CULTURE-SPECIFIC MOBILE PHONE USE ETIQUETTE – AN AWARENESS RAISING APPROACH FOR MULTICULTURAL GROUPS

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Abstract: One of the forms of professional communication to be encountered worldwide today is that via mobile telephony, with the emergence and development, over the last decade, of new etiquette rules, much different from those valid for fixed telephony, and which genuine professionals in all domains who wish to find first employment in well-reputed companies of the multinational type should be aware of. With the globalization of job offers and the possibilities that graduates from various countries and/or cultures have today to become part of such multicultural teams, the issue of ensuring higher education trainees with an increased awareness of the culture-specific features in communication of any type, which includes that via cell phones, has turned into a must, alongside with other soft skills expected from first job candidates, for the universities preparing them. In the educational setting described in this paper, viz. bachelor level engineering students, having English as the medium of tuition, and working in multicultural groups that comprise learners from different countries/cultures, it is the foreign language teacher's assumed role to provide this type of input content, alongside the linguistic one, in an ESP/CLIL type of course, based on an in-house 'English for Professional Communication' course book. Therefore, an original set of materials has been designed and taught, as an amendment proposed to the course book unit devoted to 'Telephoning', which is rather out-of-date, as it deals with fixed telephony only, and it does not make almost any reference to cultural differences in terms of phone speaking etiquette. Thus, there are two main objectives for the proposed set, viz. (i) to update the course book content by making reference to mobile telephony, and (ii) to discuss mobile phone culture-specific vs internationally accepted etiquette rules, with a view to sensitize the learners about such issues. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to present a coherent approach proposal to covering both objectives, on the basis of an array of tasks of the communicative type.

Keywords: professional communication, multicultural groups, awareness raising activities, culture-specific issues, mobile phone etiquette

1. Paper background and aim

Today there is a need of good practice examples as far as cell phone use is concerned in multicultural environments, as quite numerous mistakes and misunderstandings in terms of cultural differences that are not taken into account have been noticed in authentic contexts.

The first question to be asked and discussed is whether there is a golden rule, more specifically if any such thing has been formulated, which could operate universally, or, in a rather more practical approach to the issue, how can one take into consideration cultural differences that are so strongly manifested around in professional contexts and not only, in order to identify a culture-sensitive manner of using the cell phone in multicultural work settings.

Therefore, the broad aim of this paper is to: (i) identify best ways of getting the students in the educational context presented to become more aware of culture-specific mobile phone

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etiquette differences, and (ii) discuss commonly acceptable practices, by means of an awareness raising project, set in the foreign language class.

This proposal should be seen both as supplementary materials to an *English for Professional Communication* course book (Blându, M., Catană, S., Catelly, Y. M. et al., 2004), with a unit devoted to *Telephoning*, basically designed along the paradigms of fixed telephony etiquette, and also as a localization of the input for multicultural groups, specific to the educational setting discussed in the paper, namely higher education engineering students having English as the medium of tuition and with groups comprising learners from Romania and several foreign countries/cultures.

The activities proposed will investigate culture-specific rules vs internationally valid ones, with a view of drawing the trainees' attention to identifying the best practices in communicating based on mobile telephony.

2. On mobile phone etiquette – viewpoints and guidelines

Quite recently, the concern of researchers in communication, but also that of teachers interested in carrying out empirical research in their educational settings on the topic of what is acceptable etiquette and what is culture-specific in mobile phone use has generated a number of studies – most frequently comparative ones, based on investigations in local settings, but with some interesting conclusions that are transferable over other contexts, as well.

Moreover, the need for guidelines that should be acceptable worldwide has prompted a number of useful etiquette tips to occur. Thus, there are certain recurrent pieces of advice as to what is advisable and/or recommendable in professional and academic contexts.

There are authors (Baron & Hård af Segerstad, 2010) that initiate a thorough discussion about cross-cultural patterns in mobile phone use. They emphasize the fact that, although the technology is the same all over the planet, there are certain cultural differences to be taken into consideration in terms of mobile phone practices. Among the main *cultural issues*, they list the following:

- attitudes towards quiet in public space,
- personal use of public space,
- tolerance of self-expression.

Certain *variables* within such paradigms are studied comparatively for students from Sweden, the USA and Japan, with the conclusion that there are culturally associated differences; what is more, there are also shared views of the respondents in terms of the 'advantages and disadvantages of reachability by mobile phone'.

Larger investigations were also carried out (Bednall, Totten & Lipscomb, 2011), starting from the issue of 'intrusiveness' of this medium – hence, the need for more precise social etiquette rules, like in the case of e-mail and Internet use for that matter, meant to set prescriptions about what is internationally tolerable/acceptable as good practices rules.

It is interesting to note that, in this research, as well as in many others, given the fact that the issue under debate is quite new and very much culture-specific, there are no data pointing to full agreement of respondents belonging to various cultures for many of the aspects under consideration.

There is a visible *continuum*, we maintain, of the limits of *tolerance* in terms of mobile phone use, with, for instance the Australians more tolerant than the Americans in most situations, but only very recently (Chan, 2013; The Whiz Cells, 2015) studies of country-specific etiquette rules have emerged.

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Narrowing down the interest to specific etiquette rules for *professionals*, we should focus on input (Lee, 2015) that underlines working environment mobile telephony use which are accepted worldwide.

To conclude, the literature, both theory-oriented, and the pragmatic one providing tips, covers a range of commonsensical aspects, which can be listed as follows.

Firstly, a clear cut distinction is made between the *public* and the *private* use of cell phones, with rules that are somewhat stronger for the former case, whether the context is work, a show, a place of worship, a means of transport or other public situations. The same rules are applicable to texting, as well.

In the second place, there are also tips regarding the ideal *manners* on cell phone, with advice covering maintaining a civilized tone and vocabulary, using a soft voice, avoiding discussing private topics in public places, and – a generally accepted important piece of advice – never drive and talk on the phone, as it can be extremely dangerous.

3. The classroom approach – student questionnaire and task types proposed

Based on the fact that the educational setting discussed here refers to bachelor engineering students from various countries and/or cultures, with sometimes significant differences among many social aspects and patterns of behavior, including the use of mobile phones, an approach meant to sensitize the students as to the existing rules that are valid internationally and the common practices they should be aware of as would-be professionals in multinationals worldwide has been initiated and taught several times so far.

As a particular note, which in fact represented the starting point in terms of interest manifested towards the topic by the teacher/researcher, the approach was generated by recurrent observations of the students' behavior in terms of phone use in class, during the lesson and the breaks.

The teacher is of the 'tolerant' type, viz. she allows the use of the phone for emergency calls/texts, but she requires that the students' phones be on silent mode during the class.

On the other hand, as a rule, the teacher encourages the use of the phone in class by the students as a *learning tool* – for various purposes, such as searches on Google, dictionary work, taking photos of class board and other materials etc.

However, in some cases the trainees kept using their phones during the class for personal purposes, although this was specifically forbidden by unwritten conventions, but which are well-established from the beginning of the year. What is more, there are subtle but quite noticeable differences in the approach to using the phone by students from different countries/cultures in the English class.

Consequently, that was the background core in designing the approach presented in this section. Each step will be described, together with the rationale underlying its role within the project as a whole.

The *Student Questionnaire* - it comprises a number of 11 questions, and it is administered in the language class, with answers then commented upon in a speaking activity.

The rationale is multiple: as it is administered at the beginning of the chain of activities focused on mobile phone etiquette, its purpose is both to (i) elicit sincere answers, and also to (ii) get the learners to reflect on the various patterns of behavior they have in this respect – and which can be very different from those of their peers from different cultures/countries.

The questions cover a range of *variables* (that will be further on replicated in the content input of the tasks taught within the module, for data triangulation purposes with a view to

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enhancing the validity of the entire approach), such as: *public vs private behavior, formal vs informal contexts, speaking vs texting, good vs bad manners* a.s.o.

Most questions are of the open-ended type, to allow students to reflect and provide answers able to illustrate their subtle views on the topic at hand. Consequently, the data to be obtained are mostly of the *qualitative* type and, therefore, processed and interpreted based on certain common categories, with room for citations from the individual respondents' viewpoints for further clarifications.

Moreover, the answers may be useful in providing feedback as to the students' language proficiency at the moment when they answer the questionnaire, in an economical and very little time-consuming manner.

The questions are as follows:

- *Q1 – Have you /has someone you know ever had any problems in using the cell phone to talk to people from other cultures?!*
- *If YES, please specify; If NO, what are, in your opinion, some of the points you should always observe when you speak on the cell phone to someone from another culture – please specify.*
- *Q2 – In your own country/culture, is it ok to keep your mobile phone ON when you are in a formal situation at work/school?!*
- *If YES, and someone calls you, what exactly do you do?! – please specify.*
- *If NO, how do you make sure you will be reached during that period of time?!*
- *Q3 – What do you do if you are called in the middle of an important professional context?!*
- *Q4 – How do you handle a call from a number that is not in your contacts list?!*
- *Q5 – Is there any significance attached to the customized ringtone in your country/culture?!*
- *If YES, please specify.*
- *Q6 – How do you typically handle the following situation in your country: you call someone that does not answer – what exactly do you do then?! – please specify.*
- *Q7 – What is considered 'bad manners' in terms of phone etiquette in your country/culture?! – please list as many items as you want.*
- *Q8 – Are there any differences between speaking on the cell phone in public and in private in your country/culture?! Please specify.*
- *Q9 – Are etiquette rules the same as to speaking and to texting, or there are differences in your country/culture?! Please specify.*
- *Q10 – What are the contexts when it is totally forbidden to use the mobile phone in your country?!*
- *Q11 – Do you personally always observe the etiquette rules you have described in your answers?!*

The questionnaire was administered to several groups of students annually, and a detailed presentation of the main findings is to be carried out in another study.

For our purpose here, the *maintrends* that have recurrently been noticeable are briefly presented, against a general and quite necessary remark, namely that the responses do vary from year to year, in the sense that a certain amount of *internationalization* of the answers has tended to occur, with roughly the main attitudes to be identified with most trainees, irrespective of their cultural background. There seems to be general agreement among the respondents on the most commonsensical attitudes to adopt in public, in formal situations and so on.

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However, there are some students belonging to the Arabic countries who tend to behave in a more relaxed manner in terms of etiquette observance, attaching importance mostly to respecting the rules in places of worship.

Adversely, the Chinese students are quite strict in terms of observing the rules, both in their answers to the questionnaire, but also in reality, in the language class where their behavior was observed with a view to increasing the data validity.

As far as the Romanian students are concerned, their behavior substantially corresponds to the image people generally have about the type of culture in Romania – quite extrovert, relatively permissive and tolerant, however basically aware of what the *Dos & Don'ts* should be in this respect.

The second part of the module on cell phone etiquette comprises a *chain of topic awareness raising tasks*, which will be described in what follows. It may useful to mention that the tasks are designed in such a manner as to combine their main aim of sensitizing the learners as to the topic at hand, i.e. *Using the cell phone today in a culturally aware manner*, and the purpose of enhancing the linguistic input in that particular area, consisting in the necessary lexical, grammatical and functional structures that are typical for this particular form of communication.

Each task proposed is briefly described and its rationale is given; obviously, this is just a starting point, but teachers in various other educational settings might find some of the suggestions useful – with the necessary amendments and modifications prompted by the specific needs of their own contexts.

The *Warmer* is a 10-question quiz, based on input from the Internet, such as, for example, the one at https://www.thewhizcells.com/mobile-manners-around-the-world/. The students have to answer the questions individually, against time limit, with points to be won by those who finish first and whose answers are quite correct.

The rationale is quite obvious, the role of quizzes is generally that of eliciting information while getting the learners to focus on the topic proposed by the teacher. Competitiveness will be enhanced if there is a contest with prizes involved.

Once the first contact is established, there is follow up as *homework* for the students' portfolios, meant to enlarge the teacher's own possibilities in terms of identifying Internet resources and materials dealing with the topic *Mobile telephony etiquette rules* – these are in fact the Google entry words for the search the trainees have to carry out. They are specifically required to 'dig' deeper than the first 2 – 3 pages of Google returns.

Alternatively, the students could be asked to reflect what they would list in an article on etiquette rules - before searching the net for ideas.

Also, the topics for their searches could be either to look for rules from their own country/culture, for the host country where they are as students, for internationally valid rules etc. The teacher could suggest some links, such as https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/26/cell-phone-etiquette-15-r_n_514927.html, but only as a form of minimal support, for *guidance* at the incipient phases of the project.

The next *tasks* in the chain will be based on the input produced by the students in the previous stages, with the listening or reading input texts processed in class in terms of ideas, general comprehension, lexis and grammar, functions in communication, models of approach etc.

The rationale underlying these activities is, on the one hand, to complement the informational objective of the lesson by the linguistic enhancement which can be generated based on the input texts, and, on the other hand, to sensitize the students on the fact that rules in terms of etiquette

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are not rigid elements, on the contrary, they are flexible, dynamically being replaced by new ones. Therefore, there is a *mentality and attitude formation* component in the design of these tasks, as well.

This gets us neatly to the logical sequel, viz. getting the students to work in pairs or groups and write down lists of *Dos & Don'ts* regarding cell phone rules in their own culture, or international or comparing both etc.

The initial course book unit proposed tasks can also be enriched by *simulations* of mobile phone calls between people from various countries/cultures, based on scripts that place the speakers in contexts where knowledge of etiquette may make the difference between professional success and failure.

Alternatively, with higher level students, such as master or doctoral ones, *simulations of call conferences*,with people from at least three countries/cultures participating, could be interesting and useful for providing 'food for thought ' to the participants.

A debate can be included here, on issues such as:

- *Whose rules do you observe in such a context?!*
- *How do you adjust in?!*
- *Are you prepared and knowledgeable in the manner you accept alterity and/or diversity?!*

4. Open conclusions

The possibilities for the tasks does not end here, of course. Each teacher can add and/or modify the activities suggested in this study, but the essence of the proposal, entirely based on sound pedagogical principles of the communicative approach to the teaching of English, with eclectic additions which have proved useful and well-received by the trainees, can be transferred to a variety of settings.

In the context taken into account in this paper, the students' response has been quite enthusiastic, with sound evidence that they tend to shape up their mentality based on personal and guided observations of the social rules surrounding them.

It is in fact an approach based on the *learning by doing* principle, which involves the trainees in reflecting and adapting their mentality and attitudes.

Moreover, although the topic refers only to communication on the mobile phone, there are signs that by teaching these tasks in the foreign language class, the students are given support in terms of a wider context of rather controversial issues connected to *managing alterity* and taking appropriate decisions in *diversity policies.*

Therefore, this study should be also read in its key as an *awareness raising exercise*, carried out within a form of education based on the need to train multicultural groups in order to prepare them for the high expectations of the society of today and especially of tomorrow, in terms of mentality and appropriate attitudes in professional contexts.

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