

Oral Language Proficiency Level of International Business Process Outsourcing Agents

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ABSTRACT

Oral English language proficiency is an important skill every call center agent must possess. Towards this end, this study sampled 125 call center agents of Sykes in Cebu City, Philippines primarily to determine their level of proficiency in oral discourse. A descriptive-quantitative design was pursued wherein respondents were assessed using the said industry's standardized instrument that measured on their pronunciation, stress, and intonation; language accuracy, and vocabulary range; discourse and strategic competency; and, interactive fluency and sociolinguistics. It also specifically sought answers on their gender, highest educational attainment, school attended, and place of origin. We presumed that their highest educational attainment and gender had influenced their oral language proficiency level. Results revealed they were modest users which mean

that they are non-native-speaker-like agents. They have partial command of the language. Statistical tests revealed no significant difference and relationship, respectively, on respondents' oral proficiency level in terms of their gender and highest educational achievement. These imply that whether male or female, and finished college or not, their oral proficiency level is not affected. In other words, gender and college achievement are not the factors towards their oral proficiency level. Nevertheless, call center agents of Sykes need to improve their oral language skills for them to retain employment.

Keywords— Language and Communication, Business Process Outsourcing, descriptive design, Cebu City, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The English language has a prominent standing in global communication. Hence, both oral and written English skills are essential around the world. However, for many, speaking English seems to be a very challenging task. Since the aim of English education is not only to develop knowledge of grammar and writing skills but also to teach oral English skills, this problem needs to be studied to remedy the situation (Paakki, 2013).

Oral English proficiency is an essential skill every call center agent must possess. This skill is indeed essential for effective communication. On his part, Emanuel (2011) stressed that excellent oral and written communication and interpersonal skills are among the foremost skill sets required for call center agents. The ability to speak eloquently, and effectively has, for centuries, been recognized as the hallmark of an educated person. They further claimed that sufficient skill in communication had paved its way to becoming a passport to success (Emanuel, 2011; Benaissi, 2008). Whether a professional, social, and private individual, people are adjudged as to how well they master the skills of communication in various aspects of their lives. Many competencies are measured according to their abilities to express themselves in a clear and convincing way of using the English language.

Various studies revealed that when students' proficiency in the English language is high, it will positively affect and improve their academic performance (Wilson and Komba, 2012; Aina & Olanipekun 2013; Mahmud, 2014; Olanipekun, Garuba, & Mohammed 2014; Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi 2015). Nevertheless, there was not enough literature which delved into the oral

language proficiency level among call center agents in the Philippines which tried to correlate such language proficiency towards educational achievement and gender. Thus, this study is in order and believes in contributing to the body of knowledge.

The importance of English language for enhancing educational attainment through improved communication ability can never be overemphasized, that is why students with so much difficulty with their communication skill in the English language may not function effectively, not only in English language but their academic endeavor (Aina & Olanipekun 2013).

As a terminology, proficiency suggests variability, and it has traditionally been related to measurement and testing in second language teaching and learning (Llurda, 2000). As such, Hakuta, Butler & Witt (2000) insisted that oral English proficiency is best checked through standardized proficiency tests.

Oral language is about communicating with other people who involves a process of utilizing thinking, knowledge, and skills to speak and listen effectively. As such, it is central to the lives of all people. As a process of verbally transmitting information and ideas from one individual or group to another, oral communication becomes a skill that must be mastered.

One of the few studies which have been conducted on the effect of gender on the production of oral skills is that of Koosha, Ketabi, & Kassaian (2011). In the same year 2011, a study conducted on whether gender plays a role in the assessment of oral proficiency by Motallebzadeh, and Nematizadeh (2011), it was found out that females did better in vocal performance than males; however, the difference was not that significant.

Halpern (2004) provided ample evidence that different hormonal configurations can partly explain the differences between male and female cognitive functioning. The production of male sex hormones from early childhood on in boys is assumed to be critical in this respect. As a result, masculinization of behavior and cognition occurs; causing a variety of differences between men and women in, for example, motor skills, spatial abilities, mathematical aptitude, perception, and verbal abilities. Girls develop communicative skills at a younger age than boys exhibiting larger vocabularies and using a more extensive variety of sentences (Halpern, 2004). Furthermore, on gender, a 1998 Canadian assessment of students' speech communication skills showed that there were many significant gender differences among individuals' listening skills (Hunter, Gambell, Randhawa, 2005). The study revealed that the vocal production of males was consistently below than that of females (Koosha, Ketabi, & Kassaian,

2011). According to Claes (1999) “the evidence for inherent sex differences in language is not convincing.”

In a study conducted by De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn (2012) he concluded that speaking proficiency is a matter of declarative knowledge, a matter of processing instruction quickly, and a matter of pronunciation skills, and that linguistic knowledge and processing skills deserve a prominent place in any model of language proficiency.

One area in speaking which has shown to be quite challenging to master completely is that of the pronunciation and intonation of the language (Koosha, Ketabi, & Kassaian, 2011).

In the Arab region, although English is being taught for quite a number of years, the results are nowhere near the expected outcomes; that is, young adults are ill-equipped to use the language as fluently or efficiently as can be desired (Al-Ahdal, Alfallaj, Al-Awaied, & Al-Hattami, 2014).

In the Philippines, the fact remains evident. However, employers still turn away many of the younger applicants because their English skills are below American standards despite the claiming the Philippines as being a country where the English language is deeply entrenched in local culture (Hernandez, Greene, Vaughn, Francis, & Grigorenko, 2015).

Thus, these reviews of the literature have triggered the researcher to conduct the study which primarily aimed to determine the oral English proficiency level of the Sykes Asia call center agents, and whether or not their gender and highest educational attainment influence their oral proficiency.

FRAMEWORK

The present study is anchored on Hymes’ “Communicative Competence Theory” in 1972. This great concept according to Hymes himself refers to “one’s competence of language use appropriate to the other participants of the communicative interaction and appropriate to the given social context and situation.” Moreover, in Canale’s (1983) version of communicative competence, he introduces it with four separate components – grammatical competence, which is quite similar to that of Chomsky’s idea of competence; sociolinguistic competence, which addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic context; discourse competence, which is related to the correct organization of text following the rules of cohesion, and coherence determined by the text itself and by its

particular genre; and strategic competence, which is restricted to what has come to be known as communication strategies as opposed to learning strategies. Four components of the said theory were the bases of the model framed by Jane Lockwood (2012) in her Business Performance Language Assessment Scale (BUPLAS) that she used in evaluating call center agents' language proficiency level. Sykes used this same instrument also to assess the language proficiency level of the agents. In such a tool, it has four interrelated areas namely: pronunciation, stress, and intonation, language and vocabulary range, discourse and strategic competence, and interactive fluency & sociolinguistic competence.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study determined the proficiency level of Sykes' Call Center Agents in Cebu City. Specifically, it 1) sought answers of the profile of the call center agent regarding their gender, educational attainment, school attended, and place of origin; 2) determined their oral English language proficiency level in the attributes of pronunciation, stress and intonation; language accuracy, vocabulary range; discourse and strategic competency; and interactive fluency and sociolinguistic; 3) determined the significant difference between the respondents' oral language proficiency level regarding their gender; and 4) determined the significant relationship between the respondents' oral language proficiency level towards their highest educational attainment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study made use of a quantitative-descriptive approach using a correlational type of research undertaking to find out whether the demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, highest educational attainment, school attended and place of origin, as independent variables are related to their oral language proficiency level, as dependent variables. Furthermore, it used convenience sampling in determining research respondents. Moreover, this study had an ex-post data, meaning the data were taken from those agents who were on their Language Certification Week. This means they already have undergone Customer Service Training, Language Training, and Culture Training as well as Product Training. They were waiting for their QA Certification. These data were sought and accessed and with permission from Miss Venus S. Lim, SGA

Training Manager, and Mrs. Ma. Anna Kristina Villaba, Operations Director, Sykes Asia Inc. These data were the assessment rates of 125 agents who were on their probationary period.

Research Site

The study was conducted in Sykes, Asia, Inc. located at F. Cabahug Street, Mabolo, and Cebu City, Philippines. Sykes Asia, Inc. is a foreign-owned, US-based call center that operates in four different sites in the Philippines. It is the first call center company to invest in the country in 1997, according to records of the Board of Investment (BOI), besides support departments of multinational companies relocated offshore to take advantage of lower costs.

It used the industry's standardized tool in assessing their agent's oral language proficiency level courtesy of Jane Lockwood's (2012) Business Performance Language Assessment Scale (BUPLAS) model. Sykes used the said tool for quite some time. The respondents are probationary employees and agents of the said entity with four months and onward who are seeking regular employment.

Instrumentation

The assessment tool is made up of 4 interrelated attributes as evaluation areas for the agents. These attributes include 1) pronunciation, stress & intonation which pertains to the ability of the agent to use globally acceptable pronunciation patterns for the work in a call center. This scale includes an assessment of individual words, syllable stress, word stress, and intonation. This also covers voice texture, clarity, volume, and speed. It is weighted 20%; 2) language accuracy & vocabulary range which includes the ability of the agent to use a wide range of language structures and vocabulary items accurately and appropriately. If inaccurate, this band also assesses whether the agent is aware of the error/s he is making and can reformulate correctly. It determines whether there are stabilization problems and whether the agent has the ability to standardize or simplify technical and account jargon in a way that can be readily understood by the caller (20%); 3) discourse & strategic competency which refers to the strength of the agent to understand the nature (CALL FLOW and MOVES) of the spoken text he is participating in. This also pertains to the ability of the agent to adequately take control (or respond) to the "moves" within the text, and use appropriate connectors and signaling devices. This is also evidenced by good caller control and time management of the call. It also covers the ability of the agent to "repair" the discourse, e.g., the ability to recover from misunderstandings, upset, confusion, etc. This also includes the ability of the

agent to construct clear, direct, and linear text that is easy for the listener to understand reflecting that the speaker is “thinking in English” rather than in Tagalog (30%); and 4) interactive fluency & sociolinguistic competency which refers to the agent’s ability to understand and respond appropriately to the cultural expectations (ethnic / company), the accent and the idiomatic language of the caller. It also covers the interactional strategies in the exchange. e.g., turn-taking, initiation, responding, apologizing, explaining, politeness markers, etc. Good awareness of interactive fluency and sociolinguistic understanding is evidenced in good customer relationship building in the call center industry (30%).

These attributes are rated with a raw score of 5-1 with each assigned percentage. To wit: 5 as EXPERT USER (EU) or Native-like speaker. It is TOEFL’s equivalent to 96-100% wherein the agent is described as having full operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriateness. The CSR can handle complex argumentation and description thoroughly. The agent would perform at senior/middle management level in a call center. The agent is in the very complex CSR level; 4 as VERY GOOD USER (VGU) or Near-native like a speaker. This is equivalent to 86-95% where the agent has excellent operational command of the language though with occasional minor inaccuracies. He/she generally handles complex language well, understands, and can make detailed reasoning on complex and demanding calls. The agent would perform well at middle management level, QA, training and team leader, multiple CSR level; 3 as GOOD USER (GU) or Non-native speaker with 76-85% wherein the agent generally has sufficient command of the language despite some inaccuracies and misunderstandings. He can use and understand reasonably moderately complex or routine language, and handle calls in a satisfactory manner causing minimum frustration to the caller. The agent will improve fast with support and CSR experience. He/she is in the moderately complex/routine CSR level; 2 as a MODEST USER (MU) or Non-native speaker, with 66-75%. Here the agent has partial command of the language coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. He should be able to handle essential communication in everyday cases. He/she would perform at usual CSR level only; and one as LIMITED USER (LU) with 0-65%. In this level, the agent’s basic competence is limited to common questions. He has frequent problems with understanding and expression. The agent is not able to use complex language. Communication breakdowns frequently occur. He/she should be able to do routine processing work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Respondents' Profile

On Sex. By sex, we mean here both sexes, the male and female species. This is taken into account on our presumption that male differs with that of female abilities in their oral language proficiency as literature reviewed in this study. The result showed that out of 125 respondents, females (70 or 56%) were more than in number than males (55 or 44%). In short, most of the respondents were female. This result is supported by the studies of Domingo-Cabarrubias, and Belt, Richardson, and Webster (2002) where the majority of call center workers were female. In the Philippines, almost sixty percent of workers in the call centers are women (NSO-GDC). According to Cabrera-Balleza (2005), as cited by Domingo-Cabarrubias, 2012, that BPO is presently the single largest technology where mostly employed by women. Much more according to del Rosario, “women are preferred more over men in the customer service representative task in almost all the call centers in the Philippines.” Scientifically proven, women generally possess a high tolerance to stress and soothing quality of voice although married women show more seriousness at work than single women (See Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents in terms of Gender N=125

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	55	44
Female	70	56
Total	125	100

On highest educational attainment. This refers to whether the respondents were college graduate or college level. Results revealed that most of them (75 or 60%) completed their college degrees; while 50 or 40% were college level. This outcome corroborated Melgar, Ofreneo, Kintanar, & Cand (2009) study where seventy percent of the total respondents have graduated college studies. However, in a survey conducted in Davao City by Castro, and Deluna (2013) on the “factors affecting call center as a job preference among employees,” the result showed that majority were college level at 51.3% and, only around 45% were college graduate.

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents in terms of Highest Educational Attainment N=125

Highest Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percentage (%)
College Level	50	40
College Graduate	75	60
Total	125	100

On school last attended. This demographic characteristic of respondents refers to their school last attended before they were hired, whether such school is public or private. The result would serve as the data bank for future researchers of which the present researchers wanted to find out what type of school would dominate in such a call center industry. Results unveiled that those who come from private schools in the country outnumbered (84%) with those from public higher institutions, with only 16%.

In Nigeria, most excelling students tend to emerge from the private school in the modern academic dispensation with the paradox of whose teachers developing from the public school in the old educational allocation (Oredein & Oredein 2016).

Table 3. Distribution of Respondents in terms of School Last Attended N=125

School Last Attended	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Public	20	16
Private	105	84
Total	125	100

On the place of origin. This profile tracks the home addresses of the respondents. This profile is presumed to be of influence to their oral English proficiency level, taking into considerations of their geographical setting which could affect their intonation, accents, diction, etc. The present study classified the respondents as those coming from the three principal geographic divisions of the country - Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. In this study, 72% came from the Visayas region, 20% from Mindanao area, and only 8% from Luzon. This is precisely because of the geographical location of the call center industry, the Sykes, where it is located at the heart of the "Queen City of the South," in Cebu City as part of the Visayas region.

Table 4. Distribution of Respondents in terms of Place of Origin N=125

Place of Origin	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Luzon	10	8
Visayas	90	72
Mindanao	25	20
Total	125	100

On their oral proficiency level. This determines their oral proficiency level in the use of the English language. Results showed that they were modest users or non-native-speaker-like agents with an overall weighted mean of 2.70. This result is interpreted as second from the lowest level of such English language proficiency. This further means that the agent-respondents have partial command of the language coping with whole meaning in most situations, though are likely to make many mistakes. They can handle essential communication in routine situations. They would perform at routine CSR level only. This result validates the studies of Hernandez, Greene, Vaughn, Francis, & Grigorenko (2015) where he claimed that in the Philippines, employers still turn away many of the youth because their English skills are below par, despite the Philippines being a country where the English language is deeply entrenched in the local culture.

Table 5. Oral Proficiency Level of Respondents N=125

Oral Proficiency Level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Weighted Raw score
EXPERT USER (EU) or Native-like speaker = 5 pts. (96-100%)	0	0	0
VERY GOOD USER (VGU) or Near-native like speaker = 4 pts. (86-95%)	0	0	0
GOOD USER (GU) or Non-native speaker = 3 pts. (76-85%)	15	12	3.17
MODEST USER (MU) or Non-native speaker = 2 pts. (66-75%)	105	84	2.67
LIMITED USER (LU) = 1 pt. (0-65%)	5	4	1.95
Total/Overall weighted raw score	125	100.00	2.70

On their Proficiency Level Measured by the Four Attributes from the Tool. Using the four attributes reflected in their assessment tool, results showed that the respondents were modest users or non-native speakers, with an overall weighted mean of 2.70. The same results revealed as with their oral English

language proficiency level, meaning the respondents have low performance in all of the four attributes measured. Moreover, the respondents were noted here to have much difficulty in their discourse and strategic competence area, which means that they were weak in the following aspects: understanding the nature of the spoken text they were participating in, using appropriate connectors and signaling devices, maintaining good caller control and time management of the call, having the ability to “repair” the discourse, e.g., the ability to recover from misunderstandings, upset, confusion, etc. and having the ability to construct clear, direct, and linear text that is easy for the listener to understand.

Those who were rated weak will be part of Training Needs Analysis to come up with a training module or specific coaching tips. Then, an agent who now has attended the Intervention Training is expected to improve his/her score. Once he/she is cleared or has improved, with the recommendation of the English Specialist, the agent now can proceed to take calls with minimum to no observation. If, at any rate, the agent reverts to his/her old habits, another set of call-listening and observation will be done using the scorecard. Also, the observation period may last for 3 months or a quarter. This is what is called PIP or Performance Improvement Plan. The agent and the Account will come up with an agreement. The gist of the agreement is that termination of employment will be reached if performance is not improved.

Table 6. Oral Proficiency Level Measured by four Attributes

Four Attributes	Weighted Raw score	Proficiency Level/description
Pronunciation, Stress & Intonation (PSI) = 20%	2.78	Modest User/non-native speaker
Language Accuracy & Vocabulary Range (LAVR) = 20%	2.90	Modest User/non-native speaker
Discourse & Strategic Competency (DSC) = 30%	2.50	Modest User/non-native speaker
Interactive Fluency & Sociolinguistic Competency (IFSoC) = 30%	2.64	Modest User/non-native speaker
Overall weighted raw score	2.70	Modest User/non-native speaker

On the difference between the sex profile and oral English language proficiency level. Tested hypothesis yielded no significant difference between gender and proficiency level where the computed z-value of 0.05 is lesser than

the critical value of 1.96; thus, the null hypothesis is accepted, which means that both genders have almost the same proficiency level, or gender is not much of an issue towards their oral language proficiency level. The result validates the study of Gorjian, Moosavian, and Shahramiri (2011), as cited by Koosha, Ketabi, and Kassaian (2011), concerning “the effects of an oral summary of short stories on male/female learners’ speaking proficiency,” where no significant difference between the two genders was noted, although females slightly outperformed males. In contrast of the same year, a study on whether gender plays a role in the assessment of oral proficiency by Motallebzadeh, & Nematizadeh (2011), it was found out that females did better in vocal performance than males; however, the difference was not that significant. Furthermore, the oral production of men was consistently below than that of females (Koosha, Ketabi, & Kassaian, 2011). According to Claes (1999), the evidence for inherent sex differences in language is not convincing. Table 7 follows.

Table 7. Difference between Respondents’ Oral Proficiency Level in terms of Gender

Language Proficiency Level		z-value	Critical Value	Significance Level	Interpretation
Male	Female				
2.69	2.71	0.05	1.96	0.05	Insignificant

On the relationship between highest educational attainment towards oral English language proficiency level. The result showed that the correlation coefficient of 0.176 is lesser than the p-value of 0.327. Again, the hypothesis tested yielded negative correlation between the highest educational attainments towards oral English language proficiency level; thus, the null hypothesis is also accepted, which means that whether they have completed a college degree or not, this is not a factor towards their oral language proficiency level. Most of the respondents’ verbal proficiency scores are the same whether they have finished college or college level only. There is no significant relationship between respondents’ educational attainment and language proficiency level (p-value>0.05).

According to Aina & Olanipekun (2013), students who have so much difficulty with their communication skill in the English language may not function effectively, not only in English language but in their academic and social endeavor. Depicted herein is Table 8.

Table 8. The relationship between Respondents' Highest Educational Attainment and their Oral Proficiency Level

Variable	Correlation coefficient (r) with Language Proficiency Level	Significance Level	p-value	Interpretation	Decision
Educational Attainment	0.176	0.05	0.327	Insignificant	Accept H_0

CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, there is not enough evidence to claim that there is a significant difference between the proficiency level of male and female call center agents in Cebu City. This means that the difference in their sex, male or female, has nothing to do with their oral proficiency level. And since the correlation between their highest educational attainment and their oral language proficiency level showed an insignificant result, again, the researchers do not have enough reasons to believe that their educational qualification has affected their oral proficiency level. The data showed that college level and college graduate respondents are nearly or approximately the same, whether they have finished a degree or not and that their oral proficiency level was not affected by the result. Putting it simply, whether male or female, finished a college degree or not, the level of oral proficiency is not affected. Their low level of oral English language proficiency might be attributed to some other factors such as places of origin and age of which this present study fails to investigate, and thus recommended for future researchers to delve into.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The results of the study serve as eye-openers for both private and public higher institutions to continue giving more emphasis on the importance of acquiring sufficient skill in communication as it is one indispensable tool for success in such an industry and also in other academic and social endeavor (Aina & Olanipekun 2013). Thus, in their continuous assessment of their students, language teachers may use the language competence model of Canale (1983) as this is also patterned by the survey tool in assessing call center agents in their hiring, rehiring, and promotion at Sykes Call Center in Cebu city. Furthermore,

the study calls for the strengthening of academe-industry linkage so that students with communication flaws who aspire to work in BPOs must be checked.

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