (2008) regarded this practice and the language training, in general, as highly problematic because these were designed for native, rather than non-native, speakers of English and are used in the United Kingdom and the United States as quality measures. Lockwood also maintained that although the scorecards aim to measure communicative competence, they have not been informed (nor adapted for NNS) by existing frameworks in language testing and assessment.

This was supported in his (Lockwood, et.al, 2012) later study by stating that there are scorecard problems especially in a workplace environment when the CSR is operating in a second language that this scorecard measurement suffers from an incomplete set of criteria for English language communicative competence. Lockwood, et.al (2012) also added that good language and communication assessment practices have defined the salient features of communicative competence in 3 or 4 major categories such as pronunciation; interactive ability; discourse coherence and language range and choice.

Finally, findings of this study revealed that call centers provide coaching as a sort of intervention or enhancement of the skills or key areas as the result of the monitoring of the agents' performance. Alderson and Banerjee 2002; Bachman 2000; and Weir 2005 (in Lockwood, 2012) termed it as "washback", what is tested will be taught and learned. If the scoring and QA processes are based on solid research and are valid, the "washback" will be positive; that is, trainers will make correct judgments,

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

and the diagnosis of what is going wrong will be comprehensive. If, on the other hand, the scoring and QA processes are inconsistent, incomplete and poorly weighted, the scoring will be inaccurate and the diagnosis problematic, thereby rendering the coaching a waste of time. However, call center managements must consider a research-based content of their scorecards to provide accurate monitoring results and effective coaching.

Table 2 shows the criteria, methods, and intervention for language assessment, monitoring, and coaching.

**Table 2. Criteria, Methods, and Intervention for Language assessment, monitoring, and Coaching**

Language trainer	Practice	Criteria for language assessment & monitoring	Methods	Coaching Intervention/Activities
1	Language assessment & monitoring	No specific criteria known to the trainer	Call listening	One-on-one coaching in communication skills
2	Language assessment & monitoring	using scorecard with 3 components, grammar, pronunciation, and oral presentation.	Mock call	Coaching in grammar, pronunciation, and oral presentation
3	Language assessment	grammar, spontaneity, clarity of speech, pronunciation, and word connection	Call listening	Activities for enrichment of communication skills
4	Language assessment & monitoring	friendliness, honesty, with no FLI or first language interference, and language accuracy	mock calls, oral presentation and call listening	Coaching on behavior (friendliness, honesty), FLI or first language interference (eliminate regional accent) and language accuracy (subject-verb agreement)
5	Language assessment & monitoring	Language assessment (pace, fluency and spontaneity) Monitoring (scorecards and evaluation forms)	Mock test & oral reading	Enhancement activities

### 3.1.2 Accent neutralization training

All the five language trainers employed accent neutralization as one of their language training practices. They all confirmed the training of agents on accent neutralization for a specific purpose. These reasons are:

LT1 - *To do away with regional accent*

LT2 - *To neutralize glaring FLI or regional accent*

LT3 - *To take away Ilonggo accent*

LT4 - *To eliminate regional accent*

LT5 - *Not to let agents to sound like locals*

Table 3 presents the exact words of language trainers indicating the reason for/purpose of providing accent neutralization training to call center agents.

**Table 3. Reason for/Purpose of Accent neutralization training**

Language Trainer	Reason for/Purpose of Accent neutralization training	Insights
1	<i>Accent neutralization is something that uhh...would teach them how to speak like Americans, not really...not totally with the...with the thick American accent but more on how they would...they just do away with the regional accent that they usually have because it really disturbs American clients.</i>	The language trainers taught accent neutralization or accent modification to agents to eliminate regional accent because this disturbed the American customers. The American customers complain when they hear a different accent, and this may cause a problem in their business transactions. For the trainers, the regional accent is the



## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

2	<p><i>...if you are not a native speaker of English you will have significant FLI's we call it a first language influence. <b>And one of the glaring FLI is that...we have is really regional accent.</b> If you're someone who is not exposed to English, it would be very challenging for you to neutralize your accent.</i></p>	<p>speaker's mother tongue which significantly influences his/her ability to speak English. They consider the regional accent a big issue or problem that needs to be addressed, changed, or neutralized. Moreover, they believe that one way to make American customers understand the call center agents is to allow the agents to speak with a neutralized accent.</p>
3	<p><i>... to take away...let's say the...the Ilonggo accent...so that American customer would not be irritated with the accent of call center agents.</i></p>	<p>It implies that the neutral accent taught was the American accent, because they want to please and satisfy American customers. Zagabe (2017) explained that American English is considered as the standard basis for the quality of English required for a job in a call center.</p>
4	<p><i>Actually, it's the regional accent that we wanted to eliminate from the trainees during the training. ...they need to neutralize their accent to be more understandable to the customer. Not imitating the American accent.</i></p>	
5	<p><i>...we are aiming towards easing and neutral...more neutral accent ...we don't want our agents here to sound like locals</i></p>	

In Philippine call centers, a great deal of time and effort was spent in providing recruits to the industry with courses on 'accent neutralization', which in practice meant instructing new staff in the basics of American English phonology (Cowie, 2007, cited in Bolton, 2013) which focuses on pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation. Language trainers believe that teaching accent neutralization in this manner may not create problems in the agents' transactions with customers.

Accent neutralization is emphasized in the module or training courses in call centers. Lockwood (2012) observed that training on accent neutralization is done to minimize the impact of the mother tongue in spoken English and that the training courses do a great deal of accent neutralization to mask first language (Li) differences. American accent was taught because Filipino call center agents are serving American customers. It is one way for call centers to provide good quality service to their clients/customers because these call centers believe that they had attained excellent customer satisfaction when customers were not questioning the agents' accent.

For BPO industries in the Philippines, the regional accent of Filipino call center agents is a big issue or problem to make their American customers understand the transaction and for them to promote better customer satisfaction. Kanjirakkat (2017) opined that accents, identities, and cultures have been "neutralized"; that is, modified to be more palatable to their English speaking customers. The teaching and practice of accent neutralization, not only during the training but also used by the agents on the floor throughout the telephone transaction with customers, has been the trend in call centers, not only in the Philippines but in other NNES countries as well.

Language trainers admitted that American customers' dissatisfaction with the accent of Filipino agents implicitly demonstrates discrimination and lack of recognition or acceptance of linguistic and cultural differences. Kanjirakkat (2017), in his book review of Aneesh' (2015) *Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global*, opined that the phrase "neutral accent" is used partly referentially and partly metaphorically that gives an account of how differences – linguistic, cultural, temporal, and gender-related are disregarded in the functioning of the call centers. Kanjirakkat added that this term- neutral accent brings deleterious effects of a lack of attention to accent variations and presents these effects as an argument against indifference to difference.

Moreover, Acosta (2012), in his study of the *Oral Proficiency level required by the main Call Centers in El Salvador*, said that much of the English language training for the call center industry inappropriately focused on discrete grammar rules and accent neutralization which has little to do with the customer service interaction.

### 3.1.3 Use of Scripted Language

Most call centers in Bacolod City were using scripted language as revealed in the study with 3 out of 5 trainers (LT1, LT3, and LT4) who explicitly stated it; however, the second and fifth language trainers said that they were using scripts based on the format

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

or call flow provided to agents. According to Dzuba (2015), structured call flows are essential to every call center, and this means that agents used a prescribed language called the script in their transactions with the customers. Scripted call flow simulation is one of the strategies used by call center training programs in an attempt to mold NNS call center agents into communicators able to interact with and understand NS callers. (Downing, 2004, cited in Lombard, 2014).

This prescribed language/script in a structured call flow followed and used by agents were written by Americans for the call centers to use. The third language trainer (LT3) even admitted, that for example that the *opening-closing, hold procedure, transfer procedure* are scripted, and the conventional words when opening a call, for example are “*thank you for calling, how can I assist you?*”

The third language trainer indicated that the call flow/script is a standard one which means that it is something set up and established by authority. Lombard (2014; Herndl&Lacona, 2007) opined that the American writers made efforts to standardize and control workplace language, limiting meaningful two-way communication and leaving the NNS call center agents to both questions what they were told and invent new ways of communicating. Since the American writers have control of the workplace language, the call center agents have no choice but to follow the standardized scripts in their conversations with customers.

However, in the study of Woydack (2019) titled “*Language management and language work in a multilingual call center: An ethnographic case study*”, there were call center agents who admitted that the scripts they used contained examples of correct grammar that helped them enhanced their understanding and use of a language.

Table 4 presents the exact words of language trainers indicating the reason for/purpose of using scripts.

**Table 4: Reason for/Purpose of using scripts in call centers**

Language Trainer	Reason for/Purpose of using scripts	INSIGHTS
1	<i>Scripts were used at first, but were discontinued</i>  <i>At present, Formats are provided as guide</i>	Based on the statements of language trainers, it is clear that the discontinued use of scripts was done not long after the practice of the prescriptive language. It also implies that their mastery of the scripted language was due to the length of the exposure of the call center agents to the call transactions with the customers and not attributed to the training or practice provided by the company.
2	<i>No scripted language used</i>	It also means that the longer the call center agents' exposure to their work, the more improvement can be observed in their call performance. And since the use of scripts was discontinued, formats were provided instead.
3	<i>Scripts are used for call branding</i>	For the company which did not use scripted language, the call center agents use their own words in transacting business with the customers during the entire call. Perhaps, the applicants who qualified as call center agents in the company had a better facility in spoken English communication and were familiar with call center communication and
4	<i>Scripts are especially for those who are first timers in the call center during training, for practice purposes.</i>	structured call flow in call centers. It may be that the call center agents had a thorough practice through mock calls during the training; they were able to understand the concept, and then, they became spontaneous when they had started to do the actual work on the phone.
5	<i>No scripts are allowed, instead agents are exposed to call flow</i>	Apparently, the employment of prescriptive language for training or practice purposes is a type of scaffolding among the agents. When the agents have established or developed their speech habits during the training period, they no longer used the scripts. In addition, it can be inferred that the agents are expected to use their own words during the actual call and not memorize the script. The non-use of scripted words was to make sure of the agents' spontaneity in oral communication. It implies that the company's non-practice of scripted language, not only during the training but also in the call transactions of agents with the customers, was to develop in agents well established communication skills.

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

### 3.2 Call center agents' perception of the effectiveness of language training

Call center agents differed on their perceptions of effectiveness of the language training provided by call centers. Some call center agents were satisfied, while others were not. However, almost all agents had a good impression of the trainers/instructors and their presentations. The training was said to be inadequate on language aspect, for it was more on product training. Not all agents learned a lot of knowledge, skills, and attitudes from the training, and that not all the things learned were applied in the actual job. Compliments and positive feedbacks of customers were more on service quality rather than on language used.

Based on the responses of the call center agents, it can be noted that only 14 of them were satisfied, and 16 were dissatisfied with the language training conducted at call centers.

The findings of the present study, where agents regarded training as insufficient; and that they believed not all the things learned were applied in the actual job, have similar findings with the study conducted by Kisiel (2013) on performance measurement and job satisfaction in call centers. The survey revealed that employees believe that training offered to them doesn't help in their career development.

Using Kirkpatrick's (1959, 1975, 1994, cited in Rehmat et al., 2015) four levels of training evaluation model, the following shows the perception of call center agents about the language training:

#### Level 1-Reaction

All 30 call center agents claimed that the company provided language training for call center agents. Duration of training lasted for two to three months, but in the case of agents who attended training for a month considered the training was short and easy. The training used computers, recordings of the actual calls of call center agents and some presentations about the account that they had to handle in the actual calls. The agents stated that although the materials were not helpful during the training, they were relevant and functional during the actual calls. However, some agents who admitted that they did not have many materials during the training. Presentation of topics and lessons were done through power point. The training includes product and account training, utilization of computer tools, some English lessons, ways to handle customers, opening and closing spiels (scripts), and American culture.

Extract 7

CA2: *...most of the materials are relevant and useful such as the computers, recordings and some presentations about the account.*

Extract 8

CA6: *We have scripts when we are still under training, scripts for opening spiel and closing spiel and uhmm...sometimes we have also scripts for the specific problem of the customer...*

There were call center agents who said that the training conducted was *good, fun, enjoyable, interesting, and satisfying*. There was no feeling of boredom and sleepiness during the entire lesson. Yet, some agents opined that the activities were monotonous, stressful, and full of pressures.

Extract 9

CA15: *yes... it's a crystal clear presentation, ...uhmm.. that is fun and enjoyable. I like also the jokes of our trainer.*

Extract 10

CA18: *It's some sort of a review of some...uhm...I think only few of our English lessons when I was in school...that's why I get...uhhh...bored and sleepy...sometimes*

The call center agents opined that the training provided by the companies was more on product training rather than language training. Training on the language aspect was inadequate, and one agent was confused if the training conducted was language training because it contains only a part of it.

The call center agents regarded the training as insufficient because some suggest only a part of English lessons are taught. As a non-native English speaker, the Filipino agent needs proper training to become fully equipped with communicative competencies.

Extract 11

CA17: *in...this company, they didn't provide language training...just a training about the product or the assigned account for you and it's like for two months.*

#### Level 2 – Learning

There were call center agents who claimed that they learned many things from the training. Others asserted that they acquired knowledge, developed or enhanced their skills and was aware of the change in their attitudes during their actual work as call center agents. Nonetheless, there were agents who admitted that they did not benefit so much from the training because what they attended was not language training, and no language trainer taught them on the use of the English language. The training merely focused on the account they had to handle and possible solutions to customers' problems



## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

Extract 12

CA4: "...it is just training...but not language training... training on how you could possibly give solution to the query of your customer. We don't really have the language training and language trainer what we have is the trainer for the specific account you were assigned to".

Extract 13

CA27: *Our company provides us training but not a language training to be exact, it is training about the account you are going to handle.*

This suggests that not all the lessons essential to enhance communication skills were tackled or included in the training. The training might have been half-baked, rushed haphazard, or incomplete. This may also mean that language training was not carefully managed, and because they need to plunge agents right away in front of a phone, the training program suffered.

### Level 3 – Behavior/Application

As to the application of learning in the actual job, varying responses were gathered from the call center agents during the interview. The call center agents testified that what they learned from the training was barely adequate or helpful in the actual job. However, there were call center agents who claimed that they were able to apply in the job the things that they learned from the training. The agents felt that the firm provided them with the proper training that will help them improve their knowledge, skills and attitude. Some agents admitted that there were parts of the training that were not relevant or were not applicable in their job, but they still believed that they gained confidence, improved their performance and enhanced their interactional skills not because of the benefit of the training but because of common sense and will power when they were already on their actual job.

CA1: *I exactly applied everything to my job as an agent*

CA5: *to be honest...it is only 10% in the training that can be helpful in the actual job as an agent...some of which will come from your common sense and the uhm...the power uhm...on how you deal with the customers.*

CA7: *There's a lot of changes in me...I've improved because I'm already one year in this account and in this call center industry... because I was able to adopt the culture and the accent of the Americans....and fortunately,...my interactional skills enhanced...which is definitely not part of our training.*

The situation tells that language trainers were not qualified language specialists because only 2 out of 5 interviewed language trainers had earned the Bachelor's degree related to the language course (Mass Communication and BSEd English). Therefore, these trainers did not deliver a good quality of training to agents, and the training resulted in minimal learning of agents; thus, what they applied in their actual job was the minimal amount of knowledge and skill gained from the training. This idea is supported by Lockwood, et.al.(2008) in his study which he found that in the majority of call centers in the Philippines, 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.

### Level 4 - Results

Level 4 (Results) of the Kirkpatrick model talks about the actual results that affect the organization on a bigger scale. To this end, analysis of coded/categorized responses under this level was done to reveal whether the company received good comments and compliments from customers about the improved and overall language performance of agents.

According to call center agents, the company did not receive any comments regarding their language performance; what the company usually received were feedbacks about the services provided by the agents to the customers. The feedback or comment received indicates either customer satisfaction or customer dissatisfaction on how they handled calls in dealing with the customers and not how the call center agents used the language.

CA1: *...in terms of language performance, they... the company has not received any comment from the customers...but...in terms of our service provided to them, well...*

CA6: *I think there is no feedback as to the language performance of agents from ...from the customers...but I think...only comments about our services...how better or worse we serve them.*

It can be inferred that the comments or feedbacks received by the company was focused only on the pleasant or unpleasant situation or experience of the customers with the call center agents on the duration of the calls. Customers were not making any comment on the language or words of the agents; the call center agents believed that American customers were not concerned with the grammar but the response of the agents to queries/problems of the customers. It could also mean that feedback provided by customers had something to do with the service quality, and then the quality service results in satisfaction. According to Kisiel (2013), there is a relationship between service quality and satisfaction, where satisfaction is what the customer thinks of the service when compared with their previous expectations of service.

Table 5 shows the call center agents' different perceptions of effectiveness of the language training provided by call centers.

## Language Training and Language Training Practices in The Call Centre Industry

**Table 5. Call center agents' perception of the effectiveness of language training**

Level of training evaluation model	Focus of Interview	Themes Derived from Interviews
<b>Level 1 – Reaction</b>	Perception about the trainers	Knowledge authority Eloquent speaker Obliging/Congenial
	Usefulness of the training	Enough for the job Not Enough for the Job
<b>Level 2 – Learning</b>	Topics that were taught in and knowledge gained from the training program	Grammar and vocabulary Account and product information How to handle customers American culture Accent/intonation, pronunciation Scripts/scripted language Call center jargons
<b>Level 3 – Behavior/Application</b>	Application of learning in the actual job	Not all learning is applicable Almost all learnings have been applied
<b>Level 4 – Results</b>	Comments and compliments received from customers of the improved over-all language performance of agents	No comments received as to the language performance Feedbacks on the situation or experience Service quality Compliments/expressing gratitude

### 4. CONCLUSION

Language training programs in call centers do not focus their lessons on language, specifically on aspects that agents have difficulty with. Most call centers do not know the specific language needs of Filipino call center agents in their telephone exchanges with American customers. The training practices utilized by call centers may be included in the teaching curriculum as part of concepts for aspiring call center agents to learn and understand. Their awareness of such terminologies and practices might inform them of what they need to expect when call centers conduct training for qualified applicants. Language training programs need to emphasize linguistic features in teaching call center English to fully equip call center agents with excellent oral and intercultural communication skills. In this way, the contents of training programs and the teaching of call center English may meet the standard set by language experts/applied linguists. Other researchers may wish to conduct a similar study using the recorded call center transaction for analysis because no local studies were conducted utilizing recorded calls, and the call center management did not permit the researcher to have copies of these recorded calls.

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