

Learning to Serve: An Analysis of English Language Training in Call Centres of India

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The Context

Thomas Macaulay's design to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" is taking a new turn. We are learning English not only to serve the colonial intent within our nation, but now, also to meet the requirement of the fast globalizing world. The nature of the global political economy demands further learning, or relearning, to serve and survive. In this paper, we present an analysis of English-learning for international call centres. This paper is based on a study of data generated from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with call centre agents and employers across twenty-six call centres located in the environs of the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The fieldwork for the paper was first conducted in 2005. A follow-up was done in 2011 to examine the issues involved in detail. Notes from interview transcripts were used to groom the discussion. All the call centres studied are outsourcing centres for businesses in Europe, Australia and the United States of America.

Training is an essential part of call centre employment. Once an agent joins a call centre she/he has to undergo training irrespective of any earlier similar, employment experience. Many call centres provide this 'on-the-job-training' free to their employees, while a few others 'charge' for it in the form of reduced salary along with loss of monetary incentives. The time period for the training varies from two weeks to two months. By talking to call centre agents and managers, we

gathered that agents undergo both generic (accent, grammar, customer service) and process-specific training (about the products) before they are allowed to take/make live calls. Usually, call centre training is broadly divided into three sequential parts: voice and accent training followed by soft skill training, and finally process training. In this paper we have focused only on voice and accent training, which is the process that forces employees to relearn the English language according to the needs of this industry.

Voice and Accent Training

In call centres, voice and accent training is the first stage of training. A review of the call centre guidebooks available in the market in India provide us with certain guidelines of these training processes. Chadha (2004) argues that this training involves listening to different accents by the call centre agents to get accustomed to, and to better comprehend what the customers are inquiring about. This is confirmed by all the agents interviewed, who reported that they are taught a number of practical techniques to increase their own 'comprehensibility'. In order to achieve this, an effort is made to neutralize the Indian accent as much as possible.

It is noteworthy, however, that in comparison Raina (2004), discussing call centre training in his guidebook for training states that to be in the call centre industry one need not put on a fake accent. He argues that one would be quickly exposed without impressing anyone. He

emphasizes on the importance of being one's real self rather than adopting a different persona. Nevertheless, later in the same book Raina advises potential call centre employees to listen to others and "imitate" anyone whose style of speaking appeals to them. Such contradictory versions of accent training are not only perceptible in the call centre guidebooks but are also evident among the managers, trainers and call centre agents.

Interestingly enough, when asked whether they have to speak with an American or European accent, the vast majority of managers (95 per cent), a significant number of trainers (88 per cent), as well as numerous agents (60 per cent), denied it and reported that they are in fact taught to speak with a "neutral accent". According to Mirchandani (2003) in her study of Indian call centres, the purpose of "neutralizing" the accents is to convert individuals into malleable human resources. During our interviews, two-thirds of the call centre agents stated that in India people often have strong regional accents, commonly known as the Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) in the call centre industry. Agents from all the call centres researched in this study reported that it is very important to overcome these regional accents so that the customers can understand the agents clearly.

In his call centre training manual, Raina (2004) explained MTI as a kind of "muscular laziness" and comfort associated with one's own language. Therefore, even while speaking languages other than the mother tongue, the mother tongue influences are maintained. These are revealed through a set of signifiers and sounds that are not common to the other language(s). For example, many people from the southern parts of India have a tendency to put more emphasis on certain letters like 'h' and 'd'. Therefore, when they pronounce 'water', it may sound like 'wader'. Similarly, people from North India have an inclination towards pronouncing 'w' as 'who', for instance, 'what'

might sound like 'wohat'. MTI is common in a country such as India where dialects change every few hundred kilometres; clearly all of us speak with some MTI. Yet it was argued by trainers and agents alike during interviews that there was a need to get rid of these MTIs in the call centre industry, a process called 'neutralization of accent'.

Gupta (2003) describes a neutral accent as one that is understood globally. Nevertheless, Phillipson (2001), writing on the usage of English language more internationally, notes that 'neutral' in this sense contains a significant regional bias, reinforcing the 'racist hierarchization' implicit in identifying Western English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate. Accents are a characteristic of a person's identity, and a person's native region is often identified by his/her accent. The neutralization of accents thus erases such identity markers and homogenizes the agents.

Despite their denial of 'accent learning', all the trainers of the call centres that we interviewed stated that during the training process they teach employees the differences in the pronunciation of the vowels and particular words used in the UK and the USA. Contradictions were thus clearly apparent since learning the pronunciation of vowels is a large part of the accent training, as was evident from a discussion with two-thirds of the interviewees. Almost 85 per cent of the agents stated that they also have to relearn certain words and idioms specific to the country they are calling or receiving calls from. Books are now available on precisely this topic. These books, produced for training prospective call centre employees, provide exercises and CDs that enable one to learn the different pronunciations of verbs for UK and USA.

Gupta (2003) clearly mentions in the preface of his book on call centre training that to make a career in a call centre, it is very important to develop skills in speaking, writing and comprehending an 'American kind of English'.

During our interviews, an example of this USA emphasis was cited by Hiralal, a male trainer in an America-based call centre, "...we teach them how to converse and then some specific details like, you know, in America, like they do not pronounce 'z' (zed) they say 'zee'. They don't pronounce Jose as 'Jose' (pronouncing the 'j') they say 'hosey'. Ironically then, even the trainers are not really aware of American parlance as 'j' is pronounced as 'h' in Spanish and not in American English.

During the training, employees are taught phonetics, pronunciations of alphabets, and words that are different in American and British English. Examples of these words have been given in Table 1 below. A quarter of the employees stated that unlike in India, where the alphabet is taught along the lines: 'A is for apple, B is for bat, and C for cat', they had to relearn the alphabet the American way, which they argued, equated to 'A is for alpha, B is for bravo, and C is for Charlie', and so on. Clearly, it is precisely such training that creates in the minds of these employees perceptions about their customers and the countries they are from.

Table 1: Examples of different British and American words

British	American
1. Fortnight	Two weeks
2. Anticlockwise	Counter clockwise
3. Autumn	Fall
4. Caretaker	Janitor
5. City centre	Downtown
6. Lavatory	Washroom
7. Mobile phone	Cell phone

Source: Selected from Raina (2004: 79-81).

In addition to such training, employees are also educated in speech regulation; for example, to speak slowly so that customers can understand them accurately. Chadha (2003) provides a

'Pronunciation Dictionary' for the agents (some examples are provided in Table 2) to facilitate the learning of various words. At the end of the day, employees have to qualify in the voice and accent training to be eligible for process training.

Table 2 : Examples from 'Pronunciation Dictionary'

Spelling	xx Errorxx (INCORRECT Pronunciation)*	Pronunciation
A Academics	a-KAD-a-mics	Ak-a-DEM-ics
B Bowl	Bowl (sounds like foul)	Bole (sounds like coal)
C Cabin	CAY-bin	CAB-in
D Deliver	DEL-iv-er	dl-LIVE-er
E Emergency	Em-er-JEN-see	im-MER-jn-see

Source: Selected from Chadha (2004:131-54).

* These pronunciations are common amongst Delhi urbanites.

In all the call centres where fieldwork was undertaken, voice and accent training was provided on site. Initially, when the first call centres were opened in India, trainers were recruited from the country of the parent company. However, over the years, the situation has changed and now the call centres also have Indian trainers. Not surprisingly, these trainers have been trained by trainers from the country of the parent company, and are expected to carry out their mandate in the training process of spoken English.

In Retrospect

Over the years, English language in India has acquired its own flavour, and like in all other

places, the language has been influenced by the local dialects, especially the spoken English. Call centres—part of globalized workplaces—require the employees to shed their local flavour in English and give it an international essence. However, spoken English can never be ‘accent free’, even in parts of UK and America. For example, the accent of a person from Wales is very different and clearly distinguishable from that of England. Similarly, people in Texas, USA speak with a different accent from those in New York. In Canada, there are different variants of English from coast to coast.

In India, there is a popular saying that the dialect of a language changes every hundred miles. The homogenization process for only one kind of English, for the international corporate market, will undermine this social diversity. We would like to recognize this process as ‘linguistic deculturation’ (Raj & Raj 2004). In fact, through voice and accent training, call centre agents are asked to *unlearn* their native accent and *learn* (emphasis added) the accent of another geographical region. This is a distinctive example of globalization which tries to erase any/all cultural differences to serve the corporate agenda.

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