

Exploring Language Proficiency Enhancement Trainings of Call Center Agents: Unveiling BPO Trainer Strategies from Agents' Standpoints

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the strategies trainers use in language proficiency enhancement training, as perceived by student call center agents. It specifically examined strategies for developing the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and grammar skills. Using thematic analysis, it was found that various strategies were employed. Firstly, reading strategies involve active reading and practice reading. Secondly, in terms of writing, their strategies were the process-based approach and the rule-based strategy. Thirdly, the strategy used in listening was active listening. Fourthly, the speaking strategies involved simulation and speaking tests. Lastly, for grammar skills, the strategy used was direct instruction. Participants also shared insights on the training they received from BPO companies, which included challenges in understanding diverse communication styles, struggles with fluent and natural communication, and language acquisition and development strategies. The results imply that understanding call center agents' perspectives on language training can enrich the curriculum by offering effective strategies, such as hands-on simulated activities, active learning, and student-centered pedagogies, optimizing learning experiences and fostering more effective communication skills. Furthermore, the results underscore the importance of using learner input to continually evolve and optimize curriculum design, emphasizing the transformative impact of learning and learner-centered approaches on educational practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency refers to a person's ability to effectively use a language in various contexts, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing [22]. This skill is crucial for effective communication, encompassing vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and all aspects of English language proficiency [51]. However, as Asemanyi [6] notes, traditional classroom-based language teaching often hinders the development of practical communication skills, with an overemphasis on

correctness and theoretical knowledge rather than meaningful interaction. In contrast, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) company language training focuses on practical skills that enhance customer interactions and operational efficiency, addressing specific needs such as accent neutralization, effective listening, and clear articulation [54].

Conventional language teaching methods often rely on a planned, restricted, and gradual approach to second language learning, emphasizing comprehensive language development for academic purposes [90]. This traditional approach tends to focus on grammatical accuracy and sentence structure analysis, often at the expense of real-world communication skills [87]. In comparison, BPO training offers a more hands-on approach, exposing learners to real-world communication scenarios that enhance both oral and written communication skills [38]. This practical focus prepares employees for effective interactions in professional settings, highlighting the stark contrast between theoretical language learning and its practical application in the BPO sector.

BPO training often begins with role-play and other experiential methods to simulate real-life scenarios, providing trainees with the necessary skills before they interact with customers [72]. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional language education, which often emphasizes theoretical knowledge over practical application [7]. Pragmatism in education advocates for a shift towards contextual and real-world learning, aligning more closely with the methods used in BPO training [21]. The integration of BPO strategies into traditional education could enhance language proficiency by moving from a syntactically driven approach to one that is more communicative and authentic, offering valuable insights and potential improvements for both educational and professional contexts.

2. METHOD

Research Participants

The study involved 15 student-call center agents from BPO companies in Davao City, chosen using purposive sampling based on Creswell's [27] and Plano Clark's [79] recommendations. Participants were selected for their relevant experience and current engagement in language proficiency training in English.

Research Design and Procedures

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore BPO trainer strategies for language proficiency enhancement from the perspective of call center agents. This methodology, as described by Creswell [28], provides a detailed exploration of participants' experiences without imposing preconceived theories, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of context-specific phenomena. Through interviews, the study gathered in-depth insights into the strategies used by trainers and their impact on agents' language skills.

Thematic analysis, following Miles and Huberman's [69] guidelines, was used to identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. This approach uncovered key themes related to speaking, writing, listening, reading, and grammar skills, offering a nuanced view of how language proficiency is developed in call centers. The research's systematic data collection and analysis process enabled a thorough examination of the strategies employed by trainers and their effectiveness from the agents' viewpoints.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading

Incorporating the senses reinforces reading skills by engaging the mind [11]. This approach is crucial for accessing information, acquiring new knowledge, and engaging with the world. To enhance language training, two methods are used: active reading and practice reading.

Active Reading. Active reading involves engaging with the text to determine meaning and evaluate relevance, making reading more effective [4]. Unlike passive reading, which can lead to confusion and forgetfulness, active reading strategies help focus, comprehend, and retain information. This

approach includes techniques like highlighting and monitoring comprehension for deeper understanding and retention.

Highlighting. Yue et al. [110] found that highlighting helps students engage more deeply with text by focusing on key information. In this strategy, student agents highlight essential client concerns, as shown in the responses below:

“I usually highlight or mark the details that I like or need to remember.” [SA 13]

“I would always have a Word document saved in my account to update it from time to time.” [SA 5]

SA 13's response highlighted the need to mark crucial details to manage client issues effectively, showing that highlighting is a common technique for emphasizing important text [49]. SA 5's strategy of maintaining an updated Word document also supports this, indicating a proactive way to retain and access essential details without repeated reading. Highlighting helps student agents stay engaged and alert with the text [46].

Monitoring Comprehension. Monitoring comprehension involves actively engaging with and checking one's understanding of the text, helping readers identify and address misunderstandings [5]. BPO student agents use this strategy to assess their understanding, as seen in the responses below:

“Reading text repeatedly.” [SA 1]

“We should take time to read and comprehend the customer's concern.” [SA 4]

SA 1 emphasized the value of repeated reading, aligning with monitoring comprehension in active reading, which enhances understanding and performance [44]. This approach suggests rereading texts to fully grasp customer concerns. SA 4 supports this, noting the need for thorough reading to understand issues accurately. Overall, monitoring comprehension boosts reading skills and engagement [76].

Practice Reading. Reading practice is crucial for enhancing comprehension and vocabulary, influencing both crystallized and fluid intelligence [98]. This strategy involves repeatedly reading a text to achieve fluency and accuracy [25]. For student agents, practice reading helps address comprehension challenges, refine reading skills, expand vocabulary, and improve pronunciation.

Reading Comprehension. Comprehension is the ability to understand written words [15] and is a key pillar of reading. BPO student agents must continually refine and practice this skill to effectively address customer concerns, as seen in the responses below:

“They will let us read some scenarios and right after they will ask us questions to assess if we really comprehend what we read.” [SA 1]

“To be able to comprehend and understand what the problem of the customer.” [SA 10]

“Comprehension is very essential since we usually deal with foreigners.” [SA 13]

SA 1 showed that trainers use reading materials and questions to assess comprehension, focusing on understanding. SA 10 stressed that comprehension is key for resolving customer issues effectively. SA 13 highlighted its importance in interacting with native English speakers and clients from diverse backgrounds. These responses underline comprehension's critical role in customer service, essential for understanding needs and providing solutions. Without comprehension, reading is just tracking symbols.

Speed Reading. Speed reading enables faster reading while maintaining comprehension [2]. This technique helps student agents quickly understand and address customer issues effectively, as seen in the responses below:

“Speed reading by mock call”. [SA 8]

“We [do] speed reading by setting a target time and feedbacking.” [SA 5]

SA 8's response showed that practicing speed reading during mock calls helped develop rapid comprehension, crucial in fast-paced customer service [97]. SA 5 supported this by recommending speed reading, setting target times, and giving feedback to enhance reading speed

and efficiency. Adjusting reading techniques can quickly improve both speed and comprehension [24].

Pronunciation. Reading improves pronunciation by exposing learners to correct models [40]. It helps understand word meanings and usage, which is vital for effective speaking and writing. BPO student agents were trained to correct their pronunciation to enhance communication with customers, as seen in the responses below:

“Read passage or scripts to practice pronunciation.” [SA 9]

“Read novels and English stories to improve my pronunciation of words.” [SA 15]

SA 9’s response indicated that reading passages or scripts improved pronunciation by addressing challenging words, enhancing clarity and articulation. SA 15 supported this, noting that reading novels and stories boosts pronunciation and confidence, leading to more effective communication [100]. Unlike school reading, which offers broad educational value but may lack practical application, BPO companies use simulated environments to prepare employees for real-world scenarios [23].

Writing

Writing abilities involve the clear and concise communication of ideas. A proficient writer conveys messages effectively without unnecessary verbosity, ensuring the audience's understanding [57]. In the BPO context, writing skills are enhanced through two main strategies: the Process-Based Approach and the Rule-Based Strategy.

Process Based- Approach. The process-oriented writing method helps learners organize and express ideas fluently before addressing grammar [86]. It enables agents to write systematically and clearly by focusing on key points and using outlining.

Application of Writing Process. The writing process involves steps like brainstorming, drafting, and refining ideas [37]. BPO trainers use this method to help student agents focus on essential details, structure their content accurately, and create well-organized documents.

“Approaches is first, comprehend what is your idea, arrange it, and, by the time it's arranged then you're good to write your ideas.” [SA 3]

“Since we are assisting customers and walking them through on the steps on how things should be done, we break down all of the steps in a way that it can be easily understood by the customers so they can easily follow through.” [SA 4]

SA 3’s response shows that the writing process involves identifying ideas, organizing details, and producing the final output. The student agent followed this process systematically, from generating ideas to drafting and finalizing the document. SA 4 emphasized the importance of breaking down information for easier customer understanding, supporting the idea that a structured writing process helps produce well-crafted documents. This highlights that writing typically involves stages like brainstorming, drafting, refining, and sharing [37], which enhances writing proficiency.

Outlining. Outlining helps writers organize and refine their ideas efficiently, resulting in clearer and more concise writing [62]. This is seen in the responses below:

“Using clear outlines help me organize my thoughts.” [SA 9]

“I’ve learned how to organize my thoughts systematically before actually writing just like how I investigate the customer’s concern first before responding.” [SA 13]

SA 9 and SA 13 demonstrated that outlining helps organize thoughts and structure writing effectively. By creating clear outlines, student agents were able to map out main ideas and supporting details, leading to more coherent and well-organized documents. This strategy improved their writing skills, enabling them to produce precise and meaningful outputs through systematic drafting and editing.

Rule-Based Strategy. This strategy, developed by Brown, Campione, and Day [17], involves summarizing content, removing unnecessary details, and creating clear topic sentences [66]. It

helps BPO trainers teach agents to condense lengthy documents and focus on key points for clearer, more concise writing.

Note-Taking. Note-taking involves recording important information for easy tracking and retention [83]. In BPO settings, it helps agents document crucial details from interactions, aiding in better understanding and memory.

“Writing the main concern of the customer while having a conversation with them.” [SA 8]

“It is to always document or write down key points to avoid consuming too much time and only highlight the most important points.” [SA 11]

“Jotting down points.” [SA 12]

SA 8 highlighted that note-taking helped agents capture key customer concerns, making it easier to address them effectively. SA 11 and SA 12 noted that jotting down and highlighting important points saved time. Sporring [92] supports this by stating that note-taking aids in revisiting crucial aspects of research. This strategy helps agents efficiently track and recall essential details for their written outputs.

Summarization. Involves creating a brief version of a text, focusing on key points [67] [14]. BPO agents use this to condense call conversations into concise summaries of relevant queries and resolutions, avoiding lengthy texts.

“We are trained not to fully write the transaction that happened during the interaction with the caller because it will take too much time.” [SA 6]

“Be coherent as possible.” [SA 7]

“It is to write in a short and precise way that would help organize thoughts.” [SA 11]

“To be direct to the point and so we are given minimum of word count and time to write our ideas.” [SA 5]

SA 6 indicated that agents are trained to create concise call summaries, focusing on key points to save time [78]. This approach aligns with the need for efficient documentation by condensing information. SA 7 and SA 11 also stressed that summarization aids in organizing thoughts and producing clear, focused documents, in line with Marzano et al.'s [66] view of retaining essential information while omitting unnecessary details.

Active notetaking and summarization help BPO agents quickly capture essential details and create clear documents, improving both efficiency and clarity. BPO note-taking is real-time and client-focused [91], while classroom note-taking is comprehensive and review-oriented [53]. In BPOs, outlining and summarization streamline workflows and client communications [16] [32], whereas in classrooms, they aid in organizing and synthesizing information for assessments [109] [65]

Listening

English proficiency in listening involves understanding spoken English in diverse contexts, including different accents and complex ideas [39]. Effective listening skills involve accurately receiving and interpreting messages. Trainers employed an active listening strategy, discussed below.

Active Listening. Active listening goes beyond hearing; it involves understanding the meaning and intent behind spoken words, requiring mindfulness and focus [29]. This skill improves communication by enhancing relationships and fostering empathy [105] [52]. Mastering active listening helps student agents capture essential details in customer interactions, refining their skills to provide effective solutions and better understand key aspects of the message.

Recorded Call Listening. Call recording is commonly used for replaying and sharing call audio [20] [56]. BPO companies use recorded calls for training, process optimization, and quality assurance [33]. Student agents use these recordings to identify client concerns and assess how issues are addressed, as seen in the responses below:

“We are given recorded calls to listen to.” [SA 4]

“Our training will have us listen to recorded call transaction between a customer and an agent.” [SA 5]

“Trainers use common customer’s concerns through recordings.” [SA 6]

Businesses use call recordings for training, process improvement, and quality assurance [33]. SA 4 noted that recorded calls were used in training to help learn professional responses to customer problems. SA 5 supported this, emphasizing the analysis of recorded transactions to understand context and key information. SA 13 added that trainers used common concerns from recordings to help student agents address issues confidently and professionally.

Call Listening. Call listening involves supervisors and quality assurance professionals reviewing conversations between agents and clients [20]. This is evident in the responses below:

“By listening to live calls.” [SA 1]

“Trainers will let you listen to a conversation through call.” [SA 10]

“They let agents listen to a call.” [SA 15]

“Listening to a different call scenarios from other agents.” [SA 6]

SA 1 and SA 6 noted that their training includes listening to live calls to better understand accents, tones, and speech patterns. This practice, supported by R10 and R15, helps student agents practice active listening and receive feedback. Trainers use this method to assess performance and ensure high-quality customer experiences [47]. Despite the importance of listening education, it often receives less focus compared to other skills. BPO companies, however, require strong, empathetic listening skills for effective client interaction [106].

Speaking

Language proficiency involves speaking skills. To enhance these, two approaches are used: simulation and speaking tests.

Simulation. Simulation involves creating real-life scenarios for agents to practice in a controlled environment [43]. In call centers, this includes mock calls and interview simulations to assess and improve speaking skills [71].

Interview Simulation. Interview simulations closely mimic real-life settings, allowing trainers to evaluate agents' skills and identify areas for improvement [26].

“We have interview simulation wherein the trainers or co-trainers would point out the details that needs to be improved on.” [SA 11]

“Pronunciation and fluency are practiced through interview simulation with co-trainers or sometimes trainers, this is also to practice for actual interviews with clients.” [SA 13]

SA 11 noted that interview simulations help identify and correct speaking errors, enhancing agents' skills by providing immediate feedback [63]. Unlike traditional methods, simulations offer real-time evaluation, focusing on pronunciation and fluency to improve overall language proficiency [77]. SA 13 highlighted that these simulations boost confidence and competence, making them an effective tool for refining speaking skills before real interactions.

Mock calls. Are practice conversations that help student agents build confidence and improve communication skills [94]. These simulations allow agents to interact with simulated customers, enhancing their speaking proficiency and adaptability in real scenarios.

“Mockup call with co-agents and not following any script.” [SA 6]

“All BPO industries do have what they call a "Mock Call" where you pretend on dealing with the customers to resolve their issues.” [SA 10]

SA 6 noted that mock calls without scripts boosted their confidence and speaking skills by allowing them to respond naturally. SA 10 highlighted that these calls help agents practice handling issues and speaking professionally. This aligns with Velasco [102], who states that mock calls are crucial for assessing and improving agents' proficiency in managing customer interactions.

Speaking Test. During training, agents undergo speaking tests to assess their accents, intonation, and language use, helping them practice correct English pronunciation and intonation patterns [30].

English Only Policy (EOP). Call centers enforce an English-only policy to ensure agents speak fluently and professionally in English, fostering better communication with clients and maintaining a professional environment [42].

“Since we are dealing with native speakers of the language, we are expected to be fluent and well-spoken with the language.” [SA 5]

“Knowing how to properly speak in English is a MUST.” [SA 10]

SA 5 and SA 10 emphasized that fluency in English is crucial in the BPO industry. To support this, the English Only Policy (EOP) requires agents to speak exclusively in English, ensuring they become proficient and effective in communicating with native speakers.

Accent Neutralization. Accent neutralization helps agents adapt their speech to sound more like native speakers, improving clarity and communication. This strategy ensures that student agents achieve native-like English pronunciation, crucial for effective interactions in the BPO industry.

“The trainer did some discussion on how to pronounce the words appropriately and how to neutralize our accents.” [SA 7]

“Our trainer before will show us common words that you encounter in BPO industry and have us pronounce it and make sure that we can hear the difference of our pronunciation and show us how it affects the overall intention or your tone.” [SA 5]

“In our first week, our company.... taught us how to change our tone of voice.” [SA 14]

SA 7 noted that trainers focused on accent and tone neutralization to improve pronunciation, as a neutral accent is essential in the BPO industry [41]. Unlike classroom settings, where students initially observe before speaking [99], BPO training emphasizes immediate practice with common industry terms to master pronunciation and intonation [30]. SA 14 highlighted that tone adjustment is also taught to enhance clarity and fluency.

Grammar Skills

Grammar skills are essential for language proficiency, as they enable individuals to convey meaning and communicate effectively in writing. Mastery of grammar involves understanding language rules and structures and applying them skillfully in written contexts.

Direct Instruction. Direct instruction effectively establishes a foundational understanding of grammatical concepts, providing a clear and structured learning approach [59]. In the BPO context, it enhances language proficiency by helping agents grasp grammar, improving their communication with clients [12].

Explicit Instruction. Explicit instruction on subject-verb agreement is crucial for coherent English communication, forming the backbone of language rules [8]. In the BPO context, call center instructors focus on teaching basic subject-verb agreement to address specific grammatical challenges in customer interactions [18]. This approach allows agents to clarify doubts, share insights, and receive real-time feedback, enhancing their communication skills.

“Answering mostly the SVA question.” [SA 10]

“Grammar during trainings, just a refresher of the basics like SVA.” [SA 13]

SA10's response highlights that their trainer focused on mastering basic grammar rules, particularly through regular practice of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA), which enhanced the agent's understanding and grammar skills. Similarly, SA13 noted that trainers frequently revisited fundamental grammar concepts, like SVA, through scheduled review sessions, providing ample opportunities for agents to practice and reinforce these rules in real-life situations. This method aligns with Ayling [9], who emphasized the importance of mastering SVA for clear communication. Comparing BPO and school settings, the BPO approach is more practical and effective, as it prioritizes hands-on, repetitive practice and immediate feedback, aiding in long-term retention and real-world application.

Grammar Test. Grammar tests are a practical tool for evaluating language proficiency and understanding targeted structures [110]. In the BPO context, regular grammar tests in training programs help employees assess their grasp of grammatical concepts, measure their proficiency, and identify areas needing improvement.

“Our quality assurance team sends us email highlighting our grammatical errors during the interaction.” [SA 6]

"These may include interactive exercise where agents practice identifying and correcting grammar errors." [SA 9]

"Grammar drills and sentence building." [SA 15]

"In our first week, our company conducted foundation training that focused on grammar." [SA 14]

SA6's response reveals that their training relies on feedback from the quality assurance team, allowing agents to identify and correct grammatical errors continuously, which fosters ongoing improvement in grammar skills. SA9 highlighted the role of interactive exercises, where agents actively correct grammar errors, reinforcing their understanding through practical engagement. SA15 noted the use of grammar drills and sentence-building activities, providing a structured approach that strengthens agents' grasp of grammar principles for real-world application. Additionally, SA14 emphasized the importance of foundational grammar training, ensuring agents have a solid base before advancing to complex topics. Compared to school settings, BPO training is more practical and feedback-driven, offering real-time correction and hands-on practice, which enhances agents' communication skills more effectively than traditional theoretical approaches [13].

Challenges in Understanding Diverse Communication Styles

Accents and cultural differences can lead to communication breakdowns, causing delays or inaccuracies in conveying intended messages [36] [45]. In the BPO context, agents often face challenges in understanding customers' needs due to language barriers, diverse accents, and cultural differences, which require a high level of cultural sensitivity [95]. These barriers can lead to frustration for both agents and customers, hindering the call center's ability to provide accurate and efficient service [80]

"Cannot hear and understand the words of the customer, especially black Americans, because they have their different speaking styles."

[SA 11] "Challenges recognizing various dialects and accents." [SA 4]

"Diverse accent of customers and communication barriers." [SA 14]

SA11 and SA14 highlighted the challenges of understanding diverse accents, such as those of black Americans, which can disrupt communication and lead to misunderstandings in the BPO context. Similarly, SA4 noted struggles with various dialects and accents, emphasizing the need for agents to distinguish and adapt to different linguistic backgrounds for effective communication. Miscommunication due to cultural or language barriers can cause frustration, confusion, and dissatisfaction among customers, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity and proficiency in navigating diverse communication styles within BPO settings [84]

Struggles with Fluent and Natural Communication

Fluency in English is crucial for call center agents to accurately understand customer concerns and respond appropriately, but many agents struggle due to anxiety over grammar, vocabulary limitations, and pronunciation issues [96] [58]. Language anxiety, fueled by fear of communication failure, making mistakes, and low self-esteem, further hinders agents from achieving natural and effective communication.

"Communicating with clients and I usually overthink my grammar that sometimes hinders me to collect my thoughts during certain situations." [SA 13]

"Conversational and fluency." [SA 7]

SA13 and SA7 highlighted that overthinking grammar can hinder agents' ability to communicate fluently and effectively, leading to pauses and difficulties in articulating thoughts. In the BPO industry, this language anxiety can disrupt client interactions, causing hesitation and impacting overall client satisfaction and operational success.

Strategies for Language Acquisition and Development

Language development is primarily achieved through learning principles such as association and reinforcement [88], while observation and imitation play a crucial role [10]. Andrade [3] likens language learning to building a structure, emphasizing that consistent exposure and practice

solidify the foundational elements of the language. In the BPO context, effective communication is nurtured through continuous practice and strategic exposure, which reinforces language acquisition and proficiency.

“Just keep on practicing.” [SA 7]

“Read, practice, and watch English movies without subtitles. Listen to English music and try to understand and speak in English even though it’s not required.” [SA 11]

SA7 highlighted that consistent practice is crucial for overcoming language challenges, aligning with the idea that regular exposure is key to language acquisition. SA11 recommended strategies like reading, watching movies without subtitles, and listening to music in English to enhance comprehension and internalize grammar rules. Immersive practices, as noted by Bukar [19], make the language more intuitive, enabling student agents to confidently handle customer interactions and improve their performance in the BPO environment.

4. CONCLUSION

In the BPO industry, active reading plays a vital role in agents' comprehension of customer issues. By utilizing highlighting and monitoring comprehension, agents can efficiently identify and retain important information. To apply this in practice, educators should teach students how to highlight selectively during reading exercises and assign problem-solving texts to enhance their comprehension skills. This approach helps students avoid the need for repetitive reading and enables faster access to key information.

Regarding writing, trainers in the BPO sector use process-based and rule-based strategies, such as summarization and note-taking. Educators can mirror these techniques in the classroom by encouraging students to engage in free writing and outline creation. This practice should focus on idea expression rather than strict grammar, allowing students to develop their writing skills without the anxiety of producing lengthy outputs. Additionally, incorporating active listening exercises and simulations into classroom activities can enhance students' speaking and listening skills, similar to BPO training methods. Finally, incorporating direct instruction and structured feedback in grammar teaching can help students overcome language anxiety and build confidence. Creating a supportive and interactive learning environment will further assist students in improving their English proficiency.

This research highlights the effectiveness of BPO industry training strategies, which offer a hands-on, interactive approach distinct from traditional language teaching methods. By using intensive training, authentic materials, client interactions, simulated communication, and rigorous assessments, BPO programs significantly enhance language proficiency compared to conventional classroom methods. The insights from this study are poised to improve English teaching practices, especially in specialized contexts, by refining syllabus design, activities, and learning environments. The study also underscores how BPO companies tailor their training to specific job needs and continuously refine skills through daily practice. The researchers aim to adapt these effective strategies for academic settings, enhancing overall educational outcomes.

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