Accent neutralization policy as a form of unequal Englishes in Philippine call centers

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Abstract: Recent developments in global markets have led to a renewed interest in outsourcing. In the Philippines, where a majority of the outsourced businesses are call centers, the opportunity to be considered a global leader in the market has raised issues in language, accent, and globalization. With the validation of English in these businesses, American and British varieties become models for prospective employees, resulting in a constricting policy. This paper will discuss how the Accent Neutralization Policy is a primary consideration in the recruitment, selection, and training of employees in the outsourced contact industry, even if the practice can be considered a form of unequal Englishes. In addition, the paper strongly recommends the elimination of this strategy in the entire contact center process. Existing findings and interviews conducted by early researchers in international call centers will be used. Also included in the discussion are personal insights and experiences of the author as a former call center mid-manager and recommendations as to how the industry can move forward in adopting a more globally inclusive English.

Keywords: Call Center; ESL; Unequal Englishes

1. Background

1.1 The English Language and Call Centers

The increasing number of outsourced call centers operating internationally raised essential issues in language and globalization. It also strengthened the position of English as an international language in countries with localized Englishes (Bolton, 2013). Outsourcing is defined as contracting an external provider to do a business function usually done in-house (Marvin, 2011). Business Process Outsourcing, on the other hand, is the "delegation of service-type business processes to a third-party service provider" (DTI, 2003) that covers customer care, marketing, sales, business administration, and information technology (Magtibay-Ramos, Estrada & Felipe, 2007). Developing countries such as India and the Philippines are at the receiving end of the big business in offshoring multinational support services (Lockwood, 2012a) because of the two countries' large English-speaking population and low labor cost (Bajajnov, 2011). This "Linguistic Outsourcing" that is happening specifically in the Philippines and India, with both countries at the forefront of the international BPO industry, validates the claim that

English is truly a world language and no longer the sole possession of Britain and America (Bolton, 2010). However, one underlying issue on linguistic outsourcing is not just on the perspective of second language acquisition but the linguistic performances of some ESL countries under the concept of the native speaker and near-native English speaking skills (Kingsley, 2016). Admittedly, India has lost its steam in the voiced offshoring business (Marvin, 2011) because the English spoken by Indians is considered not as close as to the ideal American accent compared to the Filipinos (Bajajbov, 2011). The observation that Indian English seems unsuitable for western customers is apparent in its phonology. Maxwell (2014) observes that Indian English has distinct phonology that has been influenced by other indigenous languages whose hybrid system of intonation is the result of its development and use. However, the Philippines, a former American colony, became a much-preferred destination over India for offshore call centers not only because of its near western English speakers and accents but also its minimized cultural differences with the US (Marvin, 2011). Thus, despite the pervading notion of a globalized economy, language may be a commodity though its value is measured under certain political conditions (Heller, 2010).

1.2 The English Language and the Filipino Call Center Employee

The critical element to getting hired in the Call Center Industry is good communication skills, and the parameter used to check the employees' English skills is American (Zagabe, 2017). This should not be a problem in the Philippine CCI, since the Standard Filipino English (SFE) was developed within the native speakers' standards and is intelligible (Tayao, 2004). Still, SFE has a distinct phonological feature (Tayao, 2004) from American English; therefore, a Tagalog (a Philippine language) speaker may mainly find it challenging to flatten the vowel "o" sound (Calderon, 2016) during training or in the actual customer calls.

Further, as Davies (2013) states that "it is not likely that many second-language learners become native speakers of their target language," given the primary condition that a native speaker is someone who acquired the language at the beginning of their linguistic development. Hence, contact center employees in the Philippines undergo thorough training to achieve a neutralized accent perceived as far more acceptable in conducting client calls in the US. Salonga (2010) alludes that this particular requirement may harm the cultural and linguistic identity of the Filipino call center agents. She opines that the symbol of identity will always be the local language, and an international language like English should only be purposeful for economic advantages (Salonga, 2010).

1.3 Accent Neutralization Policy

Accent Neutralization is "siloing" or "fragmentation" of the several communications training that consists of grammar instruction, pronunciation drilling, culture knowledge, and customer service skills (Lockwood, 2012a). It is also a sociocultural recalibration that mitigates regionally accented English to comply with global integration. Moreover, the said training policy targets to neutralize employee's thick regional accents while adapting the intonation, emphasis, and pace of their second language (Aneesh, 2012). The ultimate goal for this accent neutralization policy is to achieve a near-native accent. Ghorshi, Vaseghi, and Yan (2008 in Ze Wang et al., 2013) refer to 'standard American Accent' as an accent "free from any regional influence.' In the case of this authors' 10- year experience in the CCI (call center industry), news agencies such as BBC and CNN are used as models that applicants/trainees and employees must emulate to have a more acceptable accent during training. Similarly, other companies use anchors of FOX News in America as examples of a neutralized accent that agents should achieve before taking their first calls. These are complemented with tongue twister exercises before being subjected to an accent test like correctly pronouncing the American "a" and other soft vowel sounds of sample statements like "A lot of long hot walks in the garden" in less than 2 seconds.
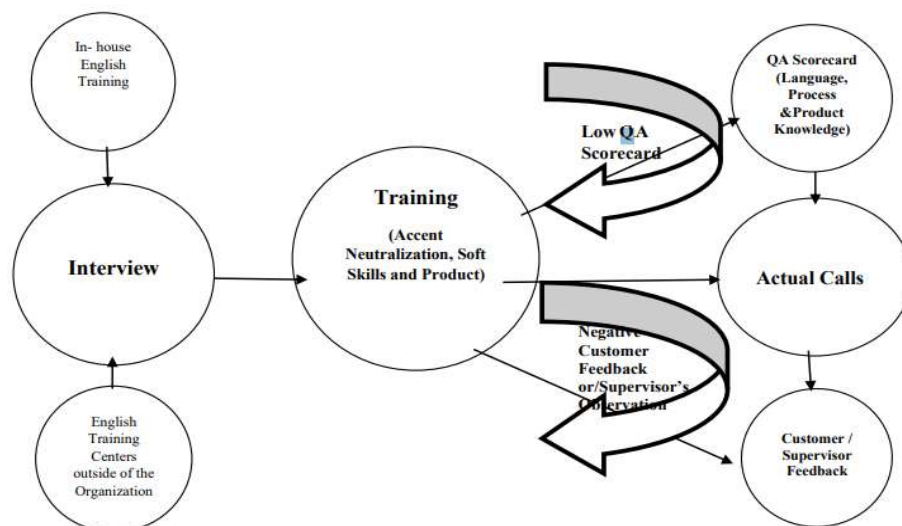
Masangya's 2018 Contact Center Interview and Training Model

To further illustrate how institutionalized accent neutralization policy is in CCI's, featured above is the interview and training model that shows the process employees go through in some Philippine call centers experienced by this author. In this model, interview, training, and actual calls are the three stages in which language and accent are detrimental. During the interview stage, applicants are measured with their language and accent

proficiency during a 10–15-minute phone interview. If they pass the phone interview, they will be invited to a face-to-face interview conducted on-site. Certain companies may subject the applicants to undergo additional state-of-the-art pronunciation simulation exams. After passing all interviews, applicants will undergo language, product, and soft skills training before taking live calls. Should the applicants fail the interview stage, they may enroll in an English language proficiency class offered in-house or outside the organization. Once applicants are already taking live calls from customers, QA analysts will score the quality of their calls based on call handling, product knowledge, and language/accent proficiency. Any low scores (based on the company's standards and repetitive instances over a specific observation period) coming from these areas may mean re-training on soft skills, product, and language. Vital considerations are also given to customers' feedback and supervisor's observation for the trainees '/employees' re-training recommendations.

1.4 Related Studies

Several studies discussed accents and conforming to standard English in actual customer calls and training within the International BPO industry. In three-part research conducted by Ze Wang, Arndt, Singh, Biernat, and Fan Liu (2013) titled "You Lost Me at Hello," they examined how customers' biases are revealed based on call center employees' accents. Aneesh (2012), on the other hand, discovered exciting facts about the call center life in an ethnographic paper titled "Negotiating Globalization: Men and Women of India's Call Centers." His findings show that call center employees look at their jobs as a stopgap to a "real career" and that despite their college degrees, they still feel insecure and embarrassed with their English skills and accents. The British English accent is marked as a "global accent" in India's BPO industry. Further, Cowie's (2012) ethnographic study on the "accent training" of the major call centers in the south of India showed how native speakers of English are still delegated to conduct the training of local agents, which often adds to the frustration on the training floor especially if there are no results over the three-week training period.

Meanwhile, Lockwood's (2012a) study on the Philippine call center recruitment process reported that only 1% of the total number of applicants are selected due to an apparent lack of English language skills. She also finds it alarming that job applicants are assessed using poorly done and problematic interview rubrics made by non-language experts. Tupas and Salonga (2016) discussed how Philippine call center agents accepted ideologies in the workplace that appeal to unequal Englishes. Notable also in their study is how some of these agents feel privileged in exploiting the language. This was shown in one interviewee who would change accents

during calls. The study also discussed how respondents feel restricted in conforming to the standard of American English and the preceding belief of the native speaker's English as superior.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

The issue of the accent neutralization policy is not on its efficiency but on how it can be condescending to non-native contact center employees. Aneesh (2015) finds it a form of "indifference to difference." Further, Lockwood (2012a) argues that accent neutralization in call centers is problematic because of the lack of appreciation of the nature of the employees' spoken English and language needs. Accent reduction is also contentious because it will discriminate against employees and create discord between managers and subordinates over English pronunciation even if the job is accomplished (Dizik, 2015). This form of discrimination stems from the English variety that the employees are using, which demonstrates unequal Englishes.

1.6 A Case of Unequal Englishes

Unequal Englishes assume that "Englishes are all linguistically equal, but their political legitimacies are uneven" (Tupas &Rubdy, 2015 p.3). Tupas and Salonga (2016, p.368) define unequal Englishes as Englishes that are "more acceptable" and "privileged" than others. Rubdy and Saraceni, (2006 in Tupas & Rubdy, 2015) assert that the root of unequal Englishes is the supremacy of both native speakers of English and the principles of Standard English due to globalization and colonization processes.   Also, inequalities in the language are created from ideological and social phenomena wherein English varieties are considered inferior (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). In the case of the Philippine CCIs, the kind of English that the agents bring into the company would be the variety taught in the Philippines. Bolton (2013) described Philippine call center English as "mesolectal" or the kind of English variety that is spoken by the educated whose distinct accent is marked by "stress timing associated with Philippine English speech"(p.4). He adds that to counteract this, employees are subjected to American Phonology. This is a clear indication then that Philippine English is not enough for the western call center customers. In hindsight, this author relates that in the early years of CCI in the country, sourcing and selection of applicants conducted by one of the industry's pioneering companies concentrated on the top four universities of the country. The main reason for this initiative is the impression of foreign Call Center executives that students at these high-end schools are studying under a strong English curriculum. They also assume that these learners have access to cable television to American programs with "California Valley High accent" speakers. In this case, discrimination is

pronged to two levels: language and class. But as Tupas and Rubdy (2015) had posited, no one has the exclusive right to English, and anyone who speaks of it has the right to own it. Further, they strongly emphasized that there are many Englishes and no one superior English (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). Thus, the need for the outsourced contact industry to eliminate the Accent Neutralization Policy as a primary consideration in the recruitment, selection, and training of employees for it is a form of unequal Englishes.

2. Methodology

In this paper, three sets of data were featured to show how Accent Neutralization policy in interviews, training, and actual calls manifest Unequal Englishes.

The first data is the criteria rubric from Lockwood's (2012a) study on the English Language Recruitment Assessment Practices in the Business Processing Outsourcing Sector. In her paper "Are We Getting the Right People for the job? A Study of English Language Recruitment Assessment Practices in the Business Processing Outsourcing Sector: India and the Philippines" Lockwood (2012a) conducted on-site visits to selected call centers in both the Philippines and India. One of her criteria for analysis on the language recruitment practices of the said companies would be the language assessment tools and processes used by the companies. A 12- item speaking skills rubric is used for call center agent applicants in one Manila-based company that she coded as Company B. Devised by the site's in-house recruiters and trainers, the items on the rubric which the said organization termed as "attributes" are supposed to assess the communication skills of the applicants (Lockwood, 2012a). Each attribute provides descriptions to guide call center assessors.

The second data is an excerpt from an interview conducted by Aneesh (2012) with a call center agent regarding accent neutralization in India. For this ethnographic study, "Negotiating Globalization: Men and Women of India's Call Centers" Aneesh (2012) interviewed 50 India-based call center employees composed of agents, mid-managers, and managers. The scope of the hour-long interviews includes culture and customers, identity, accent, and language, among others.

The last data is a table from Ze Wang, et. al's (2013) study "You lost me at hello': How and when accent-based biases are expressed and suppressed." In this research, 595 participants, using a US-based crowdsourcing company, answered an e-survey that determines if there are customer biases on phone attendants' accents in contact centers.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 Example Test 6: Company B Communications Quality Assurance Scorecard (Lockwood, 2012b)

Company B list of 12 communication "Attributes" or Criteria Rubric:
1. Neutral inflection: Description—Participant's native inflection must not be evident.
2. Clear and distinctive speech: Description—Participants must not stutter, slur, or poorly string words together.
3. Vowel and consonant pronunciation: Description—Participant must be able to pronounce vowel sounds correctly.
4. Professional tone: Description—Participants must not sound monotonous but must be aware of the peaks and valleys of intonation.
5. Moderate pace: Description—Participant's rate of speech must match that of the listeners. She/he must not stumble on words or display any sense of urgency in his/her speech.
6. Sentence construction: Description—Participants must not use double past tenses and verb contractions must also be avoided. Parallelism must be observed. Participants must use correct verb/subject agreement at all times.
7. Spontaneity: Description—Participant must respond immediately to the customer query and not hesitate.
8. Cultural phrasings: Description—Participant should not communicate with any awkward cultural interpretations.
9. Response cohesion: Description—Participant must respond in sentences with a complete thought. Sentences should be linguistically and pragmatically correct. Word sequencing should likewise be observed.
10. Phone etiquette: Description—Participant must not interrupt or talk over the customer.
11. Active listening and paraphrasing: Description—Verbal nods and paraphrasing must be utilized to validate understanding of the customer's concern.
12. Customer sensitivity: Description—Participant must positively set the customer's expectations through offering an assurance statement.

Table 1 shows a Quality Assurance scorecard or rubric used by QA analysts to assess call quality during operations (Lockwood, 2012b). This paper's author also relates that a similar rubric is being used to assess applicants during interviews (call simulation exams) and trainees during 'mock calls in other Manila-based BPO companies. Trainers, QAs, and interviewers simply tick or put a checkmark on the attribute that a trainee, agent, or applicant subscribes to. As can be seen, neutral inflection is listed first on the list, which indicates a priority in any activity used by the rubric. Noticeable is how customer sensitivity was placed last. Surprisingly too, is the inclusion of vowel and consonant pronunciation attributes. This is because, in reality vowel and consonant pronunciation can be hard to track down in turn-taking communication, especially if the main task is to sell products over the phone.

Table 2 Accents and Biases Online Survey Results (Ze Wang, et al., 2013)

Sample break-down for Study 1 Field test			
	Outcome		
Accent	Unfavorable	Favorable	Total
Non-Western	60	26	86
USA	45	66	111
Total	105	92	197

Table 2, on the other hand, shows the results of the online survey about recent call services experienced by respondents on the Accents and Biases study conducted by Ze Wang, et.al., (2013). Participants were asked to recall a phone transaction and rate the service outcomes. The component used by the participants in their recollection was the phone agents' accents. Next, they were asked if the agents were Americans or foreigners and tagged if the calls were favorable or unfavorable. As can be seen, the majority of the phone transactions that they have recalled made by foreign agents were unfavorable, while respondents reported 66 calls that they find made by Western-sounding agents favorable.

Table 3 Interview Excerpt on Accents and Cultural Adjustments (Aneesh, 2012)

> "*During the job interview, Payal, a senior trainer in her 30s, asked me, "Could you stop using that American accent?. Can you stop rolling your R's as Americans do, and start using a neutral accent, instead?" She explained that it was very important for the firm to train its employees in a neutral accent. I protested that there was no such thing as a neutral accent, and Payal replied, "Well, there is. Do you hear how I'm speaking? Plain and neutral English." When I clarified, "You mean plain, Indian English," she proudly exclaimed, "Yes, Indian English is global English. It is neither American nor British."*

The interview excerpt above was taken under the "Cultural Adjustments" section of Aneesh's ethnographic paper. As can be seen, the senior trainer that was interviewed seems to be repulsive towards using an American accent. She may have emphasized using the neutral accent but described it as Indian English. Remarkably, she declared that Indian English is a global English that is not influenced by the standards of the language.

Discussion

The first data as mentioned, was developed with a full emphasis on language and accent rather than the quality of the job rendered by agents. The metrics used target American English standards. Lockwood et.al. (2008) mentioned how modules in Philippine call center training are too

Americanized and with total disregard towards the language needs of the local agents. This strengthens the notion that the Accent Neutralization policy upholds the supremacy of native speakers (Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006 in Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). It also subscribes to the permeating ideologies in call centers that Tupas and Salonga (2016) talked about, like being conformists and questions about identity. The rubric is also deemed unrealistic because it will be used by employees whose English is of Philippine variety. This rubric will only discriminate employees on how they pronounce words, even if it has little to do with how they perform their jobs (Dizik, 2015).

As mentioned by this author, the rubric featured is similar to what is used on interviews (call simulations) and training (mock calls). Using these rubric types that emphasize more on language and accent rather than soft skills like cross-selling, up-selling, and problem solving lessens the chances of getting any agent hired or passing the training stage. From this author's experience, there have been instances of successful agents whose accents are no near American variety but surpassed daily, weekly, and monthly sales quotas but are subjected to language re-training because of specific QA scorecard ratings. On the other hand, interviews can sometimes be too picky because certain applicants show interventions of their regional accents. Ironically, the interviewers themselves are also second language learners that may not be as a near-native with their accents but strictly comply with the almighty American English standards.

The second data, on the other hand, was a clear indication of biases towards non-native speakers. Calls deemed unfavorable were recalled based on accents and not problems or transactions that were solved by the agents who attended the phone calls. Though the respondents may not be exposed to different Englishes, they should still do away from stereotyping. After all, biases are formed through stereotypes. Exposure to other Englishes could have lessened their indifference to difference. As Bolton (2010) stated, there is no exclusivity in the ownership and use of the English language.

On the contrary, the third data upholds a more positive outlook on how some agents may view their variety of English. Pressured by their superiors and company owners to strictly "bow down" to what is perceived as biases of customers to accents other than their own, call center agents should need to assert their identity and ownership of English. Tupas and Salonga (2016, p.368) have emphasized how certain Englishes are "more acceptable" and "privileged" than the others. However, allowing varieties of Englishes inside call centers makes agents proud of the product they represent and the job they do.

4. Conclusion

This paper strongly asserts the need to eliminate the Accent Neutralization Policy in employee recruitment, selection, and training as it develops a notion of unequal Englishes to the English variety that agents bring into their companies. In the years that the policy has been implemented since the first call center was formed in the country, no company can claim that there were no reported instances that a customer did not form biases towards an international call center agent despite his/her almost near native-like accent. Customers, after all, are fully aware that most call centers are already outsourced outside of the United States. That comments regarding agents' accents come from their own stereotyping and biases. Conversely, to steer clear of accent biases on call centers is like asking the world to be free from racial discrimination. But, asserting the need to use the variety of English that the agents bring into their companies allows them to distinguish themselves from what is a job from their actual identity. In doing so, recruitment agencies may fill in the void in the selection process of agents. Training can also focus on the more important skill sets like selling and product presentation to achieve company goals.

On the pedagogical aspect, educational institutions should encourage Business Process Outsource practitioners to attend conferences and forums to be enlightened on the advocacies of promoting Philippine English. Collaborations between private call centers and higher education institutions should be supported to improve training outcomes regarding the review of the English language. Trainers and module developers should also be encouraged to take classes in education to fine-tune their tools towards second language learning and not just simply comply with American or British English standards.

Lastly, further studies may investigate the development of questionnaires and observation tools used in BPO recruitment and language training modules where the accent policy strongly manifests.

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