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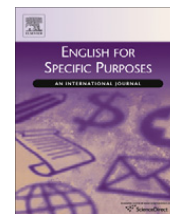
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## English for Specific Purposes

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# Developing an English for specific purpose curriculum for Asian call centres: How theory can inform practice

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## ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this article is the investigation of how current applied linguistic research into the nature of call centre communication breakdown in business processing outsourcing (BPO) sites such as India and the Philippines, can impact English communications training program content and design for this industry. It is argued that a research-based approach to English for specific purpose (ESP) syllabus design and content will yield improved outcomes. It is the interface between the research and the design and content, rather than the implementation and the evaluation of the program, that is the focus of this article.

A case study of an ESP curriculum development project commissioned by a large multinational company operating global call centres and back offices in Asia is used for this investigation. There has been concern within this company about the level of English communication skills where their customers are native speakers of English, but their customer services representatives (CSRs) are second language speakers of English. The article outlines the theoretical principles upon which this ESP syllabus was developed and then traces the steps in integrating the findings and tailoring the program to the needs of this multinational worksite.

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## 1. Introduction

The offshoring of multinational support services to developing countries such as India, Costa Rica and the Philippines is big business. Large savings and competitive advantages accrue to those companies that have chosen to relocate such support services as, for example, customer services, IT help and retail, and legal and financial assistance, to these countries. However, one of the main concerns of the business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry is the ability of the customer services representatives (CSRs) to communicate well in English by phone, thus ensuring the quality of these services. The Business Processing Association of the Philippines (BPAP) reported in its annual report (BPAP, 2006a, 2006b) that the lack of English language proficiency was one of the largest threats to this burgeoning industry, particularly in the call centres where being skilled in spoken English is a core competency.

There is growing literature on the causes of communication breakdown in call centres in non-English speaking BPO destinations, such as India and the Philippines (Friginal, 2007; Hood & Forey, 2008; Lockwood, Forey, & Price, 2008) and Singapore (Clark, Rogers, Murfett, & Ang, 2008). Interestingly, these applied linguistic research findings on the causes of and solutions for problematic call centre communication appear to be at odds with the perceptions of call centre industry stakeholder groups who themselves develop and commission English communication programs. The key business stakeholders, such as the account managers, human resource office (HRO) recruiters and communications quality assurance personnel

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commonly view mother tongue interference (MTI) in pronunciation and the grammatical inaccuracy of their CSRs as the key reasons for communication breakdown on the phones. However, our early research (Forey & Lockwood, 2007) suggested otherwise:

[It appears] that communication failure has less to do with the traditional notions of poor language skills i.e. poor grammatical knowledge and poor pronunciation, and more to do with poor interactional and discursive skills and cultural appreciation of the nuance of what the customer is saying (p. 323).

Most outsourced and off-shore call centres currently provide English communication training prior to CSRs starting work on the phones and these training solutions are typically developed by the businesses themselves. These training courses do a great deal of 'accent neutralisation' to mask first language (L1) differences and seek to eradicate grammatical interference mistakes, often through drilling and through the explicit teaching of grammar rules (Friginal, 2007; Lockwood, 2008). A further problem identified in call centre business training practices (Lockwood, 2010a) relates to the 'siloing' or fragmentation of communications training into 'language training' (meaning explicit grammar instruction); accent neutralisation (meaning pronunciation drilling); intercultural training (knowledge of the target culture) and soft skills training (customer service skills) which are often delivered by different trainers in different departments. Furthermore, these trainers have usually risen through the ranks of the call centre and therefore typically do not have teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) qualifications and experience. Another practice that has compromised the validity of the training has been the wholesale 'transportation' of on-shore native speaker soft skills' training packages (developed for UK CSRs) to the new off-shore non-native speaker destination. Friginal (2007) states:

Training topics in telephone support which address service competence include appropriate speech techniques, establishing rapport and personalization of support; and clarity, effectiveness and accuracy of information. The foci of these topics already assume fluency in the English language. These common topics are universal in the context of outsourcing but there is a need for grounding of these skills in cross cultural competence, and consequently effective language usage. (p. 199)

Whilst all this is common practice, it is argued in this paper that 'siloing' and 'transporting' the communications training in this way is problematic for two reasons. These practices reflect both a lack of appreciation of the nature of spoken English from a sociolinguistic perspective and the language needs of this English as a second language (ESL) target group of CSRs. The ways in which sociolinguistic research outcomes in BPO communication breakdown impacts syllabus design and content selection is the subject of this article. In describing the theoretical linguistic framework that has informed the development of the ESP program central to this article, I draw on the work of genre based and systemic functional linguists who have published in this area (Bhatia, 2008; Clark et al., 2008; Hood & Forey, 2008; Lockwood et al., 2008). I have also taken time to explain the context of the call centre site and the importance of the business stakeholder perspectives in informing this project.

### 1.1. Background to the project

In 2008, a Request for Proposal (RFP) was issued by a large multinational workplace which, for the purposes of confidentiality in this study, will be known as Glocal Financial Services (GFS). GFS was seeking a provider group to supply English language assessment solutions and an ESP communications training curriculum for its global off-shore call centres. Over the previous decade, different assessment and curricula tools and processes had been developed internally and/or supplied by external vendors across the GFS sites. There were two main problems with what existed at the time of the RFP call. Firstly, there was no systematic approach across the off-shore call centre sites because each had sought its own ad hoc solutions to assessment and communications training. Secondly, the validity and quality of both the assessment solutions and the training curricula were being seriously questioned by the learning and development team as well as the business. The Asian regional training manager at GFS commented:

There is a mountain of the best of 'bad practice' out there in the call centre industry telling us that immediate communication solutions can be achieved by eliminating all first language interference mistakes. It's all problematic and our industry has spent millions of dollars on misinformed solutions in training and assessment that are exacerbating, rather than solving our problems.

One of the major findings in the Executive Summary of the provider communications audit for GFS reported:

Both sites (India and Manila) were inefficient and inaccurate in picking the best candidates at recruitment, while training and coaching were sub-optimal in preparing and developing candidates for the communication demands of the call centre floor. There is no standard communication assessment within a site, which makes it impossible to effectively address real communication problems on the floor. There remains a serious disconnect between Glocal Financial Services sites; each site has developed homegrown training and assessment solutions, methodologies and communication benchmark levels rather than streamlining and standardizing quality in these areas region-wide. (GFS Audit Report, 2008, p. 3).

It was decided to select one training provider to develop both an assessment solution and a communications training solution for GFS. A Manila-based business communication specialist group, *FuturePerfect Business English Specialists (FPBES)*, was selected. The aim of the GFS ESP program was to improve the language competency levels from a high B2 Common

European Framework (CEFR) speaking and listening level to a C1 level (roughly equivalent to IELTS 7, TOEFL 102/IBT) across the domains of pronunciation, language accuracy and range, discourse competence and interactive capability within the context of the call centre.

It was agreed that the English language assessment tools and processes developed by the chosen provider (FPBES) would be embedded at GFS recruitment sites first and then the ESP training curriculum development would follow. This sequence would ensure that the level of the communication training would mirror the proficiency language needs of the accounts as well as job performance needs. It would, furthermore, provide a valid and reliable language assessment framework to benchmark success in training and quality assurance within call centres. A final reason for first embedding the assessment was to ensure positive washback from the assessment criteria into the curriculum. A 'communicative' assessment framework would ensure a communicative curriculum (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980). The Business Processing Language Assessment System (BUPLAS)<sup>1</sup> was implemented in 2009 and the work on the training curriculum started in late 2009 and was implemented in the first half of 2010 in GFS sites across Asia. The BUPLAS assessment framework is further described in Section 3.2 as it relates to the syllabus design process and the washback into the program.

## 2. The current research informing the ESP GRF curriculum project

Genre based studies (i.e., the way spoken and written texts are organised), discourse analysis (i.e., the way certain lexico-grammatical features are reflected and patterned in the texts under investigation) and corpus linguistics (i.e., the frequency of the occurrence of certain lexico-grammatical features found in the authentic texts) have provided innovative frameworks for ESP (Paltridge, 2009) in recent times. Research studies using these frameworks have informed the ESP curriculum design process for GFS. However, it should equally be emphasised that the business stakeholder perspective and the context of the call centre sites themselves have also been important in understanding the communication needs of the CSRs. The bridging of what Bhatia has called the "integration of discursive and professional practices" (2008, p. 161) into critical genre analysis has also been a recent preoccupation in ESP and has influenced the design of this program, as described later in the article. Showing how recent research in the analysis of authentic call centre exchanges contributed to the GFS ESP curriculum project is the core aim of this article.

### 2.1. Applied linguistics and ESP

Hyon (1996) originally distilled, and more recently, Tardy (2009), Flowerdew and Wan (2010), and Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) have discussed, current ESP approaches to genre analysis as falling into three broad schools of thought. The first is the ESP approach (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1998) that explores genres, particularly academic and professional genres, identifying a schematic structure exhibited by communicative functions. Bhatia (1993) outlined seven steps to analysing genres which have provided an invaluable framework for ESP genre researchers to methodically investigate new sites. The second is 'the Sydney School' (Hood & Forey, 2008; Martin, 1992; Martin & White, 2005) that comprises scholars who have expanded the systemic functional linguistic framework first developed by Halliday (1978, 1985). SFL investigates meaning through its tripartite framework – the ideational (field), interpersonal (tenor) and textual (mode), and describes and links lexico-grammatical choices and register to this larger socio-cultural framework. And the third school is, 'the New Rhetoric' (or Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) (Bazerman, 1994; Hyon, 1996) that emphasises the fluidity of genres and the notion of intertextuality. This school is more concerned with the context of what is being described and the purpose of the text as a way of explaining language.

The development of the ESP program discussed in this article has drawn on all three schools but has had a particular reliance on the work of the Sydney School when considering the identification and selection of language skills and lexico-grammatical features for inclusion in the GFS ESP program. The ESP approach has informed the analysis of the call centre data in terms of the 'call flow' identified in the 'moves' in the authentic recording (Forey & Lockwood, 2007). Such a textual analysis, it should be said, is also typical of the SFL approach. These moves are used in the organisation of the syllabus and the development of tasks where candidates are asked to identify the stages of a call for themselves. Both schools promote the creation of a corpus from authentic recordings. In this case, the actual call centre interactions provided by the BPO worksites form a corpus stored at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Call Centre Communication Research (CCCR), found at [http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call\\_centre](http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call_centre). This corpus has informed the selection of frequently occurring items for the grammar tasks and idioms in the program.

Where research and practice emphasise the role of cultural, institutional and discipline practices as their starting points for ESP curriculum development, (Lockwood, 2002, p. 30), this project also draws on contextual and situational understandings characteristic of the New Rhetoric and those committed to interdisciplinary approaches. St. John (1996, p.33) suggests that "an interdisciplinary approach (to ESP for business) is called for to take account of language, interpersonal communication skills, business know-how and cultural issues".

<sup>1</sup> The Business Processing Language Assessment system (BUPLAS) was first devised as an end-to-end language assessment solution by FuturePerfect Business English Specialists for the BPO industry in 2004.

It is argued in this article that ESP needs analysis should go beyond learner need and text analyses, to ascertain the business need and become familiar with the context of the site in which it is embedded. The information collected during the GFS audit from business stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions, as well as observations (including listening to many authentic calls), framed the program and assisted in the selection of calls, as will be explained below.

## 2.2. ESP and the BPO industry research

Most of the current research into the nature of the discourse of call centre interaction is seen through the sociolinguistic frameworks described above. An early study carried out by Forey and Lockwood (2007) on 500 USA calls made in the Philippines revealed a set of obligatory and optional moves in the telephone exchange, each of which was realised through a range of lexico-grammatical choices. This research highlighted where the call communication appeared to be most problematic. The 'purpose' and 'servicing' moves, where the resolution of the problem typically takes place, were found to be where communication breakdown frequently occurred. Forey & Lockwood, 2007 report:

The caller interactions which appear to cause difficulties for the agents are the complaint itself; frustration, reiteration, vagueness, silence, no feedback, no apology, overuse of technical language and formulaic responses and personalization. (p. 318)

Problems with discourse or extensive turn-taking were also revealed in a later study (Lockwood et al., 2008) causing breakdowns of communication in the Philippine-based calls:

We suggest that there may be something in the discourse structure of Philippine English that is, at times, incompatible with conventional discourse patterns of Standard American English (SAE). This manifests itself in claims by customers and clients that the (Philippine) CSR sounds as if they are 'beating around the bush' or 'long-winded' in their explanations. (p. 235)

A further analysis of the nature of relationship building and interpersonal language was undertaken by Hood and Forey (2008) using Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). Appraisal Theory, grounded in systemic functional linguistics, attempts to identify, for example, how mood is embedded in the language (including prosody), either explicitly, for example, 'you are a complete waste of space' or implicitly, for example, 'maybe it would be best if I talked to your supervisor'. This study, based on an analysis of authentic calls, reveals patterns in the lack of explicit attitude shown by the customer in the call centre data, and the heavy reliance, therefore, on the CSR's listening ability in being able to respond to a series of implicit appraisal markers. This was of relevance when designing the GFS ESP program, as the selection of listening texts needed to be rich in implicit appraisal markers, and tasks needed to be developed for candidates to identify and deal appropriately with these. The extract below comes at the end of a very long and frustrating call (PolyUniversity corpus), where the caller is having difficulty in paying an account that is being billed in her husband's, rather than in her company's name. Whilst the customer does not openly lose her temper, there is implicit anger in her responses, for example, frustration is nuanced in her word stress (as indicated below in bold) and intonation patterns. It is also shown by using uncontracting negative auxiliaries and by repetition:

Caller: **No one** seems to be able to work out the right account on my payment....it **should** be under the company name Litmus Construction Ltd...I've made this request **so many times** and **nothing** happens.

Agent: Uh, because we can actually change the account...this account name...

Caller: But they **haven't**. I've done it already....a **number** of times. If they were changing it, they would have **done** it by **now**, and they wouldn't have sent me a new invoice, **which has not happened**.

Agent: This account is still under your husband's name ma'am, this account is under Bob Burkett Junior, but if...since you would like this account under the name Litmus Construction Ltd...we can do that...it still hasn't been done and a name change form needs to be filled out...you need...

Caller: And what would **that** do?

Agent: Hello? Sorry?

Caller: And what would that do? It didn't work the **last few times**. Do whatever you need to, but let me speak to **your supervisor** in the interim.

Hood (2010) has also used Appraisal Theory to investigate the naming and negotiating of relationships in call centre interaction. This appears to rely very much on the caller personality and call concern where the naming may change from formal to casual depending on what is being said as well as the context. Again the research in this area suggests the use of rich authentic listening texts as key to the development of the ESP program.

There is a developing literature in call centre research on issues to do with pronunciation. Cowie (2007) and Cowie and Murty (2010) have focused their research on Indian CSRs in terms of the comprehensibility of varieties of Indian accents for call centre work. They, as well as Pal and Buzzanell (2008), also investigate issues to do with identity and the accommodation of native speaker accents. Using a systemic functional linguistic framework, Wan (2010) demonstrates how pronunciation and voice quality can make meaning on the phone: "The purpose of voice quality analysis is to allow us to understand how voice quality features construe interpersonal meaning within a particular context" (p. 115).



For example, in the following authentic call centre exchange (PolyUniversity corpus), the prosodic features and the voice quality were critical for the CSR to understand that the female customer in this exchange was becoming increasingly exasperated.

Caller: It's a one-time payment? (slowly, deliberately and quizzically)

CSR: Just a one-time payment Ma'am. . . it must be just something minor like that. . . (tentatively)

Caller: Just a one-time payment. . . I'm sorry what's your name again? (repeated what the CSR said in a mimicking way, then transitioned into an angry sounding question)

CSR: Isabelle

Caller: Isabelle. . . and you can't answer my question? (said in a way that questioned her competence)

CSR: I can only confirm you have to pay the USD127 amount this month. . .

Caller: So what you're saying is that I have to pay USD127 this month extra and you are not able to explain it to me. (high pitch and said slowly, deliberately and with a falling intonation)

Elias (2010) bemoans the fact that much of the current cultural training in the BPO industry relies solely on information and facts downloaded from websites. He proposes a multidimensional intercultural training framework that encapsulates language, motivation, behaviours, skills and selected knowledge for syllabus development (e.g., Byram, 2000; Earley & Ang, 2003). He makes the point that, given a sociolinguistic framework in training (e.g., genre-based approaches and SFL theory), intercultural issues will be grounded in the interaction on the phones and will be evidenced in the language. In a sociolinguistic framework language, behaviour and culture are continuously negotiated in a dialogic process:

In the BPO context and in call centres in particular, the ideational meaning (the field or content of what is being transacted and discussed); the tenor, i.e. the interpersonal meaning (the complex relationship between the CSR and the customer) and the mode (the textual unfolding of the call on the phone) interact with each other to produce very specific intercultural registers (Elias, 2010, p. 160)

In the development of the GFS ESP syllabus, it is the syllabus designer who 'unpacks' intercultural meaning for the learner in the tasks. For example, in the GFS program, the intercultural issue of what is public and private information emerges in one of the calls where the CSR is probing for very personal information around a credit card debt.

For the GFS ESP program this research suggested a number of things. First and foremost, selecting rich authentic listening texts as the 'backbone' of the syllabus was a key requirement. Furthermore, it suggested that a deconstruction of these listening texts would provide the basis for a set of highly relevant language and cultural tasks, reflected in these authentic calls, for each of the units. Let us now consider briefly the context of the call centre site and in particular the business stakeholder requirements for the training.

### 2.3. The context of the call centre and the business stakeholder perspective: the GFS ESP program

Incorporating stakeholder needs, beyond the learner him/herself into the GFS ESP syllabus was an expectation of the GFS business. Put simply, GFS is paying for the program, so they want to see certain business outcomes. There is expansive business and management training literature that describes a variety of tools and processes to assist in the planning and evaluation of workplace training syllabus programs (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brinkerhoff, 1997; Easterby-Smith, 1994; Goldstein, 1980; Kirkpatrick, 1994). These business stakeholder perspectives have been captured in the TESOL process standards for workplace language training (Friedenberg et al., 2003). In the case of off-shore call centres, the quality assurance issues embedded in the terms and conditions of service level agreements (SLAs), such as average handling time (AHT), first time resolution (FTR) metrics and customer satisfaction scores (CSATs) were the key business requirements. It is a business requirement to keep the phone calls short and to resolve the customer issue on that first call; phone backs are not possible. Understanding such requirements was crucial as the impact of the program would be measured against such business outcomes.

As course designers, FPBES was expected to understand the business performance requirements of the CSR on the floor and use these as motivators and drivers in the ESP program. For example, we needed to think about and investigate the communication implications of FTR. A common complaint from the CSAT survey data was that the CSR does not tell the customer what s/he is doing when they are put on hold, nor are customers told how long the investigation is likely to take. Consequently, 'professional think aloud' strategies such as, "the reason I think I need to call up your account information is that I suspect you may be overdrawn. . . let's just check that" could be built into the program – modeled in the listening component and practised in the tasks. In other words, this simple business requirement suggests a range of specific communicative functions to be taught to ensure CSR success.

Businesses set very high CSAT scores as proof of their quality service, and some outsourcing clients build target levels into their Service Level Agreements. The CSAT questions relate to the 'customer experience' in terms of resolving the customer issue satisfactorily and they also probe the perceived ease of customer communication with the CSR. This CSAT service is normally provided by an external vendor to ensure 'objectivity' in the quality process. When difficulty in communication is identified in the CSAT, business stakeholders most often interpret this to mean that the CSR has grammatical accuracy and/or pronunciation difficulties rooted in mother tongue interference (Friginal, 2007; Lockwood et al., 2008). These areas

then become the sole focus of training. As well, business managers often respond to poor CSAT scores by mounting extra soft skills training. Soft skills training, as suggested earlier, is not typically seen as a language issue within the business, but as a knowledge issue, where the CSR is assumed not to know how s/he should be treating the customer. Similarly cultural training, as also suggested in the earlier research, is viewed as content and knowledge, and again dealt with in a separate program. In the process of researching and designing this ESP program for GFS it was critical for us to be educating the business client on how the language communications training program would be addressing the soft skills and cultural problems by using a sociolinguistic framework, as described earlier in this article. This issue of educating the client is critical as 'buy in' from the business stakeholders is fundamental to successful change.

### 3. The GFS ESP syllabus outline development

As discussed earlier, genre-based approaches have informed the ESP GFS syllabus mapping, task and skills development course. Authentic listening texts ground each unit, with related language practice tasks to follow. Such activities included global and detailed listening tasks; lexico-grammatical and phonological tasks and extended discourse, intercultural and interactional training. The content and skills embedded in such tasks relate directly to the research findings, as discussed in the previous section. The selection of these task types were further suggested by the BUPLAS domains for assessment outlined later in this section. Let us now explore the auditing outcomes for this project, the first step in the syllabus planning process.

#### 3.1. The communications audit and needs analysis

ESP workplace syllabus planning should reflect the needs of the students as well as the needs of the business (Lockwood, 2002). Such information can be gathered through diagnostic assessments of candidates at the pre-course stage, as well as an analysis of the needs of the workplace (in our case through an audit report). The needs analysis component informs all other parts of the syllabus and is vital for achieving accurate impact analysis and ensuring that the training is valid. This is an ongoing and cyclical educational planning, delivery and evaluation process (Nunan, 1988), incorporating the phases of defining needs and goals; selecting and grading objectives, content and tasks; selecting methodological and delivery processes and assessing and evaluating the outcomes. As Nunan (1988, p. 3) states, "it is important that, in the planning, implementation and evaluation of a given curriculum, all elements be integrated, so that decisions made at one level are not in conflict with those made at another".

GFS allowed FPBES to perform a full communications audit of all the UK GFS off-shore accounts before the design of the ESP program. This took place addressing several different angles of the communication needs on the call centre floor and addressing the perspectives of a range of different stakeholder groups. The auditing process included the collection of a sample of calls from each account; focus group interviews with key stakeholders, such as CSRs, HRO recruitment personnel, trainers, account managers and quality assurance personnel, and observations on the floor. The audit report notes:

Our needs analysis of GFS calls both in the Philippines and in India found few (if any) discrete grammar or pronunciation errors causing communication breakdown. The issues defined as causing communication breakdown and/or customer dissatisfaction were a lack of cultural awareness; limited lexico-grammatical choices and an inability to keep control of the call.

These kinds of issues have not been diagnosed or reflected in their existing training curriculum. Therefore aspects of communication that do not cause problems on the phone form the focus of the current curriculum, while significant issues that do adversely affect CSATS are ignored in training. (Unpublished Consultancy Report for GFS, 2008, p. 14).

Authentic calls across a representative range of the UK call centre accounts were made available and transcribed for our needs analyses by the training provider. It was found that within the 100 different process types of GFS services, some were more challenging and complex than others from both a product/process and a communication point of view. Chasing credit card debt is very different from changing a postal address. We decided that the ESP curriculum would represent a 'spread' of account types and communication concerns around the UK calls as the newly hired CSRs would not be attached to specific accounts until after the communications training. We further decided to rank the listening texts from easy to more difficult to ensure that trainers could move at a pace commensurate with the abilities and expectations of their trainees.

We set the entry benchmark level at a high CEFR B2 (IELTS 6+; TOEFL 79/IBT) and set the task difficulty level within the syllabus at a C1 CEFR (IELTS 7+; TOEFL 102/IBT) level thereby ensuring that all new recruits would be suitably challenged irrespective of the slight variation in proficiency levels of the successfully recruited participants.

When analysing the authentic calls we were able to confirm the findings from the research outlined previously (Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Lockwood et al., 2008) which pointed to problematic interpersonal communication and discoursal turns. First, it was found that CSRs often experience difficulty in understanding the nuance of what is being said. Sarcasm and jokes are often missed and CSRs reported particular difficulty in understanding subtleties of tone and meaning in the UK calls. They also found many of the regional UK accents difficult to understand. Secondly, it was found that the lack of a good range of lexico-grammatical choices, such as the use of modality and conditionality, impacted on communication quality far more

than inaccuracies in the grammatical items the CSR uses. In order to pacify angry and upset customers, delicate and timely linguistic choices are imperative in getting the problem resolved. For example, the difference between the CSR saying “Sorry about that” and “I really am so sorry about that, would you like me to follow that one up?” can be crucial in terms of the customer feeling listened to and professionally assisted. CSR ‘extensive’ turns, which were sometimes scripted, were also found to be problematic. For example, taking the customer through a procedure, or providing a detailed explanation or persuading the customer to buy a new product, often caused antagonism.

### 3.2. The design of the ESP syllabus outline

As previously discussed, a selection of authentic listening texts was to form the backbone of the unit design for the syllabus. As listening to and understanding the linguistic and cultural nuances of the caller’s concern were found to be key skills in successful call centre service, these calls would then form the basis of the selection of lexico-grammatical input and practice, speaking and pronunciation task development and intercultural awareness training.

From the GFS sample calls, the syllabus designers selected ten authentic calls that represented a spread of company products and services as well as a range of good and bad customer service calls highlighting different language and communication problems. Other selection criteria related to the gender, age and cultural/regional background of the callers. Whilst we recognised the importance the business stakeholders had previously placed on pronunciation, we were committed to working on the ‘meaning making’ of pronunciation rather than focusing solely on mother tongue interference pronunciation mistakes. This was directly informed by the Wan (2010) study described earlier. We also chose to promote the development of ‘global comprehensibility’ rather than encourage the common business aspiration to native speaker accents and pronunciation levels (see Bolton, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2007).

The GFS authentic listening components in the program have tasks that rely on interpreting voice quality, pitch and prosodic features as a way into deconstructing the caller’s concerns and level of emotion throughout the call. Understanding this, it was felt, should assist the CSRs in knowing when and how to deal with customer anger or distress. One listening task, for example, encourages them to draw a customer’s ‘emotional graph’, plotting the highly charged exchange. This is followed by a class discussion on the optimal time for intervention. Interestingly, meaning making through the judicious use of prosodic features in voice training is not taught in the many accent neutralisation courses that have recently flooded the call centre training market.

When selecting the calls, we ensured that a challenging variety of functional linguistic features, which were identified in the research as being problematic (Hood & Forey, 2008; Lockwood et al., 2008), were represented in the texts, thereby assuring that the language tasks would be rich and varied. It was further decided that each unit would have eight hours of teaching material spread over a number of tasks that related to listening comprehension, pronunciation, functional language input and practice, discourse and interactional tasks and intercultural awareness tasks. A modified and truncated version of the GFS Syllabus map is exemplified in Table 1.

Not only are these syllabus tasks highlighted in the current research as truly problematic, they also form the domains of the BUPLAS assessment framework for speaking. The BUPLAS four speaking domains are as follows: (i) Pronunciation; (ii) Lexico-grammatical accuracy and range; (iii) Discourse capability; and (iv) Interaction and strategic capability. In designing each unit in this way, the writers were able to model and exemplify each of the teaching points by referring back to the authentic calls fronting each unit of study. This ensured that participants would understand the relevance of each task as the task activity emerged directly from the authentic text. We felt this would be highly motivating to the candidate as anxiety about understanding and communicating with native speaker callers is understandably the most common concern of the newly recruited CSRs. For example, in Unit 2, the caller, an angry UK male, requires pacifying, whereas in Unit 5 the caller is a UK woman who is very sarcastic and complains about the over familiarity displayed by the CSR in using her first name by saying, “I am not your new best friend you know”.

Let us briefly consider Unit 2 of the syllabus. Each authentic listening text is about 3–4 min in length, and for the purposes of the GFS ESP syllabus, the private information was ‘scrubbed’ and the calls were rerecorded. In this unit, an angry UK customer calls in because, before leaving the UK, he had informed the GFS credit card division that he would be travelling through South America on holiday, but then found his card had been blocked when he came to pay his hotel bill in Rio

**Table 1**  
GFS syllabus outline (2 units).

Unit	Listening text	Language focus	Pronunciation	Extensive turn	Roleplay-soft skills	Intercultural awareness	How am I doing?
1	GFS Account A-male Indian agent talking to a female UK customer	Practising open and closed questions on the phone	Intonation for questioning and probing for information	Providing detailed information	Probing and checking information	Public and private information	Reflection task
2	GFS Account B-female Filipina agent talking to a male UK customer	Using concessive markers ‘just’, ‘actually’ and ‘still’	Word stress and meaning – production & understanding	Recounting the outcomes of an investigation	Active listening and checking information	Taking responsibility and apologising	Reflection task



de Janeiro. GFS claimed that they had never received his message and so they blocked the transaction in the interests of his own security. This excerpt takes place between Ron (the UK customer) and Gina (the Filipina CSR):

Gina: Well, actually Sir we blocked your credit just in case it was fraud... I mean we... it's for your own protection...

Ron: But I told you, I wrote before... in fact... hang on... I have the very email here... what's wrong with you? You say you didn't receive it..?

Gina: We have nothing on record Sir... you said you emailed us? Did you complete a Form ABC?

Ron: No I didn't complete a Form ABC... I didn't know such things existed... I said I wrote to you... here... on August 5th... sent 5.27 pm. The fact of the matter is that it ruined my holiday... and you...

Gina: I'm really sorry to hear that Sir, but...

Each call centre listening exchange in the GFS is followed by a global listening (e.g., profiling the customer) task. Being able to identify the customer's concern, the personality and the emotion being displayed are key to resolving the issue quickly, efficiently and politely. An initial listening task asks candidates to profile the customer from a cultural, personality and demographic point of view. More detailed listening tasks follow that require extracting information, inferencing meaning, and analysing and synthesising information.

The call is then deconstructed into a series of tasks that relate to functional language and pronunciation practice; soft skills for roleplays; extensive speaking and intercultural awareness tasks. Each task returns to the listening as its reference point and a transcript is available for each unit call for closer analysis during training. A final self-reflection and evaluation exercise encourages the students to think about their own strengths and weaknesses so they can independently address these.

Concurrent with the development of this commissioned ESP call centre communication syllabus was the development of *Contact US* for Cambridge University Press (Lockwood & McCarthy, 2010). This commercial publication reflects the same applied linguistic and pedagogical frameworks and is readily available for those readers who would like a very detailed understanding of the kind of syllabus outline and research-based tasks described in this article.

### 3.3. The assessment and evaluation processes as part of the curriculum cycle

The BUPLAS speaking assessment framework has been built around a sociolinguistic theoretical construct that seeks to probe communicative competence. This was first developed by FBES in 2004 and is now used in many BPO worksites for a range of summative and formative purposes around the business requirements of recruiting, training, coaching and quality assurance (Lockwood, 2008; Lockwood, 2010a). In summary, BUPLAS provides an end-to-end assessment solution that reports on-going and systematic assessment information about a company's employees' speaking competency from recruitment through to quality assurance processes on the floor. The domains that form the basis of this assessment have been outlined in the previous section. It has a 5-point scale where BUPLAS 3.5 is seen as a desirable benchmark for most call centre work and recruits often enter employment and training at an average of BUPLAS 2.5 or 3. The communicative BUPLAS domains are reflected in the GFS syllabus unit tasks (see Section 3.2) insofar as the tasks of pronunciation, language focus, extensive turn-taking and roleplay reflect the four BUPLAS assessment domains. In organising the syllabus in this way, the GFS trainers were further afforded the flexibility to weight the training program towards BUPLAS domain areas that needed particular strengthening.

## 4. Discussion

Braiding the researched functional language, the cultural and business contexts and the required soft skills focus for each of the units into the commissioned GFS communications course for call centre agents was possible through an integrated genre-based approach to the ESP syllabus design. This was a radical departure from what existed previously in GFS where each of these components were trained for and supported separately. Interestingly, this shift was viewed positively by trainers and other stakeholders alike who had become disillusioned with the previous language and communications training.

To what extent the genre framework and resulting syllabus for the GFS communications program is strictly attributable to any one of the New Rhetoric, ESP or SFL schools is not important as all have contributed in their own way. However, as previously mentioned, SFL researchers have been particularly active in BPO communication analyses and the research outcomes proved very useful to the construction of this ESP syllabus.

Let us first reflect on the perspective of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS). The GFS call centre worksite displayed highly complex "intertextual density" (Dias & Pare, 2000, p. 133) where the business culture and requirements, the customer cultures, the customer personalities and the CSRs were all important in co-constructing the text. Each account within GFS has specific product training that typically lasts for 4–6 weeks and the business demands of the product or service impacts the CSR's communication style in different ways. For example, an account that is outward bound and is concerned with the collection of overdue accounts will be different from an inbound account where a customer maybe complaining about a new financial product. Added to this, the agent needs to juggle the contingencies of the customer's personality, the seriousness or complexity of the subject of the call, as well as the gender, age and demographic and cultural background of the caller.

Developing communication skills around this complex and dense sociological and business context for communication draws on the work of rhetorical genre scholars who “have tended to understand genres as sociological concepts employing textual and social ways of knowing, being and interacting in particular contexts” (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, p. 54). During the design of the GFS communications syllabus, there was discussion about whether the English language communication program should be embedded within the 4–6 weeks training program so that the speaking practice could be tailored to the requirements of the product and typical customer profiles. Due to the business requirement to have minimum class numbers in the training communications courses; the uneven recruitment across the accounts and the priority given to timetables for product training, this was not possible. However, it was interesting that the business could see the benefit of tying the communications training directly into the requirements in the product training. This possibility remains on the agenda at GFS.

An earlier study (Forey & Lockwood, 2007) outlining the series of mandatory and optional moves in call centre interaction drew directly on what could be termed ESP genre research. The call centre interaction could be seen by the researchers to not only reflect a series of moves, but also to be constructing them in relation to business needs and the socially-constructed talk. Moving from an understanding of the purpose of the text and the context in which it is patterned, to a description and analysis of the genre's rhetorical moves, both textually and linguistically, has been reflected in the works of, particularly, Bhatia (1993), Hyland (2003) and Swales (1998). In designing this program, we were not just interested in the linguistic analysis, or the “textual artifact” (Bhatia, 2008, p. 161) of the call centre event, we were just as interested in the social context, the personnel around the event and their professional practices. A thorough understanding of the worksite through the GFS call centre audit enabled the ESP training provider (FPBES) to develop training curricula suited to the needs of the CSRs and the business.

The GFS syllabus explicitly exposes training call centre agents to the moves within a typical call centre exchange and provides particular training and focus on those moves the research found to be most problematic, particularly the moves dealing with the resolution. While the ESP school also provides a linguistic analysis of the lexico-grammatical features patterned in the texts, SFL scholars have been particularly active in researching these texts in the call centre workplace.

This study has challenged the popular, and perhaps unfair, positioning of SFL scholarship as being particularly concerned with school-age children (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Hyon, 1996) with a focus on teaching explicit pre-genres, such as recounts and narrative texts to young children and disadvantaged students. Indeed, SFL scholars have occupied a space in the research into professional and workplace contexts for some time, as evidenced by Forey (2004) in her SFL analyses of workplace written texts; Ventola's (1987) examination of service encounters; Iedema's (2006) investigation of public health service administration in Australia as well as hospital communication breakdown in Australian hospitals (Iedema, 2007; Scheeres et al., 2008). Pioneering work now is being carried out by SFL scholars in researching the nature of communication breakdown in the BPO industry (Forey, 2010; Hood, 2010; Lockwood 2010a; Lockwood 2010b). SFL findings, such as those using Appraisal Theory (Hood & Forey, 2008; Wan, 2010), contributed not only to the content of the syllabus but also to the training of the GFS communications trainers on how to introduce the contexts and choices in the lexico-grammatical part of the syllabus.

To date, the implementation of the program has entailed providing GFS trainers with support in communicative approaches to language training, including the fundamentals of a sociolinguistic view of language. For some trainers, this has presented a steep learning curve and further research into the time taken, and level of professional development required for the adoption of this new training program is of relevance.

There has been an assumption within GFS business that the explicit teaching of language in communication and product training is essential. The issue for FPBES, as the provider, was to ensure that the language content and tasks embedded within the syllabus were informed by genre-based research. This would support the findings of Ledwell-Brown (2000) who, in her study of genres used within a Canadian pharmaceutical company, found vast differences between writing in tertiary and professional contexts. These differences in values for newcomers leads Ledwell-Brown to argue for more guidance from supervisors and a focus on both implicit and explicit methods of socialising novices into the workplace (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). For the GFS program and the induction processes of novice customer services representatives into the work of the call centre, the GFS business was mindful of the need for on-going explicit training interventions and support where teamwork, coaching and an over-riding concern about quality assurance metrics remain core business values and practices.

The GFS program is now being implemented across regional sites and ‘train the trainer’ one-week workshops have preceded the implementation. A full evaluation of the program from the CSR, the trainer and other GFS stakeholder perspectives will be carried out over the next 12 months. An impact analysis of the GFS ESP training program on GFS quality assurance metrics will also be completed as part of the evaluation.

## 5. Conclusion

This study revealed a number of problematic business requirements during the audit phase that seemed to impact on communication quality on the phone. These included scripting parts of the calls, ‘upselling’ (persuading the customer to buy a new product/service), and rebutting requests for the cancellation of services. In the audit, it was found that transitioning from dealing with a customer complaint to upselling a financial product through a scripted monologue to that same customer (irrespective of whether the complaint was dealt with satisfactorily) was particularly problematic and the calls often ended badly. As well, the requirement to rebut three times when a customer would like to cancel a service caused communication tension and antagonism. Future research that perhaps demonstrates the impact of such business practices would be

valuable to the BPO industry where communication quality is one of its core competencies. It was, however, decided not to tackle these issues as part of the development of this ESP training package, although these problems were raised by the business in the needs analysis for inclusion in the course.

GFS also requested, as part of the ESP training and assessment package, a measurement tool for intercultural skills development. The ESP approaches and sociolinguistic frameworks that inform them quite clearly have cultural contexts embedded within them, but it is unclear how they can be unpacked for assessment purposes beyond knowledge checks; and whether this is just a matter of further educating the client on how language and culture are intertwined when assessing interactional and discursive competency using the BUPLAS assessment. Current language for specific purpose (LSP) assessment research is challenging the communicative competency frameworks (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) so commonly used in spoken assessment for LSP testing. Douglas (2001, p. 176) for example, argues for the development of LSP assessment criteria that emerge from an empirical analysis of the target language use context; something he terms “indigenous criteria”. This too could be an interesting area of further research.

However, perhaps the most important study to carry out next will be an investigation of whether the ESP GFS program has positively impacted the business by providing non-English speaking background CSRs with relevant and targeted training and support as they start answering the phones at the call centre. ESP researchers and practitioners have a great deal to offer the BPO industry, but communication in this industry is still very under-researched. The BPO industry is globally expanding and finding quality service solutions in developing countries, although developing English communication skills remains a challenge. Clearly the academic and business worlds need to work together. A willingness to engage with the context of the worksite reaps benefits both for educationists and researchers in applied linguistics, as well as for businesses and their employees in the BPO industry.

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