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Integrating multi-communication research and the business

English class

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Integrating multi-communication research and the business English class

1. Brief description

The study reported in Gimenez's (2014) article investigated multi-communication (MC) practices at four multinationals based in London, UK. Following previous studies (e.g., Cameron & Webster, 2011; Stephens & Davis, 2009; Turner & Reinsch, 2010), the article defined MC as "the act of holding multiple conversations at the same time" (Gimenez, 2014: 2), expanding the coverage of the term 'conversation' to include not only face-to-face but also electronically mediated communication (e.g., talk over the telephone, email and IM). The study also expanded on previous research by examining the underpinning role of digital media in workplace interactions, and revealed a set of interactional skills, such as 'thematic threading', 'presence allocation', 'media packaging' and 'audience profiling', needed to communicate effectively in the contemporary workplace. It also revealed a preference for efficiency rather than effectiveness, highlighting that efficiency "has become a more relevant feature of business communication in today's highly technicalised workplaces" (p. 3). Based on its findings, the article suggested applications for the business English (BE) class, featuring a number of technology-enhanced tasks that aim at helping students to feel prepared for the communication demands of the contemporary workplace.

2. Significance of the paper

The significance of the paper lies mainly in the novelty of its findings as it was the first study to identify four key skills which are important for MC. These skills are:

- **Thematic threading:** This refers to the ability to decide what messages can be dealt with simultaneously based on their topic or theme
- **Presence allocation** which requires communicators to allocate their presence over a number of simultaneous communication instances
- **Media packaging:** This relates to the ability to decide what media to combine on the basis of their real or perceived compatibility; and
- **Audience profiling** that concerns ways in which similar needs of diverse audiences can be grouped together to be dealt with more efficiently.

Another significant contribution of the study was the hypothesis that, in highly technicalised workplaces like the ones examined, efficiency seems to be preferred to effectiveness. In such settings, communication requires these four skills so that communicators can do more in less time and thus become more efficient. This requirement seems to condition communicators to prioritise media that lend themselves more easily to being packaged together over other aspects of communication such as content.

These findings informed the design of a number of technology-enhanced MC tasks, as illustrated in the paper. The tasks were created around typical workplace communication situations in which MC plays a central role. They feature simulations for pair or group work and include debriefing activities intended to promote students' discussion and reflection upon their task performance. For example, a workplace simulation designed to practise 'thematic threading' requested students to discuss an issue with a customer on the telephone while writing them an email to confirm what had been discussed. Another task required them to focus on the shared features (e.g., age, income, lifestyle) of a group of customers so that they could meet their needs more efficiently, thus helping students to develop their 'audience profiling skills'. Yet, another task was set up for students to learn to 'package compatible

media' such as telephone and email so that they could be used together to complement or reinforce communication events.

3. Influence on the field

The paper has influenced the field on two main counts. From the theoretical perspective it has helped to expand the coverage of the term 'conversation' to include not only face-to-face but also electronically mediated communication (e.g., talk over the telephone, email and IM). It has also advanced our knowledge and understanding of four key skills and competencies required for MC: 'thematic threading', 'presence allocation', 'media packaging' and 'audience profiling'.

Pedagogically, it has made a strong case for a closer integration of mobile learning resources in teaching BE, which has been echoed in the research of other scholars in the field (e.g., Machili, Angouri & Harwood, 2019; Nickerson, Rapanta, & Goby, 2017; Reinsch & Turner, 2019; 2021).

Although Gimenez's paper was published 9 years ago, a number of its findings seem to be still relevant for researchers, practitioners and students of BE, as indicated in more recent studies (e.g., Mehra & Nickerson, 2019; Reinsch & Turner, 2021). In terms of researching MC, the increasing complexity of business communication would still require a multidimensional investigation of workplace practices, and the paper's multi-data methodological approach could be updated to help researchers unpack such complexity. Similarly, the pedagogical tasks proposed in the paper could still inform some of the teaching and learning activities in the BE class.

However, there have been a few equally important contributions that recent research has made, some of which seem to challenge the hypotheses put forward in Gimenez's paper. For instance, Grewal, et al. (2022) have strongly emphasised the dynamic relationship between key components of communication such as message, members, media and

multimodality, thus challenging Gimenez's (2014) hypothesis about the supremacy of media over content. In a similar vein, the increasing use of moderate media, which integrates both rich (e.g., face-to-face) and lean (e.g., email) media, may mean that skills such as media packaging may be less relevant in today's workplace. Finally, some of the tasks suggested in the 2014 paper may also need revisiting so that they can be adapted to include other, now more frequently used, media such as teleconferencing, and devices such as tablets.

4. Future directions

Based on the previous analysis and discussion, a number of future theoretical, methodological and pedagogical directions for MC could be highlighted:

1. **Theoretically:** Gimenez's (2014) article formulated a few hypotheses that challenged some of the beliefs about communication at the time such as a preference for efficiency over effectiveness and compartmentalisation over undivided attention in hybrid business settings. New ways of theorising communication in such emergent contexts (Mehra & Nickerson, 2019; Reinsch & Turner, 2021) would now be required to explain the latest developments in corporate communication, such as the increasing use of moderate media reported in Mehra and Nickerson (2019). Moderate media such as videoconferencing is making MC for daily workplace communication easier even when important matters may be still be "communicated via email" (Chan, 2019, 75). Thus, new theories would need to be developed to help us explore MC in these evolving contexts of interaction, and in particular the dynamic relationship between the content of the message, the members of the interaction, multimodality and the media used as argued by Grewal, et al. (2022).

2. **Methodologically:** In order to capture the nature and dynamics of MC events like the ones explored in Gimenez's work, less polarised approaches to researching "media in

organizations” (Mehra & Nickerson, 2019, p. 1594) would have to be further designed. Such approaches would need to challenge, for example, the traditional way of looking at media as either rich or lean. They could include new theories and categorizations which could expand those proposed in his 2014 paper so that a more in-depth understanding of the role and use of mobile technology and moderate media in corporate communication could be gained.

3. Pedagogically: Following on Gimenez’s call for a closer integration of research and pedagogy in the BE class, new research-based pedagogical practices and learning materials could seek to incorporate emerging mobile technologies. As Nickerson et al. (2017, p. 148) propose “more integration of mobile learning resources into business communication training” is needed. For instance, technology-enhanced tasks could incorporate the use of moderate media and tablets to carry out simulations in workplace communication. In a similar vein, project-based learning tasks like the ones reported in Rapanta, Nickerson, and Goby (2014) could encourage BE students to use mobile technologies to search, select, and evaluate information on the Internet to carry out communication projects.

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