Multi-communication and the business English class: Research meets pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the findings of an ethnographically oriented study that examined the multi-communication (MC) practices in four multinationals in the telecommunications, management consultancy, marketing and banking industries based in London, UK. The study followed a multi-data approach (MDA) that combined a survey, a series of interviews, three shadowing sessions and a number of documents and artefacts (e.g., computer screenshots) as its data sets. The main findings reveal that MC, defined as holding multiple conversations at the same time, requires people to make strategic decisions about (a) thematic threading (bringing together communication tasks on the same topic) and (b) presence allocation (spreading communicator's presence over a number of communication instances), and corporations to provide the media and training for (c) media packaging (deciding what media work well together) and (d) audience profiling (grouping diverse audiences by similar needs/requests). Based on these findings, the article examines implications for the business English (BE) class and features a number of technology-enhanced pedagogical tasks to help students to be better prepared for the communication demands of today's workplace. The design of the tasks, which is informed by the results of the present research, aspires to show research-informed pedagogical interventions for the communication class in BE.

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1. Introduction

The workplace has become a complex communicative space where the demand for 'doing more in less time' seems to be the prevailing norm. To respond to such a demand, people have been resorting to multi-communication (MC), that is, holding multiple, face-to-face and electronically mediated conversations at the same time (Cameron & Webster, 2011; Garrett & Danziger, 2007; Stephens & Davis, 2009; Turner & Reinsch, 2007). In business contexts, people may, for example, write an email and/or a text on instant messaging (IM), while speaking to a customer or colleague on the telephone. Although the body of research on this workplace communication practice has grown considerably in recent years (see, for example, Cameron & Webster, 2005, 2011; König & Waller, 2010; Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008; Stephens & Davis, 2009; Turner & Reinsch, 2010; Waller, 2007; Wang & Tchernev, 2012), some questions still remain unanswered: What main skills are required for MC in today's workplace? How does MC relate to communication effectiveness? How many simultaneous communication tasks would people normally get involved in before communication breaks down? How can skills for MC be best developed?

This article reports on a study that examined these questions in the context of four multinationals based in London, UK. It explores the main findings from the study and examines the implications for the business English (BE) class. Findings reveal

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that to be able to multi-communicate business people need to make strategic decisions about (a) what messages can be dealt with simultaneously, (b) how the presence of the communicator can be allocated over a number of simultaneous communication instances, and for corporations to determine how to provide the media and training for employees to be able to decide (c) what communication media work well together, and (d) how similar needs of diverse audiences can be grouped together to be dealt with more efficiently. Thus, the article focuses on the four main skills required for MC: 'thematic threading', that is, bringing together communication tasks that deal with the same topics/issues; 'presence allocation', which requires communicators to decide how to spread their virtual presence over a number of communication instances; 'media packaging', that is, deciding what media to combine on the basis of their real or perceived compatibility; and 'audience profiling', which involves grouping diverse audiences by similar needs or requests.

These requirements pose significant challenges to even the most seasoned communicators. In the case of BE students, the requirements may look rather daunting and even appear insurmountable. Pedagogical interventions would therefore need to focus on helping students to develop the underlying skills for making decisions about MC.

The article first presents a review of the literature that has informed the study. Next, a discussion of the main results and the implications for the BE class follows. Based on this discussion, the article features a number of tasks designed from the findings which aim at helping BE students to be better prepared for the MC demands of today's workplace. Through these research-based tasks, the article showcases research-informed pedagogical interventions for the communication class in BE.

2. Emerging tendencies in MC practices in the workplace: A review of the literature

MC has been defined as the act of holding multiple conversations at the same time (Cameron & Webster, 2005, 2011; Stephens & Davis, 2009; Turner & Reinsch, 2007, 2010). The term 'conversation' is used here in its broader sense, covering face-to-face as well as electronically mediated communication (e.g., talk over the telephone, email and IM). MC has increasingly become a frequent occurrence in internal and external communication practices (e.g., meetings, presentations of new R&D projects, exchange of information with external publics) across corporations that heavily rely on technology for their communication needs, despite a number of studies having pointed to the need for communicators to train themselves to avoid communication overload (e.g., Edmunds & Morris, 2000; Soucek & Moser, 2010).

Stephens and Davis (2009) suggest that during business meetings people in technology-infused corporations often multi-communicate by engaging in electronically mediated activities that are not always meeting-related. Multi-communication has in fact been greatly facilitated by the latest advances in technology which have provided highly flexible and mobile communication tools (Gimenez, 2009, 2012), allowing people to engage in a number of simultaneous tasks.

Garrett and Danziger's (2007) study of IM, one of the media that people use to communicate in the workplace, found that MC is more likely among 'heavy users' of IM, mainly due to its flexibility as a means of communication. In a similar vein, in a study that examined the key features of multi-communicators in a high-tech organisation, Turner and Reinsch (2007) discovered that they have developed a noticeable ability to engage in multiple related conversations by 'packaging' a variety of media such as email, telephone and IM. 'Media packaging' refers to the act of mixing media (e.g., email, telephone, IM) that are known or perceived to work well together on the basis of their compatibility, allowing communicators to do more at the same time.

Turner and Reinsch's (2007) finding about multi-communicators' ability to package compatible media provides significant insight into some of the skills needed for MC in today's workplace. To be able to multi-communicate, people need to be aware of not only the appropriacy of media in relation to message and context, as previous research in electronically mediated communication has shown (Otondo, Van Scotter, Allen, & Palvia, 2008; Spitzberg, 2006), but they also need to know what media can be packaged together, that is, be able to decide what media work well together on the basis of their real or perceived compatibility or complementarity. Telephone and email, for instance, seem to lend themselves readily to multi-communication: whilst discussing a new policy with a customer over the telephone, a communicator may be simultaneously composing an email message with further information about the policy. The ability to evaluate media compatibility for packaging purposes and thus be able to do more in a limited period of time is also relevant to the number of tasks a person can perform without producing breakdowns in the communication process, an aspect of MC that has not yet received enough attention in the literature (Stephens & Davis, 2009; Turner & Reinsch, 2007). This will be further discussed in the following sections.

These findings also have a direct bearing on how MC is conceptualised, especially in relation to traditional views of effective communication. Traditionally defined 'effective communication' is based on the communicator's ability to (a) match the best communication medium for a given message to a specific audience; (b) devote their undivided attention to the communication task; and (c) provide high levels of empathy (Krizan, Merrier, & Logan, 2007; Stanton, 2004). This view of effective communication is mainly informed by the work of Goffman's (1967) norms for face-to-face communication, but MC does not seem to sit well here. Rather, it requires communicators to package a variety of media in order to respond simultaneously to multiple communication demands (Turner & Reinsch, 2007), to divide their attention over a number of tasks (Reinsch et al., 2008; Turner & Reinsch, 2010), and to attend to the needs of wider, more complex and diverse audiences with whom they may be communicating at the same time (Turner & Reinsch, 2007). As Cameron and Webster (2011) argue, when multi-communicating "we are not just juggling tasks – we are juggling *people* and often, multiple media" (p. 767, emphasis in the original).