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Developing Effective Telephoning Skills in the English Language Lab: Overcoming Challenges

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Courtesy: <http://relationshipmatters.wordpress.com/2010/07/15/what-makes-a-great-phone-conversation/>

Abstract

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Talking on the telephone needs special skills such as communication skills and soft skills and hence requires extra effort due to lack of visual cues. Many people assume that they have adequate telephone skills, whereas, in fact, a number of difficulties can arise when telephoning.

This paper focuses on how a learner can answer the telephone effectively while responding to a variety of situations by improving telephoning language. It highlights the use of appropriate telephoning phrases to improve confidence when telephoning. It looks at how relevant and suitable vocabulary, for example, idioms and phrases, needs to be used in a variety of situations. It also sheds light on the importance of telephone etiquette since being courteous and helpful since will make a positive difference to the interaction.

Finally, the paper provides appropriate telephoning techniques, practice exercises and suggestions for role plays and live situations to improve specific telephoning skills for use in the English Language Lab.

Introduction



<http://conversation.which.co.uk/consumer-rights/stop-nuisance-phone-calls-cold-calling-ico-tps/>

There are many situations where the learner is called upon to answer the phone. Therefore developing good communication habits and knowledge of proper telephone etiquette is essential.

The telephone is one of the most widely used telecommunication devices of today as it conveys information in a fast and effective manner. It has become an indispensable feature of

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today's communication. At times, one's success in personal and professional life lies in the ability to communicate successfully by telephone. Therefore learning how to speak competently on the telephone with confidence, clarity, coherence and audibility has become one of the top priorities for many learners who need to use English at home and work.

The conversation on the telephone leaves a lasting impression of the caller and receiver. A mental picture of the person spoken to is built determined solely by what we hear through the earpiece. Hence to communicate effectively, learners need to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary suited to a variety of situations. They can overcome numerous difficulties involved in telephone communication by practicing listening, speaking and learning telephone language.

Challenges in Using the Phone

The language learner may be faced with various challenges when telephoning since he or she lacks the benefit of seeing the listener's reactions via facial expressions and body language. Other challenges may include background noise, disturbance on the line, ineffective listening, use of jargon and /or technical terms, unfamiliar accents, unusual verbal habits, complexity of information, voice volume of delivery, speaking too quickly and mispronouncing words.

Expressiveness of the voice and clarity of speech and thought are the pre-requisite features of effective telephone communication. If these are lacking it leads to miscommunication and incomplete understanding of the message. The paper looks at how to improve telephoning skills by suggesting different telephoning techniques, the use of relevant vocabulary and various classroom-based activities to enable the learners to speak efficiently and confidently on the telephone.

Phone Techniques

i) Active Listening

. Possessing good listening skills can make a huge difference in effective telephone communication. An effective listener listens to everything attentively without missing anything.

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In doing so, he or she not only gains valuable insights into the conversation but also wins the cooperation and goodwill of the person he or she is speaking to. They make an effort to be patient and desists from interrupting or hurrying the speaker. They ask questions only if they are pertinent and necessary, taking care not to disrupt the flow of conversation. Such a listener tries to overcome barriers or disturbances successfully, to communicate effectively through the phone.

ii) Effective Speaking

Effective telephone communication serves the purpose for which it was planned when it has the desired effect on the listener. Indeed, “Good telephone communication does not just happen. It needs thinking about. It needs planning, and communication by telephone needs executing with care.” (Forsyth,1997, p.1)This is possible when one speaks audibly with the right rhythm, speed, volume, pitch, tone, and intonation in a manner that is appropriate in the given situation.

Care should be taken that the information given on the phone is correct, accurate, precise, clear and complete. For instance, the telephonic message, “You have to pay the Examination fee by the 15th of this month,” is an example for accuracy, clarity and completeness.

The speaker needs to choose words that are short, simple and easily understandable. Care may also be taken to avoid jargon, slang, ambiguous expressions or words that are rarely used, difficult or bombastic.

Knowing the words and phrases that are commonly used on the telephone helps one to converse appropriately and overcome language related obstacles tactfully and diplomatically. This could be done by guessing unfamiliar words or phrases, taking care to avoid asking for clarification repeatedly when one has not understood or heard the other person properly.

A learner can improve telephoning language by learning relevant phrases and idioms that are used while speaking on the phone such as **hold on** and **hang on** both of which mean to 'wait'.

Other examples include:

- **Hang up or ring off** - Finish the call by breaking the connection or to put the phone down.
- **Ring up** – is the opposite of **hang up** or **ring off**, i.e., make a phone call.
- **Pick up** the phone - Answer a call when the phone rings.
- **Put through** – Connect your call to another telephone.
- **Call back** means to return a phone call
- **Speak up** - Speak louder.

On a professional front, it is advisable to use the caller's name to establish rapport, listen carefully, make a note of all the facts and confirm whether the caller has understood the information supplied. It is prudent to answer only such questions for which information is available or else offer to find the information. It is good to avoid defensive reactions and emotional conversations. Finally, one could make a commitment to follow up and thank the person for calling.

iii) Friendly Disposition

A smile has amazing power over one's attitude and influences everyone around. Hence it is important to put a smile in one's voice since it conveys a person's mood, feelings, emotions and personality. As it is said, "simply remember to smile as you answer a call." (Finch, 2000, p.14). Maintaining a neutral tone and being polite will leave a good impression of the speaker.

Therefore, one needs to be positive, friendly, enthusiastic, warm, cheerful and speak with a smile and have a genuine desire to understand the other person on the call. Such a friendly disposition will make one feel good and result in a positive response since it is not what one says, but the way one says it that makes all the difference.

iv) Level of Formality

The lack of physical presence demands that we cultivate a certain type of etiquette while conversing over the phone. It is not only important to make a good first and last impression but also to make a lasting positive impression on the caller. Presenting a professional image, both in person and on the telephone, is very important. Courtesy and thoughtfulness are the basic components of telephone etiquette. The knowledge of etiquette makes telephoning easier because

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if one creatively obeys the rules, one can be confident of behaving in the most appropriate and productive manner.

It's important to maintain the right level of formality. Liberties may be taken with the language when we speak to a friend or sibling in informal situations depending on the socio-cultural nearness or relationship with the speaker. However, in formal situations, the language needs to be proper or formal. An appropriate level of decorum has to be maintained especially when speaking to superiors.

Methods

Speaking effectively on the telephone has become one of the top priorities for many learners who need to use English at home and work. It is essential for the learners to communicate successfully by phone to succeed in their personal and professional life. Therefore learners need to practice their telephone language regularly in the English language lab. Teachers can facilitate this by employing various methods such as oral and written tasks, role plays and real-life situations in order to improve their telephoning skills.

The aim is to proceed gradually from simpler activities to more complex ones. For instance after the teacher has explained the various telephone techniques, he /she gives them handouts to solve simple exercises involving telephone phrases followed by role plays which involve simulated situations. Finally, the learners are expected to make live calls from the English Language Lab.

Given below are some exercises that can be used in the English Language Lab to improve the learners' telephoning skills.

1. Oral and Written Exercises

Given below is a whole class activity. The following are the options:

- Writing the exercises on the Board and eliciting the answers orally
- Completing the exercises in the handouts given
- Completing the exercises on the computers in a Call Lab

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i) Fill in the Blanks with the Most Appropriate Phrase

- i. Sorry, it's really busy and noisy in here. Could you ----- a little please? (speak with, speak in, speak up)
- ii. Could you please ----- while I check the information for you? (hold on, hold off, holding)
- iii. Don't worry about it. I have to go. I have another call _____ (coming through, to come, coming off)
- iv. Customer: I'd like a large pepperoni pizza with mushrooms, olives and extra cheese.
Take-out-clerk: Okay. I've ----- (got it all down, got it done, getting)

(Answers: i: speak up, (ii) hold on (iii) coming through and (iv) got it all down)

ii) Match the Following

Learners are asked to identify the vocabulary needed to speak effectively on the telephone in personal and business situations and match the situation with the appropriate telephone expressions:

Procedure

- Divide the class into pairs A and B.
- Group A gives out the situation orally while Group B chooses the right option that matches the given situation.

S. No.	Situation	Telephone Expression
1.	Ending a conversation	a. Let me repeat your information to make sure I got it right.
2	Connecting someone	b. I need to speak with him on an urgent matter. Please have him call me as soon as he gets in.

3	When you don't understand the caller	c. One minute, I'll transfer you now.
4	Leaving a message for someone	d. I'm sorry, I didn't catch what you just said.
5	Clarifying what your caller says	e. It's been great talking with you. I've got a meeting now so I better run.

(Answers: 1e, 2c, 3d, 4b, 5a)

2. Role Plays

Role playing refers to taking part in a make-believe situation to focus on specific English skills. Role plays can be used to help the class develop telephone language skills to practice situations that learners could encounter and the language they would need to employ in real life. The most important thing about practicing telephone conversation is that one shouldn't be able to see the person speaking to, on the phone. Here are a few role playing suggestions:

- In the same room, chairs can be put back to back to practice speaking on the phone wherein one only hears the other person's voice which will approximate a telephone situation.
- Learners may be asked to use the different internal office lines in the English Language Lab and call one another practising various conversations e.g. as an irate caller, a caller in a hurry, a talkative caller.
- Another variation could be to have one of the learners make a call on the telephone, pretending to be a native speaker.

Procedure

- Prepare Role Play cards.
- Divide the class into pairs and place two chairs back to back at the front of the class room.

- Let the learners pick up a card each i.e. as a caller and a receiver.
- Encourage the learners to enact the situation mentioned on the cards, in front of the class
- Let the class listen and take notes.
- Make necessary corrections or reformulations and provide appropriate/ useful telephone expressions after the role play.
- Repeat the same process with other pairs too.

It may be noted that variations of the above are possible. For instance, instead of Role Play Cards, the class may be divided into pairs and situations could be presented on PPTs, using an LCD or the CALL Lab systems. Alternatively, the situations could be written on the board.

Given below are some situations and characters or names that can be mentioned on the cards in which the learners use phrases commonly used on the telephone.

i) Introducing Yourself

The learner needs to understand that first impressions are generally formed, based on one's language and the tone one uses. Accordingly, it is important for the speaker to identify, clearly state the purpose of the call, and create a desire to continue the conversation in a friendly manner. Given below are examples of formal and informal contexts:

a. Formal

Anees Fatima: Good morning, thank you for calling Vibrant Solutions. This is

Anees Fatima. How may I help you?

Ajmal: Hello, This is Ajmal. I am a B.Tech. graduate. I would like to know about the job opportunities available in your organization. Could you connect me to the concerned person?

Anees Fatima: The HR Manager Mr. Reddy would be right person to speak to. I will put you through at once.

b. Informal

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Abdul: Hello, Abdul here.
 Sudhakar: Hello Abdul. This is Sudhakar Chauhan. Can I talk to your dad?
 Abdul: Certainly Uncle, could you hold on a minute?

ii) Putting Someone through (connecting someone):

The learner needs to be aware that if one is talking to someone in a business context, it's customary to use modal verbs like **could**, **can**, **may** or **would** when making a request. Similarly, it is important to use courtesy words like **please** and **thank you** when asking for or receiving help or information.

c. Varshita: Good Morning, Eazy Business Solutions. This is Varshita
 Vimla: Good Morning, this is Vimla. Could you put me through to Shreya please?
 Varshita: Sure. *I'll put you through* right now. (Phrasal verb meaning connect).

d. Dhinakar: Good Morning, Pyramid Placements, Dhinakar here.
 Prashant: Good Morning, Prashant here. May I speak to Anil Andrews?
 (Formal)
 Dhinakar: One moment, please. I'll see if he is available.

It should be noted that if the line is busy, the caller can be asked if he/she is willing to wait for a few moments.

e. Front Office
 Executive: Good Afternoon! Jayant Krishna, Vivanta Spa
 Caller: Can I have extension 321? (Extensions are internal numbers in an organisation)
 Front Office
 Executive: The line is busy Madam. Would it be possible for you to please *call back* after sometime? (When the extension requested is

busy)

Caller: No, I prefer to *hang on*, it's very important.

I'll put you through, call back and *hang on* are examples of frequently used phrasal verbs on the telephone.

iii) How to Reply When Someone is Not Available

The learner needs to be aware of how to reply in the event of the concerned person not being available and if necessary explain his/her absence.

Office Executive: Good Morning! Silicon Business School.

Caller: Could I speak to someone who can resolve my billing issues?

Office Executive: Sure but I'm afraid Ms. Ashalata is not available at the moment

Caller: Does Ms. Ashalata handle the billing issues here?

Office Executive: Yes. She does. She's in a meeting at the moment. Would you please call back at 3.00 PM?

iv) Taking a Message

While taking a message, it is essential to know who the call is for, the date and time of the call, name of caller, his phone number, reason for the call and a convenient time to return the call. Also note details of anything you have agreed with the caller.

Abdul: Hello, Abdul here.

Peter: This is Peter Jackson calling, is Papa in?

Abdul: I'm afraid he's out at the moment. Can I take a message Sir?

Peter: Yes, Could you ask him to call me at 6PM this evening? I need to talk to him about Mr.Chopra's wedding.

Abdul : OK Sir. I'll make sure Papa gets this message.

Peter: Thanks, bye.

Abdul : Bye

v) Leaving a Message

At times, the person one wishes to contact is not available. In such a situation, one should take care that the recorded message one leaves is audible, complete, concise and clear so as to avoid any misunderstanding. As Seid (URL) states, “Especially when leaving messages, speak clearly and slowly. Do not use broken phrases, slang or idioms. Always, always leave your return telephone number as part of your message, including the area code . . . and S-L-O-W-L-Y, including REPEATING your telephone number at the end of your message.”. A useful tip provided by Syndi Seid (URL) is that one should practice leaving one’s number by saying it aloud to oneself as slowly as an informational operator says it.

It’s always good to plan on what one is going to say in the message. It may take a few minutes, but it does make a lot of difference. Make sure one’s own name , name of the person calling ,the reason for calling, the time called, the time the receiver should call back, and phone number (if necessary) are included. Take care that there isn't any background noise.

Be friendly, polite, and get right to the point. Ensure not to whisper, ramble, pause unnecessarily, or add words like *uh*, *um*, etc. It is important to say a proper goodbye or have a good ending to the message. At the end of the message, one can consider adding something along the lines of "Hope to see you soon," or "Have a great day."

- Nousheen: Hey Mini. It's Nousheen. Call me! (Informal)
- Richards: Hello, this is Richards calling for Prashant. Could you please return my call as soon as possible. My number is 334-5689.
Have a good day. (Formal)
- Mahima: This is Mahima calling from doctor Reddy's office. I just wanted to let you know that you're due for a check-up this month. Please give us a ring whenever it's convenient.
Hope to see you soon. (Formal)

vi) Dealing with Problems

It's always better to seek clarification or help when one is unable to understand the conversation properly than to pretend that one has understood everything. It's perfectly acceptable to use phrases like 'Could you repeat that, please?' 'Could you speak a little more slowly, please?' and 'would you mind spelling that out for me please?' Using phrases like these will help make sure that you have a successful phone call, and may save you from lots of problems later on.

- Arsalan: Good Morning, this is Arsalan from Zenith Computers
- Vivek: Good Morning . This is Vivek. I've come to know about the special offers at Zenith Computers through the newspapers. Can you *throw a little more light* on them?
- Arsalan: Sure Sir, there are two special offers: Multimedia Monster with latest Core 2 Dual with 4 GB RAM, 1 TB Hard Disk, monitor included – Rs.50,500/- and Office Taskmaster with ordinary CPU, 2GB RAM, 500 GB Hard Drive, monitor not included – Rs18000/-. There is 1 Year guaranty on all computers and a discount of 5% is offered for orders of more than five computers
- Vivek: I'm sorry, I don't understand. Could you repeat that, please?

vii) Handling Confidential Information

The learner needs to be made aware of the importance of protecting confidential business information when responding to caller requests for information. Given below are responses that the learner can use when handling important, sensitive information. For example:

- "I'm sorry, Sir/Madam. Company policy is that I am not permitted to give out that information."
- "May I have more details on why it is required?"

The learner can then make an assessment from there. If they are unwilling to say who they are, remember that one is under no obligation to continue speaking to them.

viii) Ending a Conversation

It is important to end a conversation on a polite and positive note. The learner can be assisted in doing this by using phrases which indicate that the conversation has come to an end. Before deciding to end a phone call, one should make sure that the "business" part of the conversation is complete. However excessively talkative callers can pose a problem. In such cases, when the caller takes a pause in the conversation, one should promptly take the opportunity to end the call, with a pleasant statement choosing one's words carefully. For example:

- I am glad to hear about your child but I am afraid I have to take another call. If you need any help in filling the forms for your child, please do call back.(informal)
- Your business is very important to us and I need to enter your order into the system. Is there anything else you need? (formal)

3. Real Life Situations

An excellent way to improve telephone language is through employing real life situations. Finally the learners could be asked to make live calls. For example, they could find a product they are interested in and research it over the telephone.

Procedure

- Mention the purpose of the call, telephone number and the name of the organization on the card.

- Ask every learner to come and pick up a card from the card box.
- Record the live calls and play it out to the entire class to make necessary corrections and reinforce the appropriate telephone language.

Card No 1

Product Information

Call the computer store mentioned below and ask for the following information:

- Current special offers on computers
- Computer configuration (RAM, Hard Drive, CPU)
- Guaranty
- Discount available for an order of ten computers

Name of the store: Computers and Beyond

Telephone No : 04027565120

Card No2

Enquiry

Call the Book Store Avidreader and enquire whether the English Language Text books suggested by the Dept. of English of AUL University are available.

Name of the Store: Avidreader

Telephone No : 04023469879

Conclusion

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Learning to speak graciously on the telephone and paying attention to telephone etiquette is important since this can mean the difference between success and failure in life.

This underscores the need for teaching telephone English which can be challenging due to the lack of visual clues. This paper looked at how this can be overcome by enabling learners to become adept at the basic phrases that are used in telephoning thus empowering them to speak confidently on the telephone through a variety of oral and written exercises, role plays that simulate authentic telephoning situations and through real life situations.

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