

Communication Challenges in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry: Input to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for BPO Agents

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Abstract A plethora of Filipinos who work in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry face communication challenges in interacting with Americans. This study identified the oral communication challenges that deviate from the standard American English. The results were used as basis for input to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for BPO agents. Six trainees/agents working in the BPO industry were purposively selected based on the following criteria: lower than 90% quality evaluation scores given by the onshore quality analysts, exuded communication challenges on their calls, have been working in the BPO industry for at least one year, and are part of the three-week nesting process. Results revealed that the oral communication challenges of the trainees/agents are focused on pronunciation, syntax, and phrase/sentence construction. Thus, assessment and evaluation of varied teaching methods and techniques must be done to address the challenges in English proficiency.

Keywords: Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry, call center agent, communication challenge

Introduction

The Business Process Industry (BPO) or Call Center Industry has tremendously been growing in the Philippines. However, issues relating to diversity and convergence in the use of English are becoming strongly prominent. Albeit English is the second language (L2) of Filipinos, there

are still differences on how they use such language compared with Americans, hence called *Filipinisms*. This concept is defined by Volz (2014), as words or phrases that seem to be correct, but are grammatically incorrect, and are a result of transliteration (*direct translation from one language to another, [Volz, 2014]*). This is one of the major challenges of call center agents who are working in the BPO because they use English as their second/foreign language. Hence, communication challenges between interlocutors happen, which might be the reason for stagnation of BPO industry in the country.

BPO Industry and Language Skills

According to Chanco (2017) “the BPO sector is expected to generate \$40 billion in revenues, 7.6 million direct and indirect jobs, 500,000 jobs outside of the National Capital Region, and is assumed to cover 15% of the total global outsourcing market by the end of 2022” (p.14). This only means that BPO is indeed a fast-growing industry in the country. However, to be able to work in this industry, fluency in using English plays a vital role to become a highly efficient call center agent. This competence requires fluency in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary including idiomatic expressions commonly used by native English speakers. Schelmetic (2012) states that understanding the customers is not enough because inability to understand foreign customers’ culture can leave a call center agent with dissatisfied customers. Studies also show that Filipinos speak English, but not at the level of what the international industry is looking for. Graduates usually fail when they engage in a free-flowing conversation, and when they talk about business communication (Mercado, 2012 as cited in Dumlao, 2013).

Studies in English Language Training and Communication Challenges in the BPO

In the BPO, the most important skills are English proficiency specifically oral communication skills as well as critical thinking and problem solving (Visconti, 2012). Most outsourced and offshore call centers currently provide English communication training before the agents start taking phone calls. These training solutions are typically developed by the businesses themselves. These training courses focus on *accent neutralization* to mask first language (L1) differences, and seek to

eradicate grammatical interference mistakes, often through drilling and through the explicit teaching of grammar rules (Friginal, 2009; Lockwood, 2010).

According to Lockwood (2010a), another problem in training is the fragmentation of communication training into language training. This means that the training focuses on explicit grammar instruction and pronunciation drill, instead of intercultural training, accent neutralization, and soft skills training. Moreover, the trainers who facilitate the training session usually do not have a formal background in language teaching.

These practices reflect a lack of appreciation of the nature of spoken English from a sociolinguistic standpoint, and the language needs of this English as a second language target group of agents. Therefore, this study aims to provide inputs in the design of syllabus that focuses on the challenges of the Filipino agents in communicating in English. This way, these challenges will either be eradicated or minimized.

Framework of the Study

The study focused on determining communication challenges in the business process outsourcing industry as basis for English for Specific Purposes instruction contextualized according to the workplace demands. In addition, the communication challenges of the agents are given attention, and not of the callers. The agents' communication challenges could be on pronunciation, words, and phrases or sentences in relation to semantics and syntax which could differ with the callers' language production in oral conversations. Hence, the focus is on communication challenges that deviate from the standard American English.

Communication trainers help the agents improve their communication skills so that they will understand and appropriately respond to the queries of the callers. This is where the theory of communication accommodation comes in, which pertains to the adjustments that people do in their speech, vocal patterns, and gestures whenever they communicate.

Supervisors, quality analysts, and process trainers ensure that the agents/trainees follow the quality standards and its components: *welcoming, understanding, helping, and keeping* on their calls. The identification of oral communication challenges of the agents can then be used as basis for ESP-based language training program in the context of BPO industry.

Purposes of the Research

The main purpose of this study was to describe the oral communication challenges of the agents in the business process outsourcing industry that deviate from the standard American English.

Specifically, the research aimed to:

1. Describe communication challenges in Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) of the agents in terms of *welcoming, understanding, helping, and keeping*.
2. Categorize the communication challenges experienced by both interlocutors

Methodology

Research Design

As it is aimed, this research described and categorized the communication challenges of agents who work in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry. A qualitative research using phenomenological study was employed to describe and categorize the existence of communication challenges of the agents in the BPO Industry. This served as basis of the input to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for BPO agents.

Participants of the Study

The study utilized six agents working in the BPO industry, who were purposively selected based on the following criteria: have lower than 90% quality evaluation scores given by the onshore quality analysts,

have exuded communication challenges in their calls, have been working in the BPO industry for at least one year, and part is of the three-week nesting process.

Instruments

Four instruments were used in this study.

Profile Survey – A researcher-made interview guide served as the instrument for collecting data on individual's personal information. When the interview guide was developed, two experts reviewed it to ensure content validity. There were some corrections with the wordings but were corrected to ensure clarity in data collection.

Quality Evaluation Form - This form has two (2) sections: the first section encapsulates soft skills that covers the communication style of the agents/trainees while the second section covers product part that pertains to the specific processes that the agents/trainees need to follow. For reliability, this form was initially used to some agents for testing. Moreover, the onshore trainer and onshore quality analyst who are both native speakers of English checked its content. After which, some items were revised and rephrased.

Guide for Analysis of Communication Challenges – This was the main instrument used in the study. Communication challenges have the following categories: pronunciation, words, phrases or sentences. Under phrases and sentences, grammar and semantics were looked into. To validate the communication challenges, another instrument (*Validation of Identified Communication Challenges*) was utilized. This instrument was submitted to the authorities who are considered experts (a language educator, a culture and communication trainer, and an offshore quality analyst) in the field of language and communication to check the validity of the instrument. The researcher considered all their recommendations and suggestions in the revision.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher first ensured that all authorizations and permissions were processed before the conduct of the study. After selecting the participants and securing their informed consent, the researcher started

with interview sessions. Each interview took 20 minutes. It happened during the participants' work schedule which was from 9:00 PM to 6:00 AM. The participants were pulled out one at a time and the profile survey was administered. In this way, the personal information of the participants such as their name, gender, age, degree, languages spoken, among others were gathered. The interviews happened in an air-conditioned and quiet room. Technological devices are not allowed in operations; hence, the interviews were not recorded but the researcher took interview notes.

Moreover, the researcher selected the calls that obtained a score of lower than 90% based on Quality Evaluation of the onshore analysts. The recorded calls were transcribed for analysis purposes. The excerpts that manifested communication challenges were taken and manually categorized into four: pronunciation, words, syntax and semantics. After which, they were analyzed and possible reasons why these communication challenges occurred were deduced.

Findings

This section presents the data that were gathered from the recorded calls that were transcribed and evaluated. These data were analyzed to determine the communication challenges faced by the Filipino call center agents in terms of pronunciation, words, and phrases - syntax and semantics. Inferences and insights were drawn in accordance to the analysis of the recorded calls. Moreover, implications were integrated in the discussion and interpretation of the data.

A. Communication Challenges in BPO

Table 1. Summary of Communication Challenges

SOFT SKILLS	Pronunciation	Words	Syntax	Semantics
SUBTOTAL				
Welcoming	9	0	10	0
Understanding	14	0	5	0
Helping	39	5	26	1
Keeping	5	0	6	0
TOTAL	67	5	47	1

The greatest number of challenges fall under pronunciation or sound production. This implies that despite their experience working in the BPO industry, they still need to be more familiar with the way English words are pronounced by English natives. They also faced challenges in constructing correct phrases/sentences. Lastly, the trainees/agents exuded minimal challenges in word usage.

Based on Table 1, it could be inferred that despite the number of challenges under grammar and pronunciation, the meaning of the phrases and sentences that the trainees/agents wanted to convey is perhaps still more important over grammar. It goes to show that although both challenges have to be overcome, sentential level of communication is more important than grammar and pronunciation.

Welcoming

This part of the quality form consists of four parts: welcome greeting, personalizing the call, courteous and professional tone/demeanor, and verifying contact information as presented in Figure 1.

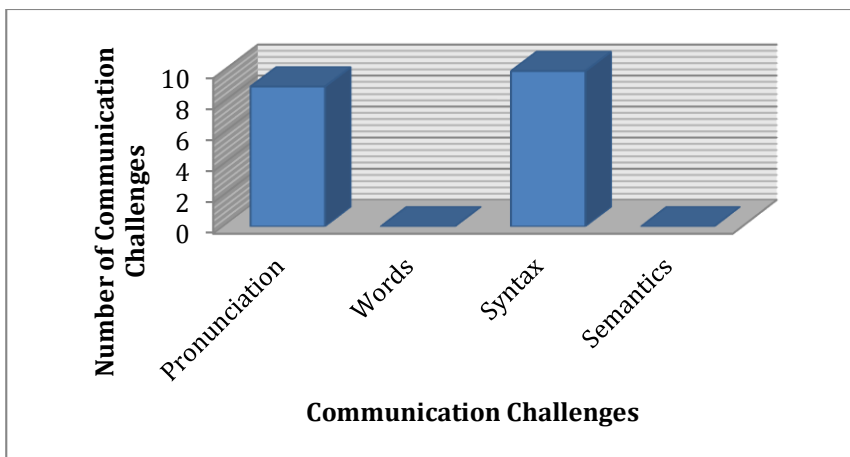


Figure 1. Summary of Communication Challenges on Welcoming

On Pronunciation

Under Welcoming, the agents exuded communication challenges on pronunciation and syntax.

In delivering the standard opening spiel, “*Thank you for calling (name of the company, this is (name) and how can I help you?*” Three out of six (50%) agents mispronounced the word mortgage. The correct pronunciation of mortgage is [ˈmɔːr.gɪdʒ] but they said [ˈmɔːrt. geɪdʒ]. Moreover, Agent 2 asserted department [ˈdɪj.pɑrt.mənt] rather than [dɪˈpɑrt.mənt].

Agent 3 also showed communication challenges on pronunciation. In his call, he said, “*Perfect [ˈfɛrfɪkt]! Thank you so much for that information and thank you for verifying [ˈbɛrɪ-fajɪŋ] the account.*” The pronunciation challenges that the agent manifested on the call were [b] and [v] sounds. Because of these pronunciation challenges, he said [ˈbɛrɪ-fajɪŋ] instead of [ˈvɛrɪ-fajɪŋ]. This also shows that he is challenged in producing the schwa [ə] sound. Furthermore, he said on the call [ˈfɛrfɪkt] instead of [ˈpɛr.fɪkt].

In the verification process, Agents 3 and 5 manifested challenges in pronunciation because one of the questions that Agent 3 asked was,

“*May I have the [ðɪj] loan number?*” The correct pronunciation is [θə]. This means that he has a challenge on the stress [ðɪj]. He also asked, “*And how about the last [lɑst] 4 digits of the Social Security Number?*” Apparently, the agent mispronounced the word *last*, he said [lɑst] instead of [læst]. Moreover, Agent 3 asked the caller, “*May you please verify ['berɪ- fəj] the property?*” and “*May I please verify ['berɪ- fəj] your email address?*” He said ['berɪ- fəj] instead of ['verə, fəj]. Lastly, one of the verification questions that he asked was, “*May I know the name of your new insurance [ɪn'sʊ-rəns] company?*” On the call, the agent or trainee mispronounced the word *insurance*. He said [ɪn'sʊ-rəns] instead of [ɪn'ʃʊərəns]. For Agent 5, when she pronounced the word *loan*, she said [lɒn] instead of [loun]. “Another question that was asked by the agent was, “*May I have the insurance that [dæt] you are representing please?*” The agent said [dæt] instead of [ðæt]. For the other agents, they did not mispronounce any words while they were performing verification.

On Syntax

Agent 1 was the only agent who tried to build rapport with the caller. He said, “*I’m also the person who you spoke with, I do show here.*” Apparently, the meaning of this message is clear; but it has issues on verb tenses because instead of saying, “*I was also the person that you spoke with*” the agent said, “*I’m also the person that you spoke with.*” Furthermore, since it was the second time that the agent spoke with the caller on that same day, he could have added the adverb “*earlier*” at the end of the sentence, so it becomes “*I was also the person that you spoke with earlier. I do show here.*”

Agents showed communication challenges in verifying customers’ information. Agents 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 showed the following challenges: Agent 1 uttered, “*Regarding on*” this information “*that you needed regarding on this endorsement check.*” This is wrong and redundant because “*regarding*” is a preposition; hence, no need to add *on* which is also a preposition. Apart from this, the agent also asserted, “*That you needed.*” Again, grammar wise, this is incorrect because the agent should have said, “*That you need*” since the need is at the moment of speaking; hence, simple present tense of the verb should have been used.

In connection to verb tenses, the agent mentioned during the conversation, “*I already update*” and “*all the information is already been provided.*” The agent should have said, “*I already updated.*” This denotes that the action is over and done with. Moreover, Agents 1 and 2 used “*Is been*” in their conversations with the callers. They should have used “*has*” instead of “*is.*” The correct phrase is, “*Has been.*”

In addition, Agent 5 also made some mistakes in this aspect. The phrase, “*The insurance company that you representing with*” was used by the agent. This is ungrammatical because after the pronoun you, the linking verb “*are*” is needed. Moreover, the preposition “*with*” is not necessary.

Moreover, Agent 4 said on the call, “*Your insurance agent phone number.*” It was vivid that he was asking for the phone number of the insurance agent so this also covers possession; therefore, the agent should have said, “*Your insurance agent’s phone number.*”

Agent 3 also exuded some challenges in terms of syntax. On the call, the agent said, “*Let me access the accounts right now.*” The caller only has one account. This challenge is on subject-verb agreement.

Understanding

This construct encapsulates three parts: being attentive/listening to the caller, demonstrate reassurance, and express empathy.

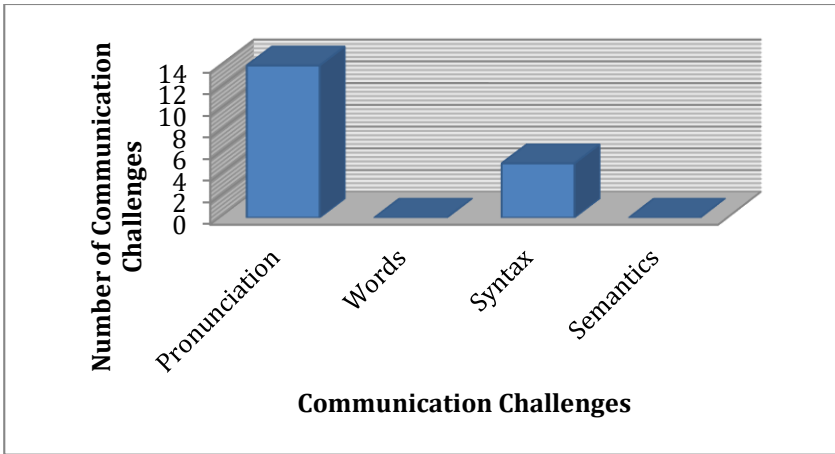


Figure 2. Summary of Communication Challenges on Understanding

On Pronunciation

Except for Agent 1, all the agents showed pronunciation challenges. Agents 2, 5, and 6 manifested pronunciation challenges in producing the [th] sound and in determining when to say [ðij.] and when it is correct to say [θə]. Agent 2 mentioned on the call, “*The [ðij] representative from customer service...*” and “*Tell me when you’re ready for the [ðij] best call back number.*” On the other hand, Agent 5 said, “*I’ll be more than happy to assist you regarding that [dat]...*” Lastly, Agent 6 uttered on his call, “*When there’s an accident within the borrower there will be ahhhh a pay off or the [ðij]...*” On the call, Agent 5 said [dat] instead of [ðæt].

Agent 2 reassured the caller by saying, “*I’ll be more than happy to provide you the [vest]...the best advice Mr. Smith.*” He is challenged in producing [b] and [v] sounds while Agent 3 said in his conversation with the caller, “*I’m so sorry if [ɪp] you got confused with the letter that you have received.*” Moreover, he also mentioned, “*Perfect [ˈfɜfɪkt] instead of [ˈpɜfɪkt].*”

“*I’ll be happy to assist you with that ma’am*” is one of the most common reassuring statements that the agents say on their calls; however, Agent 4 [mam] instead of [mæm]. Another common

reassuring statement is, “*I’ll be more than happy to assist you regarding that [dat] letter [’lɛtər].*” Agent 5 exuded more communication challenges. She mispronounced the word *letter*. She was not able to produce the d-flap sound or soft d, [ɾ]. It should have been [’lɛrɛr]. Apart from this, she used [ɛ] instead of [ə]. On the other hand, Agent 6 said “*...loan [lɔn] will be automatically paid off. Am I correct?*” He mispronounced the word *loan*. He said [lɔn] but the correct pronunciation is [lɔʊn].

On Syntax

Agents 1, 2, 3, and 6 made mistakes in grammar. In the call, Agent 1 said, “*That’s not a problem for the information.*” In the conversation, the agent probably wanted to say, “*That’s not a problem, I am more than happy to help you with that information.*” Agent 2 said in his conversation with the caller, “*The reason of the call about insurance*”, “*They are the one who has the power to provide you the best assistance*,” and “*Who we are paying sir?*” The agent wanted to confirm the reason of the call, and because of this he asserted, “*The reason of the call about insurance?*” In this question, the linking verb *is* is missing. The correct form that Agent 2 should have used, “*Is the reason of the call about insurance?*” In connection to this, one of the questions that the agent asked was, “*Who we are paying sir?*” There is something wrong with its order. The correct form is, “*Who are we paying sir?*” When the agent was trying to advise the caller to contact his insurance provider for him to be assisted, he mentioned, “*That they are the one who has the power to provide you the best assistance...*” The correct form is, “*They are the ones who have the power to provide you the best assistance...*” On the other hand, Agent 3 said, “*I have a good news for you Mr. Smith.*” News is an uncountable noun; hence, article *a* is not necessary. Therefore, the correct form of the sentence is, “*I have good news for you Mr. Smith.*” This is another challenge in terms of subject-verb agreement. Agent 6 uttered in the call, “*The borrower calling about insurance that we offer.*” The correct form of the sentence is, “*The borrower is calling about insurance that we offer.*”

Helping

This construct has four parts: yielding or listening to the caller, proactive approach or ownership and hold and extended transfer courtesies.

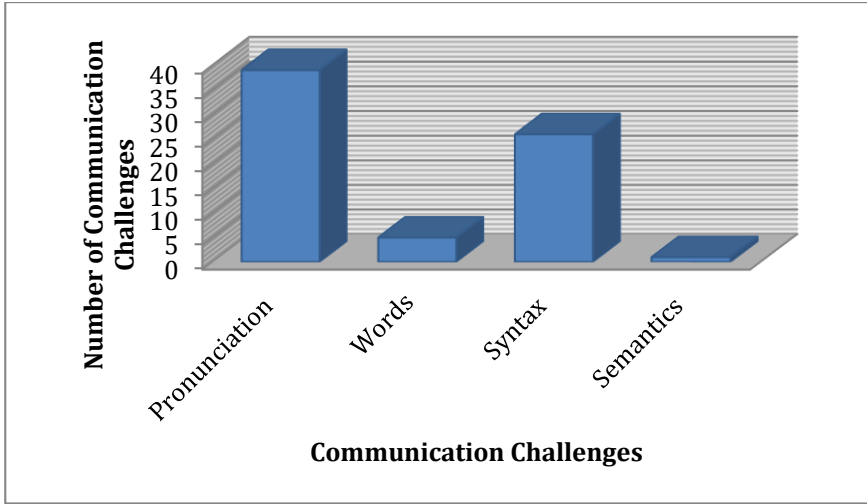


Figure 3. Summary of Communication Challenges on Helping

On Pronunciation

Agent 2 uttered on the call, “If they’re [dejr] asking for documentation for the ahm evidence of insurance came from their [dejr] preferred insurance company”, “If you’re going to transfer that [dat] here in the insurance, I cannot provide any evidence of insurance...”, and “The timeframe for that is ahhhmm up to three [trij] business days.” For they’re and their, what he uttered was [dejr]; also, for the singular demonstrative pronoun *that*, he said [dat] instead of [ðæt]. Agent 3 said, “Everything [’evri, tɪŋ] is updated”, “You just have to wait until the [ðij] loan number...”, “Oh, in that [dat] case...”, and “... that you want them to send it back to MAB directly so that [dat]...” Again, he exuded communication challenges in stressed: [ðij] and unstressed: [θə] and the production of the [th] sound. During his interaction with the caller, the agent said the [ðij] loan number but the correct pronunciation is [θə]. Moreover, instead of saying [ðæt], he uttered [dat]. Agent 4 verbalized

in his conversation with the caller, “*You have three [trɪj] options to send the refund check back to your escrow.*” Apparently, the agent mispronounced *three* [θrɪj]. Agent 5 said, “*There is an insufficient coverage for the [ðɪj] policy*” and “*I’ll just update the [ðɪj] policy here.*” Agent 6 uttered, “*The only thing (ting) that we provide is to update...*” and “*...know make a payment for the hazard property but for that [dat]...*” On the call, the agent uttered [dat] but it should have been [ðæt]. In a nutshell, the representative needs to work on his [th].

In his conversation with the caller, Agent 2 verbalized, “*...their preferred [ˈprɪfəd] insurance company...*” The agent repeated this word twice on the call. Further, this agent also said, “*...that you can fax [faks] it over here in MAB mortgage.*” The agent uttered [faks] instead of [fæks].

On the call, Agent 3 said, “*...you have changed your insurance [ɪnˈsʊ-rans] company within the period*”, “*So what will happen since you changed your insurance [ɪnˈsʊ-rans] company within the period? You might receive a refund check from the old insurance [ɪnˈsʊ-rans]*”, and “*If you already informed your old insurance [ɪnˈsʊ-rans] company...*” In this conversation alone, Agent 3 mispronounced the word *insurance* four times. In addition, Agent 3 also said, “*Once you receive it you have an options [ˈap sɒns] to mail it to us.*” Apart from it, he uttered, “*...that you want them to send it back [bæk] to MAB directly.*” For the word *back*, the representative mispronounced it by saying [bæk] instead of [bæk].

Agent 4 exhibited pronunciation challenges in English vowels such as [æ], [ə], and a diphthong [oʊ] on the call, the agent said [ˈkærənt] instead of [ˈkərənt] and [mənɪj] rather than [mənɪj]. In addition, the agent uttered [ˈhɑm, ɔʊnər] for [ˈhoʊ, moʊnər], [dɒnt] instead of [doʊnt]. Furthermore, he addressed the caller as [mɑm] rather than [mæm]. Lastly, other communication challenges of this agent are [p] vs [f] and [b] vs [v]; while speaking with the caller, the agent said, “*Let me provide [frɔˈvɑjd] you the address.*” He mispronounced the word [frɔˈvɑjd] but it should have been [prɔˈvɑjd]. Also, Agent 4 said [ˈfæləsɪj] instead of [ˈpæləsɪj] and [əˈbeɪləbəl] for [əˈveɪləbəl].

The pronunciation challenges of Agent 5 are almost the same as Agent 4’s; these are [æ], [ə], [ɪdʒ], and a diphthong [oʊ]. The agent

mispronounced the word *match*. She said [mʌtʃ] instead of [mætʃ]. In addition, when she pronounced the word *loan*, she said [lɒn] instead of [loʊn]. The word *coverage* was also mispronounced twice because the agent said ['kɒvərəɪdʒ] but the correct pronunciation of it is ['kʌv.ə.ɪdʒ].

On Syntax

Grammar wise, all the six agents manifested challenges. In his conversation with the caller, Agent 1 said, “*We’ll quick inspect of the check.*” The agent should have said, “*We’ll quickly inspect the check*” Agent 2, “*We will..are advising the caller to please contact their preferred insurance provider...*” He could have used, “*We will advise*”, “*We are going to advise*,” or “*We will be advising.*” This is another communication challenge on verb tenses. In relation to future events, the agent uttered, “*It will automatically posted up here in our system.*” The agent would like to inform the caller that once he calls his insurance company and updates his information that will automatically update his information in the system. Apart from this, the preposition *up* is not necessary. Agent 3 also manifested challenges in verb tenses. On the call, the agent said, “*We just provide you a notice saying that you have changed...*” On the call, the mortgage company sent the notice a couple of days ago, this means that the action happened in the past and because of this, the agent should have said *provided*. In addition, one of the statements that Agent 4 uttered was, “*It will expired this...*”but the correct form is, “*It will expire this...*” In addition, the agent uttered in his conversation with the caller, “*It will requires*” but it should be, “*It will require.*” Moreover, the agent also said, “*I try to call the phone number.*” The action again is over and done with therefore, the correct sentence must be, “*I tried to call the phone number.*”

Furthermore, Agent 2 said in his conversation with the caller, “*I will advise to you.*” In this phrase, the preposition *to* is not needed. Moreover, he articulated, “*It up to three business day.*” First of all, the linking verb *is* is needed to connect *it* and *up*. Furthermore, since the turnaround time is three and not one, the agent must have asserted *days* and not *day*. Agent 3 also manifested a challenge in subject-verb agreement. The agent uttered, “*An options*” during the call. Articles *a* and *an* mean one (1), since the representative is providing a lot of options to the caller, article *an* is not needed. Agent 4 also showed

communication challenges on Subject-Verb Agreement. The agent said, “*Have online account.*” In this phrase, the article *an* is missing. Furthermore, he also asked the caller, “*Do you have pen and paper ready?*” The article *a* is missing before the noun *pen* because *pen* is a countable noun. Agent 5 also had communication challenges in subject-verb agreement. The agent asked Amanda, “*May I ask if there’s replacement coverage for this one?*” The article “*a*” is missing between there’s and replacement coverage. The agent mentioned on the call, “*There is replacement coverage*” three times. In addition, Agent 6 said, “*MAB don’t offer.*” In this phrase, *MAB* is singular which requires a singular verb; therefore, the correct form is *doesn’t*. Furthermore, on the call, he said, “*They are the one.*” Apparently, the subject in this phrase is *they* which is plural; hence, he should have said *ones* instead of *one*.

Agent 3’s communication challenges in his conversation with the caller focus on subject-verb agreement and verb tenses. Apart from this, a challenge on the correct usage of article *the* was also observed on the call. The agent said, “*I’m so sorry for interruption.*” This sentence lacks an article *the*. Therefore, the sentence must be, “*I’m so sorry for the interruption.*” Aside from the communication challenges on subject-verb agreement and verb tenses, Agent 4 also showed challenges in using prepositions. On the call, when he was informing the caller, he said, “*On the future*” but the correct phrase is, “*In the future.*”

When Agent 5 was almost done helping Amanda, she said, “*Everything is taking cared of now here the account.*” This is ungrammatical because the correct participial form is, “*Everything is taken care of.*” This only means that the inflection happens with the verb *take* and not *care*; hence, this becomes *taken care*. Another point is that the preposition *on* is necessary after the adverb *here*, so this becomes, “*On the account.*” The grammatically correct phrase is, “*Everything is taken care of here on the account.*”

Lastly, when the customer service representative said, “*Okay, thank you for that information and have a great shift,*” Agent 2 responded by saying, “*You too as well.*” This is an example of redundancy, *too* and *as well* have the same meaning; therefore, they must never be combined.

On Words

In his conversation with the caller, Agent 2 uttered an erroneous structure which was, “*Please attention to the loan number of the policy.*” The semantics of this sentence is clear but the verb *pay* was omitted after the word *please*.

Agent 4 exhibited challenges in word choice, what he said was, “*Encash*” this term is an example of British English and the correct American term is *cash* (delos Reyes, 2011). There were two instances that the agent verbalized *put attention*. First is, “*Please put attention to your loan number*” and the second one is, “*Put attention to ahmm escrow deposit only.*” Agent 4 could have used the verb *pay* for a better and clearer meaning.

In communicating, many Filipinos say *with regards*. However, the correct phrase is, “*With regard.*” In the conversation between Agent 6, and the agent from customer service department, Agent 6 said, “*With regards.*”

On Semantics

Semantics was also affected on the call when Agent 4 said, “*May I place this call for a month?*” The response of the caller was, “*WHAT?*” This triggered the agent to correct himself by saying, “*May I place this call for a moment?*” However, even though the agent corrected himself, it still lacked the phrase *on hold*.

Keeping

Keeping covers three parts: offering additional assistance, summarize actions and next steps, and pleasant closing.

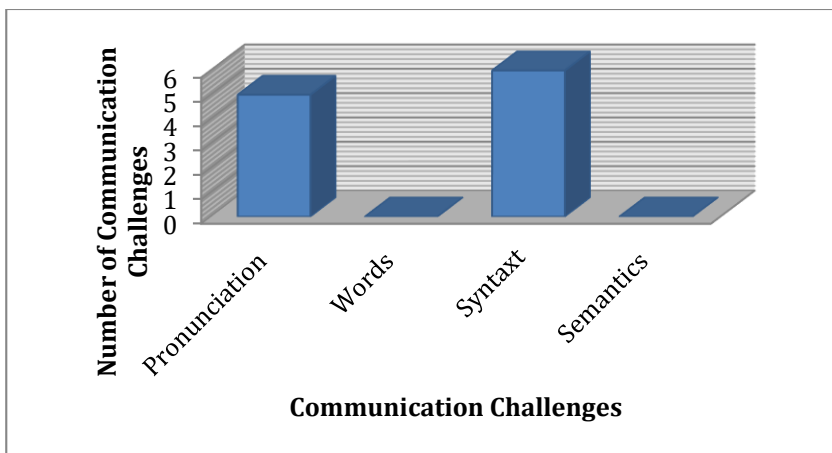


Figure 4. Summary of Communication Challenges on Keeping

On Pronunciation

Under *keeping*, Agent 3 exuded challenges on producing the [p] and [f] sounds. He said, “*Perfect [ˈfɛrfɪkt]! Thank you so much for that.*” He verbalized [ˈfɛrfɪkt] instead of [ˈpɛr, fɪkt]. In addition, when the agent delivered his closing spiel, he mispronounced the word *mortgage* again. He uttered, “*So again, thank you for calling MAB Mortgage [ˈmɔːr.ɡeɪdʒ] and have a great one, Bon voyage Mr. Smith.*” It must have been [ˈmɔːr.ɡɪdʒ] and not [ˈmɔːr.ɡeɪdʒ].

However, both Agents 3 and 5 mispronounced the word *appreciate*. Agent three (3) said, “*I really appreciate [əˈprɪfɛt] it.*” While, Agent 5 uttered, “*Thank you I appreciate [əˈprɪfɛt] that [dat].*” The correct pronunciation of this word is [əˈprɪʃɪ, ɛjt]. Furthermore, Agent 5 said [dat] instead of [ðæt].

On Syntax

Agent 4 said, “*Have I answer all of your questions today?*” For this example, present tense form of “*to have*” plus the past participle of the verb (which can be either regular or irregular in form), it means that the correct form is, “*Have I answered all of your questions today?*” This example encapsulates tenses of the verb. Lastly, when Agent 5 expressed

her happiness that she was able to assist Amanda, she uttered, “*And I’m so glad that I was able to provide the information that you need.*” Again, the meaning of this sentence is clear and this may sound correct; however, there is an inconsistency when it comes to verb tenses. “*I was able to provide the information that you need*” denotes that the action is over; hence, the verb *need* has to be inflected to get its past form so it becomes *needed*. The grammatically correct sentence is, “*And I’m so glad that I was able to provide the information that you needed.*”

On Words and Semantics

At the end of the conversation, the caller tried to build rapport by saying let’s drink a bottle of wine. Agent 2 said, “*Yes sir, thank you for the initiative Mr. Smith.*” It should have been invitation and not initiative.

B. Categories of Communication Challenges

The following were the different categories of the communication challenges:

Table 2. Summary of the Categories of Communication Challenges

Categories of Communication Challenges	
Pronunciation	In this study, this means the production of sounds, such as vowels, consonants, and diphthongs.
Words	This pertains to the words that Filipinos or other nationalities use but Americans do not.
Phrases or Sentences	These are phrases or sentences that are erroneous and ungrammatical in terms of syntax and semantics. In addition, this also encapsulates redundancies and Filipinisms.
Syntax/Grammar	This refers to structure of English that does not follow prescriptive and descriptive rules of sentence construction.
Semantics	In this study, this covers the vague and inappropriate meaning of the phrases and sentences. This covers redundancies and Filipinisms or those phrases or sentences that Filipinos use but Americans do not.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to describe the communication challenges in business process outsourcing industry, the result of which may serve as input to English Language training program for agents in the BPO context. This study revealed that in the *Welcoming* part of the call, the trainees were very polite and courteous to the customers, which may be due to the Filipino culture of being ‘customer-centric’ (Chua, 2015). Moreover, they showed minimal challenges in the *Understanding* part of the call as well as in the *Keeping* part primarily because the trainees/agents used scripts; hence, they were guided during their calls. On the other hand, the trainees/agents were most challenged in the *Helping* part of the call because they needed to provide the best resolution in resolving the customers’ concerns and in doing this; they had to explain it to the customers in a free-flowing manner. They must also sound conversational. Lockwood (2010) states that communication breakdown happens when the (L2) representative tries to resolve the problems of the (L1) customer on the phones.

Moreover, the oral communication challenges faced by Filipino agents in the BPO industry fall under pronunciation, syntax, and phrases/sentence construction in relation to the English language. The trainees/agents are challenged in the following vowel sounds: [ə], [ɪ], [æ], and the diphthong [ou]. They also have challenges with the consonants [p] and [f], [b] and [v], [sh] or [ʃ], and [th] both stressed [ð] and unstressed [θ]. When it comes to syntax, the representatives are challenged on verb tenses, prepositions, articles, subject-verb agreement, and redundancies and/or Filipinisms or Philippine English. According to Celce-Murcia (2010), the absence of some of the English vowel and consonant sounds as well as diphthongs in the Filipino language makes it challenging for them to produce these sounds. Moreover, the discrepancies in syntax and grammar between the English and Filipino languages contribute to these challenges. This means that the first language of the agents/trainees interferes the way they use English, and this is called interlingual error (Sari, 2016). This study implies that English teachers should not only focus on grammar; but they have to give attention to proper pronunciation as well. The learners need to be exposed to the way the native speakers use English. This process may acquaint the accent of trainees and agents to the expected pronunciation.

Apart from this, they will also adhere to the native-like communication to ensure understanding. Furthermore, this study can raise awareness on L1 and L2 idiosyncrasies to develop sensitivity to linguistic properties and to compare and appreciate/understand their nature and characteristics.

This study exuded that there are a number of things that need to be done to improve the quality of English language in the Philippines. English proficiency is a need that has to be given an immediate action and attention to alleviate instances of errors being made by Filipinos in the English discourse. This means that a curriculum in English for Specific Purposes that would help the students in the K to 12 Basic Education Program to strengthen their English communication skills must be developed so that graduates are skilled enough in terms of language for them to work in this industry. In the advent of the K to 12, this study could serve as inputs to the development of syllabus design that could enhance the practical methods of teaching English to second language learners. The lessons in pronunciation, grammar, sentence construction, and Philippine English/Filipinisms have to be balanced so as to reflect adherence to native-like communication on one hand and respect for language use of second language speakers may be observed.

Recommendations

This study is only focused on the BPO industry. Therefore, it is highly recommended that similar studies must be conducted to other industries with different respondents. This will help to vividly determine the communication challenges that Filipino learners are facing.

Future studies on the assessment and evaluation of varied teaching methods and techniques must be done to determine the most ideal teaching methodology that can be used to address the issues on English proficiency not only in the call center but in other industries as well.

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Bionote:

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