Language at Work

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Analysing Language Use in Work, Education, Medical and Museum Contexts

Edited by

Helen de Silva Joyce

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8711-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8711-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Tables

INTRODUCTION

HELEN DE SILVA JOYCE

Human beings are meaning makers, putting language and other semiotic systems to work in the various contexts of daily life—to entertain, to retell experiences, to amuse, to build relationships, to complete tasks, to inform, to explore, to teach, to warn, to sell, to form partnerships, to collaborate—inter alia. Most humans, most of the time, are not conscious of what they do with language, what they achieve through language, how they use language, perhaps reflecting the way they developed as social beings.

> In the development of the child as a social being, language has a central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a *society*—in and through the various social groups, the family, the neighbourhood and so on—and to adopt its *culture,* its modes of thought and action, its beliefs and its values. This does not happen by instruction, at least not in the pre-school years; nobody teaches him the principles on which social groups are organised, or their systems of beliefs, nor would he understand it if they tried. It happens indirectly, through the accumulated experience of numerous small events, insignificant in themselves, in which his behaviour is guided and controlled, and in the course of which he contracts and develops personal relationships of all kinds. All this takes place through the medium of language. (Halliday, 1978, 9)

For others, discovering how language works becomes a fascinating journey of discovery. As an English in the workplace teacher, over many years, I went into various organisations when people saw language as a *problem*—engineers could not communicate with contractors in the field, attendants at the parliament house could not take telephone messages, factory workers were wrongly categorising faulty steel castings, railway workers could not complete training, team members were not communicating in meetings, operators were not understanding computer screens on machinery, workers were operating unsafely and so on. The first question for me became—Is language the issue or is there some other *problem* for which language is being blamed? The second one was—If language is an issue, how can I understand the language in this context in order to teach it, to make it explicit to those within the context?

Initially the second question was perplexing but I found answers in theoretical frameworks developed by Michael Halliday and colleagues (for example, Halliday 1985a, 1985b, 1978 and 1973; Halliday and Hasan 1976) and in ethnographic orientations towards language and literacy (for example, Barton 1994; Barton and Ivanic 1991; Graff 1987; Heath 1983). From these perspectives it was possible to explore the processes of language and literacy use within the workplace contexts and to analyse workplace texts within their contexts of use. They helped to solve *my* workplace problem and led to a continuing interest in language in social contexts, pursued through research into spoken and written language and, more recently, multimodality in various settings, and to this book, to which people who share a fascination with language have generously contributed. All the authors in this volume recognise that '[l]anguage is a social fact' (Saussure), 'a product of the social process' and cannot be understood 'except in a social context' (Halliday1978, 1 and 10). I hope you find these chapters as informative and absorbing as I have as editor, whether you are a student of linguistics, a language teacher, a museum curator, a trainer, a lecturer or someone interested in organisational communication.

Over recent decades, linguists have used various theoretical frameworks to investigate the language of the workplace and public institutions, and this work continues to expand into new work and institutional contexts. This linguistic research has been used for various applied purposes, including the need to improve communication within organisations and with external clients/customers/patients or to develop communication and language training programs. This volume brings together 13 chapters that reflect recent linguistic and broader multimodal research in a cross-section of institutions—museums, schools, defence contexts, non-government organisations, universities, hospitals and corporations, as well as Asian-based call centres. Many of the authors use Systemic Functional Linguistics as a baseline framework for investigating discourse, some combining it with other frameworks. Others approach communication from different perspectives as they explore human activities in work, education, medical and museum contexts.

The book is divided into four parts, the titles of which indicate the broad context that the chapters explore in various ways. *Part 1—Language at work in workplace contexts* is concerned with how language within the workplace is used to build customer relations, group solidarity and partnerships between organisations. *Part 2—Language at work in education contexts* ranges from broader perspectives on how institutional policy documents position teachers to implement curriculum change and how school-based professional development impacts on student outcomes to analysis of the day-to-day work of teachers and university lecturers. *Part 3—Language at work in medical contexts* focuses on how language in the routine processes of the hospital puts patients at risk, reinterprets the subjective experiences of medical and mental health patients and on how senior clinicians integrate their teaching role into discussions about patients. The final section *Part 4—Language at work in museum contexts* focuses on the role of language in relation to museum visitors, how the visitor is constructed, informed and educated through museum texts and what this means for social groups who are not seen as *traditional museum patrons*.

The volume opens with a chapter by **Jane Lockwood** that explores communication as the *core commodity* of call centres that operate out of Asia and provide services to customers in English-speaking countries. The chapter focuses on how subject matter experts and linguists worked together to develop 'a quality assurance scorecard' to use for 'communication skills appraisal and diagnostic coaching feedback'. It provides insights into the way in which workplace personnel and language specialists need to work together in order to understand the *real world* of work and how language for specific purposes assessment can provide meaningful feedback on how staff put their communication skills to work.

The second chapter by **Elizabeth A. Thomson** shifts the language focus to the role of everyday workplace talk in aligning people around shared norms and building team membership. The specific focus is on banter, playful teasing that 'implies the lighthearted sending up of certain people, possibly at their expense, for the enjoyment of others', which can lead to acceptance or marginalisation. The analysis focuses on banter using a causal conversation network (Eggins and Slade 1997) to identify patterns in the selection of turn-taking choices for player moves, whereby difference is successfully negotiated, and non-player moves that signal that 'difference is still a point of contention'. While the specific focus is the defence workplace, the exploration of banter as a means of reinforcing the norms and power of the dominant group or marginalising others has implications for understanding the importance of everyday talk in workplaces where the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse.

The final chapter in Part 1 by **Theo van Leeuwen**, **Ken Tann** and **Suzanne Benn** considers the language of partnerships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business organisations, 'different kinds of organisations, with different kinds of interests'. The chapter focuses specifically on *environmental* partnerships, between World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Australia and two commercial organisations. Linguistic and recontextualisation analyses relate 'the micro-analysis of texts systematically to the macro-analysis of their contexts', in order to examine how the organisations represent themselves and the partnerships in different contexts, such as documents for their stakeholders and joint publications. The chapter provides an approach to evaluating what partnerships achieve and the authors suggest that partners do not necessarily have to agree on reasons for action but only on what actions should be taken.

Part 2 begins with a chapter by **Sally Humphrey** and **Lucy Macnaught** who explore the workplace context of a secondary school. The chapter focuses on 'the development of teachers' knowledge about language and metalanguage' and addresses the issue of 'whether a professional learning program to build teachers' knowledge of the language and literacies' in specific disciplines enables them to more effectively integrate language and literacy into instruction and feedback to students. Drawing on surveys, linguistic analysis of teacher feedback to students and examples of classroom texts from the subject area of Technology and Applied Sciences, the focus is on how literacy instruction can be integrated 'with what teachers recognise as *core business* content learning'. The chapter contributes to the important growing body of research into how teachers' professional learning impacts on the outcomes of their students.

Continuing the focus on education in Chapter Five, **Lesley Farrell** and **Ken Tann** tackle the 'social effects of education policy', through analysing formal policy documents and the processes that produce them, with a particular focus on the development of an Australian national curriculum. The authors draw on Institutional Ethnography to map the *ruling relations* surrounding the curriculum documentation and Systemic

Functional Linguistics to examine how the documentation positions stakeholders at various levels of implementation, and what this implies for teacher knowledge and practices. The chapter contributes to important debates about teacher professionalism, expertise and autonomy as they are expanded or limited in negotiation around the interpretation and implementation of national education policies.

The third education focused chapter by **Susan Hood** and **Patricia Maggiora** shifts to a particular university context and the exploration of a particular law lecture 'in which … disciplinary knowledge is constructed'. The authors are concerned with how the lecturer uses spoken language, body language and movement through the lecturing space to build the disciplinary knowledge. The study challenges a singular focus on language in English for Academic Purposes contexts as it reveals 'the ways in which the potential for students to recognise and comprehend the structuring of knowledge in lectures is about so much more than listening'. This perspective is of particular relevance at a time when tertiary institutions are moving rapidly to various forms of distance education and the authors conclude with a plea for institutions to understand the significance of *live* lectures in building knowledge and to 'reflect critically on current denigrations of the mode as merely monologic or out dated'.

Chapter Seven by **Susan Feez** focuses on the school as a workplace in which teachers undertake a range of work-related reading and writing tasks. The chapter begins with a focus on a specific secondary school project but moves to the broader issue of teachers' workplace literacy practices. Four teachers kept a literacy diary, noting the reading and writing they undertook in four categories—curriculum and teaching, student welfare, administration and other areas such as professional learning and accreditation. The study draws parallels between 'the progression of the literacy demands placed on school students and the literacy demands of the teaching workplace'. The analysis of the literacy logs reveals how the fragmentation of teachers' working days, limits 'opportunities for teachers and students to engage in the type of sustained higher-order, specialised literacy activities which ideally underpin secondary school education'.

Ineffective communication between clinicians and patients is a well-recognised contributor to patient harm in hospitals. In Chapter 8, **Diana Slade**, **Jack Pun**, **Graham Lock** and **Suzanne Eggins** describe a research project that tracked the journeys of patients in a Hong Kong hospital emergency department. The chapter focuses on two specific contrasting doctor-patient interactions as the patients are discharged. One patient was satisfied with the consultation and the other was not. Drawing on the tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis of these interactions reveals that, at some stages of the interaction, interpersonal and informational communication is particularly at risk. The authors argue that these moments of misalignment are a safety issue and label them *potential risk points*. The analysis of these moments provides a valuable insight into what actually goes on when doctors and patients communicate and the possible consequences for patient satisfaction and adherence to treatment regimens.

One important role of senior clinicians is to apprentice junior doctors into a community of practice. In Chapter Nine, **Suzanne Eggins** presents fine-grained linguistic analyses of three recorded hospital interactions in which information about patients, who have been admitted to the hospital is shared with colleagues. The analyses reveal three strategies clinicians adopt to teach junior staff during the ‘non-formal teaching opportunities' offered by routine interactions. The clinicians are seen to model key medical activities by thinking out loud with junior doctors, to interpose ad hoc teaching into interactions and to instruct through dialogic insertion sequences and shared completion of discourse. A particularly interesting aspect of the analyses is the identification of the ‘linguistic ways in which clinicians make medical reasoning explicit’.

In the final medical chapter, **Suzanne Eggins**, **Nayia Cominos** and **John Walsh** use critical social-functional linguistic analyses to contrast how patients are represented in medical and mental health hospital handovers. Medical and mental health clinicians express their different disciplinary orientations in routine professional talk and at the same time ‘reinterpret the patient’s unique subjective experience into generalised clinical categories’. As these handovers happen away for the patients, the language of the clinicians can represent patients as objects or beneficiaries, rather than as agents or actors. The authors signal that such representations will need to change, as patients become *consumers* of healthcare and ‘increasingly demand to be included in discussions and decisions about their care’.

The final part of the book focuses on museum contexts through three chapters written by researchers who have investigated museums and museum visitors from different perspectives. In Chapter Eleven, **Jacqueline Widin** and **Keiko Yasukawa** use a critical literacy lens to investigate the ways in which two non-traditional visitor groups interacted with a specific museum exhibit about a group of popular children entertainers. As a result of collecting different types of data from a range of stakeholders, including the exhibition design team, differences between the design team's expectations about what would engage visitors and the visitors' diverse patterns of engagement in the exhibition were identified. In particular, the research showed that relatively little attention was given to ways in which a range of literacy practices were embedded in the exhibition design, despite the fact that these were complex and multimodal literacy practices.

Jennifer Blunden, in Chapter Twelve, focuses on museum texts, through research in three contexts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and two museums in Australia. For Blunden, spoken and written texts in museums play an important role in the in-between zone, the zone that lies between 'the specialised discourses of various disciplinary fields and the everyday discourses of daily life'. If museums, as public institutions, are to fulfill their institutional mandate 'to be inclusive and accessible to diverse public audiences', museum texts are central to communicating with visitors 'outside the disciplinary fields from which their collections and exhibitions stem'. The chapter links analysis of museum texts with knowledge about language research in education contexts, where a similar divide between students' everyday language and disciplinary language needs to be bridged, if students are to succeed. It describes how the author worked with museum staff to make them more aware of the language and the impact of museum texts in communicating with museum visitors. For Blunden, 'the museum as message … is an interaction between two meaning-makers … the museum and the visitor' and social semiotics is a means of understanding the texts that bridge the gap between the two.

The volume concludes with Chapter Thirteen, which looks at families engaging with objects and literacy in two museums in far-flung Tasmania, though the lenses of Literacy Studies, Material Culture and Material Semiotics. Like Widin and Yasukawa, the author, **Helen Whitty**, is concerned with non-mainstream museum visitors, not in terms of deficits but how these visitors engaged with what the museums offer. Rather than seeing museums as repositories of texts that visitors use their literacy skills to *read,* the approach in this chapter recognises 'a plurality of literacies' that are 'socially and materially assembled', as families creatively engage through conversation and technology with the agency of objects in museum collections. Such non-traditional museum visitors are seen as a means of contributing a different viewpoint on museum communications and a fresh perspective on museums as institutions.

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PART ONE:

LANGUAGE AT WORK
IN WORKPLACE CONTEXTS

CHAPTER ONE

INNOVATIONS IN WORKPLACE COMMUNICATIONS ASSESSMENT: MEASURING PERFORMANCE IN ASIAN CALL CENTRES

JANE LOCKWOOD

Introduction

The call centre industry in English-speaking countries such as the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) is rapidly offshoring its work to developing countries such as the Philippines and India. However in these countries English is spoken as a second, not a first, language and this makes offshoring to such countries an interesting business decision, as good communication is a *core commodity* for call centre work. Onshore customers and business managers frequently complain that the level of English communication of the offshore customer services representatives (CSRs) does not equal their onshore native speaker counterparts. This results in customer satisfaction ratings (called CSats) lagging in the offshore sites and, consequently, there is a great deal of business interest in closely assessing, monitoring and providing support in English communication skills to offshore CSRs. Sourcing good English communicators in these locations is of utmost importance.

This chapter reports on subject matter expert (SME) input into the development of a quality assurance scorecard to be used for CSR communication skills appraisal and diagnostic coaching feedback in Asian-based call centres. A large UK bank, with call centres in India, to be referred to in this chapter as Bank A, has been used as the site for this study. Bank A sourced the services of Training Company A, a language consultancy group specialising in English language communication solutions for the offshored call centre industry. Both entities are so named to protect their identities.[1] Training Company A first developed the business performance language assessment system (BUPLAS) for the call centre industry over a decade ago[2] and it has gradually been refined to meet the different measurement purposes within the call centre companies that use it. BUPLAS will be described in detail in a later section but it is briefly introduced here as it is used as the basis for this study. In summary BUPLAS is a six-point spoken communication rating scale probing four key criteria of pronunciation, lexicogrammatical choice, interactive and discourse skills. Building on the success of using BUPLAS for recruitment purposes, Bank A was interested to see how this system could be tailored for their communications quality assurance (QA) and diagnostic coaching feedback processes.

The data for this study was collected over a period of a week when Training Company A was invited by Bank A to work with SMEs on refining the quality assurance scorecard, the basis of which is used for coaching feedback. It is the series of collaborative focus group discussions with SMEs, and the way these discussions impacted the final version of the BUPLAS QA scorecard, that is the specific subject of this chapter. The chapter contributes to the current applied linguistic debates on how best to construct valid Language for Specific Purpose (LSP) spoken performance workplace assessments by exploring SME views on what constitutes good and poor quality communication from a workplace point of view (see for example Elder et al. 2011). This chapter will describe how BUPLAS has expanded and adapted its criteria to reflect key business quality concerns in communication exchanges between customers and CSRs on the phone.

Literature Review

Research and development in LSP performance assessment is a relatively new field of enquiry and is particularly focused on the areas of global professional and business communication performance, with substantial work undertaken in the assessment of teachers, medical personnel, air traffic controllers and pilots (see, for example, Alderson 2011; Elder et al. 2011; Elder 2001; McNamara 1996). These studies seek to answer the question as to why employees, in a variety of occupations,

[1] I declare at the outset that Training Company A was founded in 2004 by myself in Manila, although I now work as a full-time researcher and academic in Hong Kong.
[2] Go to www.buplas.com for more information.

with good scores in spoken proficiency on generic international English language tests, for example, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) do not necessarily communicate well at work. It is logical that spoken language performances in context (for example, patient-doctor interactions, air traffic controller-pilot exchanges, call centre exchanges) require a good understanding of the occupational context and require SME input into the salient employee knowledge and skills to achieve validity when assessing. This is because the validity or the *fit for purpose* aspect of the assessment tool can be better gauged by those who fully understand the context of its use.

Using the concept of ‘indigenous criteria’ (see Jacoby 1998), language testers have looked at different sources from which these criteria may be derived. McNamara (1997) and Jacoby and McNamara (1999) first became interested in how SMEs and language assessors differed in their evaluations of successful spoken performance.

> [S]ince members of professional cultures are faced with the interactional problem of articulating to one another the grounds for their own evaluations of performance and recommendation for improvement, an analysis of *indigenous assessment* may provide a window onto an insider’s view of the complex issues involved in communicating competently in some particular domain. (Jacoby and McNamara 1999, 214)

Douglas (2001) and Hamp-Lyons and Lumley (2001) later argued that having a principled way of identifying these criteria is an important issue for the future research and practice of LSP assessment.

> These criteria are defined as those used by subject specialists in assessing communicative performances of both novices and colleagues in academic, professional and vocational fields … I suggest a procedure for deriving assessment criteria from an analysis of the target language situation (TLU). (Douglas 2001, 171)

Jacoby and McNamara (1999) made important recommendations on how to enhance LSP assessment validity through ethnographic surveys of the target language situations and understanding business and professional conventions and values embedded in the spoken performance. This, they said, would involve collaborative work with professionals/SMEs in defining what is important in the communicative performance, but they cautioned that professional competence might be viewed quite differently from linguistic competence. They concluded:

> Locating indigenous assessment activities in various professional settings and analysing them could play a role in stimulating critical reflection on appropriate criteria for special-purpose communicative language assessment. This would result in criteria that better match the real-world expectations and demands of those responsible for professional certification. (Jacoby and McNamara 1999, 213)

In a recent study, Elder et al. (2011) have also dealt with this challenge and they also used the assessment of overseas-born health professionals gaining professional accreditation in Australia, through the Occupational English Test (OET), as the basis of their enquiry. They used qualitative methods to elicit clinical communication criteria from health professionals who prioritised clinical content and outcomes, and concluded that the OET assessment criteria, which were linguistic criteria, could perhaps reflect more strongly the values of the health professionals by revising the descriptors. In a recent OET forum (Pill 2013), two new indigenous criteria, namely *Clinician Engagement* and *Management of Interaction* were presented as a result of a long-term study collaborating with key health professionals.

This chapter contributes to this ongoing debate by defining LSP performance assessment and processes for achieving high validity within the call centre industry, resulting in the articulation of business criteria for LSP quality assurance performance assessment in this workplace context.

Call Centre Assessment Studies

To date there have been only limited studies into spoken language assessment approaches in the call centre context (see, for example, Friginal 2013; Lockwood 2012, 2010 and 2004; Davies 2010). Typically in this industry, spoken assessments have been developed internally by sourcing them off the Internet or outsourcing them to commercial testing companies. However, without a good applied linguistic understanding about what such assessments should contain and how they should be administered, most tests have proven to be unreliable and invalid (Lockwood 2012 and 2010). For example, many customer services representative applicants are typically rejected at recruitment because the business managers worry about the unfounded concerns (see, for example, Friginal 2013; Lockwood 2012) of grammatical mistakes and accents in spoken communication, citing, for example, that they *sound too Filipino*. This limited view of language competence has presented other problems in the workplace where many CSRs have lost their jobs for not meeting quality communications targets on the floor, where accent and grammar accuracy are privileged as the key indicators of language ability.

Friginal (2013) recognised a need for valid LSP assessment tools and processes in the offshore call centres in Manila that would do more than just assess for language accuracy and phonology. He adapted the Melbourne Medical Students' Diagnostic Speaking Scale (Grove and Brown 2001) for this purpose. Whilst the results of a pilot were encouraging, he concluded that there was scope for 'more extensive analysis of on-the-job oral performance focusing on critical items such as information packaging, intercultural awareness (Korhonen 2003) and service level observance and workflow compliance' (Friginal 2013, 34). The call centre study in this chapter does just this by reporting on how SMEs in Bank A, working with language assessors have developed a quality assessment scorecard, based on BUPLAS, an assessment system that captures what they feel is important for the business when communicating with customers about their specific banking needs across different accounts. In an industry that is developing so rapidly, Bank A has become very motivated to try different communications assessment approaches, linking them to business outcomes. In this regard they have been ideal collaborative partners in developing LSP performance assessment criteria, tools and processes for this context.

The BUPLAS Assessment

The BUPLAS assessment tool was first developed by Training Company A over a decade ago and has gradually been refined to meet different purposes required within the call centre industry. These purposes can be roughly divided into two categories:

1. BUPLAS for recruitment purposes
2. BUPLAS for quality assurance purposes

The BUPLAS system is provided on a licensed basis and has achieved successful penetration into outsourced and offshored contact centres in the Philippines, India and Costa Rica, where it is estimated that over a million call centre candidates have taken the BUPLAS recruitment assessment. A series of internal industry validation studies have been carried out by Training Company A clients, although these are difficult for the public to access for privacy reasons.

The philosophy underpinning BUPLAS has been a *knowledge and skills transfer* to the key call centre stakeholders for their own use at their workplaces. Typically it is recruitment personnel, operational managers and quality assurance specialists who are trained and calibrated to use the BUPLAS system for their respective business purposes. BUPLAS can therefore be described as an *end-to-end assessment solution* tailored to, and embedded into, call centre business. Early observations of call centre assessments revealed major problems with the home-grown and off-the-shelf spoken performance assessments they had been using (Lockwood, Foley and Elias 2009). Unfortunately, the internal proliferation of different assessment tools across each section of the business had resulted in different measurements that did not relate to one another. So, for example, criteria and scores generated in recruitment did not relate, nor align, to scores generated in quality assurance on the floor. This resulted in business and employee confusion in what was meant by all the different communication scores, as well as there being no shared metalanguage to talk about CSR English communication skills across the workplace (Lockwood 2012 and 2004).

The linguistic framework used for BUPLAS is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Ventola 2005; Halliday 1994), as well as on the early and very practical work of Bachman and Palmer (1996), Bachman and Savignon (1986), Canale (1983) and Canale and Swain (1980), in their seminal works defining communicative competence. Canale and Swain’s criteria of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competencies for spoken communication were particularly influential in the conceptualisation of the BUPLAS framework. As well, the SFL ideational (field/subject matter), interpersonal (relationship building) and textual (mode and structuring of the exchange) metafunctions[3] provided a contextual and integrated framework for making appropriate language choices, well suited to spoken language assessment for service encounter exchanges (see Ventola 2005). In summary, a functional, rather than a simple structural view of language underpins BUPLAS.

BUPLAS Recruitment Assessment

BUPLAS, as used in recruitment, incorporates the criteria of pronunciation and lexicogrammatical choice, interactional and strategic

[3] See Halliday and Matthiessen (2006) for an explanation of the language metafunctions.

language use and discourse. It is important to understand these four criteria, which are elaborated below, in order to appreciate how the BUPLAS for quality assurance is built out of the same set of criteria. In recruitment, BUPLAS assessors are checking that the recruits have met predefined proficiency benchmark levels in order to cope with the English language communication challenges of the call centre. BUPLAS has five levels ranging from a Common European Framework Reference of A2 to C1+, and each of these has a .5 measure which indicate features of the whole level descriptors above and below it. These levels are used to achieve granularity in the proficiency assessments. The BUPLAS criteria, as outlined in Table 1.1, are weighted evenly for recruitment.

When adapting and expanding the BUPLAS tool for recruitment to quality assurance purposes, it was necessary to consider what, from the business standpoint, is of further and different concern for communications performance measurement on the floor, and what might affect and extend the criteria and descriptors. In order to capture and understand this detail, SME input became critical.

Recruitment domains	Weighting	Description of domain
Pronunciation, stress and intonation	**25%**	This domain poses the questions as to whether the agent is globally comprehensible and is using the prosodic features to make meaning appropriately.
Lexicogrammatical range and accuracy	**25%**	This domain poses the question as to whether the choice in the grammar and vocabulary is of a sufficient range for the communication task at hand, and also whether errors in grammar are systematic, thereby posing a threat to communication.
Discourse capability	**25%**	This domain poses the question as to whether the CSR keeps control of the call and is able to explain information clearly and logically to the customer. In accounts, where there is a lot of explaining and instructing regarding products and services (for example, how to install a new piece of software or operate a piece of machinery), the account level in this domain may be set higher.

Interactive and strategic capability	**25%**	This domain poses the question as to whether the CSR is able to build a relationship and interact effectively according to customer need. In accounts where there is audience sensitivity (for example, making collections calls), the account tag may be set higher than in other domains.

Table 1.1—Weighting and descriptors of BUPLAS recruitment domains

Methodology

The data for this study was gathered with the permission of Bank A and the assistance of Training Company A in 2013. Access to 15 Bank A SMEs, across the different accounts of Fraud, Disputes, International Help Desk and Sales and Services was permitted during a BUPLAS training and coach-the-coaches workshop that took place over a week, on site, in India. As the BUPLAS for quality assurance was still in the process of being adapted, expanded and refined from the BUPLAS for recruitment, it was important to have daily SME focus group discussions (FGDs) about the nature of the emerging BUPLAS quality assurance tool. Although only limited recordings were permitted within this worksite, detailed notes were taken of the SME FGDs and diary notes were also made by the researcher, on a daily basis over this period, detailing their thoughts. Ideas from a small number of other SMEs at Bank A, who were not formally part of the workshop, were also collected. Documents were also made available to the researcher, for example, copies of old Bank A quality assurance scorecards, as were opportunities to listen to live and recorded calls across the different accounts. Patterns and themes emerged over the week from these multiple sources and these are described and discussed below.

Bank A Case Study

Training Company A had embedded the BUPLAS recruitment tool into Bank A processes in 2012 and this had resulted in improved rates and quality of CSR candidate employment. This was significant for the business, as locally designed tests, based on principles of counting grammar errors and pronunciation mistakes, unreasonably excluded, on average, 95% of applicants. Building on this early success in Bank A, discussions with the senior management took place regarding the possibility of adapting their quality assurance (QA) scorecard to align around the recruitment BUPLAS criteria. This was seen as highly desirable as there had previously been serious misalignment between what recruitment and QA specialists measured and defined as *good communication*. It was therefore decided that Bank A and Training Company A would work collaboratively on the BUPLAS QA scorecard as part of a general week-long BUPLAS training and coach-the-coaches workshop. The impact of regular coaching around the BUPLAS criteria, it was hoped, would be enhanced.

In initial discussions with Bank A, Training Company A suggested that BUPLAS, as a QA measurement tool, could probe the four linguistically and communicatively oriented recruitment criteria as previously described, but might also add a workplace specific ideational dimension of task fulfillment, that was called *Business Solutioning*. This criterion would focus on the business content and processes provided to the customer, for example, the articulation of company policies, account products and processes, thus ensuring appropriate business solutions were generated.

SME Input into BUPLAS for Quality Assurance

An early task in the first FGD was for SMEs to write their own short definitions of what they thought were the key issues in a business solutioning domain, as opposed to the other LSP performance domains (interactive/strategic and discourse capabilities) in BUPLAS. The following SME definitions revealed priority areas as follows:

1. Being able to give various alternatives based on our products and procedures—in other words they have complete knowledge and control over our repertoire of products and services
2. Being proactive and able to resolve the query without call-backs—this limitation in calling back is a problem for offshore
3. Answering the query successfully in an unfavourable situation where the customer loses his temper because of incomplete or contradictory advice
4. Giving the customer options according to need, ensuring the solution is somehow tailored to the customer
5. Giving correct and relevant information in the shortest period of time without going over the recommended average handling time
6. Making a negative situation into a positive one by providing a solution to the problem
7. Being precise and right in the diagnosis and the cure by listening really carefully and concentrating on what the customer is saying

8 Thinking about the way you bring an end to the process of problem solving in a constructive and helpful output—*Business Solutioning* is always important as we need to come up with a resolution or establish common ground where we meet and understand each other in terms of working towards a common goal

10 Matching the customer problem perfectly with the business solution with the help of the system in the shortest time possible … if only!

(Selected comments from SME Bank A FDG participants— India— 2013)

What was interesting to the SMEs was how the other BUPLAS performance criteria of interactive, strategic and discourse capabilities are also highly relevant to being able to communicate information about Bank A products and processes. For example, in relation to Comment 1 above, a CSR's knowledge alone, without the requisite skill of linguistically organising the information, would not provide a basis for promoting products. In relation to Comment 6, very good interactional skills would be required as well as knowledge, for the generation of an acceptable business solution.

The SMEs were then asked to consider both the business processes and typical problems and queries from customers in each of their account areas, after which one question was posed for them to respond to individually, discuss and then categorise. The question related to what CSR communication skills resulted in optimal service from both a customer and business point of view, and they were also encouraged to give examples with their responses. Their ideas, which were typed up and circulated, reflected the following five common themes.

1 Profiling the Customer

Listening well was considered key to providing an appropriate solution to the customer. There was broad agreement that this was not only an English language and intercultural skill, but also one that would draw on their own knowledge of their account product and process, as one SME said:

I was coaching a CSR last month where she was promoting a new online product to what was clearly an elderly woman on the phone. I asked her why she did this and the CSR responded by saying she had no clue the woman was elderly until she offered the product and was then told by the customer that she couldn't work a computer. When we listened to the call

> *together again, I realised that the simple expression 'righty-o' had helped* ***me c****ategorise this customer as old … no-one under 70 says 'righty-o', right? and no-one at that age is ripe for new technology products, using their smart phones, right?*
> (Female Quality Manager—mid 30s, Indian)

Another SME used the following analogy, which implies that listening closely to the customer and ensuring good profiling is necessary before offering and selecting Bank A solutions, indicating that listening skills are key.

> *It's rather like the skills of a tailor … he has the knowledge and skills to make the suit, and he also has the material; but then you have to make the suit into a perfect fit otherwise the customer won't like what you've done. The business solutioning reflects exactly that process where the CSR has to measure the size of the customer and do some fittings before he (the customer) eventually walks out of the shop happy with his purchase.*
> (Male Operations Manager—early 30s, Indian)

2 Navigating the Call and the Bank A System

The ability for the CSR to navigate the computer systems well, whilst on the phone to the customer, was also highlighted as a key knowledge and skills set for business solutioning. As the customer problem unfolds, the CSR is expected to navigate the system in a predictive way. Opening up multiple screens on the computer, whilst listening to the customer enquiry and diagnosing the problem is not easy.

> *This is not an easy skill for the novice CSR to develop (or even an experienced one on a complex call) and it is important to set customer expectations realistically and give detailed explanations as required, checking they understand as you go along, you know saying something like 'are you following me?' Sometimes the CSRs tell the customer everything they know about the product /process, when it is more important to select carefully what the customer needs to know … this way they can deliver the solution efficiently.* (Male Team Leader—30s, Indian)

In the Fraud and Collections accounts at Bank A there are over 30 screens available to serve the customer, and the CSRs have to be very adept at pulling up customer details seconds into the call. For example, in the Collections account, the CSR needs to quickly ascertain the amount that is owing, and also whether there is a history of late payments. These factors affect the way the call is then handled. Switching between screens, according to customer need, and summarising the key information is a fundamental skill in good customer service. According to the SME participants in the FGDs, if these processes are not carried out efficiently, the CSR is not able to provide relevant and efficient service to the customer.

> *This process can be very hard for the CSR, especially the new ones, as they need to listen hard and pull up the information about the customer on the screen as they are making their request. They (the CRSs) have to perform a kind of diagnosis on customer accounts as they talk to them, which means being totally familiar with the process, the product knowledge and the type of customer query. We reckon this takes about 3-6 months to achieve … But even experienced CSRs sometimes have difficulty doing this well; they kind of get lazy and if you miss some of the early signals it can prolong the process and this affects the AHT* [average handling time] *and FTR* [first time resolution]; *both of which are key quality measures on the floor.* (Female Operations Supervisor—mid 30s, Indian)

3 Integrating Promotional Offers

There was a long SME discussion about the common problem of CSRs not meeting their monthly product promotions targets. These extra banking products, most of which do not attract an extra charge, include direct debit services, use of supplementary credit cards and online registration of accounts, and should be regularly and strategically promoted to existing customers during calls.

> *Most of the CSRs just leave it* [offering product promotions] *to the last minute; they don't listen and profile the customer so they don't know what products may be useful to them and when to recommend them. I overheard one of the CSRs offering an online registration service to a pensioner who didn't even like using the ATM; that was useless! I think good promotions relate to early listening to and understanding customer need and coming back to it at the 'sweet' moment in the call. Can we coach this?*
> (Female IHD Manager—mid 30s, Indian)

A linguistic analysis of successful Bank A promotions calls would perhaps reveal how good agents manage this business requirement and this would make a useful and interesting area for further research.

4 Saying No

One of the most challenging situations for the CSRs in Bank A, according to the SMEs, is the *turnaside*, the service encounter **no** or, in simple terms, declining the customer request and saying no.

You have to be very skilled and set customer expectations as soon as possible on the call, if the request is going to be rejected. You also need to follow all the right processes so that the customer can't come back and appeal that she didn't know something was the case and that it's not fair. This is really tricky and only really experienced CSRs carry out this process well. (Female Quality Manager—mid 30s, Indian)

Average handling time targets are often exceeded and customers become upset because the CSR is not able to decline a request in a polite and professional manner. The SMEs suggested that there might be intercultural challenges in doing this well, where confrontation and delivering bad news is viewed as face threatening for both the customer and the CSR.

5 Exceptions, Alternatives and Escalations

No customer calls at Bank A are exactly the same, according to the SMEs. The variables inherent in the type of customer, the type of account, the kind of problems and levels of solution being demanded keep the CSR actively engaged in the search for the best banking business solution. Bank A trains CSRs to offer alternatives and exceptions according to need, and these are supposed to be used judiciously. For example, a CSR may decide to offer to refund the cost of a long distance phone call, where the fault lies with the bank. However, poorly matched offerings may result in customer call-backs and in the customer feeling they have been *fobbed off*. One team leader reported:

You notice in the poor CSR service that exceptions and alternatives come out of the blue and appear haphazard and you get the feeling in those calls that the CSR is desperate to get the customer off the line by throwing out a short-term solution or a sweetener rather than really trying to solve the underlying issue. (Male Team leader in IHD—mid 30s, Indian)

The good use of the escalation process, where the call is referred up to a supervisor, was also seen as being central to the business solutioning domain.

Some CSRs allow this to happen too often and it usually relates to a poor understanding and subsequent choice of exceptional alternatives for the customer and then the customer loses confidence in the professional advice s/he is getting … 'I want to speak to your supervisor' is a call for customer help … we try and get the CSRs to solve the problem rather than pass it on to us, except of course in very extreme circumstances.
(Male Quality Assurance Specialist—early 40s, Indian)