

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, Call Centers have become a booming industry in our country. El Salvador is considered as one of the main locations of choice for big companies due to its low operational and labor costs. As a matter of fact, Call Centers have fast spread in the country over the last few years, and they are being considered as one of the best contributors in the economic growth in El Salvador and still foreseen to be helping the country in the coming years.

Call Centers in El Salvador provide both Inbound (inquiries, help desk, technical support, payments, order taking, complaints, assistance, among others) and outbound (telemarketing, telesurvey, telecollection, sales, among others). These are all being completed or accomplished via phone, fax, e-mail, chat and web tools.

The industry rapidly grows every year, providing society with better job opportunities and salary improvement expectations just by being fluent in the English Language, and this new industry catches the attention of people Learning English as a Second Language (*ESL*) encouraging them to improve their Oral Proficiency in the English Language in order to become a Call Center agent.

However, not all the applicants have the opportunity to achieve a position as a call center representative. There is a big inquiry about ESL students having no scope of landing in a Call Center position due to their lack of Oral fluency in the language. The findings of this research look forward to identify what is the Oral Proficiency level required by the main Call Centers in our country and what areas should be improved to make this process a lot easier for aspirants to be integrated into this competitive market.

This thesis was presented in three chapters. Chapter A, "Theoretical Framework," provided a Background and History of call centers, their different profiles, and situation faced by Call Center agents in El Salvador. Chapter B, "Theoretical Bases," looked at the theories and models applied in this research; it summarized information about Oral proficiency, Second Language Acquisition (*SLA*), ACTFL (*American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages*) Guidelines for speaking and the Oral Proficiency Interview (*OPI*). And finally Chapter C, "Operative Framework", dealt with the description of the research subjects. The chapter analyzed the information gathered from the different Instruments and pointed out some observations obtained from the results.

## **I. Statement of the Problem**

Call Centers nowadays are very popular in El Salvador. Big companies from all over the world are using foreign-based agents to answer their queries. Call Centers are centralized offices wherein the company's inbound calls are received and outbound calls are made. For the past few years El Salvador tops among countries that are preferred destination for call Center Company's operation.

This English demand by the Call Center industry in our country is what nowadays motivates people to learn English. In this way, they might get an opportunity to improve their chances of having a challenging and rewarding career and it helps them improve their English level of fluency that can eventually lead them to a huge growth potential and to a successful professional life.

In addition to this, call centers offer the chance to be upgraded to a better position, this goes from the common call taking department to a training department, quality department, management department, and even an IT department. Because these are all housed in the same call center, and it is very possible to learn different skills in these departments easily giving you an edge in your call center career.

Call centers like Sykes, Stream, Teleperformance, Benson, Heliocentric, and some others are centralized offices located in our country operated through an extensive open workspace for call center agents by using a telephone/ headset and a computer to be connected to a telecom switch. Calls may be inbound or outbound. Inbound calls are made by consumers, for example to obtain information or to complain about a service and ask for help. In contrast, outbound calls are made by agents to consumers, usually for sales purposes or telemarketing. Call Center staff is organized into a multi-tier support system for more efficient handling of calls.

This service is provided largely to native English speakers usually located in North America so it provides a wide range of development opportunities for non native English speakers that can eventually lead them to a great proficiency level in the English acquisition field. Moreover, perks usually include overtime pay, nighttime supplemental pay, medical coverage, productivity bonus and even signing up bonus. Evidence of the career's attractiveness may be seen in job fairs where call centers are dominant among companies that hire new employees. Moreover, the English as a Second Language (ESL) proficiency of many job-seekers are educated at universities, however, falls short of the proficiency required by the call centers. According to a National newspaper article published in 2005, call centers hire an average of 8 out of 200 applicants for customer service representatives. Indeed, according to Carlos Cubías, Recruitment Staff Coordinator and Operations Supervisor at Heliocentric, “5 out of 60 weekly applications fulfill their expectations to become a Customer Service Representative.”

This business process outsourcing has generated popularity and motivation within students from all over the country. The attractive compensation packages offered by call centers are simply irresistible to undergraduate students and even recent university graduated students.

Nevertheless, not all of the Intermediate and Advanced English level students are conditioned to be employed by a call center. As a matter of fact, less than 20% of the students are accepted as customer service agents. As mentioned above, the English proficiency level acquired for some ESL students does not meet the requirements that call center companies need.

But what is the Oral Proficiency level that these call centers are looking for in our country? Currently, Intermediate and Advanced Level students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in El Salvador, consider call centers as their first and best option for working. Students think of a call center as a wide range of possibilities not only for

improving their competence in the language but also the opportunity to make money without quitting their major. This research focused on the oral proficiency requirements that applicants must have in order to get a chance of working in a call center.

## **II. Objectives**

### **General Objective**

- To find out what is the English Oral Proficiency level required from candidates who want to work as call centers agents in the main call centers in El Salvador.
- To determine what are the parameters used by the call center's recruitment staff to evaluate their applicants.

### **Specific Objectives**

- To define Oral proficiency.
- To determine how students who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) acquire Oral Proficiency.
- To identify which are the different levels of Oral Proficiency according to the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language ACTFL proficiency guidelines for Speaking.
- To find out the measurement instruments used by Call Center's recruitment staff to determine the aspirants' Oral Proficiency level.

### **III. Research Questions**

#### **A. General Questions**

- What is the English Oral Proficiency level required for candidates applying to work as agents in the main call centers in El Salvador?
- What are the parameters used by call centers to determine if a candidate achieves the Oral Proficiency required to work at the company?

#### **B. Subsidiary Questions**

- What is Oral Proficiency?
- How do students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) acquire Oral Proficiency?
- According to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines- Speaking which are the different levels of Oral Proficiency?
- What is the procedure followed to apply to work as a call center agent?
- What measurement Instrument is used by call centers to determine the applicants Oral Proficiency level?
- What other aspects, besides Oral Proficiency, are taken into account by call center's interviewer when evaluating the candidates?
- What recommendation/ feedback is given for candidates whose application is rejected?

#### **IV. Justification**

The new globalized world is challenging college institutions to prepare proficient professionals committed to economic, academic and social development of their countries. The ceaseless development of technology makes easier for human beings the art of communication and it generates a lot of opportunities and tremendous advantages for big companies all over the world.

Now more than ever it is important for these enterprises the implementation of Customer Service, taking into consideration adequate quality measurement parameters for the client's satisfaction. Currently, many of these companies facilitate their assignments using the Call Center service, which generates a value-added and it helps reducing the costs of operation.

The concept of Call Center in our country started to be used in the 90's (the origin of the first Spanish-speaking call center) with the arrival of telemarketing enterprises such as TV Offer (located in Atento El Salvador), where phone orders were taken through TV advertising; later with the arrival of Internet services, orders taken online. (UCA research # 1803, March 2004).

Afterwards, the Salvadoran government started to base operations with English-Speaking call centers from huge companies, hiring bilingual employees to become Customer Service Representatives (CSR), in order to boost people's motivation to learn English as a Second Language and regulate the country's economy in its eager to grow the call center industry. Therefore, applicants started to learn the English language in order to fulfill the oral proficiency demanded by call centers and hence become a Customer Service Representative. As a matter of fact, applicants would prefer working at a bilingual call center mainly because of monetary reasons, while working at a call center, employees have the chance to earn a really good salary (from US\$600 to even



US\$1,000 monthly) in a country where the minimum wage is about US\$215 a month.

This fact was not been ignored by students from the Foreign Languages Department at the School of Arts of the University of El Salvador, and it has become evident for years now that many of these students apply to work at a call center while studying and even after graduating.

Given the fact that the call center industry has become such an important source of employment in our country and even for students from the Department, it could only be expected that extensive and deep research on the topic would have already been done by research groups in the Foreign Languages Department. However, when looking for previous research about this matter, it was surprising to find out that there was no preceding investigation regarding the Oral Proficiency level of English that a Call Center requires for employment.

This report emerged from the gap arising from that subject. The investigation was mainly directed to explore the speaking competence that students must have in order to become a Call Center Agent, as well as some additional aspects taken into account by Call Centers during the hiring process for applicants to join the call center industry. This was expected to be an opening for future research groups who would like to investigate about this topic and its relevance in concordance to society.

## **V. Delimitation of the Problem**

There are important issues for English servicing call centers to consider when they outsource their operations to non-native English Speaker destinations such as El Salvador. This research was focused particularly on the management of the oral proficiency requirements established by each outsource company. In our country, Call Center applicants might face English language communication issues due to a lack of speaking ability.

This study described the oral proficiency required by Non Native English Speakers to become a Customer Service Representative at the Call Center Industry.

### **Time and place:**

This research about Oral Proficiency level required by Call Centers took place within the main call centers in El Salvador such as Stream Global Services, Sykes, Teleperformance, Heliocentric, Atento, Benson and Transactel during the years 2011-2012.

### **Population:**

This study was addressed to people who learned English as a Second Language and are currently working at a call center. And also, people who have applied and whose application was denied by the call center company. The participation of managers and operations supervisors of some call centers in the area was also taken into account.

## **VI. Theoretical Framework**

### **A. Background**

#### **1. History and role of Call Centers in El Salvador**

Call centers in El Salvador began as plain providers for over the phone Customer Service ranging from travel services, technical support, sales department, claims department, customer care, financial services, and online business to customer support, online business to business support. The call center industry is an up-and-coming industry in El Salvador. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is regarded as one of the fastest growing industries all over the world.

El Salvador is also considered as location of choice due to its less expensive operational and labor costs. In 2007, El Salvador led as a top BPO destination for the Call center business industry (According to an article published by the U.S. Embassy).

##### **1.1 Types of Service provided by Call Centers**

The calls managed by a number of Salvadoran Call Centers can be categorized into: Outbound calls and inbound calls. Outbound calls include: sales, advisories, customer service, verification, surveys and it is usually the Call Center agent who calls the client. While Inbound Calls include: Inquiries, Technical Support, Inbound sales and various Customer Services and in this situation it is the client who calls the call center agent.

##### **1.2 Recruitment and training process**

The recruitment process for new call center agents may include (but is not limited to) the following steps:

- Phone Screening – This stage determines the voice quality over the phone and how the applicant responds to the call;
- Initial Interview – Conducted by the company human resources department, outsourcing or recruitment staff to test the oral skills, attitude and how confident the applicant responds to the questions;
- Examination – this includes aptitude tests, computer-based call simulations and Emotional Quotient (EQ); and
- Final Interview – To assess customer service, technical, or sales skills.

There are various ways in which one may initiate a career in call centers. The most common of which is to apply directly to a call center's recruitment office. This process is commonly known as “walk in applications” or job fairs by different call centers in El Salvador. Another procedure includes employees’ referral where an applicant is referred by an existing employee of a call center. A person may also apply through an outsourcing agency (Such as Outsource S.A. located in our country) which conducts its own screening procedures, before endorsing an applicant to any call center.

There is also an emerging manner to secure a career in call centers through on-line applications. Websites such as [tecoloco.com](http://tecoloco.com) place the applicant's resume in an online database so they can be notified whenever there is a call center position available. More and more companies and job seekers have embraced this means due to its benefits. Some of its many benefits include: acquiring more details of the call center before applying, facilitation of application forms.

This research paper looked forward to sharpen this English Oral Proficiency required for applicants since there is no previous background relating that matter.

There were preliminary research studies about the Labor Market for people learning English as a Second Language (ESL) that involve the local impact of the call center industry within our country; refer to Thesis #14100906 "Labor Market for ESL students period 2000-2005, University of El Salvador, Imp. 2008" & UCA research #1809 "Call center; a new Customer Service Business, March 2004. However, there was no record of previous research regarding Oral Proficiency requirements by the main call centers located in our country.

## **2. Call Center's Profiles in El Salvador.**

Call Centers make sense as a strategy for small countries in need of export earnings. The outsourcing of call center development is a recent and expanding business worldwide. It is estimated that the addressable market for global off shoring exceeds US\$300 Billion, according to the NASSCOM McKinsey Report (2005) they estimate that by 2012, potentially this business would be worth US\$110 Billion. This potential growth of call centers has also impacted our country in a positive way within the English Language Learning improvement, its business communication and globalization process. El Salvador is nowadays one of the leading countries for call center destinations. According to an article published on CNN by Christian Zappone in July 2007, Call Centers in El Salvador have hired over 4,700 employees and it boasted seven call centers operated by such companies as Spain based- Atento, Stream, Paris-based Teleperformance, Transactel, Sykes, Benson and Heliocentric. This call center industry is spreading not only in the English language but also in some other foreign languages; call

centers like Transactel already have based International accounts in different languages such as French, Portuguese and German.

These Customer Service Representatives (CSR's) are mostly servicing the United States and Canada. The majority of these CSR's are college graduates or under graduates, and outsourcing companies report improved quality of customer service due to the combination of graduated employees and strong service culture. El Salvador alone is expanding call center employment at a rate of over 60% per year (UCA research # 1803, March 2004) and this is set to continue. However, this fast growth has exposed concerns about outsourcing companies not meeting the necessary talent requirement to support this evolution. Sanez (2006:11) The CEO of the Business Processing Association (BPAP) talks about an insufficient quantity of suitable and willing talent to fuel growth in non-English speaking countries. In El Salvador, the lack of confidence in the country's ability to provide the necessary oral proficiency for communication is the major hurdle to the rapid development of call centers. According to Stream Global Services, one of the most demanded and prestigious call centers in our country, recruitment levels are running extremely low 50 out of 400 applicants are hired per week and these would have the language skills required and the rest whose biggest issues were their level of oral English Proficiency are considered near hires, meaning that with a little more training or English courses they would be at the oral level required for hiring.

From a political, economical and social perspective the call center industry is exceedingly crucial to the development of a stable economy in our country and providing useful training to future employees of this industry is essential. It is this emphasis on training within the context of the call center which motivated the present study to focus on the Oral Proficiency required by call centers and how this is measured within the industry and used for better performance, acting as well, as a

pattern for recruitment and training. By investigating the Quality Assurance (QA) in Oral Proficiency adopted we were able to understand specific features in the nature of call centers and the way in which it is interpreted by the company.

### **3. Situation faced by Customer Service Representatives (CSR) in El Salvador**

In our country, English is taught as a second language in schools and universities. Whilst the students' knowledge of grammar may be excellent (and sometimes even better than their US counterparts), their knowledge of how this grammar and language is activated in real life exchanges is a distinct story. The exposure of Non Native English Speaker's (NNES's) to real life situations might be limited. In the classroom situation, and second languages context, the demands on the speaker are quite different from the language experience of dealing with frustrated customers. Rather than personal and social contexts related to customer inquiries, the teaching of English in the classroom tends to focus on educational genres. For example, within an insurance call center context such as Heliocentric, CSR is dealing with health related issues, and the US Native English Speaker (NES) customer's register and language choices in such contexts are probably beyond the experience of many Salvadorian CSR's. Thus it would be extremely difficult, even though the Salvadoran agent may have passed all his/her language exams, with such registers where the language and cultural experience of the customer is markedly different.

Knowing about the language does not mean that one is able to use it in a complex functional setting such as call centers (Young and HE 1998). But why is it the NNES's find real life interaction with NES so difficult even though they have been receiving English language instruction from an early age or for a long period of time at school? An

answer to this might be very simple, this often relates to an approach to instruction in English through school University where heavy classroom emphasis is put on the form of the language rather than the function.

The context of teaching English in a developing country where resources are limited means that there is a higher dependency on written language and grammar rules, rather than on how language makes meaning in a specific context, i.e. the goal and purpose of language as a socially constructed resource (Martin and Francis 1997). Traditional language teachers have the mistaken notion that grammatical accuracy is the base of good language use, whereas far more emphasis should be given to understanding how language changes depending on who is talking to who, what reality is being constructed and what channel of communication is chosen.

Moreover, much of the English language training for the call center industry has proved to be inappropriately focused on discrete grammar rules and accent neutralization which has little to do with the customer service interaction. As a matter of fact, that is the situation faced by Call Center agents in El Salvador. However, this research paper did not pretend to go deep into this matter, but instead to identify the oral proficiency level that applicants must have in order to become a Customer Service agent at a call center.



## **B. Theoretical Bases**

### **1. ORAL PROFICIENCY**

When learning a second language we are involved in different steps that let us acquire the target language. Second language acquisition is the process by which people learn another language besides their Mother Tongue. It is as well as important to know about the linguistics of the target language so the learner is able to create sentences to communicate messages. However, it is equally important to develop the ability to communicate accurately ideas and/or thoughts. Why is it so important? How do students who are learning a second language acquire oral proficiency? Are there any specific guidelines to measure oral proficiency and with what purpose?

#### **1.1 What is Second Language Acquisition?**

As mentioned before, Second language acquisition is an important step when learning a second language. It also requires meaningful interactions in the target language through natural communication, in which speakers are expected to be mainly concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and trying to understand. Here is where the linguistics of the language being learned is needed. Linguistics allows the second language learner to know how the language works, so he or she may be competent to construe the delivered messages. Linguistics is a very wide field in regards to the study of human languages. However, it can be said that the central categories from linguistics of study for a second language learner are syntax (the formation and composition of phrases and sentences taken from words), phonology (the sound of the words), and semantics (how the meaning is inferred from words and concepts). Even though acquiring the linguistics of a second language is important

throughout the process of learning the target language; it is a key aspect to develop oral proficiency.

## 1.2 What is Oral Proficiency?

A learner can be fully knowledgeable in regards to the grammatical structure of the target language, and at the same time can be unable to accurately express his thoughts or ideas. Due to this, developing oral proficiency is a major concern in the teaching-learning process. Why is Oral Proficiency so transcendental? According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1978)* **proficient** is defined as “performing in a given art, skill, or branch of learning with expert correctness and facility”. A person that is proficient is not only knowledgeable about the grammatical structures and rules of the target language (linguistic competence), but also competent to perform the language in any given situation (communicative competence). Moreover, a second language learner is competent when knowing what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any situation. The competent learner is also able to deal with the social and cultural aspects that facilitate the interpretation of the linguistics forms. By the early 1970’s a study done by Sandra Savignon (1972) in regards to the concept of communicative competence states that: “communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input of one or more interlocutors” (p. 8).

Moreover, we can take as an example the Immersion Programs which are based on the theoretical assumption that a language can be acquired through comprehensible input inside the classroom (Swain, 1985). Such assumption is in accordance with Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985) which states that to be exposed to an environment rich in comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition to take place. This means that students should be able to understand the core of what is said or presented to them.

Communication that lacks appropriate cultural content frequently results in humorous or embarrassing incidents, or miscommunication and misunderstandings. What is more, a high degree of oral proficiency implies having the ability to use the linguistics knowledge to new contexts and situations and at the same time communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language (Omaggio, 1986).

In addition to that, the social context in which a language is used plays an important role in communication. The social context in which a foreign language learner is involved places different cognitive and social demands. It may affect the quality of their oral performance in regards of formality or politeness. Furthermore, the communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in a given situation. If an individual is able to do so, he/she will be considered completely competent in a determined language. The communicative competence will, as well, allow the second language learner to realize that they have satisfied their goals in a given social situation. In addition to this, the communicative competence is embedded with the socio-cultural aspects which are relevant to develop the skills that the new speaker will bring into a determined situation.

## **2 ACTFL: Proficiency Guidelines**

### **2.1 History of the ACTFL**

ACTFL stands for *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages*. It is an organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. This organization has more than 9,000 foreign language educators from different countries around the world. Its main goal, when was first founded, was to design standards that could help educators to facilitate and empower the teaching-learning experience. Those Standards provide a clear direction in the classroom and good

evidence that students are learning what is expected by design rather than by accident. ACTFL is now synonym of innovation, quality, and reliability in meeting the changing needs of foreign educators and their students.

In November 1982, the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* was the first attempt by the foreign language teaching profession to define and describe levels of functional competence for the academic context. The history of the development of these guidelines has been outlined by Liskin-Gasparro (1984), who traces the “quest of proficiency” from its antecedents in the ancient world to the modern conceptualizations of the 1970’s (p. 13). It was during this decade that a convergence of events led to a series of projects that would give birth to a significant new movement in language education (p. 13). Prior to the development of the ACTFL, many instructors and curriculum specialists had attempted to set goals and define outcomes for language learning to improve communication in the teaching learning process.

However, by the late 1970’s it was becoming increasingly clear that the focus of curricular planning and testing would need to shift from a micro-analysis of what was being *taught* to a macro-analysis of what students could actually do with the language before any real progress could be made (Scebold 1992). Paul Simon, a congressman from Illinois, with the help of language professional organizations pointed out that it was urgent to establish a special presidential commission to excellence the educational standards. This initiative was supported by the President Jimmy Carter and, by April 1978, the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies was formed. Due to this, the academic community was ready to look for some consensus on defining more clearly proficiency standards for second language programs. The projects that were developed for professionals educators brought as outcome the proficiency guidelines.

## 2.2 What are the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?

The *ACTFL proficiency guidelines* main goal is to define and measure language ability in the four major skills when learning a foreign language: speaking, listening, writing and reading. By 1950's the Foreign Service Institute of the United States developed a scale in order to describe and measure the speaking abilities of candidates for Foreign Service positions. In addition to the proficiency scale, during the 1970's the Foreign Service Institute had created an interview based evaluation procedure which was known as the *Common Yardstick*. The outcome for this project was an adoption of the government scale, known by then as the IRL (Interagency Language Roundtable) Scale. Such scale involved an expansion of the lower levels to allow greater precision in describing proficiency.

The *Common Yardstick* project was continued in 1981 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and other associations under a grant entitled "A Design for Measuring and Communicating Foreign Language Proficiency". By 1981 the ACTFL executive council targeted language proficiency as one of the organization's priority areas. By 1989, the ACTFL Oral proficiency Interview Tester Training Manual presented the Inverted Pyramid which intended to explain the development of the proficiency levels of a foreign language learner. Levels of proficiency on the ACTFL scale are graphically described through the inverted pyramid, it goes from the *Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced* to the *Superior* level. It also underlies the importance of each sub-level: *low, mid, high* in the development of the learner's proficiency.

Moreover, the ACTFL proficiency guidelines present the assessment criteria for speaking proficiency tests. These criteria are interrelated with the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). According with Buck, Byrnes and Thompson (1989) "It addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and looks at them from a global perspective rather than

from a point of view of the presence or absence of any given linguistic feature” (p. 3-1).

### **3. ORAL PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW (OPI)**

#### **3.1 Oral Proficiency Interview Guidelines**

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a standardized procedure for the Global Assessment of functional speaking ability, or oral proficiency, ACTFL Inc 1989.

This is a globally used instrument due to the fact that it measures the language production by identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses that eventually lead to the establishment of the speaker's level of consistent functional ability as well as the clear limitations of that ability. There are four categories of assessment criteria: The global tasks or functions performed with the language; the social context, which are the areas where the language can be used; the accuracy features which define how well the speaker performs the task and the oral text types, from individual words to extended discourse.

In this assessment it is not important how the speaker learned the language, instead, the OPI measures the speaker's ability to use the language in real-life situations, the OPI is not something that the speaker will be prepared for. The OPI form might take from 10 to 30 minutes recorded conversation between a trained interviewer and the speaker, whose oral proficiency is being assessed. The OPI However needs to be developed as a natural conversation.

There are two aspects involved in the ACTFL OPI. The Elicitation, which is the mandatory four-phases structure of the OPI; Warm-up, level check, probes, wind-down; and rating, which is a two step ongoing process during the OPI and at the conclusion of it when the interviewer listens to the recording to assign a final rating. In each stage, the speech is first compared to the criteria for each major level (Novice,

Intermediate, Advanced and Superior) of the rating scale and then assigned a sub level rating (Low, Mid, High) by comparing the Interview with the descriptions in the ACTFL Guidelines.

During the interview, both steps need to be taken into account, because we cannot rate without proper elicitation, and we cannot have an elicitation without rating, so the speaker's oral proficiency must be continuously evaluated during the OPI itself. Although this preliminary process must take place during the interview, a final rate can't be assigned until the conversation is finished. This gives the interviewer an opportunity to concentrate in assigning the correct rating. Ideally, the recording only reconfirms what the interviewer slightly assesses during the OPI.

The measurement of the OPI's structure is standardized, but since it needs to be developed as a natural conversation its context is basically unique for each interview and the interviewee responses about individual background, life experiences, interests and opinions. The OPI is individual-criterion referenced, meaning that the results got from an interview are not to be compared with performances of other speakers. Although the OPI is not a fixed series of questions, the prescribed structure is the same used OPI and it mainly reflects the functional language skills as they exist at the moment. One reflection of this goal is that the rating is based on determining a level of performance which the speaker can consistently maintain during the interview.

The OPI is used to predict speaker's performance in a situation where a particular level of functional language is required, such as a job, language class or the country where the language is spoken. It can be used for diagnostic placement, evaluation and research purposes since is both, time and labor intensive, the applications may be limited when dealing with larger number of speakers.

The ability to assess oral language use depends on the existence of criteria by which use can be judged, the simplest form of assessment is one which indicates that one speaker uses language differently from another. However we typically claim that although languages use is infinitely varied among speakers, criteria exist which can be hierarchically arranged.

For the ACTFL OPI, this hierarchy is summarized in a rating scale spanning a wide range of performance profiles, from those of beginning learners to those who are able to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversation on practical, social, professional, and abstract topics.

The ACTFL rating scale is based on the hierarchy of global task comprising four major levels of languages performance. The Novice Level is characterized by the ability to communicate minimally with learned material, the speaker reacts to conversation initiatives of the conversation partner, primarily with formulaic or rote utterances in words and phrases, such as greetings and expressions, list of vocabulary, etc.

The Intermediate Level is characterized by the ability to maintain simple face to face conversation in highly predictable settings. The speaker creates with the languages by combining and recombining elements of learned materials in original ways, though primarily in a reactive mode. The speaker can initiate minimally sustain and conclude basic communicative task by asking and answering simple questions.

The Advanced Level is characterized by the ability to narrate and describe in paragraphs of connected discourse in major time and aspects frames, the speaker is able to initiate, sustain, and complete a wide variety of communicative tasks. Since these tasks are less scripted they require increased ability to convey meaning using diverse language strategies.



The Superior Level is characterized by the ability to discuss a broad range of topics in depth by supporting opinions and hypothesizing about abstract issues. Superior Level speakers can participate effectively in most formal and informal conversation on a wide range of practical, social, professional and academic topics, using native-like vocabulary and discourse strategies such as: recognizing another opinion while maintaining one's own; smoothly changing the topic; gaining, maintaining and yielding the conversational floor.

A number of additional considerations help clarify the concept of the rating scale underlying the OPI.

1. The scale assumes that language use is best assessed holistically, that is, from the standpoint of overall performance. Nevertheless, this global assessment reflects a high level of awareness of the specific factors contributing to the performance of a given linguistic task.
2. The scale presumes that facility with a language increases exponentially within the various global tasks and throughout the hierarchy of tasks, rather than growing linearly in a merely additive fashion.
3. Each major level subsumes the criteria of the level below it. For example, an Advance level speaker, by definition meets the criteria for the Novice and Intermediate Levels.
4. Only sustained performance of the task required at a level suffices for being rated at that level, strong Intermediate Level speakers are often able to include some description and narration in their speech.
5. Each of the four major levels encompasses a range of performance. Different speakers whose language use represents

different constellation of the elements necessary for performing the global tasks may still be rated at the same major level.

6. Aside from the hierarchy of global task- asking and answering simple questions, narrating, describing, etc. the following elements are identified as being most instructive in assessing oral proficiency:

- The content or set of circumstances, linguistic or situational.
- The accuracy with which the tasks are performed.
- The oral text types which result from the performance of the task.

7. The concept of ranges of performance, which permits diversity within a level, has a corollary in the concept of thresholds.

The four major levels have thus far been identified primarily from the standpoint of global tasks. They are further defined in terms of the linguistic, pragmatic and strategic skills with which these tasks are accomplished by the speaker.

Novice level speech involves languages use at the word and phrase level as well as some high frequency formulaic expressions which may consist of largely correct short phrases and sentences. The Novice Level speaker is essentially limited to reacting to the conversational partner in highly predictable common daily setting and is only marginally able to initiate communication. The ability to recombine learned elements of material to change and adapt sentence-length messages in simple face to face conversation is the hallmark of the Intermediate Level speakers.

Advance Levels speech shows that speakers can expand their messages and structure beyond a single sentence or string of sentences.

Advance Level speaker are most notable for their conversation management strategies. They are full and autonomous conversational partners whose strategies competence in the languages allows them bypass, in numerous subtle as well as overt ways, the linguistic limitations they still show in grammar, lexicon or text organization.

Superior Level speech is marked by a consolidation of the various strands of the linguistic system to such an extent that the speaker can concentrate almost entirely on message conveyance and no longer dwells on the formal means to that end. Superior Level speech need not be flawless. Apparent shortcomings are often difficult to attribute solely to grammar or lexicon and are not patterned, nor do they extend throughout the system of language. They are sporadic, indicating only isolated gaps in performance which might stem from the low frequency of lexical items tied to very specific topics.

The Oral Proficiency Interview is an integrative test; it addresses a number of abilities simultaneously and looks at them from a global perspective rather than from the point of view of the presence or absence of any given linguistic feature. Linguistic components are viewed from the wider perspective of their contribution to overall speaking performance.

The term global task and function refer to what speakers are able to do with the language. The ACTFL Proficiency guidelines refer to function or task universal ranging from simple ones such as listening and enumerating to complex tasks such as presenting information and knowledge through well-structured arguments, featuring, description, narration, supported opinion and hypothesis.

### 3.2 ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking

As mentioned before, the ACTFL guidelines were created as metrics that help educators to measure their students' proficiency levels in the mayor skills: writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking describe four major levels of proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. The description of each major level is representative of a specific range of abilities. Together these levels form a hierarchy in which each level subsumes all lower levels. The Novice, Intermediate and Advanced levels are divided into Low, Mid and High sub-levels.

The Guidelines describe the tasks that speakers can handle at each level, as well as the content, context, accuracy, and discourse types associated with tasks at each level. They also present the limits that speakers encounter when attempting to function at the next higher major level.

For the purposes of this research and for more detailed information, the ACTFL Guidelines for Speaking are presented in the following chart:

	<b>LOW</b>	<b>MID</b>	<b>HIGH</b>
<b>NOVICE</b>	Speakers at the Novice-Low level have no real functional ability and, because of their pronunciation, they may be unintelligible. Given adequate time and familiar cues, they may be able to exchange greetings, give their identity, and name a number of familiar objects from their immediate environment. They are unable to perform functions or handle topics pertaining to the Intermediate level, and cannot therefore participate in a true conversational exchange	Speakers at the Novice-Mid level communicate minimally and with difficulty by using a number of isolated words and memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned. When responding to direct questions, they may utter only two or three words at a time or an occasional stock answer. They pause frequently as they search for simple vocabulary or attempt to recycle their own and their interlocutor's words. Because of hesitations, lack of vocabulary, inaccuracy, or failure to respond appropriately, Novice-Mid speakers may be understood with great difficulty even by sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to dealing with non-natives. When called	Speakers at the Novice-High level are able to handle a variety of tasks pertaining to the Intermediate level, but are unable to sustain performance at that level. They are able to manage successfully a number of uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward social situations. Conversation is restricted to a few of the predictable topics necessary for survival in the target language culture, such as basic personal information, basic objects and a limited number of activities, preferences and immediate needs. Novice-High speakers respond to simple, direct questions or requests for information; they are able to ask only a very few formulaic questions when asked to do so. Novice-High speakers are able to express personal meaning by relying heavily

		<p>on to handle topics by performing functions associated with the Intermediate level, they frequently resort to repetition, words from their native language, or silence.</p>	<p>on learned phrases or recombination of these and what they hear from their interlocutor. Their utterances, which consist mostly of short and sometimes incomplete sentences in the present, may be hesitant or inaccurate. On the other hand, since these utterances are frequently only expansions of learned material and stock phrases, they may sometimes appear surprisingly fluent and accurate. These speaker's first language may strongly influence their pronunciation, as well as their vocabulary and syntax when they attempt to personalize their utterances. Frequent misunderstandings may arise but, with repetition or rephrasing, Novice-High speakers can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors used to non-natives. When called on to handle simply a variety of topics and perform functions pertaining to the Intermediate level, a Novice-High speaker can sometimes respond in intelligible sentences, but will not be able to sustain sentence level discourse.</p>
<p><b>INTERMEDIATE</b></p>	<p>Able to handle successfully a limited number of communicative tasks. Conversations are still restricted to some of the concrete &amp; predictable topics related to personal information or preferences, daily activities or immediate needs (ordering food or making simple purchases) Their utterances are often filled with hesitancy or inaccuracies as they search for appropriate linguistic forms and vocabulary. Pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary are strongly influenced by their 1<sup>st</sup> language. Speakers at the Intermediate-Low level are able to handle successfully a limited number of uncomplicated communicative tasks by creating with the language in straightforward social situations. Conversation is restricted to some of the concrete exchanges and predictable topics necessary for survival in the target language culture. These topics relate to basic personal information covering, for example, self and family, some daily activities and personal preferences, as well as to some immediate needs, such as ordering food and making simple purchases. At the Intermediate-Low level, speakers are primarily reactive and struggle to answer direct</p>	<p>Speakers at the Intermediate-Mid level are able to handle successfully a variety of uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward social situations. Conversation is generally limited to those predictable and concrete exchanges necessary for survival in the target culture; these include personal information covering self, family, home, daily activities, interests and personal preferences, as well as physical and social needs, such as food, shopping, travel and lodging. Intermediate-Mid speakers tend to function reactively, for example, by responding to direct questions or requests for information. However, they are capable of asking a variety of questions when necessary to obtain simple information to satisfy basic needs, such as directions, prices and services. When called on to perform functions or handle topics at the Advanced level, they provide some information but have difficulty linking ideas, manipulating time and aspect, and using communicative strategies, such as circumlocution. Intermediate-Mid speakers are able to express personal</p>	<p>Intermediate-High speakers are able to converse with ease and confidence when dealing with most routine tasks and social situations of the Intermediate level. They are able to handle successfully many uncomplicated tasks and social situations requiring an exchange of basic information related to work, school, recreation, particular interests and areas of competence, though hesitation and errors may be evident. Intermediate-High speakers handle the tasks pertaining to the Advanced level, but they are unable to sustain performance at that level over a variety of topics. With some consistency, speakers at the Intermediate High level narrate and describe in major time frames using connected discourse of paragraph length. However, their performance of these Advanced-level tasks will exhibit one or more features of breakdown, such as the failure to maintain the narration or description semantically or syntactically in the appropriate major time frame, the disintegration of connected discourse, the misuse of cohesive devices, a reduction in breadth and appropriateness of</p>

	<p>questions or requests for information, but they are also able to ask a few appropriate questions. Intermediate-Low speakers express personal meaning by combining and recombining into short statements what they know and what they hear from their interlocutors. Their utterances are often filled with hesitancy and inaccuracies as they search for appropriate linguistic forms and vocabulary while attempting to give form to the message. Their speech is characterized by frequent pauses, ineffective reformulations and self-corrections. Their pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax are strongly influenced by their first language but, in spite of frequent misunderstandings that require repetition or rephrasing, Intermediate-Low speakers can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors, particularly by those accustomed to dealing with non-natives.</p>	<p>meaning by creating with the language, in part by combining and recombining known elements and conversational input to make utterances of sentence length and some strings of sentences. Their speech may contain pauses, reformulations and self-corrections as they search for adequate vocabulary and appropriate language forms to express themselves. Because of inaccuracies in their vocabulary and/or pronunciation and/or grammar and/or syntax, misunderstandings can occur, but Intermediate-Mid speakers are generally understood by sympathetic interlocutors accustomed to dealing with non-natives.</p>	<p>vocabulary, the failure to successfully circumlocute, or a significant amount of hesitation. Intermediate-High speakers can generally be understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives, although the dominant language is still evident (e.g. use of code-switching, false cognates, literal translations, etc.), and gaps in communication may occur.</p>
<p><b>ADVANCED</b></p>	<p>Speakers at the Advanced-Low level are able to handle a variety of communicative tasks, although somewhat haltingly at times. They participate actively in most informal and a limited number of formal conversations on activities related to school, home, and leisure activities and, to a lesser degree, those related to events of work, current, public, and personal interest or individual relevance. Advanced-Low speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in all major time frames (past, present and future) in paragraph length discourse, but control of aspect may be lacking at times. They can handle appropriately the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar, though at times their discourse may be minimal for the level and strained. Communicative strategies such as rephrasing and circumlocution may be employed in such instances. In their narrations and descriptions, they combine and link sentences into connected discourse of paragraph length. When pressed for a fuller account, they tend to grope and rely on minimal discourse. Their utterances are typically not longer than a single paragraph. Structure of the dominant language is still</p>	<p>Speakers at the Advanced-Mid level are able to handle with ease and confidence a large number of communicative tasks. They participate actively in most informal and some formal exchanges on a variety of concrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as to events of current, public, and personal interest or individual relevance. Advanced-Mid speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in all major time frames (past, present, and future) by providing a full account, with good control of aspect, as they adapt flexibly to the demands of the conversation. Narration and description tend to be combined and interwoven to relate relevant and supporting facts in connected, paragraph-length discourse. Advanced-Mid speakers can handle successfully and with relative ease the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar. Communicative strategies such as circumlocution or rephrasing are often employed for this purpose. The speech of Advanced-Mid speakers performing Advanced-level tasks is marked by substantial flow.</p>	<p>Speakers at the Advanced-High level perform all Advanced-level tasks with linguistic ease, confidence and competence. They are able to consistently explain in detail and narrate fully and accurately in all time frames. In addition, Advanced-High speakers handle the tasks pertaining to the Superior level but cannot sustain performance at that level across a variety of topics. They can provide a structured argument to support their opinions, and they may construct hypotheses, but patterns of error appear. They can discuss some topics abstractly, especially those relating to their particular interests and special fields of expertise, but in general, they are more comfortable discussing a variety of topics concretely. Advanced-High speakers may demonstrate a well-developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms or for limitations in, vocabulary by the confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, and illustration. They use precise vocabulary and intonation to express meaning and often show great fluency and ease of speech. However when they are called on to perform the complex tasks associated with the Superior level over a variety of topics, their language, at times, breaks down or proves inadequate, or they may avoid the task</p>

	<p>evident in the use of false cognates, literal translations, or the oral paragraph structure of the speaker's own language rather than that of the target language. While the language of Advanced-Low speakers may be marked by substantial, albeit irregular flow, it is typically somewhat strained and tentative, with noticeable self-correction and a certain grammatical roughness. The vocabulary of Advanced-Low speakers is primarily generic in nature. Advanced-Low speakers contribute to the conversation with sufficient accuracy, clarity, and precision to convey their intended message without misrepresentation or confusion, and it can be understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives, even though this may be achieved through repetition and restatement. When attempting to perform functions or handle topics associated with the Superior level, the linguistic quality and quantity of their speech will deteriorate significantly.</p>	<p>Their vocabulary is fairly extensive although primarily generic in nature, except in the case of a particular area of specialization or interest. Dominant language discourse structures tend to recede, although discourse may still reflect the oral paragraph structure of their own language rather than that of the target language. Advanced-Mid speakers contribute to conversations on a variety of familiar topics, dealt with concretely, with much accuracy, clarity and precision, and they convey their intended message without misrepresentation or confusion. They are readily understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives. When called on to perform functions or handle topics associated with the Superior level, the quality and/or quantity of their speech will generally decline. Advanced-Mid speakers are, often able to state an opinion or cite conditions; however, they lack the ability to consistently provide a structured argument in extended discourse. Advanced-Mid speakers may use a number of delaying strategies, resort to narration, description, explanation or anecdote, or simply attempt to avoid the linguistic demands of Superior-level tasks.</p>	<p>altogether, for example, by resorting to simplification through the use of description or narration in place of argument or hypothesis.</p>
<p><b>SUPERIOR</b></p>	<p>Speakers at the Superior level are able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They explain their opinions on a number of topics of importance to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured argument to support their opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, they use extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations. Such discourse, while coherent, may still be influenced by the Superior speakers' own language patterns, rather than those of the target language. Superior speakers command a variety of interactive and discourse strategies, such as turn-taking and separating main ideas from supporting information through the use of syntactic and lexical devices, as well as intonational features such as pitch, stress and tone. They demonstrate virtually no pattern of error in the use of basic structures. However, they may make sporadic errors, particularly in low-frequency structures and in some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal speech and writing. Such errors, if they do occur, do not distract the native interlocutor or interfere with communication.</p>		

#### 4. GLOSSARY

##### - **ACTFL**

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages is an organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction.

##### - **Call Center**

A call center is a physical place where customer and other telephone calls are handled by an organization, usually with some amount of computer automation. Typically, a call center has the ability to handle a considerable volume of calls at the same time, to screen calls and forward those to someone qualified to handle them, and to log calls. Call centers are used by mail-order catalog organizations, telemarketing companies, computer product help desks, and any large organization that uses the telephone to sell or service products and services.

##### - **Call Center Academy (CCA)**

Call Center Academy (CCA) is an English Academy located inside the Call Center where applicants receive appropriate training in order to become a call center agent.

##### - **Call Center Agent**

A call center agent is the person who handles incoming or outgoing customer calls for a business. A call center agent might handle account inquiries, customer complaints or support issues. Other names for a call center agent include customer service representative (CSR), telephone sales or service representative (TSR), attendant, associate, operator, account executive or team member.



**- Client**

The Client is a determined company that hires an outsourcing company to provide their customers with specific services like customer service or technical support.

**- Competence**

The ability of an individual to perform a job properly, it is also related with the knowledge and skills that enable a person to act effectively in a wide variety of situations.

**- Linguistics**

The study of the nature, structure, and variation of language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics.

**- Proficiency**

Mastery of a specific behavior or skill demonstrated by consistently superior performance, measured against established or popular standards.

**- QA (Quality Assurance)**

In developing products and services, quality assurance is any systematic process of checking to see whether a product or service being developed is meeting specified requirements. Many companies have a separate department devoted to quality assurance. A quality assurance system is said to increase customer confidence and a company's credibility, to improve work processes and efficiency, and to enable a company to better compete with others. Quality assurance was initially introduced in World War II when munitions were inspected and tested for defects after they were made. Today's quality assurance systems emphasize catching defects before they get into the final product.

## **VII. Methodology**

### **1. Research Design**

This study used the Descriptive type of research, because it led to present facts, concerning the nature and status of a situation, as it existed at the time of the study and it described present conditions, events or systems based on the impressions or reactions of the respondents of the research (Creswell, 1994). This Descriptive research involved gathering data that described events and then organized, tabulated, and described the data collection.

This investigation was aimed at finding out “What is” through survey methods and frequently used to collect descriptive data.

### **2. Type of Research Study**

Descriptive Research did not fit neatly into the definition of either quantitative or qualitative research methodologies, but instead it utilized elements of both, often within the same study. Descriptive Research can be either quantitative or qualitative. It can involve collections of quantitative information that can be tabulated along a continuum in numerical form, such as scores on a test or the number of times a person chooses to use a certain feature, or it can describe categories of information such as general patterns of interaction when using technology in a group situation. This descriptive function of research is heavily dependent on instrumentation for measurement (Borg & Gall, 1989).

Throughout this investigation, we found out that not only Descriptive Research was used, but also, this study relied on Exploratory Research as a secondary source. Exploratory Research is a type of research conducted for a problem that has not been clearly defined and seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under

question, what meaning they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn what is going on there, and to investigate a social phenomena without explicit expectations, (Russell K. Schutt, "Investigating the Social World," 5<sup>th</sup> Ed.). "This genre of research allows the investigator to gain a greater understanding of something that he/she doesn't know enough about (DJS Research Ltd, 1999)." The results of this exploratory research provided significant insight into the given situation about call center's oral proficiency in our country for the results to be generalized within the whole population being studied.

### **3. Instruments**

#### **3.1 Key Informant**

A Key informant is a person (or group of people) who has unique skills or professional background related to the issue/ intervention being evaluated, is knowledgeable about the project participants, or has access to other information of interest to the evaluator. A key informant can also be someone who has a way of communicating that represents or captures the essence of what the participants say and do. This instrument was useful to better understand the issue being evaluated and to promote legitimacy for the research. For this investigation, we used two Key informants from two of the main call centers in our country: Sykes and Heliocentric. The Key Informant was also helpful and efficient in data gathering because it dealt with information regarding the administrative area of a Call Center.

#### **3.2 Focus Group**

A Focus Group is a form of qualitative research in which people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards the purpose of the study. For this research project, there were a total of 10 participants in this group, who represented the staff of people hired by different call centers such as Transactel, Teleperformance, Stream and Atento. They were asked some questions about their experience and oral proficiency improvement while working at a call center. These questions were asked in an interactive way where participants were free to talk with the rest of the group members as in a dialogue in order to obtain their different perspectives about this matter in a collective manner, and to analyze how this has impacted either positively or negatively their professional and personal development.

### **3.3 Individual Interview**

The Individual Interview is an instrument used to explore in a more specific manner the subjective knowledge, personal opinions and beliefs on an individual. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). This instrument was used as a tool to gather deeper information about individuals who did not meet the requirements to be employed within the call center industry. These participants provided information about what feedback they were given after the application was denied or what expectations were not fulfilled according to the recruitment staff in the company.

## **4. Participants**

The population of this research comprised of employees in the Non-Native English Speaker call center area. In regards to the key informant instrument, we interviewed a total of two people, both taken from the Call Center's administrative staff who have access to further and more complete information about the hiring process and the requirements involved in order to become a Call Center agent in their company. They were given the freedom to refuse participating anytime if they chose to. The participants for the Individual Interview were five call center rejected agents; and a focus group which involved 10 call center agents. These Instruments helped us gather more information regarding applicants' experiences and points of view based on their own words.

## **5. Data Analysis Technique**

Non Native English Speaker call center agents were the target population for this data collection process. A Key informant, Focus Group, and Individual Interview were conducted regarding the oral proficiency requirements by call centers in San Salvador.

The standardized requirements to measure oral proficiency were used to gather information from the sample population. They were given the choice to refuse to participate if they wanted to, once they confirmed, they were given full detailed information about the study and briefing ethical issues. All questions were based upon the relation and relevance of the speaking proficiency demanded by the call center industry.

## VIII. Data Analysis

In this chapter, the data was analyzed using the results obtained from the different instruments: Two Key Informants, one completed with the assistance from the Operations Supervisor at Heliocentric and the second one with the Client Services Manager at Sykes, in order to have access to more confidential administrative information about the hiring process in these call centers. As well, the Focus Group, completed with a total of 10 participants currently working at different call centers in our country involving: Transactel, Teleperformance, Stream and Atento. This instrument helped us to obtain more detailed information about the participants' backgrounds, experiences, achievements and personal opinions about the call center they work for. And finally, the Individual Interview, completed with the contribution of five participants to gather information about their rejected application by the call center recruitment staff and their experience through this process. The analysis followed the same structure as the research questions. To begin with, each question was answered individually. In the end, a general conclusion linking common patterns was presented.

- **Oral Proficiency required by the main call centers in our country**

Oral proficiency is the main factor a candidate has to comply with when applying at a call center. Recruiters look for the ability to communicate ideas, convey and interpret messages. The recruitment department takes care of measuring the candidate's English oral proficiency. They track the English oral proficiency of the candidates by evaluating some main aspects like intonation, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, ability to convey-receive messages etc. Through this Program the call center company evaluates and determines the level of English

the candidates have, so that they can accomplish to the requirements a specific Client requests.

Every call center has its own scale to determine the oral proficiency level a candidate performs. This is mainly based in the Clients requirements depending on their needs. The 85% is the minimum English level that a call center requests from the candidate to be ready to get the job. The percentage or level assessed to a candidate is given depending on the calibrations that the call center handles in regards of how well the candidate conveys and delivers the message. Since the majority of the employees within the recruitment department are native speakers, they are able to know when a candidate is competent to fulfill the oral proficiency level the call center is looking for.

As a result of this investigation, we have found out that the Oral Proficiency level demanded by the main call centers in our country ranges from 85% to 100%, which corresponds to the Advanced level (measured with the ACTFL guidelines for speaking), meaning that the call center agent is able to satisfy the requirements by customers in everyday situations and work requirements. Also, the agent is able to handle complicated tasks and social situations, such as elaborating, assisting, and apologizing. The agent can also describe details, linking sentences together, facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest using general and even business vocabulary. The Advanced speaker is able to discuss concrete topics to particular interests and special fields of competence and can also support opinions, explain in detail and hypothesize. The Advanced level speaker shows fluency and ease of speech under demands at a complex level and can be understood without difficulty by native interlocutors.



- **Procedure followed by applicants to become a call center agent.**

On the other hand, the hiring process is classified in different stages. As mentioned previously in the theoretical framework, there are different ways for applicants to submit a resume: from walk-in, job fairs and even outsourcing agencies, to e-mail and on-line applications in websites such as [www.tecoloco.com](http://www.tecoloco.com), [www.computrabajo.com](http://www.computrabajo.com), etc. Depending on how a candidate submits the resume, people from the Human Resources department make a phone call to the candidates to make a brief interview and let them know about the rest of the process. This phone call is the first step that allows the recruiter to identify how well a candidate can perform in the English language. If the candidate is proved to be as proficient after the phone interview he or she will be requested to meet at the call center in a specific date and time with one of the human resources recruiters, so that he or she can have a person to person interview. This will bring the candidate to the second step of the hiring process.

Through the interview the recruiter asks some questions to gather specific information from the candidate as well as to test his or her knowledge in the English language. Those questions are not part of a specific manual to conduct the interview. The recruiter has the option to go with the flow, so the candidate feels more confident and invited to answer in a natural way. Furthermore, during the interview the recruiter is able to perceive how competent the candidate is to communicate thoughts and or ideas in the language, if he or she uses appropriate word structure, if they answer in a correct way simple Yes/No Questions, also their level of grammar, fluency, etc. Moreover, this interview allows the recruiter to know about the candidate skills and background such as family, work experience, studies and age, among others.

In addition to this, the candidate is given some other tests or tasks that are designed according to the Client expectations. If those are approved, the candidate has another interview with the Representative from a specific Account or Client. These people screen the abilities of the candidate in regards to specific demands such as customer service skills (if the candidate is capable to handle an angry customer and still provide a good customer service experience), computer or technical knowledge (if the candidate is able to help someone to understand or solve a technical minimum issue) and the like. They will finally determine if the candidate is ready to be hired or not. On the other hand, the Client's Representatives make sure to ask the candidate about aspects that will enable him or her to develop their job such as schedule flexibility, job expectations, if they are willing to professionally develop in the company, etc.

However, according to Lic. Loren Santamaría, Client Services Manager at Sykes El Salvador, “whenever a candidate is not eligible to be hired, the recruiter will make sure to let him or her know what can be done to improve and also what areas should be reinforced.” For example, if the candidate needs to get better in fluency, pronunciation or vocabulary, the recruiter can suggest some English academies or some further strategies such as listening to music in English, watching movies in English without subtitles, Conversational Programs, etc. Those are some suggestions a rejected candidate can receive. Despite the amount of rejected candidates, the call center company always has a record of the population that was not approved.

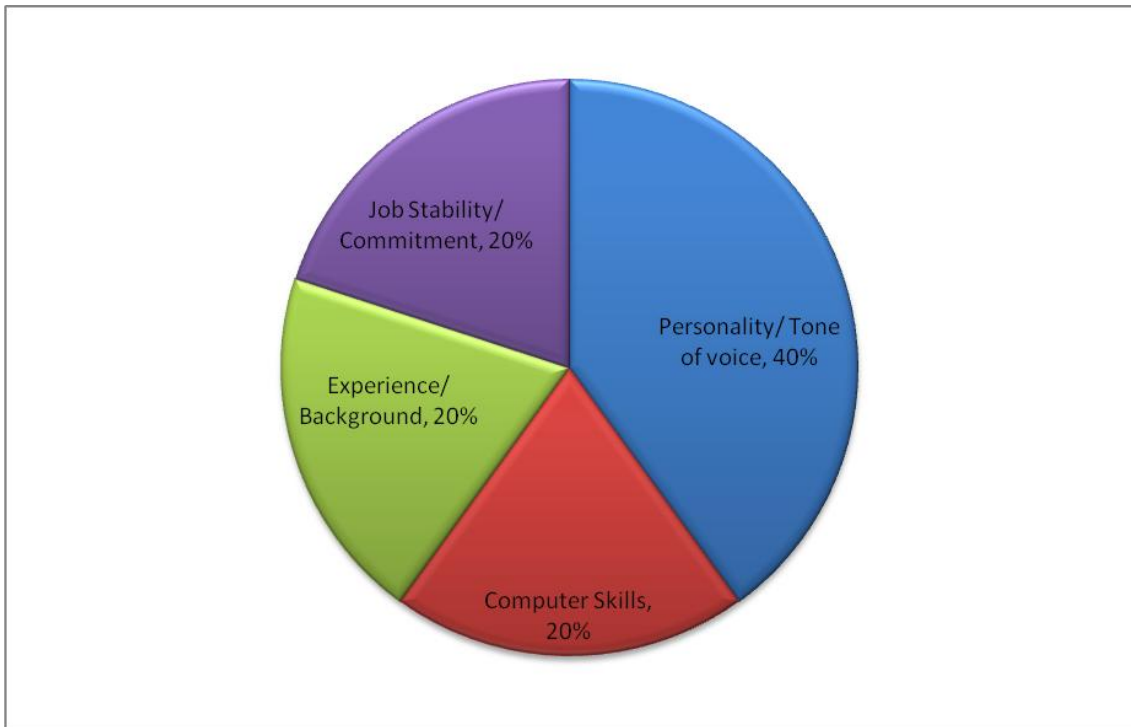
In addition to that, According to Carlos Cubias, Operations Supervisor at Heliocentric El Salvador, “The screening over the phone is the main oral proficiency measurement element used in the recruitment process”. He stated that during the first interview over the phone, if the English proficiency level was not the one they were looking for, then they wouldn't proceed with the face to face interview. According to the

interviewee, the Oral Proficiency level that applicants must have in order to qualify for a call center position is from 85% to 100%; they also, sometimes recruit those applicants who already possess knowledge related to this job, and this furnishes supporting environment to enhance the quality of the service provided to their customers. Regarding the oral proficiency measurement instruments/manuals, there is no standardized tool used to rate applicants into specific oral proficiency level, but instead, in a scale from 0% to 100% they are measured just by talking to them in a natural way, looking for an 85% minimum average in their oral competence, evaluating their fluency as well as their pronunciation in the English language. Though during the recruitment process the same steps are followed for every aspirant, the Interviewee stated that their Oral Proficiency level is distinct from each other. As a matter of fact, within this company there are 2 different Oral Proficiency levels among agents: The first one being Advanced (equivalent to 80% of the total number of call center agents); and the Second level being Native (equivalent to 20% of the total number of call center agents).

- **Additional aspects taken into account by call center's interviewers when evaluating their candidates.**

According to the Call Center's management and recruitment staff, an outstanding oral proficiency is the most important key for applicants to be hired as call center agents. However, for agents to excel during the hiring process there are some other aspects taken into account from the recruiter to measure applicant's potential before being employed. These additional bearings influence individuals performance during the hiring process, in which recruiter evaluates prospective employees as a unique model for identifying successful profiles for effective future agents, these individual's likelihood aspects of success are applied for every aspirant

and can impact their results either positively or negatively . Being that important, these additional aspects are shown in the following diagram:



- **Personality and tone of voice**

Personality and tone of voice during the interview over the phone can typically describe an individual's traits towards people. This is helpful for the recruiter as they are always looking for improvement on the company, and a proactive personality type and qualities such as: willingness to help, self-confidence and patience, dictates success for their call center. As a matter of fact, agents' personality and tone of voice have one of the greatest impacts on the overall performance during the interview, as these indicate whether or not an applicant has the skills, knowledge and ability required for the job. This also involves the person's ability to speak clearly and articulate a cleverness to meet and exceed customer expectations, along with the ability to develop rapport with every caller. It involves solving problems and managing difficult situations to end every call positively as they will be doing the same on a daily basis.

- **Computer Skills**

This involves basic knowledge of computer Microsoft programs (Word, Excel, and Power Point), CRM (Customer Relationship Management) databases, and multiple navigating software applications, all of which are taught while the applicant is on training.

- **Experience/ Background**

The fact that an aspirant has previous experience in the call center industry helps the company to provide a more personalized and elite customer service with prime performance agents. This increases their level of satisfied clients and contributes for the company's growth expanding their marketing scope.

- **Job Stability/ Commitment**

In most Call Centers, career stability is a very important aspect that they look for in new employees. It is important for the applicant to demonstrate long-term commitment to their company and focus on the development opportunities within that company. Recruiters sometimes prefer job candidates with few years of previous experience in the call center area, but with stable track record in which they can demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the companies. Some of the job candidates are judged for too much job switching displayed on their resume in a short period of time, although this standard of job stability varies by age and area.

- **Insight of the employees' profiles currently working at a call center gathered from the Focus Group**

Through the information gathered from the Focus Group, participants agreed that the first interview over the phone is the most important and relevant aspect during the hiring process, as it gives the interviewer a chance to measure applicants' oral proficiency level and self-confidence over the phone. As well, participants stated that besides their Oral Proficiency level, other aspects taken into account when they had the interview were: Tone of voice, previous job experience, commitment to the call center they were applying for and basic computer software skills. Nevertheless, participants stated that out of all these additional aspects monitored during the interview, the mastery of their Oral skills were of utmost importance, because of the fact that they will be communicating with native English speakers on a daily basis, helping them to solve their issues or providing any type of assistance requested by the Customers.

Moreover, participants from the Focus Group expressed that their Oral Proficiency level has improved since the moment they were hired. Not only because they learned how to speak fluently and accurately but also because they think more critically and analytically, as a result of the daily interaction with English Native Speakers customers. They also stated that agents not only talk to Native Speakers but also to people with different nationalities whose Mother Language is not English, and that leads the agents to speak clearly and concisely. As a matter of fact, all of the participants ranged themselves in an initial Oral Proficiency level before being hired by the call center of 85%, which has been improved to an average from a 90% to a 95%.

- **Feedback provided by call centers' recruitment staff to rejected aspirants**

According to the interviewees whose application for working as call center agents was declined, they were not hired because their Oral competence was not good enough to qualify for a call center position. However, they were provided some feedback by the recruiter to improve their Oral Proficiency level, such as:

- **Find Native Speaking People:** Applicants were advised to practice their English pronunciation with Native speakers, who could be friends, relatives, etc.
- **English Academies:** Applicants were advised of some academies which emphasize their learning in the oral skills to help them reach the Oral proficiency level demanded by call centers. These Academies include Call Center Academies (CCA), located inside the call center, where applicants were offered a free training program and coaching before they are endorsed and eventually land in the Call Center Industry. This also helps the applicants to gain priority and access in the hiring process during the course of training and upon graduation. Yet it does not guarantee a call center position, as it is mainly based on the applicants' outcomes and performance at the moment of the re-application.
- **Additional Strategies:** Applicants were also given some strategies to improve their oral skills through time. These included: watching movies in English without subtitles, listening to music in English or accessing to web and DVD courses in order to improve their Oral competence.

Finally, after these suggestions were given by the recruiter, applicants were given the option to re-apply whenever they felt ready and adequate for a call center position after 6 months have past from the first application.



## **Conclusions**

Call center Industry is now considered one of the greatest contributors in the economic growth in our country as it has provided employment for over 4,700 people since 2007 and still foresees to help the country in the coming years.

With seven main call centers currently operating in our country: Atento, Sykes, Heliocentric, Teleperformance, Stream, Transactel and Benson, this industry is rapidly spreading all over the market and it catches people's attention, encouraging them to learn English as a Second Language (ESL) to be able to qualify for a call center position in order to boost their call center career for an economical, personal and professional success.

As a result of this investigation and in accordance to the ACTFL guidelines for speaking and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) reviewed throughout this research, an Individual must achieve an Advanced Oral Proficiency level in order to be able to effectively communicate with a Native Speaker, which is the main requirement for applicants to be integrated within the Call Center Industry. This is equivalent to a Call Center range of Oral Proficiency level from 85% to 100%.

Presently, there are a lot of people preparing themselves to achieve the adequate Oral Proficiency level demanded by the Call Center Industry. Call Center agents whose native language is not English must learn to effectively comprehend the language and to communicate clearly with customers around the world. Although, grammar usage, intonation and accent and business vocabulary are important elements

in the call center industry, the most important one is the Oral proficiency level.

In addition to that, we have concluded that although the aspirant's Oral proficiency level is essential during the hiring process, it is not the only aspect taken into account by the call center industry. There are also some other aspects considered by recruiters when assessing their applicants. Some tests that evaluate the applicant's functional abilities, personality, experience, background, job stability and computer skills are also used. This could be used for future investigations regarding the call center market in our country.

Moreover, regarding the agents whose application was denied by the Call Center industry, they were given some feedback from the recruitment staff, such as: Find English Native speakers to practice their pronunciation with; Attend English Academies that emphasize their learning on the development of oral competence; and finally, they were advised to use some Multimedia Strategies such as DVD English courses, on-line courses to practice their listening and oral skills.

Finally, we can say that there is generally no formal education required to become a call center agent, as most of the skills a call center worker uses are things that he or she learns on the job through time. Basically, the only requirement an applicant must fulfill is their Oral Proficiency level being from 85% to 100%, basic computer skills, proactive personality, good tone of voice and commitment to the call center they are applying for. A solution for this issue might be an early training to the population and it should begin at an early age so they can achieve more experience in the call center market and the improvement of their speaking competence.

## **Recommendations**

As the results gathered from this investigation, call centers are big companies that are spreading all over the country, challenging people to learn English as a Second Language (ESL) in the most effective way in order to become a part of the Call Center Industry. Indeed, call centers are now one of the most immediate sources of employment for graduated/ under-graduated students. Therefore, this research study suggests that more training is implemented by the different educative entities so people can have the chance for improving their Oral Proficiency level. Though most of the call centers' applicants, whose application is rejected are able to comprehend and communicate the English language, competitive Oral skills needed for an effective communication are lacking.

As a matter of fact, this is an issue that the Call Center industry's growth is experiencing and it is being limited by their applicants' lack of English Oral Proficiency skills. Therefore, this concern is now considered as an urgent impediment to growth for Call Center companies and it is what motivates Education Departments to adopt a bilingual program and encourages students to achieve a good English Oral competence.

As a group, we recommend that Oral competence should be the main scope in the learning process for ESL students, implementing different strategies with emphasis on how to speak better English into school curriculums as call centers look for qualified staff to assist their customers' inquiries with strong English speaking skills. In that way, El Salvador can become a major player for multinational call center

companies, providing successful professional and personal growing expectations for people learning English as a Second Language (ESL).

Finally, we consider that for future investigations, students from the Foreign Languages Department should continue to do this type of research out of the Classroom even when they are not directly related to the Department itself but there's still some connection because of the fact that the English language has acquired a huge demand and has become extremely important not only all over El Salvador, but also all over the world.

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*Research regarding Oral Proficiency Level required by Call Centers in El Salvador 2011-2012.*

#### **Focus Group**

**Objective:** to get an insight from people currently working at call centers about the process they had to follow and the aspects they consider were most important to get the job.

1. Could you please tell us your names, the call center that you work for and the time you have been working there.
2. How many stages did your hiring process consist on?
3. Could you describe these stages please?
4. Were these stages conducted by different people or did the same person follow you through all the process?
5. Did you have an interview over the phone?
6. Do you consider this interview was important? Why?
7. What aspects do you think you were evaluated with this interview?
8. Did you have a personal interview?
9. What kind of questions were you asked?
- 10. Were you told by the interviewer if you were considered to be at a certain English level, eg Intermediate High, Advanced, etc?**
- 11. What do you consider is the oral proficiency level demanded by call centers in our country?**

**12. Do you believe that the candidate's oral proficiency level is the most important element involved during the call center employment application? Why?**

13. What are other aspects that call centers take into account when hiring someone?

14. Which of these aspects do you think are the most and least relevant?

**15. In which oral proficiency level do you consider you were before getting the job?**

**16. In which oral proficiency level do you consider yourself now?**

17. What have you done to reach that current level?

18. Based on your personal experience, what strategy do you think it might be favorable to implement before applying for a job at a call center?

19. Why did you decide to apply to this job and which advantages and disadvantages can you mention?



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#### **Individual Interview**

**Directed to:** people who applied to a call center but were not hired or were discarded at certain stage of the process (If it is necessary, this interview will be conducted in Spanish)

**Objective:** to get first hand information about the process followed by applicants who have not been accepted at a call center and the insight they got from this experience.

1. When was your most recent application for a job at a call center?
2. How many times have you applied?
3. Why did you decide to apply for that job?
4. After you sent your resume, what steps were followed by the company?

(Depending on what the person says, these questions will or won't be necessary):

5. Did you have an interview over the phone?
6. Were you asked to carry out any type of test at the company?
7. Did you have any type of group test?
8. Did you have a personal interview?
9. In which stage of the process were you told you would not continue?



10. Did you receive any feedback from the recruitment staff when your application was denied? What were you told?

11. Were you told if according to the company's system you were classified in a specific English level?

12. Did the company mention if there were other aspects, not related to your speaking, that you had to improve?

13. Would you apply to a call center again?

(If the answer is positive)

- How are you preparing to achieve this objective?



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#### **Interview to Key Informant**

##### **Objectives:**

To find out which are the parameters used by call centers to determine if a candidate achieves the required oral proficiency level to work at the company

To identify which other aspects are taken into account when hiring a candidate for a call center.

##### **Regarding Oral Proficiency**

1. How important do you consider English oral proficiency is in a candidate for your call center?
2. How do you measure your candidates' oral proficiency level?
3. Is there any international scale you use to determine the levels of English at your company, eg ACTFL Guidelines, CEF, etc. or have you created your own set of characteristics of each level?
4. How many levels of oral proficiency are there in your company?
5. Do you have a list of specifications a candidate must fulfill in order to consider he "belongs" to this or that level?

### **Regarding the hiring process**

#### **Stages of the process**

1. How many stages does your hiring process consist on?
2. Could you describe these stages please?
3. Are these stages conducted by different people or does a same person follow the same candidates through all the process?

#### **Interview over the phone (also related to oral proficiency)**

1. It is known that some companies first conduct an oral interview to their candidates, is this one of your strategies too?
2. Is this interview important? Why?
3. Who normally conducts these interviews?
4. At this point, what factors make you determine if the candidate should continue to the next stage or not? Is it just about their oral proficiency level or do you look for other aspects through this particular interview?

#### **Other aspects**

1. What are **ALL** the aspects that you take into account when you evaluate your candidates?
2. Which of these aspects are more relevant?
3. Do you assign a percentage to each aspect? What is it?
4. What makes you determine that percentage?

#### **Interviewers**

1. Do interviewers use any type of manual or a specific set of questions when they conduct an interview?

2. Was this manual (or set of questions) created by your company or do you use any type of international manual?
3. Do the questions or requisites for the candidates change in different situations?
4. What factors influence those requisites? (The demands of the contractor, the types of customer?)

**Rejected candidates**

1. Do you tell the rejected candidates in which level of their oral proficiency they are and which level they are expected to achieve? Why or why not?
2. What type of preparation do you suggest to someone that has applied to your company but failed at a certain point?
3. Do you suggest a specific school or academy for these candidates?
4. Does your company have a record of how many people who apply to the call center are actually hired at the end of the process?
5. From your experience, what suggestions in general would you give to people who aspire to work for a call center?

### Data Collection Process

- (1) In the following picture, you can see the participants of the Focus Group reading a summary about our investigation.



- (2) This Focus Group, included agents from different Call Centers such as: Sykes, Transactel, Benson, Teleperformance, Heliocentric and Atento.



(3) In these pictures, Individual Interview was being completed.



(4) Students provided data, based on their experience, about their application being rejected by the call center industry.



Main Call Centers in El Salvador



(5) Customer Service Representatives at Heliocentric El Salvador.



(6) Claudia Rodríguez, Teleconference Agent at Heliocentric El Salvador.



**(7) Stream Global Services Building.**



**(8) Sales Representatives at Stream Global Services.**





(9) Sykes El Salvador.



(10) Customer Service Department at Sykes.



**Teleperformance**  
SOLUCIONES GLOBALES DE TELEMARKETING Y TELESERVICIOS

(11) Teleperformance El Salvador, Sales Department Agents.



(12) Teleperformance Building.





(13) Transactel El Salvador.

**ATENCIÓN:**



(14) Atento's Customer Service Agents.