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# Globalization, Communication and the Workplace

Talking Across The World



## Chapter 14

# Consulting Assessment for the Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) Industry in the Philippines

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*This chapter reports on the development of a 'consulting assessment' (CA) approach to meet the specific needs of the BPO industry in call centres in the Philippines. Put simply, this CA approach aims to provide English language communications assessment processes and tools that key stakeholders can use to determine placement, diagnostic and achievement language levels of their employees. Specifically these tools and processes can be used at recruitment, training and on the floor in the call centres, thus providing an 'end-to-end' solution to the business requirement for constant communications measurement. As well, this chapter reports on the development of the Business Processing Language Assessment Scales (BUPLAS) that were created to provide speaking and writing scales and descriptors to be used for the CA approach within the BPO workplace. The data for this chapter is drawn from communications consulting work carried out in the Philippines in the period 2004–2007, with specific reference to two call centres. The first is a large well known 3<sup>rd</sup> party outsourced call centre with several sites in Manila and Cebu employing about 5,000 Customer Service Representatives (CSRs). The second site is a large USA-based insurance off-shored 'captive' company employing about 800 CSRs. This chapter does not provide a detailed impact study (beyond the anecdotal) on the BUPLAS tool and approach, as evaluative data is currently still being gathered.*

## Introduction

Traditional approaches to Business English language assessment are currently being challenged by the particular needs of new globalized workplaces such as call centres which are being set up in such non-native English speaker (NNES) destinations as the Philippines and India (Hamp-Lyons and Lockwood – 2009; Lockwood 2008). In these new BPO work sites NNES communicate with native English speakers from USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand and poor



communication can threaten the smooth running of the business. It is therefore important to explore where these critical points of communication occur in the call centres, and how language assessments can safeguard and inform the business requirements resulting in good communication. The Offshoring and Outsourcing (O&O) industry is estimated to be worth in excess of US\$300 billion world-wide by 2010 (NASSCOM/McKinsey Report 2005) and the current financial turmoil is tipped to add to these estimates where there is a business imperative for companies to find cheaper ways of doing business. The call centres, which form a sizable section of the O&O industry in these new NINES destinations, are currently experiencing problems in selecting, training and evaluating customer service representatives (CSRs) who mainly interact with USA or other English-speaking customers over the phones and who need to address concerns about a whole range of products and services. There is great anxiety currently within the call centre industry about poor English language skills, and the call centres are struggling to meet the demands of new client accounts being opened in the O&O destinations to serve the Western English-speaking world.

The business requirements for language assessment in the call centres are such that the traditional 'off-the-shelf' commercial business English tests do not fit the need for three reasons. First, the call centres attract very large volumes of potential employees with only 1–5% being hired. Clearly the companies are not willing to pay the high cost of language assessment in testing all interviewees with a commercial tool that charges on a per head basis. Related to this issue too, is the need for speed in assessment as the hiring process is often completed on the same day. Typically, commercial business English tests have a lead in and turnaround time of 2–4 weeks. The second reason relates to the specific placement information required for each client account. Each client account requires a language benchmark 'tag' to which an assessed newly recruited CSR is placed to work. For example, a simple directory enquiries account that provides routine information to callers will require a lower level of communicative competence than a high-end financial advisory call centre. No commercial test provides this kind of service. As well, the business wants the assessment process used in recruitment to provide information on which recruits can be categorized as pre-hire, near-hire or far-hire, i.e. how trainable are they? Assessment 'granularity' and diagnostic information are expected of any language assessment process within the BPO business and such assessments need to be aligned to and support the communications training curriculum. Finally, even after hiring, the business requires on-going communications assessment information for training, for client account migration and for quality assurance. The interactive competency of the CSR is of important and critical concern to the call centre business that constantly measures its success in customer satisfaction statistics. To meet these different demands, the call centre companies themselves are developing their own solutions, often with problematic results (Friginal 2007; Lockwood 2008). The main objective of this chapter is to explore

how one English communications training company based in Manila, has linked language assessment theory and best practice to the reality and requirements of the business in the BPO industry.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section describes the business requirements for language assessment in the call centre industry, taking companies domiciled in the Philippines as examples. In the second section, I will consider the limitations of commercially available business English language tests for this industry context and review the limited literature; and in the final section I will describe and tentatively evaluate (albeit anecdotally), one solution developed by a training provider based in the Philippines. This final section will report on the efforts of a Philippines-based communications consultancy and training group (FuturePerfect Business English Specialists\*) to develop a solution for this industry which we have termed consulting assessment (CA). CA is an industry approach to communications assessment which relies on analyses of the business requirements for assessment and responds with a systematic, tailored, valid and reliable set of tasks and assessment processes.

The business processing language assessment scales (BUPLAS) were developed by the author when consulting in Manila call centres (2004–2007) in order to provide a measurement tool and a process for carrying out speaking and writing assessments within the business context of the call centre worksite. First I document the decisions about selecting the domains for the speaking descriptors for BUPLAS and then how, as a result of the questions and problems being posed by the call centres, these scales and descriptors were embedded into the business systems at recruitment, training and quality assurance and then transferred to the key stakeholders to use themselves.

### The Background and Methodology for This Study

This study was carried out as part of two consulting assignments in the two call centres in the Philippines. The first call centre was a 3<sup>rd</sup> party company with sites in Manila and Cebu which does work for different multinational companies across a number of industry 'verticals' including telecommunications, IT, finance and insurance, retail and tourism. It employs approximately 5,000 call centre representatives (CSRs). The second call centre was a large well-known American insurance company employing about 800 CSRs all locally employed by that company. This call centre processed insurance claims for American customers from all over the USA. Over a period of 6 months the key stakeholders in both the call centres were interviewed individually and/or as part of a series of focus group discussions. These were recorded and summarized.

\*BUPLAS is the language assessment tool and set of processes tailored by FuturePerfect to the needs of the BPO industry.



As well, the consultant also surveyed a number of call centre supervisors about their needs and views on the language assessment and training requirements of their CSR teams. Language assessment tests and training documents were reviewed and observations were made by the consultant at recruitment, in training and on the floor where quality assurance processes take place. As well, the computerized assessment and monitoring for communications competence were studied on the floor in order to understand the principles behind the many metrics being generated as quality assurance standard procedure in the call centre. Call centres generate metrics related to all aspects of their operations including 'average handling time' (AHT) and success at 'first time resolution' (FTR) on the phones. These metrics form the basis of regular quality assurance (QA) reporting for each of the CSRs and feed into regular CSAT (customer satisfaction) ratings.

The qualitative and quantitative data were then analysed and written up in the form of a consultancy report together with a series of recommendations (Lockwood 2004).

### The Call Centre Industry in the Philippines

The Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) Industry or the Offshoring and Outsourcing (O&O) industry as it is becoming known as, in developing countries such as India and the Philippines, is currently reporting a serious shortage of proficient speakers of English to be employed in the call centres as customer services representatives (CSRs) (BPAP 2007; Forey and Lockwood 2007; Fernald 2007; Lockwood 2008; Lockwood, Forey and Price 2008; NASSCOM McKinsey report 2005). It is estimated that the \$5 billion a year O&O industry in the Philippines is enjoying a yearly 75% increase in the coming 5 years (Tuchman 2004). Such call centres serve USA, UK and Australian multinational companies, answering customer queries and complaints related to a range of products and services. The O&O destination of the Philippines has been heavily promoted in Western English-speaking countries because of its perceived good language skills and its cultural affinity with all things American; it also boasts of being the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest English-speaking country in the world (Gonzalez 2008).

### The Problems

The BPO industry in the Philippines is complaining that their recruitment success rates are very low (1–5%) and where the BPO industry aims to recruit 50,000+ new CSRs per year (BPAP 2008), this is a serious threat to the viability of the industry. The main cause of the low recruitment success is reported by human resource and training personnel to be the lack of acceptable English

language-speaking skills to serve their native speaker customers (BPAP 2008; Dominguez 2006; Greenleaf and Ferrer 2006; Lockwood 2008; Magellan Alliance 2005). The Filipino government, the Chambers of Commerce and the O&O industry in the Philippines all bemoan the sliding English language competence of its school leavers and university graduates. At the same time, they have launched significant English language awareness campaigns e.g. 'English is Cool' to promote English language learning (BPAP 2003). While I do not wish to debate the validity of the government concerns in this article, it is certainly the case that the call centres require extremely high levels of spoken communication as many of the companies are insisting on a 'native speaker' variety to serve American customers. A Filipino variety of English, albeit internationally intelligible, appears to be rejected as inappropriate for this kind of work and mother tongue interference is commonly cited by recruiters, trainers and QA personnel as problematic when CSRs are serving Western English-speaking customers on the phones. Currently there are three tiers of recruits that the industry looks for at recruitment, namely pre-hire (ready to go into employment with minimum induction training); near-hires (need 2–4 weeks of intensive communications training) and far-hires (need substantial training, sometimes up to 8 weeks of intensive training). Two questions are constantly being posed by BPO stakeholders as follows. How do we language assess for hireability and trainability at interview to ensure high-quality communicators on the floor? How do we measure and report on this at recruitment, at training and on the floor?

### The Business Requirements for Language Assessment in the Call Centres

One of the biggest problems in call centre English language assessment relates to the complex and multidimensional nature of the language assessments required by the business. The nature of this complexity emerged during the consultancies carried out in the abovementioned call centres in the Philippines. The business requirements of 'captive' and third party call centres for valid, reliable and practical communications assessment at client account set up, at recruitment, at training and at quality assurance are described below.

An 'offshored' client account (sometimes called 'captives') is one where the parent company simply 'off shores' its back office functions to cheaper destinations overseas. It then recruits its own employees in the new destinations. An 'outsourced' client account is one where a company wants a third party to take the work offshore and do the work. In Manila, a big American insurance company from hereon named ERA has offshored much of its own insurance administration work and its own service centre now houses over 800 CSRs who deal with ERA customers all over America throughout the night. What we will



## The Business Requirements

refer to as PESAsia, on the other hand, is a large third party call centre that services the businesses of about 40 client across a range of 'verticals' or industry types such as IT support, retail, finance, insurance and telecommunications and employs around 500 CSRs. Each client account in PESAsia is different in that their products and services are different, the customer demographics and socio-economic backgrounds are different and organizational requirements of good service are different. For example, a large US investment bank headquartered in New York and whose customers are big corporate investors need CSRs who are able to communicate under pressure with a range of educated native speakers about complex financial products and provide good counsel. At the other end of the continuum, there are retail accounts that simply give customers directory information on their outlets. How can the call centres measure the level of language difficulty and challenge inherent in each account and place CSRs into them who are well matched for language level? How can this be achieved when the tools, processes and language assessment skills of the key stakeholders responsible for recruitment, training, management and quality assurances have no familiarity with English language assessments? The key stakeholders and processes are captured in the diagram below:

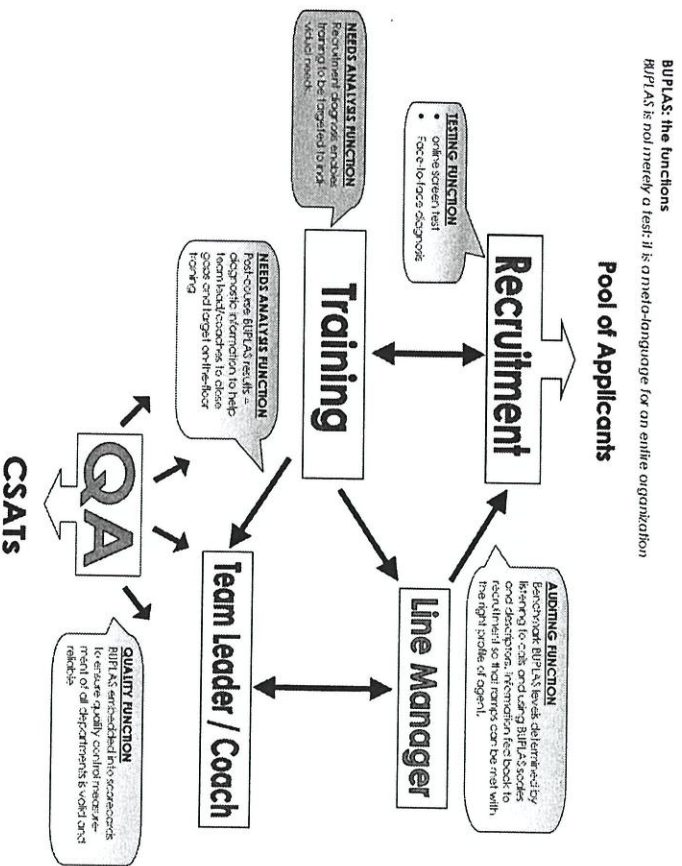


Figure 1 BUPLAS: The functions (Diagram taken from FuturePerfect publicity 2008)

The business requirements as outlined in Figure 1, relate to the following key areas. First, call centres need information about language levels **at set up**. When a new client account is set up in the Philippines, the call centre requires an assessment (or **audit**) of the language complexity and requirement of that account. As outlined above, some accounts are inherently more complex and demanding of communication skills than others. The company needs to know what the linguistic and intercultural challenges are of each of its accounts. The process of establishing this, is known as a language audit (Reeves and Wright 1996). Currently very few call centres carry out a language audit of their accounts, so how do they know what levels of English they need? Secondly, the call centres need information about how to measure language levels **at screening and recruitment**. As previously noted, the current successful recruitment rate is running between 1 and 5%. The most common complaint is that the recruits lack good enough English language skills. However, the recruitment language assessment processes are highly problematic, sometimes resulting in the stronger candidates being unsuccessful and the weaker ones being recruited (Lockwood 2008). The O&O industry and the Philippine government have recently collaborated on a 'training voucher' system that provides English language support to a new pool of potential call centre recruits called 'near hires'.

Thirdly, language assessment skills are required **for pre- and post-course training**. Most call centres in the Philippines invest heavily in pre- and near-hire communications training. Pre-hire training is short-term communications training, typically lasting 2 weeks, where candidates undertake language and communications training around the same time as their product training. The programmes generally concentrate on 'soft skills communication' and assume assured language proficiency levels that underpin choices of appropriate functional language. Near-hire and far-hire training, on the other hand, can last for anything between 2 and 8 weeks full time. Without having a capacity to measure language gain, it is difficult for training teams to target their programmes and measure outcomes. Furthermore based on observational data collected from such programmes, often their training needs analysis, training quality and reporting are frustrated by a lack of a principled framework for language assessment (Lockwood 2008).

Once the CSR has been deemed to be of a good enough level of English language competency and to be familiar enough with the product information for the client account in which they will work, they are normally put into 'incubation' or 'nesting' on the floors, similar to a trial period. This is where they receive **intensive mentoring or coaching support**. The coaching support is often carried out by team leaders in the call centres or 'veteran' CSRs (i.e. CSRs with a great deal of experience). Good diagnostic information about language and communication problems is required for the coaches to target their support,



although this was not evident in the call centres visited. In many cases the team leaders work supporting and assessing the language performance of these new CSRs simply by intuition and 'gut' feeling.

The final business requirement for communications assessment is where **quality assurance is carried out on the floor**. Service level agreements (SLAs) revolve around successful communication with English-speaking customers. To this end, each account has its own quality assurance 'scorecard'. While these scorecards may work on native-speaker CSRs at home, no allowance has been made for CSRs whose first language is not English. For a full discussion of the scorecard as a language assessment tool see (Lockwood, Forey and Elias forthcoming). Many call centres report a lack of success with the scorecard as a judgmental tool for assessing the communication quality of the calls. As well, they report a lack of success in using it as a developmental and diagnostic tool for coaching on the floor.

All these points of contact within the business require language and communications measurement skills for different purposes. The necessary task for language assessment research and development in the O&O industry is to build tools and approaches that meet these challenges.

### Some Common Problems in Using Commercial Products

Tests of business English do exist. Large testing organizations such as Cambridgeesol (UK) and Educational Testing Service (USA) have produced a selection of business English tests (e.g. BULATS, BEC, TOEIC), claiming that they can be used within workplaces to meet their needs. But can they? These 'business English' skills tests appeal to a broad sector of the working population world-wide as they are offered by large well-known and respected examinations bodies and provide useful certification for entry into a variety of workplaces. For example, TOEIC and BEC are included in employment advertisements in business in Indian and Korean newspapers. However, such large-scale tests have been found to be ineffective in meeting the particular business requirements for language measurement within the call centres. The approach is problematic insofar as the commercial tests give a one-point-in-time overall assessment score provided by an approved assessor for the test. How can such a testing model respond to the different dynamic and on-going needs outlined in the previous section? The business model is also problematic insofar as the per-head cost is deemed too high, when taking into account the call centres are screening hundred and thousands of possible candidates for 1-5% success. The turnaround time for results is also impractical for call centres wanting same-day recruits. However, more seriously, the call centres are wanting more information than most commercial business tests provide. They want diagnostic information for training purposes and they want extensive information about the 'interactive' domain of spoken English of each recruit, as they see interactive

capability as key to successful communication with their customers. Additionally business stakeholders in the call centres are also asking for measures of intercultural communication.

Government instrumentalities in the Philippines such as the Technical and Education Skills Development Agency (TESDA) in Manila are also frustrated about the lack of cost effective, valid and reliable assessment tools that can be used by the BPO industry to recruit, measure training and quality assurance (QA). TESDA is still seeking new assessment processes to be endorsed by them for the call centre industry after several years and a series of commercial language assessment test disappointments.

### What the Literature Says

'Consulting assessment', as previously mentioned, relies on in-depth needs analysis of the workplace requirements for communications assessment and also relies on the capacity of the assessment tools and processes to be tailored to the specific business requirements. While the applied linguistic literature is rich on training needs analysis (Brindley 1984; Brown 1995; Dudley and St. John 1998; Numan 1988; Willing 1988) the literature is scarce where language assessment needs analysis is concerned. Reeves and Wright (1996) address the specific issue of front-end language requirements of workplace posts through what they have coined 'a language audit'. They take a broad-angled ethnographic view of needs analysis in the workplace and encourage language providers to 'tailor' courses specifically to the needs of the workplace based on language benchmarking the 'work' within the organizations. Once these language needs and benchmarks are understood, planning for language improvement and measurement can take place.

A language audit therefore should strive to help a company's management make the right strategic decision in recruitment, in modifying the organization and the behaviour of some departments, as well as allocating resources for training and quality assurance. (Reeves and Wright 1996:2)

The language testing literature is rich in the discussions about the relative merits of using different applied linguistic frameworks to achieve construct validity and reliability in the design and use of any test and much of the discussion has revolved around pushing criteria for assessment beyond the traditional preoccupations with pronunciation and grammatical accuracy to a consideration of broader communicative domains such as discourse and interactive capabilities (Bachman 1990; Bachman and Palmer 1982; Bachman and Savignon 1986; Canale and Swain 1980; Davies 1988; Hughes 1989; Weir 1990). Assessment practices that reflect communicative approaches to language training in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) contexts is also well covered



(Luntley and Brown 1996; McNamara 1997; Douglas 2000; Elder 2001), and well-documented accounts of test development for different groups of occupations and professionals abound. McNamara (1990, 1996) and McDowell (1995) have both developed standardized and competency-based tests for a range of teachers and health professionals in Australia. Douglas (2000) looks at specific language use situations to develop test content and test methods for highly specific LSP, such as English for air traffic control. Such frameworks, however, have yet to be fully understood in an industry context and incorporated into business language assessment practices on-site to meet specific business requirements. Testing for professional performance in an individual test taker is not the same as embedded assessment in a worksite to meet a range of business requirements.

Revell (1994) talks specifically about language testing in the Hong Kong corporate context and makes an interesting and relevant link between language assessment and quality management practices in Hong Kong companies when he says:

Internal and external customer requirements are first priority, but other sources of information may be needed and should be found to make sure training and assessment are aligned with the company's quality requirements. These may be found in training criteria, in job descriptions, or in external quality requirements. (Revell 1994:333)

While Revell (1994) has articulated the problem, he does not offer any solutions in the form of practical guidance or prevailing theoretical frameworks that may prove useful to the English language workplace assessment practitioner. Lockwood (2002), in a further analysis of workplace training and evaluation processes in Hong Kong workplaces, has argued for an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and programme evaluation incorporating applied linguistic and business management models (Bramley and Pahl 1996; Goldstein 1993; Kirkpatrick 1994) to ensure business stakeholder involvement in these educational processes. This approach relies on educationalists taking a 'consultative role' in the workplace and gathering key stakeholder views to ensure that training and assessment make an impact on workplace performance. This research approach and frameworks have been key to understanding the business requirements for language assessment.

### The History of the Business Processing Outsourcing Language Assessment Scales (BUPLAS)

In the early part of 2000 in the Philippines, the call centre industry started to experience great difficulty in getting a steady supply of CSRs with the right language levels and skills for work on the phones. When the O&O industry first

started up in the Philippines, good English language speakers were sourced readily from the top universities in Manila. However, over the years that pipeline has dried up and there is now great reliance on lower tier universities and post-secondary colleges for recruiting CSRs. Not surprisingly, the level of English is not as good as their counterparts from the top schools. This has caused anxiety within the industry sector.

Call centres have responded to this recruitment crisis in a number of ways. Some have developed common sense, but layman solutions, to highly complex language assessment and training problems in order to meet the business requirements outlined earlier on in the chapter. Other companies have been importing 'ready-made' solutions from commercial business testing agencies with great expectations that one test would provide all the solutions to the call centre needs (and indeed they were marketed this way). A few call centres have been late to admit that there has been a problem at all. However, as recruitment has become more difficult over the years (BPAP 2007), call centres have been evaluating their business processes for communications training and assessment in order to develop improved recruitment processes, to target and shorten training and meet the requirements of the QA processes more effectively. In fact, call centres are now viewing improved and tailored assessment and training processes as a 'competitive edge' for their businesses (Lockwood 2008). It was in this context that BUPLAS was conceptualized and developed. The author was, at that time, consulting into the two call centres which are the subject of this article. The challenge was to find a workable solution to the business requirements and problems these call centres were posing for language assessment and communications training.

I first pose a series of business problems articulated by call centre senior managers at the time of the consultancies through the interviews and focus group discussions. Each of these problems articulated in the data pose different requirements for language assessment in the day-to-day call centre work. I then go on to discuss how the BUPLAS tool and consulting assessment (CA) process emerged to meet these business needs.

BUPLAS is a five-level scale (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest with .5 being awarded where there are features of both levels), and comprises speaking descriptors across the domains of Pronunciation, Language accuracy and range, Discourse capability and Interactive capability. There is a separate rubric for writing that is not discussed in detail in this chapter.

### The Case Study Questions

Each of the case study problems is derived from the two workplaces described above during the time of the consultancy. Each reflects different concerns around the issues of communications assessment in the BPO workplace. They are first described and then responded to.



**Case study 1 – Company request (set up):**

How do I know what level of English I need in my inbound call center? Our agents need to deal with some pretty complex calls? If I do all this testing, how do I interpret the results? How do I know the CSR is going to cut it on the floor? (Account Manager in ERA)

In the BPO industry, and call centers specifically, there are different language level needs depending on the account. Variables such as whether the account is inbound or outbound; what kind of industry the account is servicing; in which country the account is domiciled, are all factors affecting the language difficulty of the account. 'Tagging' different accounts with a BUPLAS level can be done by carrying out a language audit. This entails listening to a representative sample of calls, talking to the CSRs and their supervisors and reading about the product/service content. Typically the insurance and financial sectors inbound are tagged at a high BUPLAS level (4+), whereas outbound or routine inbound calls (e.g. directory enquiries) can be as low as BUPLAS 2.5. It takes approximately one day to audit an account.

**Case study 2 – Company request (recruitment):**

I need to ramp up to 250 call center agents within a six week period and I need to know who is ready for the account immediately and who needs training and for how long. We've got over 4,000 applicants for these jobs... where do I start? What do I do? (HRO manager of PESAsia-2003)

The volume of CSR applicants that need to be processed, especially at times of expansion, was particularly notable. Given that the industry only expects, at best, to recruit on average only 5 successful candidates out of every 100, communications assessment at recruitment needs to be as cost effective and time efficient as possible. Many large call centres employ casual teams of phone screeners who have the collective responsibility of screening out 50% of the applicants based on language requirements. The problems appeared to be threefold with the phone screeners. First, the level of English of the screeners was not good, indeed some of the screeners were high school students on vacation. Secondly, they had no scales and descriptors, nor assessment tasks to work from; and thirdly they had no training or calibration. Given these limitations, it was observed that the screeners made very haphazard and subjective decisions about who to bring in for the next round of assessment. Those who did make it through to the next round were generally given a test of grammar (these items related to first language interference mistakes e.g. verb/subject agreement), reading comprehension and a writing task. From there successful applicants would go onto the final speaking assessment carried out by an HRO or account manager. Not only was the process long, but it also was not based on sound language assessment principles and approaches (Hamp-Lyons and Lockwood 2009; Lockwood 2008).

To meet this need at recruitment, the author, who was then the consultant, decided to develop a set of scales and descriptors for call centre recruiters, account managers and trainers, and decided that these stakeholders would need to be screened themselves to ensure good proficiency levels. They would then need to be trained up to use the scales and descriptors and would require additional assistance in developing appropriate language assessment tasks.

**Case study 3 – Company request (pre- and post-assessment for training):**

We run both communications and product training before the agents go 'live' but we don't know if the communications training has any impact on our pre-hire group. What if I invest in putting longer communications training programmes on? Do these communications training programmes make any difference? How long does it take to get good enough to go on the phones? (Senior manager ERA)

The links between language proficiency development, end-of-course score reporting and short training programmes is a common concern in the call centres. Understandably there is a requirement for business to justify its expenditure on communications training but how this should be measured requires careful consideration. The author considered this issue in relation to the final domain areas selected and also in relation to the writing language achievement descriptors that related to the objectives of the communications training. While it was felt that a short training programme would not result in clear improvement in language accuracy and range and pronunciation (the proficiency domains); it was felt that improvements in the competency/skills domains of interactive and discourse capacity may show development. These latter domains were then articulated in the course outlines as objectives and measured against the scales and descriptors.

**Case study 4 – Company request (Quality assurance):**

The scorecard that we used back home to measure quality doesn't seem to be as effective in this new non-English speaking context. Can BUPLAS help us with our quality assurance processes to make sure that we pick up English language problems effectively for further support as well as provide a QA score that is meaningful? (QA Manager PESAsia)

Currently, the O&O industry uses a reductionist approach to scoring for quality. Typically a QA scorecard will contain between 35 and 50 individual items that the QA personnel simply check yes or no. Some of the items are of low importance to communication success e.g. the exact wording of the opening; while other items are fundamental to the service success e.g. 'did the customer feel s/he was being served in a professional manner?' The scorecards investigated made no allowance for ranking or weighting of the communication areas probed. As well, there were numerous overlaps in the kinds of



questions being asked. For a full discussion on the scorecard see (Lockwood, Forey and Elias forthcoming). It was felt that a set of scales and descriptors tailored to the communication requirements of the agents would:

- (i) provide a standardized framework for carrying out the QA process;
- (ii) foreground the important considerations in communication success
- (iii) provide a principled approach to the QA assessment processes for both judgmental and developmental purposes.

### The Development of the BUPLAS Speaking Scales and Descriptors

Once the multidimensional need for language assessment was understood, the author of BUPLAS started with the priority need for developing a set of speaking and writing scales and descriptors to assist the different stakeholders at the key points in the business to measure their candidates for the variety of purposes as described above. The domains of these descriptors needed to reflect the requirements of the industry, which were, predictably, focused on very good interactive skills. The scale and descriptors also needed to reflect a theoretical construct for communicative language competence.

In drafting the BUPLAS I was not only mindful of this interactive skills domain, but also the discourse skills domain that early research into the descriptions of the call centre exchanges, had shown to be problematic (Forey and Lockwood 2007). Pronunciation and language accuracy and range were also key domains to measure for basic language proficiency. The literature on communicative language testing (Bachman 1990; Canale and Swain 1980; Savignon 1983; Weir 1990) combined with knowledge of the business requirements, informed the final domain selection which are outlined in the following section.

'Communicative competence' (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983; Savignon 1983) comprises a number of elements which will be discussed below. These components provide a rich interpretation of what is present in good communication and go far beyond the limited view that good grammar and clear pronunciation is all that is required. Canale (1983) writes of the nature of linguistic communication as:

- (a) being a form of social interaction and therefore normally acquired and used in social interaction
- (b) involving a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in form and message
- (c) taking place in discourse and sociocultural contexts which provide constraints on appropriate language use and also cues as to correct interpretations of utterances
- (d) being carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions such as memory constraints, fatigue and other distractions;

- (e) always having a purpose (for example to establish social relationships, to persuade or to promise);
- (f) involving authentic, as opposed to textbook-contrived language; and
- (g) as being judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes (Canale 1983:3-4)

The following features were selected as important for the domain selection for BUPLAS to meet the kinds of business needs described above:

- Language competence** (ability to use grammar, vocabulary and the phonological features of the language)
- Discourse competence** (ability to recognize and construct the flow of a spoken or written text)
- Sociolinguistic competence** (ability to understand the intercultural nuances)
- Interactive competence** (ability to make appropriate functional interaction, and to move between transaction and interaction)
- Strategic competence** (ability to repair language breakdown, particularly in spoken language)

Specifically in the call centre context, these competencies mean the CSR has the ability to:

1. interact well and build relationships with customers
2. make appropriate language choices
3. construct text in a way that is understandable to overseas customers
4. talk with phonological features that are easily understood by the customer
5. maintain control of the call
6. understand the nuances in what the caller says in order to gauge how best to service the caller.

Native English speakers generally have these language and communication skills, but for some NNES speakers these communicative competencies needed to be explicitly identified, explained and taught. Because of the insistence of many, particularly USA accounts, to have native speaker-like varieties of English in their CSR workforce, it was decided to add the pronunciation domain as a separate one, although 'global intelligibility' was highlighted as the desirable benchmark rather than the perfection of an American accent.

### The BUPLAS Scales and Descriptors-speaking

Scales and descriptors were developed for both writing and speaking; however, this article will take speaking ones as our example.



The BUPLAS criteria for speaking are comprised of four domains for spoken communication:

- Pronunciation, stress and intonation
- Language accuracy and range
- Discourse competency
- Interactive fluency and strategic competency

These domains align with a communicative approach to assessment and most notably incorporate the interactive domain so important to the BPO industry. The scales go from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Assessors use a half way marking scale of .5 where there are features of both descriptions.

It was decided for the practical reasons of training, calibrating and reporting to have two versions of the scales and descriptors: One called the 'elaborated' scales for assessors to use in their marking and calibration sessions, and the other, the 'conflated' version for other stakeholders in the call centre (including head office overseas) to use in interpreting the scores.

Once the scales and descriptors were developed for speaking, they were piloted over a range of workplaces and refined. In writing the text for the descriptor, the author was aware of the need to use plain English as far as possible so that all stakeholders, not just the trainers, could read and understand the profile descriptions.

## Discussion

The scales and descriptors, once developed, provided a framework for the call centres to benchmark their (prospective) employees for a range of purposes. The author worked with the various stakeholders on how to assess language for the specific purpose of the business. For example, the phone recruiters simply wanted a yes/no exclusion decision and had targets of 'knocking out' 50% of applicants; the interviewers of the client accounts wanted a granulated report which would highlight hireability or trainability; the trainers wanted diagnostic information for training and for strengthening the content of the curriculum; the QA personnel wanted specific diagnostic information from the curriculum; to feed into coaching support and so on. The advantage of using the same scales and descriptors meant that, for the first time, recruiters, trainers and QA personnel were using the same language and benchmarks to talk about the needs and success of the front line CSRs. It therefore provided a much-needed systematic language assessment reporting tool where all business stakeholders were using the same metalanguage to talk about communication issues.

This model deviates from traditional language assessment products and processes in a number of ways. First, while the scales and descriptors had been written to reflect the language abilities of the candidate along a scale of 1-5,

some call centres and client accounts wanted the descriptors to be tailored more to the communication priorities within the accounts. For example, some client accounts have very complex products and services, so clear and organized explanations were critical to the success of the call. Other requests that resulted in domain description tailoring were soft skills requirements for customer service and even intercultural sensitivity (as it is manifested in language) which were written into the domains of discourse and interactive capacity. This tailoring was done by the consultant only and companies were discouraged from tampering with the scales and descriptors without expert consultancy advice.

The second way in which this model pushed the boundaries of traditional language assessment approaches was that non-language specialists (e.g. HRO, account managers and quality assurance personnel) were trained up and calibrated as language assessors. The consultant wanted the call centre to be able to operate as independently as possible using the scales and descriptor, therefore transferring this expertise to key personnel was seen as critical to the success of embedding the assessment approach within the business. The one thing that became non-negotiable in the training up of non-specialist assessors was that the language level of the non-language specialist needed to be very high (BUPLAS 4-4.5). Occasionally, and at the early insistence of the call centres, potential assessors, as low as BUPLAS 2.5, were sent to BUPLAS training and calibration workshops with frustrating results. This benchmark level for BUPLAS training entry is very confronting for the call centre management who often recruit HRO and QA personnel, phone screeners and even on-the-floor communications coaches whose language level is very low. One of the call centre senior managers admitted that it is often the case that their non-performers get moved into quality assurance functions such as coaching.

The third way in which this model varies from traditional language assessment approaches is that key stakeholders often request for the domain weightings in BUPLAS to be varied according to the needs of the client account. For example, in a client account which is particularly sensitive e.g. debt collection, insurance claims where there has been a death etc. the domain of interactive capacity is seen to be of particular importance. Another example may be where a company (e.g. IT support) has a complex product or service that requires clear explanation or instruction; here the discourse domain may be highly valued.

Assistance with language task construction for the purposes of assessment is also a requirement of this model. For example, at recruitment, traditionally a face-to-face interview involves the interviewers asking the candidates a list of questions – this has been the *modus operandi* for assessing communications. Devising scenarios for short roleplays at an interview where a candidate works as a pair or even threes has provided HRO recruiters with improved evidence of language performance capability for the work in call centres.



Investigating the business requirements for assessment, embedding the scales and descriptors and transferring the knowledge to the key company stakeholders are the three hallmarks of the CA approach.

Over the last 5 years and since the consultancies described in this chapter took place, the BUPLAS scales and descriptors have been embedded and transferred into a large number of call centre in the Philippines. The main challenges for CA and BUPLAS relate to both the quality issues of embedding and transferring the tools and processes, and also the business model for this new kind of assessment. It is important for an external party such as Future-Perfect Business English Specialists to maintain a 'presence' within the company to ensure internal calibrations are carried out regularly, that new business needs are met by assessment and that moderation studies are also carried out. Also companies need to accept the fact that the costing model, while much cheaper than a per-head flat cost, needs to account for the above on-going services supplied by external experts. This can be done through a license arrangement and regular consultancy visits. As well, further research and development needs to take place to ensure validity and reliability of the tasks and the scales and descriptors. Copyright has also become an issue where companies have simply photocopied the tasks, the scales and descriptors with no training and no license.

While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence from the companies who use BUPLAS concerning improvements in their recruitment, training and quality assurance processes, a full impact study has just begun.

## Conclusions

While the CA approach and the use of the BUPLAS scales and descriptors have not undergone formal evaluation to date, anecdotally, companies based in Manila report great success in that it provides a systematic approach to measuring language across and within each part of the call centre business. For the first time recruitment, training and quality assurance personnel are using a common metalanguage to talk about the communication levels of the CSRs. In an industry that measures everything it does, from the average call handling time to first time resolution, a measure for customer satisfaction and communications success is seen as a crucial metric to report on. Clearly there are many areas of further research and development around this model. A formal evaluation of how BUPLAS is soon to be undertaken. It would also be of great interest to see how BUPLAS has affected the communications training programmes i.e. the 'washback' into the curriculum and training approaches which have previously put strong emphasis on accent neutralization and the 'drilling' out of discrete first language interference mistakes. In addition, the impact on the business requires further investigation. Has the very low recruitment rate in HR improved as a result of a communications assessment process that looks for what potential candidates can do with language and how trainable (as well as

hireable) they may be? Have the quality assurance processes locally improved and is the diagnostic information finding its way back into more effective training and coaching programmes? The impact of BUPLAS and CA is a rich area that currently requires more detailed and in-depth research investigation.

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