Tracing the intersections of language and culture in Philippine-based transnational call centres

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Abstract

This article examines the cross-cultural communication challenges in Philippine-based transnational call centers (TCC), an expanding global outsourcing destination for a diverse range of Western business operations. Through interviews with workers of Philippine-based transnational call centers, I examined challenges in cross-cultural interaction experiences with their overseas clients in telephonic spaces. The findings indicate that distinctive spoken language features of overseas clients and questioning of physical location are of most challenge to the interviewed Filipino call center workers, despite the intercultural and language trainings they had undergone in their respective workplace. The participants also spoke of their perceptions of their overseas clients that are in play in their day-to-day experience at TCC. Although Filipino TCC workers are generally perceived to be competent users of English, this study implies a growing necessity in further trainings on workers' intercultural awareness and other aspects of spoken English.

Key words: Transnational call center, outsourcing, cultures, Philippines, cross-cultural

Introduction

Global technological advancements have enabled internet-based transnational telephone customer services, giving prominence to transnational call center (TCC) industry in developing countries such as Philippines and India. Paralleled by the expansion of business processes in Western regions, the Philippines has become a favored destination of outsourcing business due to the availability of English-speaking workforce at lower labor cost (Business Monitor International, 2010). The outsourcing industry is predicted to increase its market share from 4 to 10 percent and reach target revenue of $10 – 12 billion (Sañez, 2007), needing over 400,000 workers (Agence France-Presse, 2008). Associated with this anticipated rise in TCC staffing demand is an added challenge in managing quality of cross-cultural interactions in telephonic spaces. This challenge is not unacknowledged in TCC industry as reported by Shih and Segura (2009), in which specialized training in communication skills and culture education are sought after.

Research into TCC has traditionally focused on language standards and employee performance (Cowie, 2007; Forey & Hood, 2006; Friginal, 2007; Lockwood, Forey, & Price, 2008), organizational behavior (Mirchandani, 2008) and labor process (Taylor & Bain, 2005). Telephone conversations in TCC often involve interactions between two distinct cultures, such as Filipino workers and American clients. Meanings are linked to interlocutors’ cultural background, a communicative resource where language and culture intersect and intermingle (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Despite the common language, English, spoken in these telephone conversations, there is an enduring question whether English can bridge people of different cultures. In seeing TCC as a site of cross-cultural communication, research attention is paid to cross-cultural communication issues, where Philippine-based TCC call center workers operate in their second or third language, communicating with native speakers of English (Lockwood, et al., 2008). More recently, Lockwood (2012) revealed some misguided language assessment practices in TCC recruitment process that raise questions with regards to the preparedness of TCC workers in their work environment. This paper examines the cross-cultural communication challenges in Philippine-based transnational call centers. I specifically
look at how intercultural differences are embedded in the cross-cultural telephonic spaces based on the experiences Filipino TCC workers.

**English varieties and cultural contacts in transnational call centers**

The critical role of English in TCC industry can be observed in the surging demand of English-speaking call center workers in the Philippines (Cosgrove-Mather, 2003). This growth reflects the demand on call center workers who are linguistically competent to handle telephone conversations in English-speaking environments. However, English-in-education policies in the Philippines have left gaps for professional trainings in the industry for acquiring high-level of proficiency (Friginal, 2007). Assumedly, the varieties of English spoken by Filipinos and native English speakers are seen to be contradicting each other in the context of these call centers. For example, a localized variety of English used by Filipinos may be perceived as foreign accent by ‘native speakers’ (Lockwood, et al., 2008), such as the way Filipinos put their pause breaks and stress in their speech (Tayao, 2008).

Although accent differences do not directly alter language meaning (Chapman, 1998), they translate into source of communication barriers and stereotyping (Bonfiglio, 2002), which concern call center workers’ interactional discourse skills and cultural appreciation (Forey & Lockwood, 2007). Transnational call centers bring speakers from diverse socio-economic, geographical and ethnolinguistic backgrounds into contact (Lockwood, et al., 2008), echoing Carmel and Tija’s (2005, p. 153) perspective that operationalizing transnational call centers “means going to far away lands and working with foreign cultures. Each culture has different principles, values, beliefs and communication norms, and behaviors that are embedded deep in our minds.” Such consideration speaks to the importance of examining crosscultural communication aspects in TCC conversations that goes beyond telephonic interactional accounts.

**Tracing the cultural contact points: Theoretical perspectives**

Philippine-based TCC is an emerging site for investigations into cross-cultural conversation issues because of the cross-cultural contacts between TCC workers and overseas client in these telephonic spaces. A current need is to focus on the ways on how TCC workers perceived linguistic abilities linked to cross-cultural differences with clients at an experiential level. By exploring Filipino TCC workers' telephonic crosscultural interaction experience and their perception towards overseas clients, I show how their perceived linguistic abilities constantly intermingle and cultural differences with clients intermingle.

Through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), I illustrate how TCC workers negotiate their linguistic capabilities in English when fronted with overseas clients’ distinctive usage of English. In probing TCC workers’ perception of their clients, I deploy the Hall’s (1983) notion of chronemics and Hofstede’s (2001) individualism-collectivism dimension to highlight the perceived cultural differences in relation to time orientation and values on relational aspects with clients.

Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) developed CAT to investigate interactional issues focusing on interlocutors’ disposition and reaction to conversations with others. Within the umbrella of CAT, I specifically refer to the concept of convergence. Giles et al. described convergence as a processual change in one’s communication approach to adapt to the expected linguistic patterns of his / her interlocutor. The relevance of this concept is found in the work environment of TCC that enabled workers to position themselves in transnational conversations by attempting to adapt to their clients’ expected communication style.

Hall (1983) introduced chronemics to theorize a culture’s orientation towards time, which can be described in the spectrum of monochronic and polychronic. Monochronic cultures tend to treat time as a commodity, often ensuring a task’s timely completion. People in polychronic cultures are commonsensically characterized by their flexibility towards time, who are more likely to delay tasks. In a corporate sector like TCC, time management skills among workers are challenged not only by their job requirements but also by the expectations of their overseas clients who have different time orientation that general Filipinos.
I also draw on Hofstede’s (2001) individualism-collectivism dimension to explain how TCC workers construct values in negotiating expectations of clients. Individualism refers to cultures that emphasize self-centered values like individuality and individual rights. Collectivism describe cultures that value common goals and needs of ingroup fellows, generally associated with cultures that have emphasis on relational and familial values.

In translating these theoretical lens to TCC telephonic spaces, I am concerned with how TCC workers crosscultural telephonic challenges are embedded with different linguistic and cultural orientations. To clarify, this analysis does not stem from TCC workers micro-level telephone interactions. Rather, I probe the views of TCC workers that take place in their day-to-day experience at workplace.

**Research methods**

This study is based on cases of three Filipino TCC workers (2 males and 1 female) employed in a range of Philippine-based TCC. TCC workers carry different job titles (e.g. customer service agent, escalation team member, etc.) and have different functional roles in transnational business processes, but for the sake of consistency, I refer to them as TCC workers in this paper. The only criteria devised for participant selection was work experience with overseas clients in Philippine-based TCC who could speak about their experiences in English.

I invited participants for interviews using a snowball sampling method (Jensen, 2002) through my personal network. This was by far the most feasible method at the time of the research that posed several constraints on time and participant recruitment. Accessing larger pool of participants was ultimately unrealistic because of confidentiality concerns in TCC spaces. Understandably, TCC workers would generally refuse conversations with outsider researcher about their job for fear of breaching their company’s confidentiality policy, which resulted in lukewarm responses towards the research invitation despite the availability of compensation. But my participants were receptive to me interviewing them and writing about their TCC work experiences out of their interest in my study. I assured them confidentiality by changing their names and any sensitive information that may arise during the interview. All interviews were conducted beyond their office spaces to ensure confidentiality of the conversations.

May works for a TCC that provides international direct dialing (IDD) and long distance phone call services to the US and Canada. She has been with her company for 4 years and was a team leader at the time of the research that posed constraints on time and participant recruitment. Her main duty includes making outbound phone calls, offering phone services to overseas clients. She calls as many as 300 clients in one day as required by her company.

Paul’s company is one that manages outsourced business programs and campaigns at the United States, Canada and Australia. The company takes and makes both inbound and outbound phone calls from and to overseas. He has worked with the escalation team for about 6 years where his role is particularly concerned with clients with more ‘problematic’ issues. These are phone calls from clients transferred to his team when frontline TCC workers cannot of resolve client’s issues with regards to various aspects of their company’s services.

Mark is employed by a hotel booking center where he manages guest reservations for clients and liaise with hotel agency that does price matching. He has been in his company for about 7 months. He mainly handles inbound phone calls, where he receives about 10 calls on a typical day and about 20 on overnight shifts.

I conducted the interviews via long-distance phone calls to the Philippines. My interview questions explored the participants’ (i) background; (ii) difficulties experienced at work; (iii) response to difficulties encountered; and (iv) perceived cultural differences. I focused on their experience because it explicates their perspectives on communication challenges at work that are not easily identifiable by conversation analysis that records worker-client conversations, in which a “qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale, 2007, p. xvii).

All data were digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Analysis of data was based on Kvale’s (2007) meaning condensation method. The strength of this method is the process that puts researchers to read transcripts line by line for greater precision in data interpretation process. The transcripts were initially perused for an overall understanding. Further reading included determing the
natural units of meaning given by my participants. These meaning units were summarized into brief statements. Thematization was made possible upon interrogation of the summarized meanings of the data, which helps build the process of identification of common patterns among the participants. Along with the aims and theoretical perspective espoused in this study, I paid attention to the participants’ experiences in relation to narratives that mark their perceived linguistic and cultural differences, such as descriptions related to characteristics of clients’ spoken language and personal character. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Findings

Table 1. Constructs of TCC workers towards their challenges and clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key constructs of TCC workers</th>
<th>Linguistic and/or cultural markers</th>
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<td><strong>Cross-cultural communication challenges</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Unfamiliarity towards clients’ spoken language characteristics</td>
<td>• Difficulty in comprehending speech of English spoken by clients</td>
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<td>• Questions on physical location</td>
<td>• Accented speech of TCC workers</td>
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<td><strong>Perception on overseas clients</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Client’s need for “respect”</td>
<td>• Emphasis on relational aspects</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Particularity about scheduling</td>
<td>• Difference in time orientation</td>
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Cross-cultural communication challenges

*Unfamiliarity towards clients’ spoken language characteristics*

Proficiency in English language is a general prerequisite for TCC job positions and is by default the standard workplace language in phone calls with overseas clients. TCC context exposes workers to a wide cultural range of clientele, requiring them to be conversant of localized or distinctive usage of English language of their clients (e.g. American clients). TCC workers typically receive cultural trainings that acquaint them with their overseas clients. Despite the TCC workers’ abilities in English, there are instances where they grapple with the distinctive language use of their clients, such as comprehending idiomatic expressions. Paul attributed this to their lack of formal education in idioms during school years:

> I mean it’s not the way that English is taught at school, it’s a lot different you’re speaking with Americans that’s why in training, they… we even have a week for that just for just for how to speak in English, how to properly create a sentence on something and a lot of err… a lot of culture in it, there been taught, the idiom, again of course, they’ve learned it in school but of course you have to refresh their knowledge, ‘cause Americans speak in quills and idioms.

As such, TCC workers are in a position of reorienting themselves towards the distinctive language use of their clients. Because of this, TCC has to make an effort in understanding their clients’ spoken language better. Mark’s case is more complex as he deals with callers all over the all who do not necessarily speak English as their first language:

> Some of the difficulties that I encounter when dealing with customers globally that they there could be some accent barrier and some language barriers in which I deal with I deal globally and there are some persons who speak English differently. That’s why I need to adjust myself in dealing with those kind of callers by making sure that I’m… I understand and my case is correct.

In order to communicate effectively with overseas clients in TCC, workers face challenges in coping with different varieties of English. TCC workers like Mark converse with not only L1 speakers of English but also L2 speakers of the language. They realize the need to better accommodate their clients by enhancing their knowledge in the “kinds” of English they speak, where May acknowledged that it is the “language barrier” she has with the American clients.
Questions on Physical Location

TCC companies require workers to verify every caller’s identity for security reasons. This is accomplished by soliciting clients’ personal details upon initial phone conversation. Although this may seem a routine and straightforward task, participants report encounters of uncooperative clients who are skeptical of giving personal information to TCC workers. This is usually when clients question the location of their calling destination, as described by Paul:

They started asking… where you are… where you are physically, ‘cause they will tend to lose… uh… I mean uh lose their trust on the call ((?)) if sometimes they hear that they are calling somewhere else, not in the U.S., they’ll start saying “oh why, wait a minute, why am I giving you my information?”… and they will say… ‘cause in the part of our business we do verify everything, their name, their addresses, their home phone numbers and such and such, we get ID’s and everything and that start off…

As to why clients question their physical location, May felt that her clients are sensitive about the way she talks and are able to distinguish immediately that they are calling a Filipino TCC customer service officer:

I’m the customer service and Americans are customers, the tendency of the Americans if you, if you are a Filipino, they know that they know… actually… ah know if you are a Filipino or not. Based on the language, or based on the… pronunciation

She realized that it is her accent difference that triggered clients’ questions about their physical locations, which even marked her ethnic background: “some of the customers [would] say “you’re a Filipino?”! You’ll go “yeah, I’m a Filipino”. Although May would not deny her ethnicity to the client, she added that there is reluctance on the clients’ side in that they prefer speaking with American TCC worker.

General perceptions towards overseas clients

When asked to describe the general characteristics of their overseas clients, TCC workers generally spoke about American clients whom they serviced the most. Despite the hostility displayed by the clients, TCC workers find a certain degree of affinity with their American clients because of the colonial background of the Philippines with the US. They generally feel that they are in an advantageous position in their job positions “because Americans think that… Filipinos are very accommodating and [are] able to enunciate on how they… on how American speak English that’s why most of their jobs are outsourced here”, as Mark explained. Despite their perceived affinity with American clients, TCC workers were able to point out their cultural differences with their clients.

Great or irate: Values on relationship and rapport building

May and Paul generally spoke about relational aspects in phone calls who find that in order to have successful phone transactions with American clients, it is essential to quickly establish rapport. For example, May recounted that “rapport with the customer is very important, so he or she [clients] will be happy… to use your service”. On the other hand, she opined that failure to address queries of clients properly and promptly can easily lead to “irate” reactions, in which clients would be reluctant to cooperate with the TCC worker. Paul’s general view on his American clients is that “they demand respect”. His solution to such demand is similar to May’s, suggesting that:

it’s how you control the call… once you, if you gain their trust or respect, on starting the call by answering properly, by taking the call in and understanding them, they would… they would be happy to give out information and there would be more… more laughs with you, some would even like uh make cracked jokes.

In sum, Paul recognizes the importance of establishing rapport with clients. When a phone call is managed successfully, the result is compliance from the clients who “will thank you sometimes”. TCC workers judged that relational skills are of importance in phone conversations with American clients, demonstrating a collectivistic worldview that stresses the facilitation of harmonious relationships that was summarized Mark: “Filipinos are very accommodating”. It reflects an action that tends to avoid conflict to cultivate relationship with interlocutor (Cai & Fink, 2010).
**Particularity about scheduling**

TCC workers generally understood their duty in catering to clients from different time zones and sometimes follow up calls are necessary where complex transactions are involved. For Paul “It’s easy to work in a call center, as long as we have the energy ‘cause usually time is very different…” Mark’s workplace processes hotel bookings where he processes about 20 to 30 calls per overnight shift. This challenges his time management skills, as highlighted below.

They [American clients] setup an appointment for example at 1pm, they want that appointment to go on at 1pm… sharp… they don’t want it to be at 12:59, they don’t want it at 1:01, it’s within the clock itself, not unlike us, when we setup an appointment for example 1pm (laughs) 1:05 it’s not been starting yet that’s why they call it Filipino time. That’s how they value time, so much.

Mark clearly highlights the difference of between Filipinos and Americans on how they value time. His cultural exposure brought him to a realization that serving American clients who tend to be particular about time is an added challenge. *Monochronic* cultures, typically associated with Americans, are more deliberate in time planning and management, displaying more explicit preference on punctuality and timeliness. Mark highlighted this difference with Filipino culture’s tendency to be lenient about time, a trait displayed generally displayed by *polychronic* cultures.

**Discussion and concluding thoughts**

In today’s global workforce, Filipino TCC workers venture into cross-cultural encounters with clients across telephonic spaces, substantially reshaping the boundaries between cultures. Research into cross-cultural communication has paid much attention to interpersonal and virtual encounters where one travels to another country or make online friends from other nations. In this paper, I focused on Philippine-based TCC, exemplifying some of its intercultural characteristic through the cross-cultural experience of TCC workers. In an attempt to link these cultures, English has become a critical currency in transnational TCCs, as well as intercultural competence among the workers. Looking further, the experiences of TCC workers challenge the intuitive assumption that fluency in English language automatically affords one to work competently in transnational contexts, where I find TCC workers’ telephonic cross-cultural experiences capture the constant intermingling and negotiation of their perceived linguistic capabilities and cultural differences with overseas clients.

Through the deployment of CAT, I demonstrate how cross-cultural communication challenges of TCC workers are prompted by the linguistic differences between them and their overseas clients, complicating the function of English in TCC telephonic spaces. Despite the non-face-to-face environment in TCC, cultural differences between TCC workers (through their own account) and overseas clients are highlighted through the use of Hofstede *individualism-collectivism* dimension and Hall’s (1983) concept of * chronemics*. These concepts helped unpack some perceived cultural differences of Filipino TCC workers towards overseas clients, hinting the relational skills and time orientation that TCC workers uphold.

These experiences TCC workers in turn pose new challenges to a global work force, which raise questions and problematic areas that need to be seriously considered in TCC context where encounter of different cultures is inevitable. In being mindful of the extremely limited access to larger pool of participants, the findings here are rather suggestive. This study may be one small step to helping understand some particular cross-cultural communication challenges experienced by TCC workers and may benefit from larger scale studies and incorporating views of TCC clients. Understanding and raising questions to disclose implicit meanings such as culture and beliefs can help raise awareness about one’s own culture and the callers’ culture which in turn may stimulate improvements in communication not only in language but also in their intercultural competence in general.

Graddol further complicates our understanding of transnational workplaces in that employees “have to adopt a wide variety of language styles. Thus, English must service a range of corporate roles and identities and must be usable for both team working and service interactions” (Graddol, 1997, p. 42). How many cultural norms should TCC workers be familiar with? Are other varieties of English less intelligible to Filipino TCC workers? How should TCC workers adjust themselves to different English
speakers, especially to other speakers who speak English as a second language? These are yet to be further explored in the highly globalized TCC sphere.

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References


