

The state of the art: Asian call centre ESP curriculum and assessment development

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1 Introduction

The Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) industry, and specifically those Multinational Companies (MNCs) domiciled in the United Kingdom, the US and Australia, have been rapidly expanding into the developing economies of India and the Philippines looking for quality work at significant savings. These countries have become preferred BPO destinations partly because of their colonial legacies where English was previously used in government, education and business, and where businesses believe there are existing linguistic and cultural affinities. These countries have positioned themselves therefore for a range of business services including call centres. However, the question is:

What is the nature and quality of this English communication and how have communications training and assessment practices been developed to meet the needs of this growing industry?

This chapter provides an overview of the communications needs within the Asian call centre industry using a 'language audit' case study carried out in a third-party call centre in Manila. It provides an outline of the academic research completed to date showing where English communication has been found to break down on the phones and it will specifically focus on how such research and development has led to innovative development for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum and assessment for this industry. An important issue for call centres has been how to measure the business impact of its ESP training and assessment and there is a final discussion on how ESP applied linguists and business experts collaborate in order to achieve solutions that are not only pedagogically sound, but also positively affect the business bottom lines.

2 Asian call centre context

Western English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the US have been sending work overseas to developing countries where the work can be completed cheaply and the quality of the work, they claim, is not compromised. This trend (Freidman, 2005) has become known as 'off-shoring', where companies set up localised branches, or 'outsourcing', where third parties act as middle men in delivering such services. This section describes the context and needs of English communication in Asian call centres.