CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

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In Chapter II the review of the related literature was presented. The chapter highlighted the various aspects of communication. Language and Communication were separately defined and it has been observed that although these two are closely related they have to be treated as separate entities. The different theories of communication, their trends and the types of models of communication adopted have also been discussed at length. The importance of identifying the factors that affect communication or the barriers to communication play a vital role in improving communication skills. With the world becoming one global village and India one of its emerging economies the need for understanding different cultures and developing good communication skills has been felt like never before. A good cultural understanding creates a massive impact on any form of business communication. It makes communicating simpler and does away with any misunderstandings that may arise due to cultural ignorance. While discussing business communication in Chapter II, two types of customers had been identified. They are the external customers or the clients and the internal customers who are the employees within the organization. The latter have been selected as the sample population on which the data is to be analysed. Also three types of business communication have been identified, verbal, non-verbal and written. These form the basis of the research questions formulated for obtaining data.

The present chapter has six sections of which the first depicts the rationale of the study, followed by the objectives of the study. The third section describes the sample population, the fourth section describes in detail the tools used and the fifth section discusses the procedure for the collection and analysis of the data. Finally the sixth and last section discusses about the limitations and scope of the study.
3.1 The Rationale of the Study

The research undertaken can be defined as a descriptive study which primarily describes what is going on or what already exists. As time is considered as one of the most important elements of any research design it can be classified as a cross-sectional study or a longitudinal study. As this research has been undertaken at a single point in time it can be considered as a cross-sectional study. Data is also of two types, namely, quantitative and qualitative. As the names suggest the former refers to numerical forms and the latter if they are non-numerical. For this study both a quantitative and qualitative analysis was done and the tools used for the former were questionnaires and for the latter unstructured interviews, personal observations and daily notes. Being in the customer service industry for eight years has enabled me to make a very detailed and thorough qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis only strengthens the observations made qualitatively. The study aims to highlight the importance of communicative skills in the customer service industry. Good communicative skills have become essential in any business interaction today.

While formulating a research design many factors have to be taken into account. The researcher will need to define the purpose of the study, the context and situation, the type of data required and where it can be found, the techniques of data collection, the mode of analysis etc.

The study has been carried out mainly to identify the various communicative skills that are considered important while providing service to a customer or a client. Before carrying out the study it has been observed that there are enough variables that can be taken into account for the purpose of the study. The results of this study will enable those in the customer service industry to improve and polish the skills that are used on a daily basis at the workplace either as an employer, employee, trainer, trainee etc. Although there have been many studies on communicative skills, this study focuses particularly on the importance of each skill and how effective it can be for business communication especially the customer service industry.
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.

The young Indian learners with career aspirations will view this study as an immense help and a point of reference for enhancing their communicative skills in the Customer Service Industry especially in the international marketplace. This study will besides help them bridge cultural differences and hence enable them to understand what they are trying to communicate. The target group will also include adult learners with a desire to improve in their communication skills.

The growth of the customer service industry has seen a rise in the demand of new recruits with excellent communicative skills. Communication has become vital to business growth since our economy has firmly based itself on information, rather than manufacturing. To reiterate what has been mentioned in Chapter I, with the outsourcing boom, companies and organizations want staff who can speak English in order to communicate within the international marketplace. With reference to the present context and keeping in mind the growth of the customer service industry there is a need for professional training in communication skills. There is also a need for cross-cultural training to be able to cater to Indian customers with different cultural backgrounds and also international customers with different cultural backgrounds.
3.2 The Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

5. To identify the needs in the Customer Service Industry:
   • Better communication skills for customer retention
   • Communication tips for handling complaints thereby keeping customers happy
   • Training to equip job aspirants with key skills for Customer Service jobs
   • Kinds of communication skills required to de-escalate situations or to calm irate customers
   • Ways and means to build great customer experiences and thereby increase customer loyalty index
   • Develop more strategies to increase customer satisfaction
   • Techniques for email communication
   • Communication tips for improving internet customer service
   • Ways of communication to complete restore customer confidence after things go wrong.
   • Kinds of communication involved in various sectors like sales, emergency response services, and telecommunication services etc.
   • To develop strategies and techniques for better writing skills in business communication.

6. To identify the constraints:
   • Cultural
   • Social
   • Economic
   • Personal

7. To identify the soft skills in the Customer Service Industry:
   • Mother tongue influence
8. To develop and design the materials for Training Modules, Call Flow Scripts, Standard Verbiages, Business Etiquettes etc.

3.3 Description of the Sample Population

A sample population of 500 was taken into account for the study. The process of sampling has been done in such a way that by studying this sample the results can be fairly generalized with respect to the population from which the units were chosen. While sampling there are four groups that usually constitute a sample model. This model comprises of a theoretical population which refers to which population the study needs to be generalized to, the study population which refers to which population can be accessed, the sampling frame which refers to how the population can be accessed and lastly the actual sample which refers to the population in the study.

In this study the sample includes respondents who are associated with the customer service industry. The respondents are from the telecommunication sector, retail sector, insurance and banking sector, BPOs, travel and tour sector, hospitality sector, emergency services etc. They are employees, employers, trainers, trainees, new recruits, students who have business communication as a subject and teachers. A majority of the respondents are already working and have been in the customer service industry for a relatively long period. The student and teacher respondents are very few in number. The responses elicited from them were more theory based than practical and
hence would not contribute much to the study. More focus was given to the respondents who have served or are still serving in the customer service industry.

Factors like age, gender, educational status and total work experience have been considered. As training is seen as crucial the respondents have also been asked whether any training or course in business communication has been undertaken.

Four categories of age have been considered for the respondents. Respondents who were lesser than 21 years of age have been considered, those between 21 and 29 years were in the second category, those between 30 and 39 years were considered in the third category and those between 40 to 49 have been considered in the fourth category. Gender has also been considered as a factor for the study under the personal information of the respondents. For educational qualification three categories have been selected, namely, the undergraduates, graduates and post graduates. To quantify the work experience four categories have been taken into account. They are respondents who have work experience of less than six months, those who have a work experience of 6 months to a year, those who have an experience of 2 to 3 years and finally the fourth category is of those respondents who have a total work experience of 4 to 5 years.

With the rise in demand for better communication skills in the customer service industry many have either undergone training or completed a course in business communication. Hence respondents have also been asked to state whether or not this is applicable to them. This would help in determining the importance of the study.
3.4 Methodology and Tools Used

The methodology used for the study is mainly qualitative and quantitative. The various tools employed for the purpose are in the form of questionnaires, unstructured interviews, personal observation and daily notes. The quantitative data for this study has been mainly derived from the questionnaire and the qualitative data has been mainly derived from unstructured interviews, personal observation and daily notes.

Qualitative data as the name suggests does not have any quantitative value. It is extremely varied in nature and it includes almost any information which has no numerical significance. Field research is considered to be a means or a method of gathering qualitative data. The concept involves an active participation by the researcher. The researcher actually gets into the field and becomes a part of the culture or nature of the area of study. This enables the researcher to observe the phenomenon naturally or gives the researcher a first hand experience of the nature of study. This is often termed as participant observation wherein the researcher takes extensive notes which further get analyzed and from which inferences and conclusions can be drawn.

The purpose of an unstructured interview is to be able to form an opinion in the area of study. This kind of an interview is useful for exploring a topic from a broader perspective. It also enables the interviewer to direct the course of a conversation in any direction of interest that may arise. This helps in gathering more information and data without any preconceived ideas and concepts.

Personal observation is based more on field study or research wherein the observation illustrates some aspect of the area of study. As mentioned earlier, most of the data collected through personal observation has been done mainly while being employed in various organizations of the customer service industry, namely technical support, sales and marketing and emergency response. This can also be defined as participant observation. This is different from direct observation as it involves active participation by the researcher. Participant observation is more demanding as it requires that the researcher becomes a part of the context or culture of the study. It involves active participation, extensive note-taking and storage of enormous analyzed data. It may take months or years as the researcher will have to adapt to the culture so that field data is collected in the most natural way.
The daily notes made were mainly from existing documents and training materials or modules. Notes have also been taken from newspapers, magazines, websites, television programmes etc.

Surveys have been divided into two broad categories namely, questionnaires and interviews. The general opinion has always been that the basic difference between the two is that the former has more close-ended questions whereas the latter asks more open-ended questions. Survey research has however, changed drastically over the years. In pursuance with providing the best customer service, many companies and organizations have resorted to immediate customer satisfaction survey questionnaires to use as feedback for service improvement. Automated telephone surveys, hotel room desk surveys, restaurant table surveys, web surveys for services rendered are a few of the examples.

A survey questionnaire can be sent either by an email attachment or can be administered directly by handing the questionnaire to the respondent. In this study both methods have been employed. There are other methods also like accessing the questionnaire via a webpage or by sending a simple email (Bradley, 1999). Directly handing over the questionnaires have been found to be more effective as the responses were immediate but more expensive whereas the response rate by email attachment was low but relatively inexpensive.

Questionnaires being quantitative in nature are also free from the bias of the interviewer. The responses are always in the respondents own words and the respondents can be completely honest about sensitive subjects if any. They also have adequate time to answer the questions leisurely. There are respondents who cannot be easily reached and this mode enables a researcher to reach such respondents conveniently. As large samples are targeted through questionnaires the results of the data analysis are usually more reliable and dependable. This method also has a few demerits. It may be considered one of the slowest modes of data collection as once the questionnaires are sent the researcher loses control over them. The respondents need to be willing and co-operative but it is very difficult to determine whether the respondents are truly representative of their own self. The responses to all questions cannot be guaranteed and also return of all questionnaires duly filled in with responses cannot be
guaranteed. Both personal and telephonic interviews which have been used in this study have had more opportunity for probing, opinion seeking and forming impressions.

3.5 Procedure for the Collection and Analysis of the Data

As mentioned earlier, data has been collected quantitatively through questionnaires and qualitative data has been collected through unstructured interviews, personal observation and daily notes.

The questionnaire consists of 40 questions and the first page of the questionnaire is with regard to the personal information of the respondent. Each of the questionnaires had been distributed to the respondents at their workplace or a soft copy of the questionnaire had been sent through email to respondents who were unable to respond immediately. A majority of the respondents were from the BPO and telecommunication sector. The respondents were either currently working or had at one point in time worked in these sectors. Care had been taken to ensure that the questions in the questionnaire used simple language for easy comprehension. The questions also were unambiguous, direct and had no underlying meaning. Vague words which are misleading, presuming questions, hypothetical questions and leading questions were avoided throughout the questionnaire.

The questionnaire used in this study is a structured questionnaire wherein a statement is made and the respondents are to respond according to the given scale. The Likert scale has been used for this study. Five responses which have been used are Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree in the given scale. A structured questionnaire is simpler to administer and the data of the respondents are easier to analyze. The questionnaire is short and simple and has been kept to its minimum. This has been done in order to retain the interest of the respondents. The questions which seek an opinion have been left to the end keeping in mind that by the time the respondents answer the last few questions they are more acquainted with the topic and are in a better position to form an opinion about the questions asked towards the end.
Proper sequencing of questions is important as it avoids misunderstanding of questions by the respondents. Care has been taken while sequencing questions to establish a relation between the questions to ensure a proper flow for the respondents. The questionnaire has been sequenced in such a way that it logically moves from the general to the specific. The general questions have been put at the beginning to ensure a complete understanding by the respondents and also to gain their interest.

The first five questions include general observations on communication. Questions 6 to 8 deal with non-verbal communication. The next two questions are on cross cultural understanding. Questions 11 to 15 deal with more specific observations. Questions 16 to 19 involve the various barriers to communication. The importance of listening has been dealt with in questions 20 and 21. Question 22 is a reiteration of question 5 which tries to find out if good communication skills can calm down an irate or an angry customer. The question has been asked with the intention to determine if there is variation in responses because of a vocabulary difference. Both the questions 5 and 22 are the same, the only difference being in the words angry and irate. Questions 23 and 24 deal with clarity and accuracy respectively. Questions 25 to 28 touch on the various aspects of soft skills and ‘call flow’ or flow of conversation. Questions 29 to 31 deal with how customers are to be handled or how a telephonic conversation with a client or a customer is to be handled. Questions 22 and 33 specifically deal with the nuances of written communication. Finally, questions 35 to 40 look at the present situation or the current trends as we may refer to them.

The unstructured interviews have been conducted on both a one to one basis and also in groups. The observations have been noted down in the form of written notes. Respondents who took the one to one interview were mostly the tenured customer service representatives, employers, trainers and teachers. The group interviews were mostly conducted among the new recruits, the trainees and the bottom performers who have been sent for re-training. Group interviews were also conducted among students in colleges offering business communication as a subject.

Having served in the customer service industry for a period of eight years, there was the opportunity for the researcher to make both direct and participant observation. Starting from the grass root level as a TSA (Technical Support Associate) in Wipro BPO (New Delhi) the initial involvement was more of a participatory role. The best
observation made on communicative skills in this industry was after the researcher's promotion as a Voice Coach for Dell Technical Support. The main role of a Voice Coach then was to ensure that all the customer service representatives or the technical support associates were able to communicate clearly with Dell customers while troubleshooting or offering technical support. Dell as a client then emphasized on the need for better communication skills among the technical support associates. Customer satisfaction surveys sent by Dell had a great deal of focus on Communication and the various aspects associated with it. Also, Dell had designed several training modules on communication to help the Indian associates communicate better. The importance of communication had been felt so greatly that based on the customer satisfaction surveys on communication an associate could be sent for re-training whereby it was further determined whether or not an associate could continue as a voice associate or as an e-mail technical support associate. Most of the data collected by personal observation and a few through daily notes had been gathered at this time even before formulating the research proposal. It was done during the time the researcher was mentoring and training the bottom performers sent for re-training and also the new recruits by auditing their live and recorded calls and providing them with the necessary feedback on how to improve their communicative skills. The audit sheets consisted of pointers that assess and analyse various factors that affect communication. As a Team Leader of a team of eight voice coaches in the same organization in New Delhi and Kolkata the researcher was exposed to a wider range of data, the analysis of which provided insights into just how important it is to be able to communicate well in the customer service industry.

Another sector where the researcher had worked in was the Insurance sector where again there was a huge demand for skills like negotiation and persuasion. There was also a huge demand for skills in calming irate customers, setting the right expectations and also ownership of the policies sold. Most of the data on these communicative skills have again been collected both through direct and participant observation. Daily notes had also been taken from observations made by the team of insurance consultants who had worked with me over that period.

The emergency service sector which the researcher had served for two years had a different kind of demand for communication skills. This sector required more of call handling skills, calming irate and distressed callers and also setting the right expectations. It also required communication with the internal customers who in this
case were my own colleagues. The task had to be undertaken with extreme precision involving clear, brief and accurate communication. In this sector too, data was collected through personal or direct observation, participatory observation and daily notes.

Daily notes as discussed earlier in the chapter, have also been made from newspapers, magazines, television programmes, websites etc.

3.6 Limitations and Scope of the Study

Communication in the customer service industry had existed for a very long time now but its importance has only been realized recently. Although this study has attempted to target more sectors yet due to various reasons only the telecommunication sector, retail sector, insurance and banking sector, BPOs, travel and tour sector, hospitality sector, emergency services etc. could be touched upon. There are other sectors like the automobile industry, the aviation industry and other fast track industries like the fashion industry etc. which can be worked upon further.

Since the thrust on communicative skills in the customer service industry has only been recently realized very few books, journals and reading materials are available. There is very less research that has been conducted in this field, hence it has been difficult to draw inferences from previous researches in this field.

Similarly, the sampling which could have been at least 800 in number had to be settled for 500. Data has been collected from cities which have a huge number of corporate houses like New Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore. However, a large amount of data from Shillong could not be collected as there are relatively fewer corporate houses as compared to the other cities.

The retail industry which is rapidly growing has ample scope for study as it has various fields associated with it. The Indian retail industry is the fifth largest in the world and hence thousands of jobs will be available in the next ten years. Recent developments have indicated the possibility of an increase in foreign investments.
thereby leading to a demand for business communication in the international marketplace. Further research in particular industries and their related fields with respect to communication will not only be interesting but also enriching.

In addition, there are other skills in the same industry which can be explored further. The skill which has an equally high demand in the customer service industry or in any form of business communication is personality development. Most business schools or management institutes now have personality development programmes incorporated into the curriculum. The notion is that although students from such schools or institutes are equipped academically they may lack the communicative skills or the right kind of personality for the job that they aspire.

The feedback regarding the need for better communication skills and personality development programmes have come from none other than the placement departments or placement cells of business schools of repute. Such departments realize that although students may be technically strong or academically proficient enough to secure a high profile job in the customer service industry it is imperative for them to be equally proficient in communicative skills and also to have the right personality which fits or suits the job profile.

Due to time constraints, another statistical method could not be applied. This method could have been applied to validate the currently used method. The method referred that can be used as a scope for further research is the chi-square test. Also this study has made use of unstructured interviews. If there were no time constraints structured interviews could have also been used. So this is another scope that can be used for further study. Also, there are not enough business schools in Shillong where in depth studies or analysis can be conducted or comparisons can be made. A larger study can be conducted in more of the business schools if not in Shillong only then also in business schools in other parts of the country.