Raising explicitness through self-repair in English as a lingua franca

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1. Introduction

English is a language like no other. Quite apart from the fact that at least a quarter of the world’s population is able to communicate in English (Crystal, 2003), what is perhaps more significant is that the rapid spread of English around the world has resulted in there being greater numbers of non-native speakers of the language than native speakers. Crystal (2003) estimates the ratio of the latter to the former to be about 1:3. The implication of this is that today there are likely to be more interactions taking place in English worldwide between non-native speakers of the language than between native speakers or native speakers and non-native speakers. Rapid and efficient transportation modes together with advanced information systems and globally connected markets, among others, means that people of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are interconnected in ways they have never been in the past. For many, if not most, English is the only language they have in common to facilitate interaction and achieve communicative goals.

The situation where English is used as an international lingua franca is a highly complex one. Mauranen aptly describes the ELF context as “a hybrid of many backgrounds” (2007:244) for participants in such encounters may be of diverse nationalities, ethnicities, cultures and linguistic as well as social backgrounds. While English constitutes a shared medium of communication for the participants, their level of competence in the language can be expected to differ widely. This diversity together with the fact that the participants are likely to have undergone different experiences in learning and using the...
language (Mauranen, 2006) means that they are apt to display “starkly different pronunciation patterns, differing degrees of lexical and grammatical knowledge of the code and may interpret lexical items and pragmatic cues differently” (Watterson, 2008:378). Participants can also be expected to have different expectations, perspectives and attitudes with regard to the language and their non-native interlocutors (Cogo, 2009). The lack of commonalities among interlocutors in the areas mentioned above contributes to an interactional situation that is both unstable and highly unpredictable (Mauranen, 2007).

Yet, despite the diversity inherent in the ELF context and the many shapes English takes in international interactions, the language continues to be used successfully by its non-native speakers, often “in ‘influential frameworks’, i.e. global business, politics, science, technology and media discourse” (House, 1999:74).

Speakers of ELF are often seen to employ a variety of means to facilitate the process of making meaning and achieving mutual understanding. This paper investigates how participants in an ELF situation manage the diversity inherent in the communicative context by looking specifically at their self-repair practices, which are found to be ubiquitous in ELF spoken data. It is suggested that self-repair constitutes an “explicitness strategy” (Mauranen, 2007) that allows speakers to improve on the clarity of their utterances and promote the comprehensibility of speech and in so doing contributes to successful communicative outcomes.

2. Managing diversity in ELF

How participants transcend the many challenges arising from the ELF context to successfully achieve their communicative goals constitutes an integral part of ongoing research into the use of English as a lingua franca. Findings show that successful ELF communication is often synonymous with enhanced negotiation of both meaning and form by the participants in interaction. Participants are said to resort to “processes of simplification and the exploitation of redundancies as well as heavy reliance on communication strategies and enhanced accommodation” (Hulmbauer et al., 2009:32) when communicating in ELF. The process of accommodation, where speakers modify their communicative behaviour to mirror that of their interlocutors, is particularly significant in this context. Cogo (2009), for instance, observes how participants use accommodation strategies like repetition and code switching as means of making what they say more intelligible to their interlocutor. In addition to facilitating communication, these convergence strategies also signal cooperation and solidarity and allow participants to “reduce” the existing “differences in the interest of wider communication with other people” (Seidlhofer, 2009:196).

Participants in an ELF situation, who are in all likelihood aware of the challenges diversity can pose on the outcome of an interaction, appear to take measures to pre-empt problems of understanding from the outset (Mauranen, 2006; Kaur, 2009). Mauranen, who notes the increased occurrence of comprehension checks, explanations and clarifications as well as collaborative completion of utterances in her data, attributes this to the participants’ “natural commonsense assumption that it is not easy to achieve [mutual understanding] without special effort” (2006:147) given the precarious nature of the ELF situation. Similarly, Kaur (2009) finds that the participants in her data make strategic use of common practices like repetition and paraphrase to create redundancy and avert breakdown in intersubjectivity at junctures where there are signals to suggest that shared understanding may be threatened. Specifically, the speakers repeat or paraphrase prior segments of talk following prolonged silence at a transition-relevance place, after muted minimal responses from the recipient or following overlapping talk to enhance recipient understanding and forestall a real problem of understanding.

In addition to the above, Mauranen (2007, 2010) also suggests that the speaker’s move to make discourse explicit constitutes a strategy of import in ELF interaction. Specifically, speakers are said to employ rephrasing, topic negotiation and discourse reflexivity as means to enhance the clarity and comprehensibility of what they say. Rephrasing or restructuring the form of a prior utterance, for instance, allows speakers to make themselves clear and improves “the chances that at least one of the formulations will get across to the hearers” (Mauranen, 2007:248). Topic negotiation, on the other hand, entails highlighting a topic change by first introducing the topic using a noun phrase and subsequently employing a co-referential subject pronoun. This practice (also commonly referred to as left-topic dislocation) allows the speaker to orientate the recipient to the topic before proceeding so that both speaker and recipient are in essence on the same page. Finally, through discourse reflexivity or metadiscourse, “speakers make explicit how they wish their interlocutors to understand their contributions, how they interpret other speakers’ talk, and what they expect from others’ contributions” (Mauranen, 2010:18). The aforementioned practices are said to contribute to greater communicative clarity and encompass some of the ways in which speakers manage the many differences present in the ELF interactional context.

It appears that regardless of the diversity present in the ELF context, the participants are able to utilize the resources at their disposal, linguistic or otherwise, to achieve successful communicative outcomes. Researchers investigating ELF in fact find few misunderstandings in their data (see House, 2002; Meierkord, 2000; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005) unlike those working in other fields of research, such as Intercultural Communication, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Intercultural Pragmatics and SLA, who examine native speaker–non-native speaker or non-native speaker–non-native speaker interaction in English (see, for example, Gumperz and Tannen, 1979; Thomas, 1983; Varonis and Gass, 1985). Misunderstanding and miscommunication are said to be common in such interactions and are attributed to the lack of commonalities among the participants, particularly with regard to linguistic and socio-cultural norms. As Gass and Varonis state, “When interlocutors do not share the same native language or the same sociocultural rules of discourse, the possibility for miscommunication is profound” (1991:122). While the disparity in findings can no doubt be attributed in part to the different theoretical and methodological orientations of the researchers concerned, it nevertheless points to a need for further investigation.
3. Defining repair

According to Schegloff et al., repair constitutes a “self-righting mechanism” that addresses “recurrent problems in speaking, hearing and understanding” (1990:31). The occurrence of repair in conversations in general is said to be “massive” (Schegloff et al., 1990:54) as participants address the difficulties that arise in interaction in an ongoing manner. When linguistic or cultural differences exist among the participants in interaction, repair can be expected to take on an even more prominent role as the participants may need to deal with increased troubles in speaking, hearing and understanding the talk (Wong, 2000; Mauranen, 2006). As such troubles can threaten intersubjectivity, participants resort to repair as a means to (re)establish intelligibility and arrive at mutual understanding (Wagner and Gardner, 2004; Kurhila, 2003). Bolinger ([1953] 1965:248, in Schegloff et al., 1990:55) makes this point clear when he asserts that the motive of repair or correction is “intelligibility”.

Repair is distinguished from correction in that it may occur in the absence of an error or a mistake and conversely, it may be absent in the event of an error or a mistake (Schegloff et al., 1990). Speech production difficulties, hearing problems and problems of understanding may trigger the initiation of repair by participants concerned with “trying to ‘get things right’” (Sacks, 1987:66) in order that the talk is able to move forward. What is presupposed is that something has gone wrong in the talk that needs to be put right. However, as has been shown elsewhere (see, for example, Mauranen, 2006; Kaur, 2009), repair practices may also be employed when there are no observable problems or trouble in the ongoing turn or prior turn. In such cases, the repair may serve to pre-empt a problem from the outset, thus addressing potential, rather than real, trouble. Gramkow’s question, “how is it that we can talk about ‘repair’, in cases where ‘problems’ are prevented, i.e. before the talk becomes problematic at all?” (2001:87), brings to light the need to consider the role of repair as not only confined to “trying to get things right” but also trying to make things clear, explicit and specific so that nothing goes wrong in the first place. In this paper, repair, specifically self-repair in ELF, will be examined with the latter role in mind.

Repair may be initiated by the speaker of a turn or the recipient and similarly may be performed or accomplished by either party. Given that three of the four basic positions in which repair may be initiated, i.e. immediately after the repairable, at transition-relevance place or in third position, are allocated for self-initiation and the opportunities for self-initiation of repair precede that for other-initiation, there is an organizational preference for self-repair over other-repair. This preference manifests itself in a “preponderance of self- over other-” repair in conversations (Schegloff et al., 1990:47). In spite of the above, much of the research on the role of repair in establishing intersubjectivity in talk has focused on other-repair given that the other’s move to initiate and/or perform repair of the speaker’s prior utterance is much more easily discerned. The negotiation of meaning that takes place between speaker and recipient in a repair exchange brings to light the source and the nature of the repairable, the repair operation undertaken and the outcome of the repair. Self-initiated repair, on the other hand, is as Schwartz explains, “the most difficult category of repair to perceive as negotiated interaction because the speaker does not overtly confer with the auditor” (1980:141) when addressing a potential problem. However, as participants in interaction are driven by a need to understand and to be understood, a move by the speaker to “frame and redo concepts which are potential trouble sources for the auditor” (Schwartz, 1980:141) can be perceived as being motivated by a need to be intelligible in order to facilitate understanding for the recipient.

Mauranen (2006) in her work on how participants in an ELF situation prevent misunderstanding found self-repair to be a commonly used, effective strategy. While self-repair encompasses various practices, Mauranen examined specifically the speaker’s act of rephrasing the content, word choice and grammar of prior talk. While rephrasing is commonplace and can be perceived as an attempt on the speaker’s part to make talk more intelligible, by Mauranen’s own admission such practices of self-repair “are not often highly explicit in their attempts to secure comprehension” (2006:139). They nevertheless suggest awareness on the part of the speaker of what is required to make expression more comprehensible. The present paper builds on the work done by Mauranen and aims to provide a systematic account of some of the self-repair practices employed in ELF that seem designed to make talk more explicit and intelligible. It is not the aim of the researcher however to establish if, and how, self-repair in ELF resembles (or not) self-repair in native-speaker interaction. Rather, the aim is to investigate self-repair in ELF as a phenomenon in its own right and to describe what participants do when they use English as a global lingua franca, which is the present reality of the language.

4. Data and participants

15 h of transcribed audio recordings of naturally occurring spoken interaction in ELF make up the data for analysis. The participants who self-recorded their conversations and discussions are mainly graduate students at an institution of higher learning in Kuala Lumpur. The 22 participants are of 13 different lingua-cultural backgrounds and therefore use English as the main medium of communication (see Appendix A).

The institute where the students were enrolled for an international master’s degree was chosen as the research site as its students were said to come “from Asia, Europe and the rest of the world” (Asia-Europe Institute, 2004). In addition, the teaching staff on the programme, which comprised mainly visiting academics, came from various parts of the world as well. While the majority of the participants were of Asian origin, they nevertheless came from diverse first language backgrounds and spoke different varieties of English. With regard to English language proficiency, the institute required a minimum TOEFL score of 550 in the paper-based test or a minimum IELTS score of Band 5 for entry into the programme. Although the majority of the students displayed intermediate level proficiency in the language, there were several who displayed proficiency levels that tended towards the lower intermediate. The teaching staff and research students, on the other hand,
seemed highly proficient in English. Diversity therefore was apparent not only in the participants’ linguistic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds but also in their level of proficiency in English.

Given that the study was grounded in a CA framework, it was imperative that naturally occurring spoken data be used for purposes of analysis. As such the participants’ cooperation was sought in recording their conversations and discussions outside the classroom as and when they happened. Cassette recorders were made available to several key participants and recordings were done at the locations where the interactions would have taken place regardless of whether they were being recorded or not. The researcher was in fact never present at any of these recordings. Since the students were required to work on several group assignments for their various courses, discussions pertaining to these form a large part of the data. Consultations with staff members as well as casual conversations between the participants were also included as they constitute a large part of the interactions that take place in this setting.

The recordings, conducted over a 10-week period, were then transcribed using a slightly adapted version of the notation system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix B). The transcription system, used widely by conversation analysts, incorporates many details of the delivery of the talk in addition to what is said to provide for a more accurate representation of the communicative exchange. Given the focus of the research on self-repair, features such as pauses, sound stretches, hesitation markers and cut-offs, among others, have been included in the transcription as they represent non-lexical speech perturbations that may accompany a segment of self-initiated repair.

5. Self-repair practices in ELF

All instances of self-repair were first identified for purposes of analysis. In line with CA procedures, identification of self-repair practices was based on the participants’ own orientations, namely, that the speaker orientated to his or her own speech as requiring some form of adjustment or modification (Kurhila, 2003). Thus, segments of talk that displayed disruption in the progress of an ongoing utterance by the speaker, followed by an immediate (or fairly immediate) move to repair some element(s) in the preceding part of the utterance formed the locus of analysis. Specifically, the analysis aimed to determine what it is that is repaired and what the repair entails. By focusing on these two aspects of self-repair, a clearer picture is obtained as to what speakers treat as repairables in their own utterances which gives some indication of the function(s) the repair is designed to perform.

As expected, some of the self-repair moves seem designed to correct or put right a wrong and examples of these are examined first (see section 5.1 below). Instances of correction are identified on the basis that they follow a hearable error or mistake in the preceding segment of an ongoing turn. Other self-repair moves are not preceded by an observable error or mistake; in many of such instances the repair seems designed to improve on the clarity of the ongoing utterance by making things explicit. The practices of self-repair employed in this regard are examined in detail in section 5.2. While self-repair can serve a variety of functions, it is the aforementioned two that form the focus of the present paper.

5.1. Righting the wrongs

Correction or “doing correcting”, which entails replacing an error or mistake with what is correct, constitutes one type of repair performed regularly in talk (Schegloff et al., 1990). Following Kurhila, corrections are identified as those “cases where the alternative version is produced to replace a linguistic unit… which can be said to be erroneous according to the norms of the standard language” (2001:1086). Given the focus of the research on self-repair, the replacements of interest are those produced by the speaker himself or herself and are targeted at a trouble source occurring in the preceding segment of an ongoing turn. While speakers of a second language are said to “produce many linguistic deviations… and if they were fastidious, would have endless opportunities for correction” (Brouwer et al., 2004:76), other-correction in second language data is said to be rare. Self-corrections instead are more common and are designed to address errors involving the different aspects of the speaker’s language, i.e. phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic (Salonen and Laakso, 2006), as illustrated below.

Self-correction may address a problem at the phonological level where speakers can be seen to correct their articulation of a word or to correct a phonemic slip as shown below:

(1) S: yes for-for you know for infrastructure also building something you know cemong- er cement and you know .(0.8) steel

(2) A: so what about- eh you have any:: for example like us we have identi-id-

identification card .(0.8) you guys have identification- identification?

(3) L: okay let- let me chick- check the article huh?

In the examples above, the correction entails replacing the mispronounced word with the correct version. The initiation of repair is marked by non-lexical means, such as hesitation markers, cut-offs and pauses, and is followed immediately by the repair proper. Once the correction is done, the speaker continues with the rest of his or her utterance.

Self-correction may also take place at the lexical level where an incorrect word choice is replaced with the correct one. Alternatively, the correction may involve the insertion of a lexical item previously omitted.
K: and in this er er ... (0.7) topic I also: er raise ... (0.8) the government strategy in order to restore-to: er respond to this weakness

M: yeah the one thing is you know the Palma wa-one we know how er you know where- ... (0.6) what we need to learn

D: instead when we are sending- entering university we do not- we don’t know what the plagiarisms

As the examples show, lexical replacements are performed immediately following the production of the incorrect lexical item with little or no disruption to the syntactic structure of the sentence. The incorrect items appear to be the result of a slip of the tongue and are easily dealt with through self-initiated repair.

M: they losing their erm electronics

D: uh huh

M: their competitiveness in electronics

S: you know in ex- in my experience you know ... (0.5) last er:: last month

S: oh yeah th-the transportation was not er made for us ... (0.5) so: er the can- trip is cancel.

Insertion of lexical items previously omitted is also performed immediately, often resulting in the next word being cut off to allow for the insertion of the missing word as in (8) and (9) above. In the above cases, the missing word is necessary to render the speaker’s utterance meaningful; omission of the word therefore constitutes an error that the speaker orientates to by providing the word in question immediately.

At the morphological level, self-correction can take several forms, for instance, revising the inflection of a word, changing the tense used or correcting the word from singular to plural, among others.

D: to typing again to type, to: finish my:: er part=

M: so yeah global education become commercialise "some"- I put a little bit er: er but I don’t- I didn’t put too much.

S: so my-my friend my ... (0.5) friends er::: they are- because I-I graduated with (those) in august

The examples above show that the participants are aware of the inaccuracy of some of the forms used and correct themselves where and when possible. Morphological errors of the types above are in fact plentiful in the data but most of them pass uncorrected. This may stem from the fact that minor “deviations from the linguistic norms of the target language …rarely create trouble for understanding and meaning” (Wagner and Gardner, 2004:10) and are therefore perceived as inconsequential to the unfolding talk. However, when the speaker does self-correct, it suggests an attunement to the problem and an orientation to accuracy.

Finally, at the syntactic level, self-correction may involve the speaker abandoning the emerging syntactic construction, changing the word order or revising the clause type, and the like.

W: he-he play where? he-he- where does he play?

J: four or five articles that er ... (1.4) ‘er’ regulate ... (0.9) the area of er freedom of good er movement of- free movement of goods.

D: we have to: make- (open) a: ... (1.7) a: syncron: s-steps ... (0.6) to synchronize our steps=

The examples illustrate the speaker’s close monitoring of the emerging sentence and the move to self-correct when what surfaces is an erroneous construction in the making. Syntactic self-repairs can be more complex than word replacements or insertions as they may involve extensive revisions to the structure of the sentence-in-construction.

In addition to the correction of language errors, self-repair can also involve revision of content or fact so that the information provided is accurate (Gaskill, 1980). Some of the errors of fact appear to result from a slip of the tongue as in (17) while in other cases, the correction involves adjustment to the degree or extent of what is said as in (16) and (18).
(17) M: I mean in Burma now you know a lot of the: er: private- ...(0.6) private education ...(0.6) institution not not a lot about four, five private er you know er private education center very expensive.

(18) K: the erm ...(0.5) enrolment rate
M: [yeah
K: [of the student for example most- ...(0.5) a lot of them live in the city but some student they- they cannot afford to pay for their teacher everyday

Self-correction of content may be marked with the use of the negation marker “not” as in (16) and (17) or left unmarked as in (18). The above examples show that the participants not only monitor the various aspects of their language but also pay careful attention to what is said to ensure that the message communicated is accurate and meaningful in the given context.

In all the examples above, the speaker’s move to self-repair appears to be triggered by an observable error in a preceding segment of the ongoing utterance as reflected in the correction performed. In righting the wrongs, immediately or almost immediately, the speaker displays an orientation to accuracy in cases where deviations from the acceptable form may result in distortion of meaning which can lead to problems in understanding. While other-correction of form is said to be rare in second language conversations (Wagner and Gardner, 2004), self-correction is certainly more common as the speakers, given their non-native status, may subscribe to the belief that accuracy of form will promote the intelligibility of speech and the comprehensibility of talk and in doing so provide for success in communication (Mauranen, 2006).

The analysis above provides a basis for comparison of self-repair practices that are motivated by reasons other than the correction of a linguistic or factual error as in the examples below.

5.2. Raising explicitness, enhancing clarity

Repair (as opposed to correction) can occur in the absence of a “hearable error, mistake, or fault” (Schegloft et al., 1990:33), or as Kurhila puts it, “it does not have to be an error which evokes a repair” (2001:1084). It is this category of repair that is of greater interest in the context of the present research. The question that arises in this regard is what else might evoke self-repair if not an error? Schegloft cites “the unavailability of a word, such as a name, when needed” (2000:209) as one type of trouble, apart from error, that might trigger self-repair. While Schegloft’s observation is made on the basis of native speaker data, it is possible that in ELF conversations, where the interlocutors are non-native speakers of the language, self-repair may be triggered by other motives in addition to the aforementioned. In identifying the kinds of repair performed and the types of repairables addressed, the analysis attempts to answer the question “why that now?” when there is no hearable error or mistake in the preceding segment of talk. Specifically, the analysis focuses on those segments where the speaker produces an alternative reference for something said previously (Kurhila, 2001) or where additions are made without the presence of linguistic or factual errors.

One self-repair practice identified entails the speaker replacing a general term used in the preceding segment of an ongoing utterance with a more specific one. The following examples illustrate this practice:

(16) K: and the way:: er he speak er the way he pronounce ...(1.4) I think it’s hard for me to understand
(17) M: no- ...(0.7) I think generally they know english basic english
S: uhhuh
M: they don’t speak out too much but they know- they understand
(18) S: er do you-have you- have you found some ...(0.5) truth that how people- how students think about plagiarism?
(19) V: or: you can just check the price ...(1.0) there ...(0.7) maybe you pay immediately after you get goods- after you get book but in that of e-trade you may not see the goods physically you may just see er: an ...( sample

The examples above show the speaker replacing a previously used lexical item with a different one, one that is related to the prior but is semantically more specific and narrow. In (16), K’s self-repair makes it clear that his difficulty in understanding is not just due to the way his lecturer speaks but specifically has to do with his pronunciation. Similarly in (17), M replaces “know” with “understand” possibly as “know” suggests both the ability to produce and to understand while in this case, the group being referred appear to be lacking in their productive skills given that “they don’t speak out too much”. The lexical replacement thus narrows down the possible range of meanings to a very specific one. In (18), S, who is talking about plagiarism in academia, substitutes “people” with the more specific “students”. V, in (19), explains the concept...
of e-trade by describing what it is not. To illustrate his point, he gives the example of buying a book from a bookstore. While
the term “goods” is not incorrect, the replacement “book” is specific to the context of a bookstore.

The practice of replacing a general term with a more specific one has been noted by Kurhila (2003) in her native speaker-
non-native speaker data. The native speaker’s (of Finnish) move to initiate repair in the next turn by producing a more
specific term, in rising intonation, is said to be motivated by the need “to solve the uncertainty about what exactly the client
[non-native speaker] means” (2003:48). In the examples above, the speaker is seen to employ a similar procedure, minus the
rising intonation. While both the general and specific terms have a “loose semantic connection” (Kurhila, 2003:48), the more
general term has a broad spectrum of meanings and thus can cause some confusion for the interlocutor. By replacing it with a
more specific term, the speaker makes his or her utterance explicit which can eliminate any ambiguity that may detract the
interlocutor from arriving at shared understanding.

The speaker is also seen to make his or her reference more specific by inserting a qualifying lexical item where and when
necessary. This practice is noted in segments of talk where the omission of the item renders the meaning of the utterance
general and even vague. The insertion of the item narrows down the range of meanings that may be conveyed by the
utterance and in doing so can contribute in enhancing the clarity of communication, as in the examples below.

(20) D: I think that after …(0.5) you see er the the five member states- the five
original member state is indonesia, thailand, philipine, malaysia is the biggest
country

(21) R: for the next topic on: on internship for for er my project I: would like to write
on the role …(0.8) of diplomatic …(0.9) to the: …(0.6) trade oh world trade

(22) S: you can say the: trade- e-trade has a very high: …(0.6) risk …(0.8) got a
possibility of the risk that you will be: …(0.7) you could be er cheated=

(23) V: so it is a kind of interaction …(1.4) a kind of trading interaction

In (20), D, who is talking about the regional organization ASEAN, inserts the word “original” which makes it clear that
reference is specifically being made to the five founding nations and not just any five of its 10 member countries. R, in (21)
adds the word “world” to qualify that his project will be on the role of diplomacy in world trade specifically and not just trade
in general. Similarly in (22) and (23), the speakers insert the letter “e” and the word “trading”, respectively, which narrows
down the possible range of meanings to a very specific one. The practice of qualifying a statement by performing self-repair
of the type illustrated above can contribute towards not only making the speaker’s utterance explicit but also pre-empting
the need for the interlocutor to seek further clarification.

Another self-repair procedure employed involves the speaker replacing a pronoun used in the preceding segment of talk
with its referent. Problematic reference has been cited as a potential source of misunderstanding in both native speaker
interaction (Schegloff, 1987) and ELF interaction (Kaur, 2011). Schegloff (1987:205) explains that failure on the part of the
recipient to make the connection between a pro-term and its referent can result in an “interpretive error”, which reveals
itself as a misunderstanding in the next turn. The move to self-repair by substituting the pronoun with its referent, either
immediately or in a partial repeat of the prior segment of talk, therefore suggests possible awareness on the part of the
speaker of the ambiguity that pronoun usage can result in and may reflect an attempt to pre-empt a problem from the outset,
as the examples below illustrate.

(24) M: because they: china try to im- export very much but they- US companies and
the::: EU companies they are not allowed to import as much to er export.

(26) D: Ashok or Faridah just er: …(0.8) the guys at the: international office. Faridah
or Ashok you can ask them …(1.0) both. (3.5) it’s nice if you can go back to:::
R: are you sure that er they- they’ll be- …(1.2) are you sure that A- AEI agree=:

(27) M: do we need to do presentation for this one or?
K: I’m not sure maybe not- maybe [no
M: [I don’t think=
S: =no [no no
M: [because er she didn’t mention- …(0.5) professor didn’t mention
anything?

(28) V: yeah and japan too these three countries are very good in e-commerce and
they’re making a lot of money from it …(1.4) a lot of money from e-tra[de
In (24), M compares the export volumes of companies in China with those in the US and the EU. As she uses the pronoun “they” to refer first to companies in China and then to companies in the US and the EU, in both cases self-repair is initiated immediately where the pronoun is replaced with its referent. In doing so, the reference of the pronoun is clarified and possible confusion avoided. R’s move to replace the pronoun “they” with its referent “AEI” in (26) makes it clear that he is specifically referring to approval from the institution on the matter of whether he would be able to do his internship in his home country. The repair helps to prevent any ambiguity from arising with regard to the reference being made particularly since D, in the prior turn, had suggested that R speak to “the guys at the international office”, i.e. Ashok and Faridah, regarding the matter. In (27), M (in the last line) uses the pronoun “she” in her first mention of the lecturer of the course in question. As no reference had been made to the lecturer in the entire discussion preceding the extract, the use of the pronoun in this instance can result in non-understanding. By replacing the pronoun with its referent, M makes the reference explicit and disambiguates the matter of who the “her” refers to. Finally, in (28), V self-repairs when he replaces the pronoun “it” with its referent after a 1.4-s pause. It is possible that V expects a response or some comment at this transition-relevance place and receiving none, he produces the referent of the pronoun in a partial repeat of prior talk to clarify meaning. The practice of substituting a pronoun with its referent, as illustrated in the examples above, allows the speaker to make the reference explicit and in so doing can help improve the clarity of expression.

Analysis of the data also revealed a self-repair practice in which the speaker inserts the subject or object noun (or pronoun) of the sentence initially omitted in the preceding segment of an ongoing utterance. While the omission of the subject or object noun does not render the utterance meaningless, given that context is available in the surrounding talk, the inclusion of it can contribute to raising the explicitness of the utterance and enhancing communicative clarity.

(29) S: because ...(0.6) er miss Jodie said for er the students who stay in this er you know in Asian countries
R: uhhuh
S: many want- many students hope to go to European countries for working

(30) D: and maybe it’s ...(0.9) it’s good idea if you: ...(2.0) consultated with the Halimah and ask about er ask her about your: ...(0.6) topic

(31) V: we get the:: we invented this er pictographic language
S: yes
V: actually day by day we’s you know modify [the ( ) ]
S: [you mean-you mean you use chinese language?] V: yeah chinese. that’s why the: similar style
S: huh
V: vietnam is similar style with the chinese.

(32) S: and there’s another one ...(0.5) more to come huh? ...(0.5) another one assignment?

In (29), S tells R that according to the department secretary, many of the Asian students enrolled in the programme would like to do their internship in Europe. While the subject, i.e. students from Asia, has been established, S self-repairs to insert the noun “students” which he then follows with a lexical replacement. Thus although the reference of “many” is apparent, given the context provided in the prior talk, S’s self-repair makes the reference explicit. In (30), D suggests that his interlocutor see the lecturer, Halimah, to seek advice on choosing a topic for his essay. While the lecturer is named and the use of the object pronoun in this context is not obligatory, D initiates repair and inserts the pronoun “her” which raises the clarity of his utterance. Extract (31) sees V explaining the similarity of the Vietnamese script to the Chinese script. In the last line, V self-repairs when he inserts both the subject and object nouns previously omitted. It is possible that S’s request for confirmation a couple of turns earlier prompts V to self-repair in an attempt to improve on the clarity of his utterance. S’s enquiry in (32) follows a discussion of an assignment for a particular course. Not only is the topic switch above unmarked but the reference is ambiguous as the subject noun is omitted. S, perhaps sensing the possibility of non-understanding given the lack of uptake by the interlocutor during the 0.5-s pause, performs repair by inserting the subject noun of the question.

In the examples above, the speaker’s move to self-repair increases the explicitness of his or her ongoing utterance as a missing subject or object noun can impact the clarity of expression. In (29) and (30), the insertion of the subject noun and object pronoun, respectively, creates redundancy while in (31) and (32), that which is left unsaid can be gleaned from the context. The speaker’s move to perform repair by explicitly (re)stating the subject or object of the sentence therefore seems to suggest awareness on the part of the speaker of the need to be explicit in interaction to forestall problems in understanding.

The final self-repair practice examined differs from those discussed above in that it does not involve a lexical replacement or insertion but rather constitutes a type of meta-discourse (Mauranen, 2010). The discourse marker “I mean”, which can serve various functions in talk (see, for example, Schiffrin, 1987), is often used in repair segments or sequences “to explicitly forewarn [the recipient of] upcoming adjustments to what has just been said” (Fox Tree and Schrock, 2002:731). This function of the discourse marker is particularly important in ELF interaction where segments of disfluent or fragmented
speech can obscure the message the speaker is trying to convey. By flagging the upcoming modification of his or her utterance with “I mean”, the speaker makes it clear that what follows is “what I actually want to say or am trying to say”. This can contribute towards enhancing “clarity and explicitness in discourse organisation” (Mauranen, 2007:258).

(33) D: er: ...(0.9) I still- ...(1.9) I still does not- erm I- I mean that ...(1.0) er I have one or two:: er idea to start my proposal but ...(1.3) I’m not ...(1.1) confident yet about the: topic

(34) R: so when we make the: transparency tomorrow
S: [eh tomorrow we have to make “a”
R: where to- we- I mean we have to buy the transparency right?

(35) S: but how-how do you: how do you put er: the two weeks er for the Gareth?
...(0.5) I mean erm ...(0.5) for the I mean covering up er Gareth er er Gareth er lecture?

(36) S: and meantime I will I will find a: I mean I will put my
A: huh if you [have the time
S: [( ] inputs er input for the- the threats and the potential.

The initial part of D’s utterance in (33) is marked by disfluencies, particularly in the form of hesitation markers, cut-offs and pauses, which suggest trouble in constructing his utterance. The incomplete construction is then abandoned in favour of a different one. D’s use of “I mean” preceding the alternative construction alerts the recipient of the need to focus his attention on that which is to follow rather than on that which came before as it is the latter that is of consequence. Similarly in (34), R cuts off a question on where they could buy transparencies to first check that they were in fact required to buy them. The discourse marker “I mean” makes it clear that what follows is in fact what R wants to know at this juncture. In (35), S enquires about the two weeks required to replace the classes of a particular lecturer. Perhaps sensing the inadequacy of his prior utterance in conveying his enquiry, in addition to the disfluencies contained within it, S initiates repair to clarify the matter which he marks with the use of the discourse marker “I mean”. In (36), like in (33), S marks the restructuring of his utterance with “I mean” which may help direct the interlocutor’s attention to the following segment of talk. In the examples above, the speaker’s use of “I mean” to flag the upcoming modification of prior talk reflects an orientation towards the interlocutor (Mauranen, 2010). By making the repair of the ongoing utterance explicit, the speaker is seen to not only manage the organization of his contribution effectively but also facilitate recipient understanding.

6. Discussion and conclusion

As the analysis above illustrates, self-repair constitutes a powerful self-regulating mechanism that allows the speaker to not only make corrections when linguistic and factual errors occur but to also make talk more specific, explicit and clear. It has been suggested that determining the exact function of a repair move is far from easy (Mauranen, 2006; Gaskill, 1980; Schwartz, 1980). This observation is to a large extent true as self-repair moves can serve various purposes simultaneously including “gaining more planning time” (Mauranen, 2006:147). The absence of verbal interlocutor feedback in immediate self-repair, otherwise present in speaker-recipient negotiation of meaning, also makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact function of a lexical replacement or insertion in the speaker’s utterance. However in the extracts examined in section 5.2, the replacements and insertions display the tendency of moving from the general to the specific and from vague to explicit. This suggests that the choice of item inserted or replacing another is not randomly made but may be motivated by a desire on the part of the speaker to enhance communicative clarity. The self-repairs result in utterances that appear to be more explicit and precise and perhaps more intelligible which may in turn contribute to increased comprehensibility on the part of the recipient. Thus even in the absence of verbal interlocutor feedback, “the speaker negotiates what he [or she] says, keeping in mind the requirement for understanding on the part of the auditor” (Schwartz, 1980:141).

In section 5.2, the speaker’s move to repair suggests that he or she finds a prior segment of the ongoing utterance to be ‘potentially’ problematic given that there is no real error or mistake that requires correction. The use of generalized terms, the absence of specific reference, pronoun usage and unstated subject or object nouns are not problems in themselves but can result in ambiguity and thus contribute to trouble in understanding for the recipient. In seeking to use more specific terms, to make reference explicit and to flag upcoming modifications to the ongoing utterance, the speaker is seen to be preempting a problem of understanding by eliminating ambiguity and vagueness and emphasizing explicitness and clarity. That most of the repairs performed are immediate evidences the speaker’s close monitoring of his or her talk and a heightened awareness or sensitivity to what can go wrong in interaction and the knowledge or understanding of what is needed to keep it right. While “NNS [non-native speaker] talk can reasonably be assumed to contain plenty of speech perturbations”
self-repair practices of the kind examined above reflect the speakers’ ability and willingness “to regulate and modify their discourse, . . . offering alternative expressions” (Mauranen, 2006: 144) in order to arrive at shared understanding.

The use of self-repair practices identified in section 5.2 may also in part explain the lack of widespread misunderstanding in ELF interaction reported in the literature. According to Bazzanella and Damiano, “ambiguity seems to play a major role in generating misunderstanding” (1999: 818) in talk. They in fact attribute 66% of the misunderstandings in their native-speaker data (in Italian) to this factor. Of the misunderstandings that occur in ELF communication, many can also be attributed to ambiguity (Kaur, 2011). The examples above suggest that speakers in an ELF situation are aware of the adverse effects of ambiguity on communication and so take measures to minimize vagueness by making talk explicit and specific in repair moves which may help reduce the occurrence of misunderstanding in ELF talk. Thus, while the participants are faced with a communicative situation that is both variable and highly unpredictable, they are nevertheless able to communicate effectively to achieve successful outcomes. Self-repair practices of the kind examined above in fact preclude the need for side-sequences (Jefferson, 1972) in which correcting becomes the order of business. Rather, the speaker makes a replacement or insertion immediately following the repairable and continues on with little disruption to the progress of the ongoing utterance. Again, while utterances may be marked by disfluencies and ungrammaticalities, these do not seem to detract from the speaker’s ability to get meaning across. By making utterances explicit and specific in self-repair moves, meaning is clarified and emphasized in an ongoing manner.

Findings from ELF research suggest that “the main consideration [of speakers of ELF] is not formal correctness but functional effectiveness” (Hulmbauer et al., 2009: 28); however, the analysis in section 5.1 shows that speakers in an ELF situation do orientate to accuracy when errors or mistakes have possible “consequences for meaning” (Wagner and Gardner, 2004: 11). Various analyses of ELF spoken data reveal speakers of ELF to be competent communicators who are able to use various resources adeptly to overcome any linguistic limitations to achieve successful communicative outcomes. While formal correctness has not been shown to be a prerequisite for successful communication in ELF, mutual intelligibility has. Self-correction of grammatical errors, like self-repair that is explicitness-oriented, is thus likely to be motivated by a need to produce talk that is intelligible and comprehensible rather than by some need to meet native-speaker standards.

In addition to the explicitness strategies identified by Mauranen (2007), namely, rephrasing, negotiating topic and discourse reflexivity, the self-repair practices examined above constitute other ways in which speakers in an ELF situation enhance the clarity of their utterances to improve the chances of what they say being understood. It appears that these practices are employed in anticipation of trouble that can occur as a result of the unpredictability and instability that accompany many ELF interactions. As Mauranen puts it, “They [the participants] expect comprehension to be hard to achieve in purely linguistic terms, and engage in various strategies to offset the problems that might ensue” (2007: 245–246). Notwithstanding the participants’ less-than-perfect command of the language, they display the ability to make the distinction between general and specific, vague and explicit, ultimately making choices that reflect a move “in the direction of greater explicitness and specificity” (Watterson, 2008: 391). This ability constitutes part of the speaker’s competence that he or she relies on in making meaning and achieving communicative goals in the face of the linguistic and cultural diversity present in the ELF context.

Appendix A

See Table A1.

Table A1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Mother tongue</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Burmese</td>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cambodian</td>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Filipino-Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Indonesian</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Italian</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Research student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Korean</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Laotian</td>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Malaysian-Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>2 students, 1 lecturer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Malaysian-Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3 students, 1 research student</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Malaysian-Indian</td>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>Research fellow</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Nigerian</td>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Spanish</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Sinhala</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Thai</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Vietnamese</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

The transcription notations used in the paper are as follows:

- [ ] a left square bracket marks the onset of overlap
- ] a right square bracket marks the end of overlapping talk; this feature, however, is only indicated when it can be accurately discerned
= an equal sign marks latching
- a hyphen marks a cut off
... (0.5) a numeral placed within parentheses following three dots marks a pause of 0.5 s and above
: a colon marks a stretched sound
? a question mark marks rising intonation
. a full stop marks falling intonation
, a comma marks continuing intonation
.hhh a series of ‘h’s not preceded by a dot marks audible exhalation
hhh a series of ‘h’s preceded by a dot marks audible inhalation
’soft’ degree signs mark speech that is relatively softer than the surrounding talk
() words within parentheses mark the transcriber’s uncertainty of the actual words produced
( ) empty parentheses represent segments of talk that could not be transcribed
( ) double parentheses enclose the transcriber’s comments

References


Jagdish Kaur is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia. She works in the area of English as a Lingua Franca and examines ELF interactions using conversation analysis to shed light on how speakers using ELF achieve communicative success.