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A new path for TAPP: Reflecting on communication strategies used in ELF interactions between native and non-native speakers of English

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Abstract

When virtual exchange projects pair up L1 English speakers and ELF speakers, the first can be implicitly positioned as language experts, the second as learners. But ELF speakers are often more experienced in negotiating spoken and written communication. Are speakers of native English equally prepared to accommodate ELF speakers? This consideration inspired a project that connected students in the US with students in Italy. These students recorded spoken interactions that we analyzed to explore how the students used specific communication strategies (CS). Results show that ELF speakers efficiently used CSs, especially self-rephrasing, a key self-repair strategy based on pre-empting problems of understanding in ELF. Compared to L1 English speakers, ELF speakers proved to be more resourceful and more adept at transforming spoken communication into an act of mediation. Training in ELF did help the L1 English speakers adjust their speech, but these students need more extensive and systematic training to develop their communication skills in ELF interactions.

Keywords: *Virtual exchange, English as a lingua franca, pragmatics, communication strategies, accommodation*

Introduction

Asymmetrical relationships in virtual exchange projects

Virtual exchange projects (O'Dowd, 2018), and, specifically, TAPP (Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project) collaborations (Mousten, Vandepitte, Arnó, and Maylath, 2018) that link college courses in different countries and pair up proficient and emergent speakers of English present challenges and opportunities. A key problem is that the first group can be implicitly presented as the "language experts" and the second as the "learners" who need exposure to native English.

There are two main problems with this approach: First it assumes that standard English is a stable and discrete code that will facilitate mutual understanding in most types of communicative situations. The ideologies of monolingualism and native-speakerism

tend to present language as fixed, self-standing, and 'immune' from the influence of cultural, political, and economic forces that shape our communicative behaviors (Canagarajah, 2007; Cook, 1999, Holliday, 2006; Kim, 2011). These ideologies make us see linguistic difference as "a defining problem for and a characteristic of the socially different" (Lu & Horner, 2013, p. 583). Strangers and cultural others tend to be defined by what they lack, native-like linguistic fluency, while their ability to speak several languages and their accommodation skills often go unnoticed.

Second, intercultural communication is not a one-way road in which speakers of English as a Foreign Language (ELF) have to meet native speakers in their linguistic comfort zone. Native speakers also need to make an effort to accommodate ELF speakers, but they find it difficult because they often lack the negotiation skills that regular ELF speakers develop through sustained practice.

To avoid establishing unequal and asymmetrical relationships between the two groups of students involved in our virtual exchange project, we did not position idiomatic American English as the language to be used in the Zoom meetings or for the written reports produced by the students in Italy. We did not present the students in the US as the authoritative language experts whose main role was to coach or tutor the Italian students.

Following Helm, Guth, and Farrah's invitation to avoid positioning emergent speakers solely as language learners (2012), we emphasized their expertise as users of ELF because we agree with Canagarajh (2007) that speakers of ELF should never be reductively considered as incompetent.

Theoretical framework: ELF research

The language of intercultural exchange is not native English: Emergent speakers use ELF both in spoken and written interactions. ELF is hard to describe because of its fluid, variable, negotiable, and context-dependent nature (Canagarajah, 2007; Jenkins, 2015; Kimura & Canagarajah, 2018). However, studies on pragmatic aspects of ELF have shown that emergent speakers can effectively use strategies to negotiate meaning and achieve mutual understanding. Importantly, failure to adjust speech in situations of intercultural contact results in a type of miscommunication that Seidlhofer terms unilateral idiomaticity (Seidlhofer, 2009), which occurs when speakers use idiomatic expressions that interlocutors are unlikely to know.

Rather than focusing on features of ELF as a variety of English, an idea that has been recently rejected by scholars, researchers (see, e.g., the work of Bjorkman, Cogo, and Mauranen) have recently investigated how ELF speakers use several communication strategies to pre-empt or repair misunderstanding and achieve mutual understanding.

This line of research is important in that it allows us to understand how language and understanding are effectively negotiated in diverse contexts of intercultural communication.

Virtual exchange project conducted in spring 2021

A group of seven students enrolled in the Ecology of Global English, a course offered at Penn State Behrend, were paired up with seven students, volunteers majoring in English studies, at Piemonte Orientale University. The exchange was chronologically organized in the following way:

1. We prepared students for the exchange by introducing ELF research.
2. We organized students in groups and asked them to schedule their Zoom meetings.
3. We asked students to record their Zoom meetings so that they could later analyze their conversations.
4. We asked students to write a reflective report on their meetings.

Research goals

We did not determine a-priori which CSs (of the several identified in ELF research) we would analyze. After a first listening session, the frequent occurrence of four CSs suggested further and deeper analysis of their forms and functions. Related goals were to understand ELF speakers' attitudes toward English language learning and evaluate the native speakers' performance as users of ELF.

Methods

All the participants involved in this project are college students:

- Speaker 1 (S1): Male. ELF speaker. Proficient speaker of Italian
- Speaker 2 (S2): Female. ELF speaker. Native speaker of Italian
- Speaker 3 (S3): Female. ELF speaker. Native speaker of Italian
- Speaker 4 (S4): Female. Native speaker of English
- Speaker 5 (S5): Female. Native speaker of English

The data for our study consists of approximately five hours of unplanned, open-ended conversations (Ochs, 1979) between L1 English speakers and ELF speakers that took place on Zoom. These conversations are "interactional" in nature. The goal was to establish a social relationship (Brown & Yule, 1983). These participants covered several different topics related to culture and social life without a unifying theme. Their Zoom

conversations were recorded. Then some students shared their video recordings, others shared their audio recordings.

To analyze the conversations, we used Otter.ai, a software that extrapolates transcriptions from videos. This software links the sound file to the transcript and allows researchers to hear the original utterances while seeing the corresponding segments highlighted on the screen. The full transcription of the conversations resulted in a corpus of 31,200 words. This corpus was intensively analyzed to look into the number of occurrences of selected CSs used by the speakers.

Considering the type of interlocutors (peers from different L1 backgrounds who had never met before), the type of speech events (unplanned conversations), and the specific medium of interaction (computer-mediated), we decided to focus on the use of four CSs frequently identified and discussed in ELF research (Björkman, 2014; House, 2010; Kaur, 2016; Kennedy, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Lichtkoppler, 2007; Mauranen, 2006).

- Self-repetition (exact repetition; the form and meaning of the original is not changed at all)
- Self-paraphrase (the variation covers the majority of words of the original)
- Comprehension checks (direct or indirect questions that the speaker asks to see if the interlocutor can follow the speaker)
- Co-construction of utterances

Following categorizations established in Conversation Analysis (CA), the first three strategies are typically 'self-initiated' while the fourth one is 'other-initiated'.

Each of us analyzed and coded the transcriptions separately, picking up instances of CSs; then we compared our results. Following Björkman (2014), the CSs were identified by studying the surrounding discourse carefully and considering the previous and following turns. When we disagreed on the classification of a pragmatic strategy, we negotiated a solution rather than just discarding our finding. The units of analysis are not individual utterances, but sequences of negotiation (Seedhouse 2004), clusters of closely related turns. In CA, sequences and turns-within-sequences are the primary units of analysis.

Results

The following table reveals the number of occurrences for each CS and shows examples of these CSs in action.

Table 1 . Number of occurrences of selected CSs and examples of their use in action

Pragmatic strategy and occurrences	Examples
Self-paraphrase **N = 14**	S1 ● Some Americans have never saw, have never seen… S2 ● you are Americans, right? Like 100% Americans, or… S3 (notice the false starts) ● And the only thing... the only tickets we can... we could get it, we could have, we could had, sorry my grammatic problem. ● Here in Italy it's like crime...well not a real crime, but like a fashion crime let's say, if you wear socks with open shoes S2 (talking about acting) ● So when did you start? I mean, like, were you like a little kid or this passion just grew when you were a teenager … S4 ● No, I think, I think because of our acting background... our theatre background, we…
Self-Repetition **N = 11**	S1 ● Okay, I have a class in, I have a class called English language. I actually have English language and linguistics, English language and linguistics. S4 ● It's really fascinating that we love communicating with each other. We're so interested in how we are able to communicate with each other.
Co-construction of utterances **N = 7**	S1 and S51 ● S1: Are you vegans? ● S5: We just try to be . I don't know if we are good vegans ● S1: You're part time vegans! S4 and S5 ● I think it's so nice. So because it's, you want to be polite and kind… ● Considerate! S2 and S3 talking about aspirations ● S3: you should get a job, like a normal job and do whatever you like, no, no, whatever you like, what the society tells you to do. Because this is ● S2: What we are need to do!
Comprehension checks **N = 6**	S1 ● And it is about a guy who lives in Inglewood California. Have you... have you heard of Inglewood? S3 ● In Italy we have this thing where we say your dirty clothes you're washing in your house. I don't know if it makes any sense.

Discussion

Our findings on self-paraphrase, the most common strategy of self-repair, confirm results shared by Mauranen (2006): ELF speakers engage in rephrasing their own speech to a considerable extent while some native speakers do it less frequently. ELF speakers used paraphrases mostly to correct what they perceived as errors, either grammatical errors (wrong use of tenses, for example), or errors in word choice and collocation. They also used self-paraphrase to increase explicitness (Cogo & Pitzl 2016). As such, the use of self-paraphrase was a pre-emptive strategy to minimize non-understanding or misunderstanding.

The native speakers used self-paraphrase rarely, even when their use of academic jargon, formulaic expressions, and idioms demanded the use of explicitness strategies. When S4 and S5 presented themselves as "creative writing majors", for example, they did not anticipate that S2 and S3 would be confused. The Italian speakers relied on the "let it pass" strategy discussed by Firth (1996). They pretended to understand and moved on, but a minute later S2 asked: "So you are taking a degree in what?" S3 added: "You will work in journalism?". At this point, S5 opted for the alternative phrasing "we will graduate in creative writing", which was understood. Our observations on native speakers' tendency to use opaque formulaic language in ELF interactions confirms Kecskes (2007) findings.

Concerning self-repetition, our findings are less reliable because it was one speaker in particular, S1, who used this strategy extensively. Our interpretation is that he used repetitions to avoid silence and gain time so as to produce fluent speech while thinking about what to say next. Lichtkoppler's (2007) reached similar conclusions reflecting on the functions of this CS. S1 was the speaker who always appeared to make an effort to sound 'correct,' to use native English. Even after participating in a workshop on ELF, he remained focused on his goal to learn English from native speakers as the following statement clearly shows: "I can tolerate anything from a non-native speaker because that's not his language. But coming from a native speaker that is really considered as an offense because he should be showing me the right way."

Self-repetition was used in fewer circumstances by the other ELF speakers, who never seemed to monitor their speech too much. Rather, they sounded more carefree, free from the anxiety of performing well in English.

S2 and S3, who had never met each other before, often collaborated in the construction of utterances, a strategy also used by S4 and S5 who knew each other well. The function of this CS is to signal that speakers are on the same wavelength; that they are attentive and eager to cooperate in the exchange (Kirkpatrick 2010). House (2010) explains how the use of this CS in the Hamburg ELF data "shows a strong and consistent demonstration of consensus" (p. 375), but our data suggests that speakers of the same L1 are more likely to collaborate in the construction of sentences.

Comprehension checks were used more frequently by ELF speakers. A pause usually followed these direct or indirect questions to check reactions from the interlocutors such as nodding. This CS was always self-initiated considering that listeners rarely signalled comprehension problems unless they were due to technical problems with Zoom. What this means is that this CS was also used to pre-empt (rather than solve) problems. We agree with Mauranen (2006) that "comprehension checks and responses to them suggest both willingness to cooperate toward comprehension and an awareness of its precariousness" (140). The use of this CS as a self-regulatory discourse strategy shows intercultural sensitivity in that communicators focus on the needs of their interlocutors while trying to identify with them, understand their challenges.

Conclusion

The ELF interactions appeared to be of a cooperative nature even if ELF speakers did more accommodation work and used more proactive strategies to increase explicitness and to prevent potential misunderstandings (Björkman, 2014; Mauranen, 2006). The native speakers did make an effort to accommodate their interlocutors, but their major focus was on reducing the speed of their speech and clearly articulating words. Compared to ELF speakers, they rarely used CSs identified in ELF research. In addition, they used several idiomatic expressions thus causing problems with unilateral idiomaticity (Seidlhofer 2009). For example, at the end of one of the conversations, S5 said: "We had a blast!" What this means is that native speakers of English need explicit and specific training to communicate effectively with ELF speakers, especially in professional settings.

Finally, we observed that only S1 appeared eager to learn native English by listening to his conversation partners. In contrast, S2 and S3 never tried to imitate native speaker production and never asked to be corrected. When they needed help finding the right word or expression, they always relied on each other. They were just happy to make new friends overseas in a time of forced isolation due to the Covid pandemic.

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