

Lived Experiences of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Agents from Non-Language Fields in Cross-Cultural Communication

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business process outsourcing (BPO), cross cultural communication, non-language graduates, lived experiences, cultural awareness, coping strategies, communication barriers

Abstract. This study examined the cross-cultural communication experiences of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents who graduated from non-language academic fields such as nursing, engineering, business, information technology, and other programs not related to English. Specifically, it aimed to identify the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they developed, and how they made sense of their early experiences in the BPO workplace. The findings of the study also served as the basis for the development of an English Training Guide for BPO Agents from Non-Language Fields designed to support communication skills and workplace adaptation. This study employed a qualitative research design using Thematic Narrative Analysis. The participants were eight BPO agents from Iloilo City selected through purposive sampling based on their non-language academic backgrounds and a minimum of six months of BPO work experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, which allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their communication experiences, challenges, and adjustments in the BPO industry. The narratives were analyzed to identify common patterns across participants' experiences. The findings revealed themes including communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, emotional challenges, professional identity development, and adaptive coping strategies. Despite the difficulties encountered, participants demonstrated resilience and developed practical ways to improve communication skills and adjust to workplace demands. Based on these findings, the study proposed the development of an English Training Guide focused on communication skills, cultural awareness, customer interaction strategies, and emotional resilience. This output aims to provide practical support for new BPO agents from non-language backgrounds and to enhance training programs that can help them adapt more effectively to the communication demands of the BPO industry.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of globalization has intensified the need for effective cross-cultural communication across industries, particularly in service-oriented sectors such as the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. In countries like the Philippines, the BPO sector has become a major contributor to economic growth and employment, connecting local professionals with international clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, communication in the BPO context extends beyond language proficiency and involves the ability to navigate cultural differences, interpret meanings, and manage interpersonal dynamics in a globalized environment.

In the Philippine BPO industry, agents regularly engage with customers from countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan, each with distinct communication styles, expectations, and cultural norms. While exposure to such diversity enhances adaptability and communication competence, it also presents challenges, including difficulties in understanding accents, interpreting cultural nuances, and responding appropriately to emotionally charged interactions. These challenges highlight the complexity of cross-cultural communication, where misunderstandings may arise not only from linguistic limitations but also from differences in cultural perspectives and discourse practices.

A significant number of individuals entering the BPO workforce come from non-language academic fields such as nursing, engineering, business administration, and information technology. For these individuals, the BPO environment often serves as their first experience with intensive, real-time intercultural communication. Without formal training in language and communication, they are required to quickly develop communicative competence while adapting to the demands of a culturally diverse workplace. As they navigate these challenges, they experience varying levels of stress, adjustment difficulties, and identity transformation, while simultaneously developing coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies that contribute to their professional growth.

Despite the growing presence of non-language graduates in the BPO industry, there remains limited research that focuses specifically on their lived experiences in cross-cultural communication. Existing studies often emphasize general communication issues or focus on individuals with communication-related backgrounds, leaving a gap in understanding how non-language graduates interpret, adapt to, and make sense of their experiences in a global work environment. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more inclusive training programs, communication frameworks, and support systems that cater to the needs of a diverse workforce.

Given this context, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents from non-language fields in cross-cultural communication. Specifically, it sought to: identify the difficulties, challenges, or obstacles encountered by these agents during their initial work in the BPO industry; examine the adaptive strategies or coping mechanisms they employ to manage these challenges; and develop an English training guide or module that can support BPO agents from non-language fields in improving communication skills and enhancing workplace adaptation.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of BPO Agents from non-language fields in cross-cultural communication. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties, challenges, or obstacles do agents from non-language fields experience during their initial work in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry?
2. What adaptive strategies or coping mechanisms do Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents from non-language fields use to manage the challenges they face in their first roles?
3. What training programs or English module can be designed to support Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents from non-language fields in addressing the challenges identified in this study?

Methodology

This study used thematic narrative analysis to explore the experiences of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents from non-language fields such as medical fields, engineering, business, information technology, and other courses not related to English. Thematic Narrative Analysis was used as a method that focused on participants' stories and the meanings they attached to their experiences (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2021; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2022). The study not only identified the challenges that agents faced but also examined how they described and made sense of their cross-cultural communication experiences.

By listening to the personal narratives of BPO agents, this study gave voice to how they adapted to cultural differences, developed coping strategies, and grew in communication competence (Colla & Kurtz, 2024). This design allowed an in-depth exploration of participants' lived realities in their own words.

Through thematic narrative analysis, the research uncovered not only the difficulties agents encountered but also their creative and resilient ways of overcoming them. Presenting their experiences as evolving stories enabled the researcher to draw connections between their struggles and practical training or policy recommendations to better support non-language BPO agents (Lainson, Braun, & Clarke, 2020).

Participants

This study focused on the experiences of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) agents in Iloilo City who came from non-language academic backgrounds such as nursing, engineering, business, information technology, and other courses not centered on English. These agents were likely to face early work challenges because the BPO industry demands effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and rapid adaptation to diverse workplace contexts. Without formal training in language or intercultural communication, they needed to develop their own strategies to cope with client demands and the expectations of cross-cultural interactions (Dosdos, Orais, Polinar, Payao, & Delantar, 2023).

The study was conducted in Iloilo City, a rapidly emerging BPO hub outside Metro Manila (PWC, 2024). Iloilo's growing outsourcing sector, supported by a strong pool of skilled workers and improving infrastructure, made it an ideal site for this research (PNA, 2024). A call center company in the city served as the research location, since agents there routinely interacted with international clients and navigated linguistic, cultural, and emotional challenges (Iloilo Metropolitan Times, 2023).

The participants of the study consisted of 8 BPO agents from non-language academic fields, selected through purposive sampling. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative studies because it allows researchers to choose participants who can provide in-depth and relevant information about the topic. To qualify, participants had graduated from fields such as nursing, engineering, business, IT, or other courses not related to language studies, and had at least six months of experience working in the BPO industry. These criteria ensured that the participants had meaningful experiences to share about adapting to cross-cultural communication in their first BPO roles.

Participants	Bachelor's Degree	Age	Sex	Role	Years of Experience
P01	BS IN Electronics Engineering	33	Female	Manager	10 Years
P02	BSED in Mathematics	25	Female	Agents	2 years
P03	BS IN Computer Engineering	32	Male	Senior Agent	5 years
P04	BSED in Science	28	Female	Senior Agent	8 Years
P05	BS in Marine Engineering	27	Male	Senior Agent	4 Years
P06	BS in Biology	25	Female	Agent	2 Years
P07	BS in Financial Management	38	Female	Specialist	13 Years
P08	BS in Management	35	Female	Senior Agent	7 Years

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Instruments

The study used semi-structured interview questions as the primary research instrument. This type of interview allowed participants to freely share their experiences while giving the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions when needed. The interview questions focused on the participants' experiences in the BPO industry, particularly the communication challenges they faced, the coping strategies they developed, and their experiences in cross-cultural interactions with international clients.

Data Collection procedure

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face individual interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD). The semi-structured interviews provided participants with the space to openly share their challenges, coping strategies, and personal stories, while also allowing the researcher to probe deeper into significant experiences as they emerged (Kallio et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the FGD promoted collective reflection, enabling participants to validate shared experiences and highlight points of divergence or convergence across their narratives. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and used as the primary dataset for analysis.

This study utilized a thematic narrative research design, a qualitative approach that centers on individuals' stories and the meanings they attach to their lived experiences (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2021; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2022). This design was appropriate for the study because its aim was not only to identify the difficulties that BPO agents from non-language fields encountered but also to understand how they described, interpreted, and made sense of these experiences in their own words. Unlike quantitative approaches that compress experiences into measurable variables, narrative research allowed for rich, detailed accounts of how individuals constructed professional identities, developed coping mechanisms, and negotiated cross-cultural interactions within the workplace (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Through a thematic narrative analysis lens, this study centered on the voices of BPO agents from non-language fields, bringing forward the unique perspectives embedded in their stories. Their narratives not only surfaced the obstacles they faced but also the creative, adaptive strategies they developed in response (Lenette, Vaughan, & Boydell, 2022). This approach ensured that the findings were deeply grounded in lived experience and could inform practical interventions, such as more responsive training programs tailored to the needs of BPO workers in Iloilo City (Calderon, Mandabob, Maroto, & Syting, 2025).

Data Analysis Procedure

The study employed Thematic Narrative Analysis to examine the experiences of BPO agents coming from non-language academic backgrounds. This approach integrates the strengths of narrative inquiry, which focuses on how individuals tell and structure their stories, with thematic analysis, which identifies shared patterns across multiple narratives. Contemporary methodological discussions highlight how combining narrative and thematic approaches can illuminate both what participants say and how they construct meaning through storytelling (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2020). Rather than reducing experiences to isolated categories, Thematic Narrative Analysis enabled the researcher to explore the content of participants' accounts alongside the interpretive processes shaping their narratives.

The analytic process began with the verbatim transcription of all interview and FGD recordings to ensure that participants' accounts were preserved in full detail. This was followed by a period of immersion, in which the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to understand each narrative holistically. Coding was then conducted to identify narrative plots, key events, and meaningful expressions. These codes underwent categorization, allowing the researcher to group recurring experiences and patterns across participants. After coding and categorizing, the researcher engaged in re-storying, reconstructing participants' accounts into coherent narrative summaries while maintaining each story's authenticity and unique voice. From these reconstructed narratives, thematization took place, during which overarching themes were identified and refined across the entire dataset. Finally, through interpretation, the researcher connected emerging themes to theoretical concepts and existing scholarship, enabling a deeper understanding of how participants assigned meaning to their lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Tracy, 2020).

The guided interview questions used in this study were subjected to expert validation to ensure their clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of the research. The instrument was reviewed and validated by Ma'am Mary Jean Cataluna, Ma'am Liela Buenviaje, Ma'am Reynia Clarito, and Ma'am Kate Clarisse Pillado, whose expertise helped refine the questions and ensure their appropriateness for gathering meaningful data from the participants.

Using Thematic Narrative Analysis allowed the study to explore not only what participants experienced but also how they constructed meaning from these experiences in forming their identities as BPO workers. Their narratives illuminated how they interpreted workplace pressures, navigated cross-cultural interactions, and articulated avenues for personal and professional development insights that purely descriptive or quantitative approaches often overlook. This aligned with contemporary discussions on the value of narrative approaches in revealing identity construction and meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Riessman, 2020).

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. Member checking enabled participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their accounts; an audit trail documented key decisions and research activities; and peer debriefing alongside reflexive journaling helped mitigate researcher bias. Providing rich, contextual descriptions of participants, settings, and themes further enhanced transferability to other BPO contexts. These procedures were aligned with updated frameworks on qualitative rigor (Nowell et al., 2021; Tracy, 2020).

In summary, Thematic Narrative Analysis was the most appropriate analytical approach for this study because it centered participants' voices, preserved the integrity of their lived stories, and uncovered the deeper meanings they attached to their experiences within the BPO industry.

The flowchart illustrates the Thematic Narrative Analysis Approach Adapted from Polkinghorne (1995) Riessman (2008) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000).

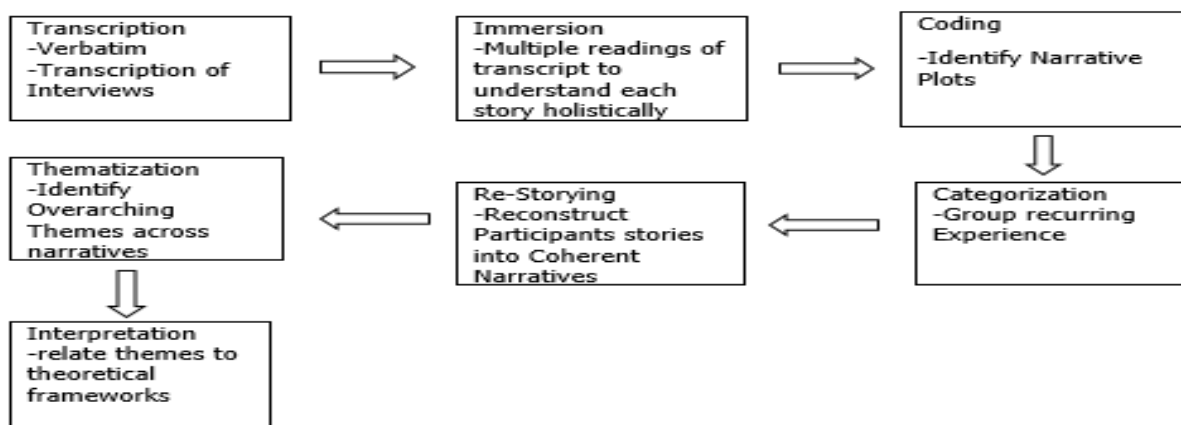


Figure 1. Data Analysis Flowchart/ Research Flow

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly followed ethical principles in conducting research with human participants. Informed consent was obtained after participants were fully briefed about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study. Participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Updated discussions on research ethics stress the importance of transparency, voluntary participation, and clear communication of risks and benefits (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2020; Tracy, 2020). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the careful removal of identifying details from all transcripts. All data were stored securely in password protected files accessible only to the researcher, consistent with contemporary data protection standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

To minimize potential risks, interviews and discussions were conducted with sensitivity, particularly when exploring emotionally challenging aspects of participants' work. Current qualitative ethics literature highlights the need for emotional safety, researcher reflexivity, and trauma-informed research practices where applicable (Birt et al., 2020; Given & Hesse-Biber, 2023). The results of the study were used solely for academic purposes and to provide practical recommendations such as designing support-oriented training programs for BPO agents from non-language backgrounds. Through following these ethical safeguards, the study upheld the principles of beneficence and respect for persons, ensuring that no harm was caused and that the research contributed positively to workplace development and professional support within the BPO industry.

Results and Discussion

Difficulties, Challenges, or Obstacles Experienced by BPO Agents from Non-Language Fields

The thematic narrative analysis revealed that BPO agents from non-language academic fields experienced interconnected challenges in communication, work adjustment, cultural interaction, and confidence development, which influenced their professional identity and adaptation. Communication and accent barriers were the most prominent, with participants struggling to understand diverse accents, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and cultural nuances such as idiomatic expressions and humor, leading to initial low self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy. Participants also encountered difficulties in adapting to graveyard shifts, managing fatigue, and balancing work with academic and family responsibilities, requiring discipline, time management, and psychological adjustment. Additionally, cultural differences and experiences of discrimination, particularly related to accent and nationality, negatively affected confidence but fostered emotional resilience. Despite these challenges, participants gradually reframed their experiences as opportunities for growth, developing improved communication skills, confidence, and a stronger professional identity through reflection and continuous exposure.

Themes	Interpretation / Discussion	Sample Responses
Communication and Accent Barriers	The findings indicate a gap between participants' academic preparation and the communication demands of the BPO industry. Difficulties in accents, grammar, and cultural language	"Communication skills were really difficult... especially grammar and pronunciation."

Themes	Interpretation / Discussion	Sample Responses
Work Schedule and Work Demands	use reflect limited linguistic and intercultural competence. However, these challenges also highlight a process of identity reconstruction, where agents gradually develop communication skills and confidence through exposure and practice. Adjustment to graveyard shifts and balancing responsibilities demonstrate that adaptation in the BPO industry involves physical, psychological, and social changes. These experiences require discipline and time management, contributing to the development of resilience and adaptability among agents.	(P03, Mathematics) "I had a hard time understanding their jokes and accents." (P04, Biology) "I had a hard time coping with my schedule since I had to follow specific shifts." (P04, Biology) "It was really difficult to balance my time in the BPO and college studies." (P07, Financial Management)
Cultural Differences and Discrimination	Experiences of bias based on accent and nationality reveal power dynamics in intercultural communication, where non-native speakers may be perceived as less competent. Despite this, participants develop emotional resilience and intercultural competence, enabling them to handle challenging interactions professionally.	"They sometimes ask for a U.S. representative when they hear our accent." (P03, Mathematics) "Some customers would say, 'I don't understand how you speak; your English is bad.'" (P06, Science)
Effects on Confidence and Adjustment	Initial self-doubt evolves into growth as participants reframe challenges as learning opportunities. Through reflection and experience, they develop clearer communication strategies, increased confidence, and a stronger professional identity, demonstrating experiential learning and personal development.	"I realized that the more I talked, the more I confused the caller." (P01, Electronic Engineering) "It affected me positively because those experiences helped me improve." (P07, Management)

Table 2. Difficulties, Challenges, or Obstacles Experienced by BPO Agents from Non-Language Fields

Adaptive Strategies or Coping Mechanisms of BPO Agents

The findings revealed that BPO agents from non-language academic fields employed various adaptive strategies to manage the challenges of communication, work demands, and intercultural interactions. A key strategy was self-directed learning, where participants actively improved their language proficiency through exposure to English media, reading, and practice, enhancing their communication skills and confidence. Emotional regulation also emerged as essential, with participants using techniques such as controlled breathing, rational thinking, and behavioral adjustments to manage stress and maintain professionalism during difficult customer interactions.

Additionally, structured routines and time management enabled participants to cope with demanding work schedules, particularly graveyard shifts, while balancing academic and family responsibilities. These strategies supported discipline, productivity, and overall adjustment. Peer and supervisory support further facilitated adaptation, as feedback, mentorship, and workplace guidance contributed to skill development, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Finally, persistence and reflective practice played a critical role in sustaining motivation and improving performance. Participants engaged in self-reflection, goal-setting, and maintaining a positive mindset, allowing them to continuously enhance their skills and adapt to workplace demands. Overall, these strategies demonstrate how BPO agents from non-language fields actively construct meaning from their experiences, leading to resilience, professional growth, and improved communication competence.

Themes	Interpretation / Discussion	Sample Responses
Self-Directed Learning	The findings show that participants actively engaged in self-directed learning to compensate for limited formal language training. By using media, reading, and practice, they developed communication skills and confidence. This reflects learner autonomy and highlights how continuous exposure to authentic language supports professional growth in intercultural environments.	"I listen to podcasts, TED Talks, and English movies... to enhance my skills." (P01, Engineering) "If I don't know a word, I search it on Google and

Themes	Interpretation / Discussion	Sample Responses
Emotional Regulation and Stress Management	Participants demonstrated the importance of emotional control in handling high-pressure interactions. Strategies such as deep breathing, rational thinking, and controlled responses helped them maintain professionalism. These findings suggest that emotional regulation is a key competence in BPO work, supporting stress management and effective communication.	watch English series." (P03, Mathematics) "It's about not giving your full emotion... breathe in and breathe out." (P08, Management) "You need to think rationally, not emotionally, when talking to irate customers." (P03, Mathematics)
Structured Routines and Time Management	Establishing routines enabled participants to manage demanding schedules and multiple responsibilities. Time management strategies supported productivity, reduced stress, and facilitated adjustment to graveyard shifts. These practices highlight the role of discipline and organization in developing adaptability and professional stability.	"Making sure that I wake up on time and arrive at work punctually." (P05, Marine Engineering) "It was difficult to balance BPO work and college, but it was life-changing." (P07, Financial Management)
Peer and Supervisory Support	Workplace support from supervisors, mentors, and colleagues played a crucial role in skill development and adjustment. Feedback and guidance provided opportunities for reflection and improvement, reinforcing professional competence and confidence. This reflects the importance of collaborative learning and relational support in workplace adaptation.	"Hearing feedback... helps you see what to improve." (P07, Financial Management) "I received 101% support from mentors and colleagues." (P04, Science)
Persistence and Reflective Practice	Persistence and reflection allowed participants to sustain motivation and improve performance over time. Reviewing past tasks, setting goals, and maintaining a positive mindset supported continuous learning and professional growth. These findings emphasize agency, where individuals actively construct meaning and take responsibility for their development.	"Before my shift starts, I review tasks we did yesterday." (P08, Management) "It's about having a positive mindset and doing your best." (P02, Mathematics)

Table 3. Adaptive Strategies or Coping Mechanisms of BPO Agents

English Training Guide for BPO Agents from Non-Language Fields

The findings led to the development of an English Training Guide for BPO agents from non-language fields, addressing gaps in communication, cultural competence, and workplace coping skills. Participants reported limited formal training in grammar, pronunciation, accent comprehension, and customer interaction, which affected their confidence and performance. In response, the Training module includes key components such as English communication skills, cultural awareness, customer interaction strategies, and emotional resilience. Using a learner-centered and experiential approach, it incorporates activities like role-playing, call simulations, and guided reflection.

Overall, the training module provides practical support that enhances communication competence, builds confidence, and improves workplace adaptability, offering a structured intervention to help non-language graduates succeed in the BPO industry.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The narratives and thematic analysis, several conclusions were drawn:

1. Non-language graduates experienced significant communication and adjustment challenges during their initial entry into the BPO industry. Many participants reported difficulties in understanding different accents, using correct grammar and pronunciation, and responding appropriately in professional conversations. These challenges were often linked to their limited exposure to intensive English communication and intercultural

interaction during their academic preparation. As a result, many participants initially struggled with confidence when communicating with international customers.

2. Cross-cultural differences and accent-related issues affected participants' confidence and workplace performance. Interactions with international clients required participants not only to communicate in English but also to understand cultural differences in communication styles. Participants shared experiences of misunderstanding accents and adjusting to different customer expectations. These situations required them to develop greater cultural awareness and adapt their communication strategies to effectively manage customer interactions.
3. Personal effort, adaptability, and continuous learning played an important role in participants' professional development. Many participants described how they gradually improved their communication skills through practice, self-study, and workplace experience. Support from supervisors, colleagues, and training programs also helped them build confidence and improve their performance. Over time, participants were able to develop strategies that allowed them to communicate more effectively and manage the challenges of working in a global service environment.

Implications

The findings of this study present significant implications across education, industry, policy, and non-language professions, emphasizing the interconnected roles of language, culture, and workplace adaptation in the BPO context. In higher education, there is a need to integrate practical communication skills, workplace English, and intercultural competence within non-language programs to better prepare graduates for global employment. Aligning with Milton (2009), who highlighted the importance of lexical and communicative competence, the study underscores the necessity of bridging academic learning with workplace realities through experiential strategies such as internships, simulation-based training, and industry partnerships.

In the BPO industry, the results suggest the need to enhance training programs by incorporating not only language development but also cultural awareness, empathy-driven communication, and resilience-building strategies. Consistent with Lockwood et al. (2008), agent performance is strengthened through the integration of linguistic and intercultural competence. Therefore, onboarding practices should include accent exposure, scenario-based communication tasks, and emotional support mechanisms to facilitate effective adaptation. Additionally, adopting inclusive training approaches that address the diverse learning needs of non-language graduates is essential for ensuring equitable performance and sustained professional growth.

At the policy and theoretical levels, the study highlights the importance of collaboration among government agencies, ICT councils, and industry stakeholders in promoting accessible language training and workforce development initiatives, particularly in underserved regions. The findings further support Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and guided learning in skill development, and align with Jennifer Jenkins' perspective of English as a Lingua Franca, where effective communication is based on mutual intelligibility rather than native-like proficiency. Moreover, the study reveals that success among non-language professionals depends not only on technical expertise but also on communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and emotional resilience. Structured support systems, mentorship, and attention to psychological factors such as confidence-building and stress management are therefore critical in facilitating long-term adaptation and success in global service work.

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Competing Interests Statement

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.