Did the Call Centers’ Industry Collapse in South Punjab Due to Human Resources’ Inadequate Linguistic Competence?
Insights into Stakeholders’ Perceptions

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt to gather insights from the stakeholders at the call centers in South Punjab of Pakistan with reference to communicative abilities of the call centers’ employees during their exchanges with the customers of native speakers’ countries. The case study is focused on three call centers established in the city of Multan, a hub of South Punjab in terms of socio-economic and cultural activities. These call centers were closed down shortly after their establishment, and no further call center has been established in Multan after the failure of these call centers. Data collection tool was an interview. The subjects were former stakeholders of these call centers. Subjects were of three types: 1) former call center representatives; communicating with native speakers mostly, 2) former call centers’ managers, and 3) former call centers’ owners. Data was analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that that the major cause of failure of this business has been linguistic inadequacies of human resources in specific areas; however, some technical reasons were also attributed as minor causes of failure. Recommendations include university-industry linkage to overcome the problem.

Keywords: Call Centers, Entrepreneurship Problems, Linguistics Capital, Mutual Intelligibility, Language and Business, South Punjab

I. Introduction
Call centers’ business in the developing countries of South East Asia like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan has a tremendous scope. Over the last two decades, South East Asia has attracted the western business companies to open up their call centers in this part of the world. India is taking a lead in this context where a great number of call centers; 350, 000 operate, according to a survey carried out in the year 2007 by Kenneth (2007). The process of the establishment of call centers in Pakistan began in the late 1990’s, when many call centers started working in Lahore, Karachi Rawalpindi and Islamabad. According to researches carried out by Bhatti (2007) and Khan (2006), Pakistan’s offshore Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry “is growing fast and
claims to be 30 per cent cheaper than India”. In 2006 out of 49 BPO service providers, 29 were call centers employing 3,500 people. However, there have been some closures too.

In the year 2007, this business was launched in the southern part of the Punjab as well by initiatives of the local business community in Multan. Call centers’ business offer job opportunities to the youth, which helps the socio-economic and cultural development of the region. By 2011, all the call centers in Multan were closed down. Why these call centers were closed down in the southern part of the Punjab whereas they are working successfully in Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and Rawalpindi, with the addition of some other cities in Pakistan. Multan is one of the big cities of Pakistan and is a hub of socio-economic and cultural activities of the South Punjab. If such a business fails in Multan, it tends to fail in all over South Punjab.

My hypothesis is:
The call centers’ business failed in South Punjab as the centers had acute shortage of human resources having adequate competence in English required at the call centers.

Therefore, the main research question is:
Why did the call centers’ business collapse in South Punjab when it is being run successfully in some other parts of the country?

II. Literature Review

Call centers are “communication factories” as pointed out by Cameron (2000) where communication culture is promoted by globalization. This culture is based upon the values of enterprise that prevails in corporate sector. Cameron further comments that in this culture, workers are forced to use a certain kind of language. They repeat the same “formulic utterances” again and again. In his study of the British call centers, Cameron (2000: 123) says that: “the conditions of the call centers impose particular pressures and restrictions on spoken interaction; operators negotiate these in various ways, but most still report some degree of boredom, frustration and/or stress”.

Rehman (2010: 136) mentions that: “though the consumption of accent in the globalized world market is more visible today than before, the linguistic practice of the powerful have always been invested with value. And, …, the disadvantaged have always aspired to acquire them”. Mugglestone ((1995) has traced the rise of accent as a social symbol in England. It is seen that “by the end of the nineteenth century, popular notions of “educatedness” were … strongly associated with the possession of a set of standard pronunciation features” (Mugglestone: 1995: 258). Rehman (2010: 136) quotes an example, in this context, from a famous novel Howards Ends by E.M Foster in which working class accents were looked down upon and social climbers, such as Leonard Bast educated themselves in pronunciation, especially those of “foreign words”, in order acquire entry into the British elite. Moreover, Received Pronunciation (RP) - or Oxbridge i.e. Oxford and Cambridge pronunciation is considered to be the elite class pronunciation. Also, “colonial Indian gentleman aspired to the RP or Oxbridge … in Naseer Ahmad Farooqi’s novels, even in the Pakistan of the 1950s, people abbreviated their names to sound like English names, drank in clubs, read English literature and the English press and aspired to education in British universities and working in British companies in
In fact, dominated groups accept the superiority of dominant group voluntarily:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci c., 1930s:12)

In the east too, “ideologies of correctness” were associated with the elite, historically. The pioneer linguist of Urdu Insha Allah Khan Insha (1802) described the notion of “correctness” (fasahat) in Urdu which narrowed the in-group of “correct” speakers to the culturally elitist Muslim families of Delhi and Lucknow of the early nineteenth century. These elitist speakers of Urdu (the ahl-e-zaban) looked down upon the ones who could not acquire the accent they themselves had.

Historically, as reviewed above, power and prestige have been attached to following a particular model of language as it was related to an entry to elite culture. Since the recent past, the notion of linguistic capital has been introduced for same kind of value of a language or particular accent of a language. This notion is derived from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Thus linguistic capital is defined as:

The constitution of a linguistic market creates the conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as linguistic capital, producing a Profit of distinction on the occasion of each social exchange. Because it derives in part from the scarcity of products (and of the corresponding completeness), thus profit does not correspond solely to the cost of training. (Bourdieu, 1981: 55)

In the contemporary world, American accent is “invested with value”, especially in the context of call centers because the US companies are larger in number than any other country’s companies. Similarly, the US is the world’s biggest consumer market. This superiority of the US in the global world has made the American accent a linguistic capital. In the context of American accent, it has been rightly said that” it represents ‘capita’ which can be invested in the ‘market’ to produce the tangible profit of employment and fairly good salary” (Rehman: 2010: 135). Referring to Pakistani call centers, where for him, American accent is the real linguistic capital as most the call centers’ representatives (CCRs) mostly talk to American customers, the mean salary per month is Rs. 21,853/- but there is also bonus for selling goods and services which may take the total income to the range of Rs. 100,000 plus. There is also intangible profit of prestige among one’s peer group and the confidence that one can negotiate the globalized linguistic labor market most advantageously than one’s peer group which lacks this kind of capital. (Rehman: 2010: 135)

The figures quoted above are of 2010. Now, they must have increased due to fast growing inflation in Pakistan.
Attaching prestige, power and wealth to a specific accent is clearly visible both in the past and in the contemporary world. However, the studies of linguistic attitudes also show resistances in attaching prestige, power and wealth to specific languages and specific accents within a language. These emerging resistances have been reported by Taylor and Bain (2005), Hochschild (2003) and Poster (2007), especially at the Indian call centers.

III. Method

Through this enquiry, I figured out whether there were linguistic competence related reasons for shutting down this business. I focused on all the three call centers which were established in the year the year 2007 onward. All were shut down by 2011. In this, chose interview as a tool of my research. The interviews were unstructured and open ended mostly. However, some of the questions were structured so that the same questions could be asked from all the interviewees. These subjects include: 1) Former Customer Service Representatives (CSRs): the employees working at the call centers whose job description included communicating with the native speakers English mostly. 2) Former Managers at the call centers, and 3) Former Owners of the call centers.

At the first stage, information was gathered about the past call centers: How many were there in Multan? Where were they? How were their owners and managers etc.? This information was obtained informally by asking the concerned using personal contacts. Next, the owners and managers were located, who provided further information about present whereabouts of the CSRs, who had worked at the call centers in Multan. Once their latest contact details were obtained, I made appointments with them to interview them. Contact details of some of the CSRs remained unavailable. The total number of subjects interviewed was 26, i.e. 3 owners, 3 managers, and 24 CSRs. Data collection was 100% in case of owners and managers as all of them were traced easily and were available too for the interview. However, out of the 36 CSRs in total, 24 (66.66%) were available for interviews.

To test the above mentioned hypothesis, I generated the following research question:

Why did the call centers’ business collapse in South Punjab when it is being run successfully in some other parts of the country?

This main research question had a number of subsidiary research questions, some structured, mostly unstructured emerging within the interview exchanges.

IV. Analysis

To gather information about the above mentioned research question, I interviewed the subjects. The qualitative analysis is presented below. Analysis has been presented in two sections. 1) Findings related to the CSR’s, and 2) Findings related to the owners and managers as their analyses were merged. Below, CSR’s findings have been presented first, next, owners and managers’ findings are presented. , and last a summary of overall findings have been given.

V. Findings related to Former CSRs
The following themes emerged with reference to the findings of the CSRs.

- Theme 1: CSR’s difficulty in comprehending native speakers’ naturally connected speech
- Theme 2: CSR’s difficulty in speaking English with fluency
- Theme 3: CSR’s deficiency in producing mutually intelligible speech

Below, we will present the details of each.

**Theme 1: CSR’s difficulty in comprehending native speakers’ naturally connected speech**

This theme reflected that the subjects were not able to understand naturally connected speech of the native speakers of English. A significant number of the subjects revealed this problem mentioning that due to this problem, they could not survive in the call center for a long and had to leave the job on the basis of non-satisfactory performance as one of the participants of the survey mentioned:

*When gora (native speaker) speak, he speak so fast and this fast English spoken by them is very very problematic. The result was that we missed many important things. We had to ask again and again but same problem. The real problem is not that he speaks fast but the real problem is that he speaks fast in such a way that the pronunciation becomes changed and strange while he or she is speaking with us.*

Commenting on the difficulty in comprehension with reference to naturally connected speech, another CSR pointed out:

*We can understand English spoken by the news casters on BBC or CNN. But when we watch movies I mean Hollywood movies we cannot fully understand the movies dialogues because in movie they speak naturally and many words are missing and many sounds are missing and they flat their tongue in many words and this is difficult for us to 100% understand, we understand 50%. Exactly same is in call centers; the natives speak is like movie. My this problem was very much there. When you can’t understand the customer fully, how will you reply accurately? My replies irritated many customers. My boss became unhappy with me. So I found another job.*

Notice another comment in this context:

*I am MA English and in our MA course we studied a subject called Phonetics and Phonology. In this subject, we studied that in naturally connected speech, there are omissions, assimilations and many other technical things that make the native speakers speak in a different way. When I got a job at the call center, I knew what the problem was with me. The problem was what I studied in the course of Phonetics and Phonology but I have theoretical knowledge of this problem only. The solution was not practically available to me. Therefore, my proficiency at job suffered and I was criticized by my boss as a matter of routine. I was disheartened, and ultimately the situation was like this that I left. My other coworkers also met the same fate.*

**Theme 2: CRSs difficulty in speaking English with fluency**

This theme showed that the CSR’s could speak English but they lacked native like fluency as they were not exposed to situations in practical life where they could speak English as a matter of routine to make them fluent in spoken English skills. This deficiency is very common in South Punjab due to a variety of reasons. The deficiency is
a hindrance in seeking jobs in general, but jobs at call centers require much greater degree of efficiency with reference to this specific skill. The following comments provide a clear picture:

I have worked in call center for more than one year. My spoken English and General English were and is quite up to the mark. But, I don’t have greater degree of fluency in spoken English because I belong to comparatively backward area of South Punjab. Around me I don’t hear English, and therefore, don’t speak English. At call center, lack of fluency in us causes boredom for the customers who are mostly native. This is a big setback for me and for many like me. Due to this deficiency, both of us, my boss and myself were not comfortable with each other. Though I left the call center as I had to move forward for my further studies, but I didn’t feel myself fit for the job on account of my deficiency in spoken form of English.

Another comment is as follows:

Business world is the world of competition. In competition, perfection is required. Call centers require perfection in spoken form of English only. In Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi, there is greater number of opportunities where one is in an atmosphere of English speaking situations. Moreover, in those cities, many parents speak English with their kids at home. Number of English medium schools is also greater than that of the cities of South Punjab. Therefore, this business is for those areas and not for the Southern part of the Punjab where you have little opportunities to enhance your competence in this area of language. I very strongly think that this business can never be successful in these areas.

Theme 3: CSR’s deficiency in producing mutually intelligible speech

This theme emerged pretty strongly as participants’ general believe was that the CSRs’ when speak English with the native speakers, the native speakers’ signals revealed that they were not comprehending adequately the messages they were communicated.

The following quotes are relevant in this context:

When I used say something, native speaker would say “pardon”. He would say “pardon”, “pardon” many times in one talk. This means that he could not understand me. But he could understand me partially. I kept on repeating, repeating. Some customers would just drop the call when they felt that I have been unable to speak they way he wanting me to speak.

Notice another comment:

My accent, my pronunciation, my style was may be Pakistani style which was creating them with problem of understanding. English is not our tongue we cannot speak like them. Our talk is hard on their ears. May be this hardness is softened if we have practice practice and practice in speaking with them by going there, visiting their countries, living with them. Only then we will speak like them and they will in full way understand us. Making them understand our message is problem unless we have similar accent, similar pronunciation and similar style.

Findings related to Former Owners & Managers

The following two themes emerged from the findings of the owners and managers of the call centers:
Theme 1: Lack of quality human resources is a major cause of failure

Theme 2: Technical issues were the subsidiary causes of failure

Details:

**Theme 1: Lack of quality human resources was the major cause of failure**

This theme confirms the above mentioned findings related to the CSR’s. The owners and managers were of the opinion that South Punjab is comparatively a backward region of the Punjab due to which we could not find sufficient number of CSRs who could communicate effectively with the native speakers of English. However, exceptions were there, according to them. But these exceptions were very few in number as they mentioned. CSRs even degree holders of universities could not deliver because of communication breakdowns during the exchanges. The following quotes of the participants are worth mentioning.

*I was the owner of the call center in Multan. I established it because I lived in the UK for a couple of years where I had observed the call centers very closely. Moreover, I realized there that the west had moved, and was still moving their call centers in the eastern countries, especially India. It seemed an opportunity. I belong to a business family in Multan. So, I worked on it and established this business in Multan. It failed because there wasn’t sufficient number of people who could communicate with the native speakers of English, mostly Americans. I had some technical difficulties related to tele-engineering in the system, but those could have been resolved with some more investment. The major problem was that those who are good at English in South Punjab, are not good at accent*

Another owner’s comments are as follows:

*For recruitment of CSRs, I worked very hard. I advertised. I had experts on my selection panel, but very little number of selectees were having accent that was satisfactory for native speaking ears. Result was we lost contracts with many companies. In Lahore or Islamabad this business is good. In Multan the problem is you don’t find very good spoken with very good pronunciation and style of speaking. Had I established the center in Lahore or Islamabad, it would not have met this fate of closing it down with a loss.*

The managers’ responses were also similar. One manager said:

*Boys and girls working at my center were hard working. They performed their duties with devotion. But understanding the native customers was causing problem. I don’t say they did not understand at all, but in fact they could understand mostly but missed some parts and at times those parts were very important. Life in the west is very busy, and customers don’t like to repeat and get irritated. For boys and girls who were working as CSR’s most of them could not make them understand their message clearly.*

The following quote of another manager further confirms the above mentioned findings:

*In Multan and other parts of the South Punjab, very few young people have native like fluency and style. Those who have, they don’t work at call centers here. Therefore, lack of CSRs with excellent accent of English was a problem in this area. Had we sufficient good CSRs we would have flourished in Multan. We also had some other problems in this business, but those could have been corrected if we would not have been depressed with the performance of our CSRs in talking with the natives.*
Theme 2: Technical issues were the subsidiary causes of failure
The major cause as it has been revealed was that of linguistic inadequacy. However, One manager and one owner also revealed that they had some technical problems as well that were adversely affecting the communication system, but they too said that these technical issues related to tele-engineering could have been rectified had we they any hope that their human resources would perform better in near future. In that context, they did not make serious efforts to resolve technical issues assuming that the business has to be shut down due to problem related to human resources.

VI. Discussion and Recommendations
The hypothesis has been proved: The findings reveal that in South Punjab, human resources’ linguistic competence falls short of the mark with reference to the required adequacy in call centers’ settings. However, some minor causes have also been attributed to the failure of this industry in South Punjab. These minor causes relate to technical issues.

Details have revealed that this inadequate competence has been in three areas: 1) difficulty in comprehending native speakers’ naturally connected speech; 2) difficulty in speaking English with fluency; and 3) deficiency in producing mutually intelligible speech.

These centers are being run successfully in other big cities of Pakistan, where adequate competence is observed as evidenced in a study carried out by Rahman (2010). Comparing Rahman’s study with the study, the conclusion reveals that in other cities, younger generation that is fluent in spoken English having a very good American accent has mutual intelligibility with the customers mostly the Americans. Rahman’s study is based on call centers in Islamabad, but we do have similar success stories as the centers are being run successfully in other big cities of Pakistan like Karachi, Lahore and some other cities.

The question arises whether any viable solution is available that can equip the South Punjab’s human resources with adequate competence with this regard so that entrepreneurism in this field could become a success story. The answer to this question is that it is possible through university-industry linkage. Researchers in the field of linguistics at the universities in South Punjab can come forward and prepare an outline of the course in the light of the findings of this research. Next, this specific course can be conducted by the universities with the collaboration of the industry i.e. the business persons who intend to launch call centers, and want to get their human resources trained. The course components must focus on: 1) excessive input of American accent through electronic resources, 2) problem solving activities with reference to different aspects of naturally connected speech of native American speakers, and 3) and practice in speech production with American accent. Speakers in South Punjab, like other parts of Pakistan. Speak with Pakistani accent as the researches of Baumbgardner (1987) and Rahman (1990) reveal. The difference in South Punjab and other big cities is that other big cities have greater number of youngsters who have either returned from the US, or native (English) speaking countries, or have developed an accent near to native speakers’ accent (especially American) due to American cultural imperialism that is more evidenced in modern cities.
References


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