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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Current Trends in Communication Skills in India

A slow but rising demand of the English language in the Customer Service Industry has seen a steady growth of many mushrooming institutes which teach Communicative English. The outsourcing boom in recent years had created such an impact that the Chinese have started competing with their Indian counterparts by fervently learning English. These outsourced employees need not go abroad for jobs. All they have to do is learn how to communicate in English and enjoy a decent salary and traditional food at home. Thomas Friedman in his book, 'The World is Flat' (2007) uses a term, ‘zippines’ to refer to the first lot of the Indian youth who shifted from socialism to global trade because India became the world’s service centre. The Indian youth is considered to be destination driven and not destiny driven. The author sums all of this in the following quote, “India right now has a great advantage in having a pool of educated, low wage English speakers with strong service etiquette in their DNA and an enterprising spirit” (2007).

All the national institutes use English as the medium of instruction. The job market encourages people with a good command of English where the interviews and examinations are conducted in English. Hence, people with career aspirations take to the English language. Until recently, all competitive examinations and interviews were held in English. Documentation in courts are also recorded in English.

India today is undergoing a transitory period where we see the demand for English like never before. This is where ESP comes in, that is, English for Special Purposes. This type of English as the name suggests is for specific purposes. Discoveries and Inventions have led to the need to coin new terms and also borrow loan words.

Today’s workplace talk or discourse is characterized by a similarity in transactional and relational goals. People working together not only interact for business but also do so by interacting with each other to create a rapport among themselves. Relationships in the workplace can also influence business transactions in a number of
ways (Charles 1996, Ylanne-McEwen 1996, Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Among the studies conducted Charles (1996) found that there existed a difference between discourse or talk among ‘old’ employees and ‘new’ employees. It is thus seen that language influences relationship-building in more ways than one. The use of certain linguistic features, during multi-cultural meetings helped in facilitating participation and creating interaction.

With the outsourcing boom, companies and organizations want staff who can speak English in order to communicate within the international marketplace. Starting with the recruitment process, followed by the training and till the time the employee is ready to “speak” with an international customer we see the requirement of the English language. When an individual applies for a job in a BPO he or she has to undergo a series of filters based on the English language. The start would be the interview with HR (Human Resources) where he or she would be tested on reading skills, speaking skills and writing skills. Reading passages with an understanding or comprehension of the content are generally used for testing reading skills. Group discussions, extempore speeches and question and answer rounds help test the speaking skills. Picture composition, essay writing, grammar and vocabulary tests are used for testing writing skills. Based on these language filters a candidate is either accepted or rejected during the interview.

A candidate who is accepted then undergoes more filters based on listening skills, speaking skills, writing skills and comprehension. Those who fare well in listening, speaking and comprehension are sent for voice based process training and those who fare better in writing are sent for email and chat process training. Even among those who fare better in writing skills there is a demarcation wherein there may be individuals who are good in speaking, however due to pronunciation problems they would ideally be put in a chat based process.

A candidate sent for a voice based training undergoes both technical process training and voice and accent training. More importance is of course given to the latter. Here is the interesting part where the individual is expected to undo whatever learning he has of the English language, be it pronunciation, accent etc. and adopt American English with the right accent. At the start of training, the trainees are made to acquaint themselves or make themselves familiar with the kind of language that Americans use.
For example a list of all the states of America is given to the trainees and they are taught how to pronounce the names as the Americans would. Let us take the examples of states like New York and New Jersey. Let us also look at Minnesota. Also there are common words like pin code and footpath which are to be substituted with zip code and sidewalk respectively. Most Voice and Accent Trainers start the training programme with a very common one liner, “This is a class where you will have to roll your ‘R’s and trim your ‘T’s. Eg. The word ‘better’.

From whatever has been discussed so far it is apparent that the BPO industry would not exist without the English language. Whether it is to express transparency, making agreement responses with an upset customer, expressing limits of support, apologizing for delayed service or backlogs, taking a firm stand while saying no, troubleshooting a problem or selling a product, or even making small talk, any form of communication used is in the English language. Hence, in the customer service industry, it is very important to analyze the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

As mentioned English has now become subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Another reason for the emergence of ESP was a major revolution in linguistics. Traditional linguists described the features of language whereas the revolutionary linguists started focusing on the ways in which language is used in real communication. The most significant discovery was in the variation of the spoken and the written form of English. Depending on the context in which English is used the variant of English will change. Thus it was concluded that if language in different situations varies, then language instruction could be tailored in such a way to meet the needs of the learners in specific contexts. The main reason according to Hutchinson & Waters (1987) for the emergence of ESP has lesser to do with linguistics and more to do with psychology. The focus is in the way in which the learners acquire language and the differences in the way in which language is acquired. Learners are hence motivated by different needs and interests which prompt them to employ different learning strategies and the use of different skills. A natural extension of this thought is to design specific courses to meet the individual needs of the learners. The catch phrase is hence learner-centred or learning-centred.
David Carter (1983) identified three types of ESP:

- English as a restricted language
- English for Academic and Occupational Purposes
- English with specific topics

This study is closely associated with the second type of ESP identified by Carter which is English for Academic and Occupational Purposes. In the tree of ELT (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) ESP has been further broken down into three branches, viz. English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Business and Economics (EBE) and English for Social Studies (ESS). Each of these have been further subdivided into two branches: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Examples for the former could be ‘English for Medical Studies’ and for the latter it could be ‘English for Technicians’.

Even though ESP has emerged in a big way yet it is important for us to realize that communication skills are important not only for the front line customer executives but also for each and every person in the workforce. Computer programmers and graphic designers who spend a great deal of their time working independently in their computers also need to develop good professional communication skills in order to succeed. They too interact with both internal and external customers. Internal customers are the colleagues who they interact with on a day to day basis. Their role too is realized in their ability to communicate using the written form of communication.

The same industry which had earlier relied on hard skills like job performance etc. with increased globalization is now looking for good soft skills in employees. The need for employees to collaborate with their counterparts both within and outside the company and now outside the country too is on the rise. The requirement for the right personality only asserts the need for personality development and excellent soft skills. In today’s world three steps characterize any job application. The first step is writing a resume or submitting one wherein your written skills are put to the test. The second step if the resume is shortlisted is the group discussion wherein verbal communication skills are put to the test. Again if the candidate is shortlisted the third step would be appearing for a job interview. Usually in this phase it is non-verbal communication that is mostly assessed. The most important soft skill today is communicating effectively.
Communication being a two way process it is very important that the message sent has to be clear and the message received also has to be equally clear.

With the advancement of technology, hard copies are now lesser and organizations are beginning to take to soft copies wherein mails are sent through the electronic mail system, reports are generated or written using various software applications. Most business presentations are now made using Microsoft Power Point which is extremely user friendly. Initially, presentations were made using a chalk and blackboard, followed by marker pens and whiteboards. In comparison to Power Point these presentations appear as dull. The use of Power Point enables a user to highlight important points using special effects. Tables, grids, pictures etc. can be inserted into the presentation making it look more appealing and thereby arouse the curiosity and interest of the listeners.

The latest although not so preferable mode of written business communication is the Short Message Service or more popularly known as ‘SMS’. This is the latest and simplest mode of communication. It is more telegraphic in nature and includes only the main points. This is due to the shortage of space and being economical. Although it is the simplest to use, it however, does not make use of correct English most of the time. Words are shortened to a point where it actually corrupts the English language. The message is comprehensible however the correct form of the language is not used. Examples of shortened words are, ‘u’ for ‘you’, ‘b4’ for ‘before’, etc. As mentioned this is done mostly for space and economy. Hence, it does serve the purpose but at the cost of correct usage.
1.2 An Insight into the Development and Use of the English Language

In India

S. V. Parasher (1979) in one of his articles attempts to show how important the English language is in the Indian context. He also explains its various roles and functions and more importantly its co-existence with the various other Indian languages. The writer terms the English language as a legacy left by the British rule. It has been further encouraged by Indian educationists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy who believed that English education would help in the scientific and material progress of the nation. The language education policy embarks on English as the main medium of instruction. It has been observed that a large percentage of universities have English as the medium of instruction. All institutes offering professional and technical courses have English as the sole medium of instruction. In addition to this, there has also been an increase in the number of students taking up English as a major subject in both the under graduate and post graduate courses. The same story is repeated in the case of English in School education where it is not only the medium of instruction and examination but it is also taught as a subject. In today’s India we see an increase in the number of English medium schools and also a rush for admission into such schools. Such schools cater mostly to the higher spheres of society or mostly the elite. According to certain findings, English language is taught as a first language in many schools all over the country especially the north-easter states and union territories.

The English spoken in India has evolved from the English spoken during the British rule to the Indian English that we now speak. The position of English is stronger in the higher spheres of society and it holds a special attraction especially for those with career aspirations. However, there are very few who speak it as a mother tongue. Also there is another factor to be considered when it comes to choosing which English is used as the spoken form and which as the written form. Usually in the Indian context the Indian English is mostly used as the spoken form and the UK English is used in the written form. The American English is seldom used except in the international job market and that too only the spoken form. However, with the advancement of technology, most people use the computer for writing or typing these days. It has been
observed that the written form is American English where words like 'colour' and 'centre' are spelt as 'color' and 'center' respectively.

As mentioned earlier, the position of English is getting stronger as it holds a special attraction for those with career aspirations. India today is undergoing a transitory period where we see the demand for English like never before. This is where ESP comes in that is English for Special Purposes. This type of English as the name suggests is for specific purposes. Discoveries and Inventions have led to the need to coin new terms and also borrow loan words. Hence, the English vocabulary continues to be enriched. Let us look at the professions of medicine and law. The jargons and the technical terms used would not be comprehensible to the layman nor would be of any use to him. On the other hand if a Language Policy saw to it that students who would be studying medicine or law are introduced to these terms right at the higher secondary level it would be easier and would save them from learning other things which would be of no use to them. Similarly, students studying commerce should be introduced to the commercial terms early so they have an idea by the time they are ready to take up any profession relating to commerce.

The dimensions of business communication cover interactions not only with other business or trade organizations but also with the Government, Press and Media etc. Intercultural communication has become both a necessity and a reality as India is highly integrated with the global economy. Keeping all these requirements in mind it would be of great help to students if English for Special Purposes could be incorporated into the curriculum. This would enable students to prepare themselves better in terms of higher studies or the job market. Parents would not have additional expenses to incur by sending their children to mushroom English Speaking Institutes which are on the rise mostly for commercial purposes. They seldom cater to what is actually required. However, the fees charged are unduly exorbitant.
1.3 Intercultural Communication

Learning to communicate would not be so difficult a task had it not involved culture. The concept that learning to read and write is a social practice rather than an individual skill is a concept that has to be reckoned with. Classroom based language learning thus must involve far more than passively encoding text, but rather the development of literate skills of thinking, interpretation and analysis. Language learning cannot be defined as an individual cognitive act, but rather as a social practice. To teach language therefore means to apprentice people into the social practices of other language communities. Culture plays an important role in cognitive development of learners through social interaction and discourse.

Many languages are considered as good sources for borrowing terms. Let us take the example of, English and German. These are considered by most as the languages of technology. Likewise, Latin and Greek are considered as languages of the arts. Hence, it is preferred to borrow terms from these languages for the concerned fields. The BPO industry in India chiefly caters to the English speaking natives. Hence, if any kind of borrowing of terminologies is done it is for the understanding or comprehension purposes of the customers calling in from the USA, Britain or Australia. The English spoken here by most Indians is the standard Indian English in which most terms may not be comprehensible to the native speaker. Most of the time it is the technical terminology that needs to be substituted. Let us take a look at the American clients or customers who refer to the CPU as the ‘tower’ or ‘the black box’ or due to ignorance ‘the modem’. The native Indian speaker has to adjust his or her speech according to the comprehension of the American customer. It is seen that since this is a professional field the BPO employees will adjust their speech according to the customer needs. Students usually prefer local sources however in the professional field there is little choice but to turn to foreign sources.

Terms that are used in technology are generally internationally recognized for scientific and material progress. With the advancement of communication, information
and technology, a completely new lexicon is created. We have words like computer, satellite, spacecraft, mobiles etc. These are inventory products of the native English speaking countries. Other countries using these products prefer borrowing the names rather than coining new ones. Similarly, in the international customer service industry, not only do the native Indian speakers have to acquaint themselves with the technical terms but also acquaint themselves with terms that are used in everyday speech amongst the Americans. This involves substituting Indian English words with American English words. Such examples would include words like ‘biscuit’ being substituted by ‘cookie’, ‘curd’ by ‘yogurt’, ‘teacher’ by ‘instructor’, ‘footpath’ by ‘sidewalk’ and ‘laptop’ by ‘notebook’ etc.

Apart from borrowing terms, there is also the process of creating new words and thereby standardizing them to the acceptable form. Such procedures include compounding of existing words and adopting an already available and currently used word of similar or same meaning. ‘Moon-walk’ a dance form in the USA was compounded only after the first step on the moon. This term has been used in the same form naming the same dance in other countries. ‘Dual-display’ is another compounded technical word in computer terminology. The list goes on with compound words like, ‘Card-holder’, ‘Stock-broker’, and ‘Health-care’ etc. A whole list of words is also generated after affixation. Examples of such words are, ‘industrial’, ‘mobile’, ‘prehistoric’ etc.

Every field of study would have innovations from time to time, with new inventions and discoveries. Names or terms have to be assigned to these. Hence there is always an innovation of terminology at the base level. However, when we talk about specified goals, we are mostly referring to professional goals. In the international customer service industry, the terminological innovation would arise as need based. The native Indian speaker adjusts his or her speech to the comfort and understanding of the native English speaker. However, it has been noticed that this happens the other way round too where the native speaker adjusts to the native Indian speaker’s speech to achieve some form of comprehensible communication. Instances would be where either of them will refer to the ‘monitor’ as the ‘screen’ for the sake of simplicity. The native Indian speaker will accept the American’s reference of the CPU as the ‘modem’ silly as it may sound.
According to Kramsch (1993) culture has always been there in the background right at the onset of any kind of language learning. A learner may feel that he or she has achieved communicative competence in a target language, however, cultural misunderstandings while communicating highlights the limitations of communication without cultural knowledge. Understanding the culture of the target language is of utmost importance as this factor either enhances or inhibits communication. It is for this reason that scholars started research on intercultural communication realizing that culture plays an important role in ‘successful’ language learning (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994:5). At any rate, culture teaching should aim to foster ‘empathy with the cultural norms of the target language community’ and ‘an increased awareness of one’s own ‘cultural logic’ in relation to others’ (Willems, 1992, cited in Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 67).

In many bilingual communities studies show that emphasis has been laid on language use in a particular context. Joshua Fishman (1972) talks about ‘proper’ usage which refers to the usage that would be expected in certain contexts. He was trying to establish patterns of language use taken from language choices made by speakers. He stressed on the concept of ‘domains’ wherein he argued that in stable bilingual communities, languages were associated with different domains of use.

Socially the learner tries to keep abreast of the social and cultural patterns of the society of the target language and to a certain extent tries to develop or speak with an accent to create that feeling of belonging. As indicated above, acquisition of language skills involves not only conversation, but also analysis, reflection, cross-cultural interpretation, collaborative problem-solving and critical thinking. Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) are in a different situation than foreign language learners in that they have more opportunities for day-to-day contact with the culture and language. Truly, learners want to have a good command of the foreign language, therefore, they need competence in grammar and vocabulary.

Culture and communication are considered to be inseparable because culture decides who talks to whom, about what and how the communication proceeds. It also determines the content of the message and whether or not the message is to be sent and if sent what particular time it is to be sent. Hence, culture to a very large extent can be considered the foundation of communication.
In analyzing workplace talk, transactional and relational goals were seen as completely separate entities. Malinowski (1972: 149, 151) coined a term 'phatic communion' and defined phatic talk as 'language used in free, aimless social intercourse in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of works'. It can therefore be safely stated that Malinowski does distinguish phatic communion as 'purposeless', from other types of talk which are more obviously 'purposeful'. Schneider (1989) makes a similar distinction using terms like 'purpose - oriented' talk to be distinguished from 'phatic communion'.

In a customer service interaction, relational exchanges like indulging in small talk during transactional or business exchange are now a common practice. Small talk could involve discussions outside the workplace, the weather or current events and happenings (Ventola, 1987). In a study conducted by McCarthy (2000) it was found that only 10 per cent of talk between hairdressers and their customers was task focused. Hence, it has been observed that 'business talk' and 'small talk' cannot really be separated. However, there is a sharp distinction between non-transactional conversation and small talk. The former involves topics which are not task oriented but discusses some aspect of the workplace. The latter, however, addresses topics outside the workplace.

There has been an increasing flexibility in the relationship between activities in the workplace and its discourses (Cicourel, 2003) and this has led to researchers being able to identify and expose the subtle interplay between social and transactional activities. Stubbe in 1998 had collected a huge amount of data pertaining to workplace interactions thereby highlighting exchanges that are part of organizational life but not part of formal business (Holmes, 2000a).

In the workplace there are types of communication that enable one to excel in the way one performs his or her own task. Although a detailed description of the related literature will be discussed elaborately in the next chapter it is noteworthy to mention verbal communication, written communication, and inter-personal communication and
presentation skills as the pivot of the various types of communicative skills. These play a vital role in the success of clinching any business deal.

Speeches may not be made on a daily basis in the workplace or interactions may not take place every day, however, verbal communication within the workplace with co-workers and managers is inevitable to complete any project or task. As mentioned above, computer programmers need to communicate verbally with colleagues or customers in order to be able to write programmes according to the project specifications. Similarly, designers also need to verbally communicate in order to produce a design which fits the customer’s requirements. Needless to say, customer executives simply cannot do without verbal communication.

Written communication in the workplace could be in the form of emails updating everyone about the status of a project or a technical document apprising everyone about the project details. Good writing needs to be free of errors in grammar, spellings, punctuation, usage and also style.

Interpersonal communication involves listening well and also forming thoughtful responses while interacting with both colleagues and external customers. Body gestures also form a part of interpersonal communication.

Good presentation skills are the combination of good verbal, written and interpersonal communication skills. Verbal communication skills ensure that the spoken portion of the presentation is delivered well. It includes rate of speech and intonation also. Written communication skills ensure that the preparation of the slides and handouts are properly done. Interpersonal communication skills on the other hand ensure a productive interaction with the audience. Based on the non-verbal cues from the audience one may have to adjust the presentation accordingly.

A majority of clients or customers are based in the customer service industries like sales, business computer services, help desk services, technical support, online business systems, hospitality, retail industry, tourism industry etc. Health and social services are two areas of the customer service industry where customers have to be treated with immense care, compassion and professionalism. It is noteworthy to mention that in addition to good communication skills in the customer service there are other
factors that also play an important role. They are problem solving abilities or issue resolution, negotiation and persuasion techniques, tools in the form of software and an in-depth product or service knowledge. Better communication skills bring about a better attitude and level of courtesy when dealing with customers.

Problem resolution at any level should always start with being honest, committed and positive towards their job. In these fast changing times it has been observed that success in any customer service industry can be achieved if there is preparedness for change and adaptability. Change is inevitable and this has come about mainly from feedback and suggestions from customers. It also ensures better effectiveness and accuracy. The role of communication here is how change is communicated to either the internal customers or the external customers.

Although oral communication is the preferred mode in most workplaces today we, however find that two writing forms exist and that too in a big way. Report writing and business correspondence are two modes of writing which still continue be it on paper or via e-mail. Any kind of certification that a company requires extensive documentation and this again can be achieved only through written communication. Developing good writing skills should start at an early stage as these skills would be required at a later point of time in their career. A good writing style can be considered as one that is technically clear, brief and accurate. The one drawback that written communication has is its inability to elicit an immediate feedback. This, however, gives the sender ample time to edit, correct, review and revise the content before sending. Failure of written communication may happen when the sender is unclear about the message he or she wishes to convey or it may happen because the recipient is unwilling to comprehend what is being sent. In both the cases it has been observed that for written communication to be successful a great deal of training is required especially for communication that needs to be used for professional purposes in either domestic workplaces or the international marketplace.
1.5 The Spoken Form of Communication

As mentioned earlier, speaking English is not enough but training learners to be able to communicate in the language is of utmost importance. Hence, before anything else can be achieved it is the 'neutralization of accent' which precedes all lessons for any trainer training Indian learners. This progresses to training in softening of pronunciation. This coupled with training in business etiquettes forms a very important part of learning communicative skills. In addition, there are separate modules like Sentence-Structuring, Intonation, Rate of Speech, Call Flow or Call Handling which are incorporated into the training structure. With the advent of modern technology learning has become easier. Learners have access to various kinds of methods of learning in addition to classroom instruction. Audio-Visuals have now made learning easier. Correct pronunciation now is only a click away.

It may appear to be enough to be able to just speak proper English. However, for a person working in the customer service industry especially the BPOs it becomes very important to adopt the American accent because there will be certain customers who will pretend not to understand the word ‘past’ or ‘chance’ unless it is pronounced as ‘paest’ or ‘chaence’. Words like ‘status’ are pronounced as ‘staetus’. Words ending with -ing now end with -in.Eg. ‘walking’ becomes ‘walkin’ and ‘cooking’ becomes ‘cookin’. Another interesting change is the /u/ sound which becomes silent in combination with a /n/ sound. Eg. Words like ‘percentage’, ‘interview’ and ‘international’. There are other words like ‘gonna’ which means ‘going to’ and ‘wanna’ which means ‘want to’. The word ‘and’ is shortened to simply ‘n’. Eg. Me n You, He n I etc. The word ‘you’ is pronounced as ‘y(uh)’. Eg. I saw y(uh) the other day. This same ‘you’ when it is in the form of a question it becomes a /ch/ sound.Eg. A sentence like, “What are you doing?” becomes “Whatchadoin?” and “Where did you go?” “Wherecha go?” In any customer service the idea is not to offend the customer even if it means pronouncing words the way he or she expects you to. Hence, a lot of importance is given to voice and accent training.

It may seem simple to just unlearn a few things like pronunciation of certain words that are commonly used and pronounce them with the American ‘twang’.
However, the case is not so. We cannot overlook the fact that the way an Indian speaks is not without the mother tongue influence (MTI), combined with a tone and syllable stress that conveys a different meaning altogether, and not to forget a rate of speech that makes it next to impossible for a native English speaker to understand.

In northern India, a ‘desktop’ computer is pronounced as ‘dekstop’ computer, ‘ask’ is pronounced as ‘aks,’ ‘virus’ as ‘wirus’. These are instances where the mother tongue influence appears. India is a syllable-timed language, ie. each syllable is stressed equally whereas English is a stress-timed language where there is stress on certain syllables within a word and certain words within a sentence. Syllable stress can alter the meaning of a word depending on where the stress is placed. Syllable stress mainly affects nouns, adjectives and verbs. Usually with nouns and adjectives the stress is placed in the first syllable and with verbs the stress is placed in the second syllable. Eg. She is a Muslim /aʊnɔːr/ , she chose to con /ˈkɒn/ vert. Again, tone determines the attitude of the speaker. In the BPO industry it helps us identify the mood of the customer as in whether the customer sounded unhappy, tired, sneering, self satisfied, sarcastic, frustrated and so on. If the customer finishes a sentence with a rising tone, we are likely to understand that they wish to continue speaking or are seeking some kind of feedback, such as an answer to a question or some information. It is used at the end of all closed questions (a question that requires a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as an answer). This tone is also used when the customer is unsure, or in an argumentative mood. A falling tone however is used to express a definite statement, to indicate that the speaker is about to stop talking, at the end of a list to show that the list is complete, or at the end of an open question (a question that requires more than just a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ as an answer). Usually, when a customer uses a rising tone, the agent must use a falling tone to avoid an argument or any confusion. Tone plays an important role in getting a desired response from the listener. A wrong tone can completely throw a customer off guard resulting in the loss of the true meaning of the intended statement. The tone of the most normal of statements and niceties, if stated with the wrong tone may instead turn into an insult or cause a strain during any conversation. Usually the tone that needs to be maintained is an upbeat one without any signs of displeasure.

Despite fine tuning all the above mentioned, customers still find trouble understanding the agent. The reason being, the agent is speaking too fast. A fast rate of
speech combined with a slight difference in accent to that of the native English speaker can confuse the customer. A way of correcting this is to set our speech at a reasonable 'pace' and also be aware of 'thought groups'. Unlike written English, when we speak English our listeners don’t see the punctuation, instead we group words by their meaning (thought groups), and pause between them. A ‘thought group’ is a group of words which convey a single idea, and which usually link onto another thought group, with a pause in between. It is important to know where to put the pauses in the sentences so that one can sound more like a native speaker.

A service sector employee should definitely have good communication skills and in addition the language should be free of grammatical errors. Basic grammar skills should be proper, formation of sentences and use of word order should be correct. A rich vocabulary will enable customer service representatives and executives come up with impressive and convincing, clear product and service descriptions. Hence, they will not only have to familiarize themselves with technical jargons and terminologies but also be qualified enough to be able to simplify them for better understanding and comprehension. Both pronunciation and diction have to be accurate and clear respectively for the facilitation of any kind of communication activity. Good articulation while speaking would include rhythm and modulations, stress on the right word while speaking so as not to change the meaning of the word due to mispronunciation or the wrong way of stressing on the word. In a demanding industry like the customer service, it becomes extremely difficult for one to maintain the same pleasant tone throughout the working day. At the same time a positive and welcoming tone is seen as a necessity in order not to convey negative emotions like anger or irritation. Tone should always show empathy and concern. Good listening skills are essential for understanding the ideas of the customer who is in conversation with the customer service executive. This helps in grasping the issue and thereby a correct solution to the problem can be arrived at. It also prevents any sort of misunderstanding and miscommunication that may arise between a customer and an employee.

All the efforts put into training should translate into effectiveness. Hence, customer satisfaction surveys on communication are sent in order to be able to measure success. Here of course, the measure of success is at the customer’s discretion. So the true picture cannot be arrived at and at the same time exceptions cannot be made.
These surveys bring about 'communication' outliers judged purely on spoken English skills, listening skills and comprehension. The communication outliers are put into outlier management groups wherein these skills are being worked upon by voice coaches.

1.6 The Written Form of Communication

The most common among all forms of written communication is letter writing or what is used today, emails. Mails in general are considered to be "a piece of conversation by post" (L. Gartside, 1967). There are two types of mails or letters, personal and business. A personal letter or email would have a tone which is more informal and friendly. A business letter or email on the other hand would adopt a more formal tone as it has a definite goal to achieve. It has to be both precise and accurate.

Business letter writing has a style of its own. It should adopt a style of simplicity, clarity and sincerity. Similar to the spoken form of communication there has to be complete transparency while communicating through letters or emails. There is no fixed style of writing for either business mails or personal mails. However, if the sender has an enriched vocabulary then the style of writing would also differ from that of other senders. Sincerity while communicating actually refers to the originality of the mail. The sender adopts his own style of writing and makes an effort to communicate his thoughts in the most natural way and in his own words. As mentioned earlier while writing business mails, it is important to remember that the shorter the sentences and simpler the words the better understood the letter will be. One should denounce the use of complex words and complicated sentences. The idea is to get the message across to the recipient in the simplest way. This will enable the recipient to understand the message easily and thereby make a good decision if one if one is needed. The whole idea is to communicate the message so as to elicit a desirable response from the recipient. This can happen only if the recipient is able to understand the message in the first place. This then leads to another important factor in written communication which
is clarity. Clarity of the message can be achieved only if the letter is carefully planned. Business letters need a great deal of planning especially the ones that have a number of points that need to be highlighted. It would help to sequence the points according to their level of importance or priorities. The way etiquettes are maintained during spoken communication the same should be maintained in written communication. There may be a notion that because it is a business letter it should be curt and precise. However, courtesy should be maintained throughout. Even if the letter is supposed to serve an order it should be courteous.

There are certain terms which are commonly used in business letters which are now considered obsolete and which at the most should be used only for specific purposes. Let us consider terms like ‘aforesaid’, ‘under mentioned’ etc. These are terms which are specific mostly to legal documents and barely have a place in today’s business mails. Hence, their usage should be restricted to legal documents or letters. Similarly, phrases like ‘enclosures herewith’ are considered to be too formal for business mails. This phrase can be substituted with another like ‘enclosures attached’ which is much simpler to understand and also use. Another factor considered to be very important in business mails is being brief. There is no point in writing long meaningless letters or ones that have too many winding statements and do not make sense. Being brief is the key to any kind of straightforward communication. The recipient of the mail would much prefer to have to read a short mail which is direct and easy to understand rather than trying to comprehend a lengthy mail which makes no sense at all. If the recipient of the mail is a client then it would most certainly dissuade him from wanting to strike any kind of deal for the simple fact that there is no clarity of the message and the length makes it more tedious. In most cases, businessmen have many letters to read and they generally do not have the time to waste on one particular letter. Here again, it is to be noted that even though the mail is brief it should not appear to be curt. Long flowing sentences like, ‘anxiously waiting for your reply’ should not be encouraged. Instead, ‘kindly reply’ should do the needful. 

The main aim for writing a business letter is to establish a business relationship. Hence it is of utmost importance to know the client. A bit of a background study is required and all the essentials mentioned above are to be incorporated in the letter to establish a good rapport with the recipient of the letter. It is more difficult to establish a
business relationship without personal contact. The idea is to create a good and lasting impression. The key factor in such a case would be empathy, wherein the sender of the mail should try and put himself in the recipient's shoes. The sender should be able to make a calculative guess about what the recipient's reaction will be. The sender will be considered a good letter writer if he is able to adapt himself to the recipient's frame of mind. However, this does not imply that the recipient is always right or that the sender has to agree to whatever the recipient says.

A mention has been made earlier with regard to planning a letter. Business mails or letters are usually written for four main purposes. Firstly, to establish business relations without making any personal contact, secondly, to provide information, thirdly, to furnish evidence for business deals made or entered into and fourthly, it serves as a record for reference in the future. A lot of business these days takes place mostly over the phone. Correspondence however, is more important as it serves as documentation for future reference of the transaction entered into or it also serves as a record about what has been discussed earlier. It may sound absurd to state that a good business letter should have the right tone. However, this is absolutely necessary just as it is so in spoken communication. A letter is just not a piece of paper with words on it. It serves to express certain objectives, goals, desires and hence it has to be expressed in the most effective way so that it yields the desired results. Also, in the context of planning it is very important to gather background information necessary for the content of the letter. The information should include facts that have to be supplemented with evidence. The right approach should be selected in order to convince the recipient about the subject matter. Selecting the right approach should also be done keeping in mind the background of the recipient. As mentioned earlier, being precise and accurate is of utmost importance. There are two kinds of approaches, the direct approach and the indirect approach. The former is an objective approach which is used mainly when information is provided or when information is sought. Requests for samples or quotations are considered to be direct approaches. The latter is a subjective approach and is usually used when there is something disappointing to convey and is usually used in the case of rejections. Rejection of applications etc. uses the indirect approach. There is also a third approach which is the persuasive approach and this is used mostly to convince clients. It is usually used in the financial sector wherein a client needs to be convinced to reinvest or to pay renewal dues etc. It should be one which would
encourage the recipient to want to know more about the product if the letter is one that
is trying to sell a product. Such a letter should arouse the curiosity of the reader to the
extent that the reader wishes to know more about the product. In today's world of the
electronic mail, we find that most of the time our inbox is full of business
communication mails that advertise, sell, recruit etc. These mails are more in number as
compared to our personal mails. A few of them stand out to capture our attention and
hence we find ourselves reading them despite our lack of time. This usually happens
when the subject line is an interesting one. The rest of the mail unceremoniously finds
itself in the trash. It is hence, very important to send a mail with an attractive subject
line as this is the only visible mark in an email. The subject line enables the recipient to
make a choice of whether or not to read the mail.

Very few people send handwritten letters these days. Almost all letters are
typed. The only factor that has to be taken care of in a handwritten letter is to ensure
legibility. Typed letters just need to be spaced properly and spelt correctly when we
look at the technical aspects of business letter writing. Emails have no such regulations
and they are usually written without any set guidelines.

Other types of business correspondence would include report writing,
presentations etc. There have been many definitions for report writing of which the
most common is 'a form communication from one who has information to someone
writing is an absolute essential in any business organization. It is a collection of facts
which has been derived after data collection and sampling. It is usually written for a
certain target audience, it contains the conclusions which the writer has reached and it
also includes recommendations. Studies have shown that a government administrator or
a business executive spends most of his time in business correspondence be it writing
letters or sending emails, be it writing reports or generating them and then filing them.
Business correspondence thus plays an important role in any organization. It is used for
documenting minutes of meetings, collection of facts, filing of reports, tabulating data
etc. which all serve as documentation for future reference. It is seen as a tool for
recording facts.

Reports are of two kinds, informative and interpretive. The former as the name
suggests contains information or data that has been collected and is now ready to be
shared with the target audience. The latter too as the name suggests helps in the interpretation of data or information gathered which is then used for constructive purposes in the organization. This is done so after careful analysis of the data and thereby reaching to a practical conclusion. Within the report writing framework, there are recommendatory reports which include recommendations exclusively. There are also progress reports for long term projects which require updates from time to time. Similarly also there are other types of reports like Inspection reports, which indicate or incorporate the results of an inspection done. These reports should be completely factual and should also be conclusive about the future course of action. Usually reports are prepared whenever there is a project undertaken or when decisions are implemented. In such reports there is no room for long winded sentences. Everything has to be clear cut, precise and accurate.

Documenting decisions taken in board meetings or departmental meetings is done so in the form of minutes of the meeting. These should be done taking into account all the points discussed without missing out on a single point. They have to be documented in such a way that priority is given to the major points or major decisions taken, followed by the lesser points and decisions taken. The points taken have to be accurate and exact. There is no room for interpretation. Facts are to be recorded as they are without incorporating additional things that have not been discussed. Corrections cannot be made and so also nothing can be removed or deleted. Facts are to be presented as they are. It should also document the names of the members present and mention is to be made about whether it is a periodical meeting, annual meeting etc. The time of start of the meeting and end of the meeting should be recorded. Only the main ideas are to be noted.

The importance of business correspondence has been realized to the extent that it now has been incorporated into various training modules. While discussing written communication it has been observed that it is intrinsically intertwined with technology. Written communication today is highly dependent on technology. Use of Email, fax, internet etc. is an example of how technology assists in written communication.
The essence of excellent customer skills is the ability to retain the old customers and winning over new ones. Communication skills in the customer service industry can be classified as basic or advanced. Basic skills as mentioned above include good spoken and written abilities. In addition, good listening skills and the ability to understand requests also form a part of the basic skills. Diction, clarity, active listening and professional business writing are also essential for good communication skills. Advanced skills require more expertise in the ability to negotiate and persuade, handle complaints and escalations, task orientation and time management etc.

1.8 Striving Towards Providing the Best Customer Service

To be successful in the customer service industry it is important to understand that customer service is all about perception. During any customer service interaction, the customers will be happy and satisfied only if they get the feeling that the server knows what needs to be done and need not be prompted from time to time. The server should also be enjoying work and last but not the least should be glad about the presence of the customer.

Everyone knows how to speak but only a limited few know how to do it skillfully and this is seen as one of the biggest problems in the market today. The need for choosing words wisely has always been felt. This is so that customers never feel dismissed, unimportant or offended. The value and importance of a customer should always be shown and this can be done so by giving a very caring impression. The best way is to speak naturally but properly. Technical jargon should always be avoided as it may sound vague to the customer and hence become totally un-comprehensible. Carefully thought of responses is also part of the good communication skills list. These could be in the form of thought processes wherein the phrases have been well rehearsed and paced and there is little or no room for error. This also lessens repetition. The choice of words and effective pacing can result in mutual understanding and an ability to build a good rapport with customers and clients. Another very important factor which has to be taken into account at all times during any business interaction is to refrain
from using technical jargon. A customer or a client would find it very difficult to understand or comprehend technical terms. These technical terms should be simplified into words that can be understood by all.

In many retail stores, small and big shops alike there are phrases “The Customer is king” and “The Customer is always right” which many come across. These are considered to be the main guiding principles over which the entire customer service industry depends. The main goal for any customer service industry is to gain customer satisfaction and also new customers thereon. The service and related industries has grown by leaps and bounds over the years. This has resulted in the availability of job opportunities for young aspirants. The job availability may be there but many aspirants may not be qualified for such jobs only because they lack certain skills set. We need to look into what these skills set comprise of.