Achieving mutual understanding in world Englishes

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ABSTRACT: Given the rapid growth in international contacts worldwide, English is increasingly becoming the chosen medium to facilitate communication among people of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, the question remains as to how non-native speakers of English of varying levels of proficiency, using different varieties of English, are able to arrive at mutual understanding in this medium. The paper addresses this question by offering some insights into the process of negotiating understanding in English as a lingua franca and the interactional procedures used in this regard. Fifteen hours of transcribed audio recordings of naturally occurring spoken interactions in English as a lingua franca (ELF), between participants of a range of first language and cultural backgrounds, were examined using conversation analytic procedures. Several interactional practices were identified as the ones utilized in the process of constructing shared understanding, namely repetition, paraphrase and various confirmation and clarification procedures. These procedures are strategically employed by both speaker and recipient as warranted by the local context to address problems of understanding when they occur. Thus, regardless of the participants’ use of different varieties of English at varying levels of competency, communication is successful as the participants make skilful and adept use of common, shared interactional practices to arrive at mutual understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid growth in international contacts and communication in recent years in domains ranging from politics, trade and technology to tourism, education, entertainment and the internet, among others, has meant that there is a need for a common language to facilitate understanding and to provide for successful communicative outcomes. In this regard, English has become the language of choice for a great majority of the people involved in international interactions. The choice is not only understandable but also expected in view of its position as a “global language” (Crystal 2003) and an “international language” (Jenkins 2003). Crystal and Jenkins both give detailed accounts of the spread of English around the world, its position and status, and discuss the many issues connected with its role as world language. The recent years have also witnessed growing interest among scholars in the field of English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF), namely the study of English as used in international communication, particularly by Outer and Expanding Circle users of the language. What started out in the 1980s as a call for empirical research into ELF for pedagogical reasons (see Hull 1982; Knapp 1987), led to the beginnings of empirical work in the 1990s by Firth (1990), Gramkow (1993) and Meierkord (1998). However, it was not until the early part of the 2000s that such work was stepped up with Jenkins’ (2000) published findings on ELF phonology and Seidlhofer’s (2004) work into ELF lexico-grammar. Many papers have since been published using ELF data from two existing corpora, namely, the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and the English as a lingua franca in academic settings corpus (ELFA), in addition to

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unpublished MA and PhD dissertations on the subject (see Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, and Pitzl 2006 for a review of some of these studies).

While research interest in ELF is timely given the role of English as international medium of communication, it is not without controversy. Questions continue to be raised regarding the nature of ELF and its subject of study. The main point of contention is that researchers working in ELF seem to have adopted a rather loose definition of “lingua franca”, encompassing both the function and the form of the code. The term “lingua franca”, which refers to the specialized use of a language as a medium of communication between people of different first language backgrounds, appears to have been extended to include the form or the structure of the language itself (Saraceni 2008; Berns 2009; Pakir 2009). That “lingua franca” is ‘more [as] a functional term rather than a linguistic one’ (Kirkpatrick 2008) remains undisputed; however, it is also true that form cannot be separated from function (Cogo 2008; Jenkins 2009). Thus, in addition to examining aspects related to the use of English as a lingua franca – for example, its collaborative and co-operative nature (see Neil 1996; Meierkord 2000; Gramkow 2001) – some ELF researchers focus on identifying the common features amidst the diversity and variety characteristic of the Englishes used in this context (see Kirkpatrick 2008 and Breiteneder 2009 for more recent examples). The latter, however, should not be taken to suggest that a new variety of English is in the process of being identified. Until there is sufficient ELF data from all the different parts of the world, involving people of a wide range of first language backgrounds, as is the reality of ELF, any suggestion of a variety or varieties of ELF is premature. However, a move is certainly being made in the right direction with efforts to establish a corpus of ELF from the Southeast Asian countries, as well as China, Japan and Korea, which can then be compared to the European corpus in VOICE (www.ied.edu.hk/rcleams/research_projects.htm).

Regardless of how ELF is used or what forms it takes, of fundamental importance is that its speakers achieve mutual understanding in this medium. That shared understanding is the goal of speakers in a lingua franca context is in fact highlighted by Berns (2009: 197) in the two examples she gives based on accounts provided by participants involved in ELF situations. The two examples, albeit anecdotal, shed light on the participants’ perspective where it appears that achieving mutual understanding overrides all other concerns including matters to do with accuracy and form. In light of the above, the present paper aims to provide some empirical evidence to support Berns’ claims. Specifically, the paper will provide insights into how mutual understanding is negotiated and achieved by a group of non-native speakers of English in an international context. Using conversation analytic procedures, exchanges that display difficulty in understanding from the participants’ perspective are examined in order to identify and analyse the interactional procedures used by the speakers to arrive at shared understanding when faced with the threat of breakdown in understanding. Problems of understanding are important insofar as they provide insights into the process of negotiating mutual understanding in ELF ‘which is otherwise not amenable to direct investigation’ (Sarangi 1994: 190).

UNDERSTANDING AS INTERACTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The study that this paper reports on is conducted within a conversation analysis (henceforth CA) framework (cf. Firth 1996). The choice of framework is motivated by the fact that a core concern of CA is ‘the question of how understanding is accomplished
and displayed in talk’ (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 41). The notion of understanding subscribed to by conversation analysts is that of understanding as interactional achievement. In essence, understanding is perceived as a matter that is locally accomplished and results from collaboration and negotiation between participants in interaction. In fact interaction and understanding are seen as inseparable as it is ‘in and through interaction’ (Kurhila 2003: 13) that mutual understanding is attained. Also, the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction and the adjacent positioning of turns, both key concepts in CA, mean that ‘speakers display in their sequentially “next” turns an understanding of what the “prior” turn was about’ (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 15). This then allows the co-speaker (and the analyst) to check on the understanding arrived at. Displays of non-understanding or misunderstanding can lead to the initiation of repair by the first speaker in the subsequent turn, namely, third position repair (Schegloff 1992).

The process of achieving shared understanding, as outlined above, is clearly a dynamic one in which both speaker and recipient have equal responsibility in accomplishing and maintaining shared understanding (Dascal and Berenstein 1987). The notion of understanding as interactional achievement also conveys the idea of ‘understanding as a continuum’ (Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, and Broeder 1996: 12), where there is adequate understanding and non-understanding at opposite ends of the continuum with varying degrees of understanding in between. Achieving mutual understanding thus in effect constitutes an ongoing process of ‘coming to an understanding’ (Weigand 1999: 769), in which varying levels of non-understanding or partial understanding are locally negotiated and jointly addressed in order to allow for an adequate level of understanding to prevail between participants in interaction.

In view of the variety of Englishes in use in the world today, particularly in Outer and Expanding circles, and the different levels of proficiency displayed by its non-native speakers, in addition to the varied cultures that come into contact, one can expect the risk of misunderstanding and non-understanding in ELF communication to be greater. However, ELF researchers, on the basis of naturally occurring data, are reporting the contrary. Like House (2002: 251), who remarks on the ‘paucity of misunderstandings’ in her ELF data, Meierkord (2000: 11), finds ELF communication to be ‘a form of intercultural communication characterized by co-operation rather than misunderstanding’. Similarly, Mauranen (2006) notes the lack of overt misunderstandings in her data, which she attributes to the measures taken by participants to pre-empt such problems from the outset (cf. Kaur 2009). While the aforementioned researchers touch on the subject of misunderstanding (or rather the lack of it) in ELF, Pitzl (2005) examines in some detail the management of non-understandings in her ELF data, specifically looking at the source of the problem, indicating procedures used and the sequential development of the negotiation segment. Her findings show that non-native speakers of English are able to skilfully manage and resolve non-understandings that stem from a variety of sources and in doing so, succeed in achieving mutual understanding. The present research, like Pitzl (2005) and Mauranen (2006), focuses on the accomplishment of shared understanding following displayed trouble in understanding. Specifically, the focus of the analysis is on the interactional procedures used by the participants to facilitate the process of jointly constructing understanding after partial or non-understanding and misunderstanding.

Clarification of some terminology is however first required. Given the keen interest among researchers in the subject of ‘problematic communication’ (Gass and Varonis 1991: 123), particularly when involving speakers of different languages and cultures, there
is a wide range of terminology in use to describe the various types of problems (see Tzanne 1999 for a review of the subject). Variety aside, there is also the problem of inconsistency in the use of these terms among researchers (Gass and Varonis 1991). Given its focus on the achievement of mutual understanding in ELF, the analysis will concentrate on the two problems likely to hamper the process of arriving at shared understanding, namely misunderstanding and non-understanding. Following Bremer and colleagues, misunderstanding occurs when ‘the listener achieves an interpretation which makes sense to her or him – but it wasn’t the one the speaker meant’ while in the case of non-understanding, ‘the listener realizes, that s/he cannot make sense of (part of) an utterance’ (Bremer et al. 1996: 40). The distinguishing feature between the two thus pertains to the participants’ level of awareness of the problem. More generally, however, the aforementioned understanding problems are referred to as trouble or difficulty in understanding within the paper.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data for the study comprise 15 hours of transcribed audio recordings of naturally occurring spoken interaction in ELF involving 22 participants of 13 different first language and cultural backgrounds (see Appendix 1). The participants, who are mainly students pursuing an international Master’s degree at a university in Kuala Lumpur, use English as the lingual medium to communicate among themselves for both academic and interpersonal purposes. Although the participants are predominantly Asian, they represent typical users of ELF the world over in that not only are their lingua-cultural backgrounds varied, but they also speak different varieties of English with varying levels of proficiency. While the English language entry requirement for the programme is a minimum TOEFL score of 550 for the paper-based test or a minimum score of Band 5 in the IELTS test, there is some variation in their command of the language.

As the students needed to produce group essays and give presentations in pairs for several of their courses, they were asked to record the discussions that took place outside the classroom for the assigned work. The students also recorded themselves when they consulted their lecturers or each other on course-related matters. In addition, recordings of casual conversations among the participants are also included in the corpus given that ELF is used to facilitate interpersonal communications in this setting. The participants recorded themselves over a 10-week period without the presence of the researcher at all times. Since recorders had been made available to several participants, they were able to record their interactions as and when they happened in their natural surroundings.

The recordings were then transcribed using a slightly adapted version of the notation system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 75). This transcription system, commonly adopted by conversation analysts, allows for details on the delivery of talk to be included in the transcripts. As such, features like pausing, latching, overlap, hesitation, volume change and cut-offs are all indicated so that the key features of the talk are preserved (Psathas 1995). This allows for greater accuracy in the reading of the data (see Appendix 2).

**ANALYSIS**

In order to gain insights into how non-native speakers of English negotiate understanding in international communication, instances of trouble in understanding are first
identified and then examined in close detail. As required by CA, exchanges are identified as displaying understanding problems when the participants orient to the talk as being problematic, or as Schegloff puts it, ‘the parties themselves address the talk as revealing a misunderstanding in need of repair’ (1987: 204). The participants’ orientations, which are discernible in the details of the talk, provide the evidence needed to support the analytic claims put forward. Thus, the participant’s move to initiate repair makes public an instance of problematic understanding, while the type of repair throws light on the nature of the problem. The turns-at-talk from repair initiation until a resolution is reached reflects the process of coming to an understanding. The question of how non-native speakers arrive at mutual understanding in ELF is thus addressed on the basis of the participants’ own verbal conduct and interactional behaviour.

A micro-analysis of the data reveals the use of several interactional procedures like repetition, paraphrase and various confirmation and clarification practices in the sequences where an understanding problem is clearly being addressed. These practices equip the participants with the means to negotiate and restore understanding so that the talk can move forward. While the procedures are often used in combination, the analysis below focuses on the use of each practice separately, as far as possible, to present a clearer picture of the role of each procedure in the construction of mutual understanding. Given the limitations of space, the extracts below understandably provide only a sample of the myriad of ways in which each practice is used in interaction to achieve shared understanding in ELF.

**Repetition**

Repetition of prior talk by participants in interaction has been found to serve a range of functions in both native speaker-native speaker (see Norrick 1987; Tannen 1987) and native speaker-non-native speaker talk (see Murata 1995; Sawir 2004). At the comprehension level, repetition is said to promote understanding simply ‘by providing semantically less dense discourse’ and redundancy (Tannen 1987: 582). In the case of ELF, the role of repetition is expected to be greater given Johnstone’s observation that repetition is ‘seen to be most noticeable in situations in which speakers are least likely to share a linguistic variety’ (1987: 205). Cogo and Dewey (2006) and Lichtkoppler (2007) confirm the above on the basis of their ELF data. While Cogo and Dewey note the use of repetition by the speakers in their study to show accommodation, Lichtkoppler finds that repetition performs three macro-functions, one of which is to help participants achieve mutual understanding. The extracts below provide further evidence of the role of repetition in the accomplishment of shared understanding to corroborate Lichtkoppler’s findings.

For purposes of analysis, the term “repetition” is used to refer to the restatement of all or part of an ongoing turn or a preceding turn (Schegloff 1997). Following Jefferson, the repetition or repeat must be seen to be performing ‘some operation’ (1972: 303) on the element or elements being repeated in order to qualify as a genuine repeat. In the present case, the repeat of prior talk must thus be seen to contribute to the resolution of an understanding problem and in doing so, brings about the achievement of shared understanding, as illustrated in Extract 1 below.

**Extract 1:** K enquires if A is agreeable to meeting after class to discuss an assignment

01 K: → ha- how do you think . . . (0.5) seeing after class? . . . (2.3) seeing after class

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K’s initial enquiry in line 1, which fails to receive a response, is partially repeated after 2.3 seconds. The repeat, coming after lack of uptake on A’s part, suggests that K is orientating to A’s silence as indicating a problem in either hearing or understanding. The repeat, which provides A with another hearing of the question, succeeds in eliciting a response from him. K, however, repeats A’s response in questioning intonation (line 4) to possibly verify A’s response and his own understanding of it, given its muted quality. A in turn, repeats his response to provide K with the confirmation he requires. In the extract above, repetition is used not only to provide the recipient with another opportunity to hear the question but also to elicit confirmation on the understanding achieved.

Extract 2 provides another example of the use of repetition to address a displayed problem in hearing or understanding.

Extract 2: D tells A about a course he has signed up for

01 D: real intensive course [and: makes:: *you* tired huhhuh[uhh
02 A: [okay [yeah?
03 D: tired
04 A: tired [okay

A indicates a problem in his hearing or understanding of something D says through his use of an “open” class repair initiator (Drew 1997), namely “yeah” in rising intonation, which signals that D ‘has some difficulty with the other’s prior turn, but without locating specifically where or what that difficulty is’ (Drew 1997: 71). Other forms of this category of repair initiators include “huh”, “sorry” and “pardon”, uttered in rising intonation. It is possible that D’s delivery of the segment containing the problematic word, which includes stretched sounds, lowered volume and laughter tokens (line 1), has affected A’s ability to perceive the word in question. However, a simple repeat of the word in line 3 succeeds in securing A’s understanding and resolving the problem.

Extract 3 presents a negotiation episode spanning several turns in which all three speakers employ repetition for different purposes but with the ultimate aim of arriving at shared understanding.

Extract 3: D wants C to explain about investor protection in the European Union

01 D: investor protection
02 C: about?
03 D: → investor protection in EU=
04 C: =in: in:
05 D: → [investor protection [investor investor
06 C: [in: yes
07 yes thank you=
08 M: → =investor?
D’s articulation of “investor protection” seems to be at the root of C’s understanding problem given that several repeats of the phrase (lines 3 and 5) fail to bring about understanding on C’s part. C’s own repetition of the first syllable, namely, “in” (lines 4 and 6), suggests that this is the only segment of the phrase that is intelligible to him. M, however, is able to perceive the word “investor” as reflected by her move to elicit confirmation of understanding in line 8. It is M’s articulation of the word, coupled with yet another repeat of the problematic phrase by D, that seems to eventually lead to understanding being achieved by C. It is likely that the earlier repetitions of the phrase by D failed to secure C’s understanding due to a slight variation in the pronunciation of the word.

In the extract above, the participants use repetition for different purposes: D repeats to provide C with the opportunity to re-hear the problematic word, C repeats the syllable “in” several times to indicate the segment that he finds problematic, namely, the bit following “in”, while M repeats to check on her understanding, as does C in line 10. Strategic and persistent use of repetition by the participants in interaction contributes to the eventual resolution of the problem and the achievement of mutual understanding. Extract 3, like the earlier two extracts, illustrates the effectiveness of a simple procedure like repetition in securing the recipient’s understanding and in averting communication breakdown. Although variations in pronunciation and other linguistic infelicities are common, they do not detract from the participants’ ability to skillfully negotiate understanding in ELF.

Paraphrase

The analysis above focused on the participants’ use of verbatim or exact repeats to negotiate understanding. Paraphrase, although frequently treated as one form of repetition in the literature (see e.g. Norrick 1987; Tannen 1987; Johnstone 1994), is addressed separately in this paper in view of the fact that it involves different operations in its formulation and can serve different functions in talk (Schegloff 1996). As Neil puts it, ‘paraphrasing entails displaying [this] given information in a new and different way, either by simplifying the form of the message or by expressing it in different words’ (1996: 142). This practice differs qualitatively from that of re-saying segments of prior talk using the exact same words. Making this distinction is particularly important in the study of non-native speaker use of English as it allows the analyst to uncover the range of resources available to the speaker when negotiating understanding in a lingua franca.

In second language acquisition research, paraphrase is regarded as a communication strategy employed by non-native learners of English ‘to compensate for some lack in the linguistic system’ (Tarone 1983: 64). However, close examination of the data reveals that the participants also employ paraphrase for reasons other than the aforementioned. In particular, paraphrase is used to clarify meaning or ‘for purposes of amplification’ (Neil 1996: 141) when negotiating understanding. This function of paraphrase is clearly illustrated in Extract 4 below.
Extract 4. D and S are discussing the subject of plagiarism for an essay

01 D: can we relate the: plagiarism with intellectual property?
02 S: pardon?
03 D: → can we make a relationship between er: . . . (0.4) our discussion
05 S: =yeah yeah I think so
06 S’ s response to D’ s enquiry in line 3 indicates a problem in either hearing or understanding. However, his use of an open class repair initiator, in the form of ‘pardon’ in rising intonation, fails to locate the source of the problem (Drew 1997). In response, D opts to re-phrase the problematic turn in its entirety. While the two keywords are retained, namely, “plagiarism” and “intellectual property”, the rest of the utterance is re-phrased in what appears to be a move to amplify meaning and secure S’s understanding. D’s choice to paraphrase rather than repeat the problematic turn suggests that he is orientating to S’s displayed problem as having to do with difficulty in understanding rather than hearing. The paraphrase succeeds in eliciting a response from S suggesting that mutual understanding has been achieved.

Extract 5 presents another example of the speaker’s use of paraphrase to restore shared understanding, this time after lack of uptake on the part of the recipient.

Extract 5: A asks D some questions for an article he is writing for the department newsletter

01 A: what was your:: view er: on living in Malaysia . . . (1.1) prior to your arrival and how . . . (0.9) has that changed since you arrived?
03 → . . . (1.4) meaning that you would have some kind of idea about Malaysia . . . (0.8) before: coming here . . . (0.9) and then after coming how: how is that different from your: . . . (0.6) earlier perception?
07 D: erm first thing I’ve . . . (0.8) the first thing that I::: “rea” realize that I think Malaysia is er::: . . . (3.2) more heterogeneous people that’s [mean from]: er . . . (0.9) er-
10 A: [okay okay]

A’s initial enquiry, in lines 1 and 2, fails to elicit a response from D. After a 1.4-second pause, A re-phrases the question in an obvious move to clarify meaning as his use of the meta-comment ‘meaning’ (line 3) indicates. The paraphrase reflects simplification of the content of the enquiry with the provision of greater detail. This understandably results in a longer utterance, which manages to convey the meaning of the question to D, as his response reflects. A’s use of paraphrase was clearly an attempt to facilitate recipient understanding by making the prior a little more comprehensible and therefore more accessible to D.

While the two extracts above illustrate the speaker’s use of paraphrase following overt displays of non-understanding, Extract 6 provides an example of the use of paraphrase in a slightly different context but with the same purpose of arriving at shared understanding.
Extract 6: R asks D if there will be questions after their presentation

01 R: then you- you have to read and understand it well . . . (0.8) because
02 these are: . . . (1.0) any question . . . (1.1) with your presentation?
03 D: “yes” . . . (0.8) there should be:: feedback from:
04 R: → our friend will ask you or something?=
05 D: =yes . . . (1.6) hhhh huhhuh[huh
06 R: [o::h how can I answer that?

R’s enquiry in line 2 receives a response that does not seem to satisfy R, as evidenced by his move to re-phrase the question in line 4. It is possible that R either does not understand the meaning of the word “feedback” in D’s response or fails to see how “feedback” relates to “question”. Although D produces an acknowledgement token in the form of “yes” at turn initial position in line 3, its muted quality may have rendered it unintelligible to R. The fact that R’s paraphrase displays an attempt to make his enquiry more transparent suggests that R may in fact be orientating to D’s response as displaying lack of understanding on D’s part. The extract above in fact presents an example of an understanding problem that seems to have multiple sources (Bremer et al. 1996). The paraphrase nevertheless succeeds in resolving the problem and in establishing mutual understanding between the participants.

Paraphrase equips the speaker with the means to resolve a displayed problem of understanding by providing the recipient with the opportunity to re-hear the content of prior talk. In addition to providing redundancy, paraphrasing also allows the speaker to provide greater clarity in meaning so that the problematic turn becomes more comprehensible and therefore more accessible. As displayed above, this is done by simplifying the form of the utterance as well as providing more detail so that meaning becomes transparent. Paraphrase certainly has a significant role to play in ELF communication where lack of proficiency in the language can sometimes obscure the meaning of an utterance.

Request for confirmation of understanding

The use of questioning repeats to request confirmation of accurate hearing and understanding, as illustrated in Extracts 1 and 3 above, is fairly commonplace in the data. While Long observes that confirmation requests ‘always involve repetition of all or part of the other’s preceding utterance’ (1983: 137), a micro-analysis of the data indicates that the participants also employ other practices to request for confirmation of understanding. One such practice involves using the discourse marker “you mean” with a formulation or “candidate reading” (Heritage and Watson 1979) of the speaker’s prior utterance. The recipient thus puts forward his or her understanding or interpretation of the speaker’s prior turn for verification, as illustrated in Extract 7 below.

Extract 7: D names some countries that he thinks could join ASEAN

01 D: and the next: country is I think the sma- is er: . . . (0.6) accessible to
02 ASEAN is East Timor . . . (1.2) East Timor
03 K: → I- oh y- er you mean in: . . . (1.5) the futures enlargement process?
04 D: yes
05 K: → you mean something like that?
06 D: yes

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In the exchanges preceding the extract above, D talked about countries that “have access to ASEAN” and named Papua New Guinea as one such country. He continues in lines 1 and 2 above to name East Timor as another country that is “accessible to ASEAN”. K, in the next turn, makes a move to check that he has understood D correctly; K has interpreted D’s talk about “accessibility” to ASEAN to refer to the future enlargement plan of ASEAN, which D confirms in line 4. In spite of the confirmation, K puts forward a second request for confirmation of understanding, which again receives a response in the affirmative. D’s choice of words, namely, “access” and “accessible”, may have rendered meaning somewhat ambiguous, causing K to check at this point that he is on the right track in understanding D.

Another practice that the participants employ to explicitly check on the accuracy of their understanding of a prior utterance involves appending a questioning tag to a candidate reading or paraphrase of the utterance, as in Extract 8 below.

Extract 8: D describes the facilities available at the university

01 D: that mean that . . . (0.6) we can study until: . . . (0.6) night and:
02 . . .(0.7) you support this study for: er: like eh . . .(0.7) a instrument
03 like computer:
04 A: uhhuh . . . (0.9) facilities yeah?=
05 D: =yeah facilities “and”
06 A: “uhhuh”

In response to a question on his perceptions of the university, D describes some of the amenities available to students, as in lines 1 to 3 above. In his description, D uses the term “instrument” for which he provides an example in the form of “computer”. This elicits from A, a request for confirmation, in line 4, in which A checks that D is in fact referring to “facilities” with his use of the term “instrument” and the ensuing example. By appending the token “yeah” to the word “facilities”, in rising intonation, A makes a confirmation relevant in the next turn, which A duly provides. The need for confirmation of understanding at this point possibly stems from D’s (mis)use of the term “instrument” in this context. The confirmation provided by D assures A that his understanding of D’s meaning is in fact accurate.

In Extract 9, the request for confirmation of understanding takes the form of a summary of the content of prior talk in questioning intonation.

Extract 9: W explains to S her reason for making a trip to another city

01 W: =er::: a friend called up, she needed some: help
02 S: oh
03 W: to do some work
04 S: yeah
05 W: so I say::: okay the pay is good . . . (0.5) I’m=
06 S: → =oh you’re also working there and earn money?
07 W: yeah I’m going there to make money huh|uhhuhhuhhuhhuhhuh
08 S: [uhhuhhuhhuh

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In line 6, S summarizes, in questioning intonation, W’s preceding explanation for making the trip (lines 1, 3 and 5) in what appears to be a move to check on the accuracy of his understanding. W certainly orients to S’s enquiry as a request for confirmation of understanding as her own response indicates. In the turn prior to line 1, S had in fact enquired if W was “just travelling there”, suggesting that S was under the impression that the trip was for leisure. That S’s enquiry in line 6 is “oh”-prefaced points to his surprise at discovering paid work involved and displays a change in his state of knowledge (Heritage 1984) following the explanation. The content summary thus allows S to check on the accuracy of the understanding he has arrived at so that any possibility of misunderstanding is eliminated.

The practices above equip the speaker with the means to monitor his or her understanding of the unfolding talk. They allow the speaker to check on the accuracy of the understanding achieved (Long 1983) and make a confirmation of mutual understanding relevant in the next turn. Since the understanding achieved is made public, any misunderstanding can thus be detected and addressed in the next turn. Practices such as the above, constitute a checking mechanism that serves an important role in the achievement of mutual understanding. As illustrated in the extracts above, the participants are able to utilize different practices, quite adeptly, for the aforementioned purpose.

Request for clarification

In addition to requesting for confirmation of understanding when there is some uncertainty about the speaker’s meaning, the participants also employ procedures to request for clarification of meaning when understanding is incomplete. Such procedures, ‘which are mostly formed by questions’ (Long 1983: 137), make it relevant for the speaker to provide additional information or a reformulation of prior talk so that shared understanding can be established. Understandably, sequences in which clarification is being sought and given constitute a ‘secondary exchange’ or a ‘subordinate exchange’ (Perrin, Deshaies, and Paradis 2003: 1851) where understanding is explicitly negotiated so that the ongoing topic can then be resumed.

While the primary means of eliciting clarification involves the use of questions, these can take various forms. In Extract 10, a single wh-question word is used in combination with a questioning repeat to convey the need for clarification of meaning.

Extract 10: D and S discuss the methodology to be employed for their research

01 D: =I-I think because er: . . . (0.9) it’s also better if we::: come to the::
02 . . . (1.3) or just: er have a observation not: not to do interview just:
03 observation=
04 S: =yeah it’s okay
05 D: just observations °not [interview°
06 S: [yeah because interview and observation is
07 the similar method so
08 D: → what? similar: method?
09 S: yeah=
10 D: → =observation and interview?
11 S: I-I mean the purpose is same.
12 D: oh okay
S’s comment in lines 6 and 7 that interview and observation both constitute similar methods elicits from D a wh-question word in the form of “what”, followed by a questioning repeat of the phrase “similar method”. While the former suggests non-hearing or non-understanding, the latter pinpoints the segment of the prior turn that D finds problematic. S’s response in the affirmative (line 9), however, indicates that S is orientating to D’s display of trouble as a request for confirmation. A second questioning repeat, this time of the two methodologies in question, is finally interpreted as a request for clarification of meaning as S’s use of the meta-comment “I mean” in line 11 indicates. The extract above in fact illustrates the complexity of the process of negotiating understanding; while there is non-understanding on D’s part as to the meaning of S’s prior utterance, the procedures he uses to seek further information results in misinterpretation on S’s part. A single question word and the questioning repeat are not as explicit as some question forms in conveying the speaker’s need for clarification. However, a second questioning repeat alerts S to the unresolved problem so that further repair work can be undertaken to bring about shared understanding between the participants.

In Extract 11, D employs more explicit means to request for clarification of meaning, namely, a wh-clarification question and an alternative-type question, when the former fails to elicit a response.

Extract 11: R explains to D and A the subject of a paper he is writing

01 R: =I comparing about the law: course [in: in-
02 D: [about the law? [oh            [but-
03 A: but one thing the=
04 D: → =what kind of law? . . . (1.1) is the: general law or::=
05 R: =general
06 07 A: ah general law [he’s a lawyer huhhuhhuhhuh should know
08 R: [general

R’s statement about the subject of his paper in line 1 elicits from D a request for clarification (line 5) as to the kind of law focused on. Although D’s request takes the form of a direct wh-clarification question, it fails to elicit a response from R. Following a pause of 1.1 second, D employs an alternative-type question in which R is offered alternatives from which to choose in order to make meaning clear. Although the question peters out after the conjunction ‘or’, the alternatives are alluded to in the preceding segment, namely, a specific branch of the law (as opposed to ‘general law’). The alternative-type question, unlike the first clarification request, succeeds in eliciting a response perhaps as a result of having narrowed down the information required. As in Extract 10, the extract above displays problems of understanding on the part of both speakers. While D indicates incomplete understanding with his request for clarification, the question put forward seems to result in trouble in understanding for R as suggested by the lack of uptake. A second more specific request for clarification, however, succeeds in eliciting the information required to bring about shared understanding.

In extract 12, a direct request for clarification leaves no room for doubt as to the meaning of the speaker’s enquiry and so elicits the exact information required for understanding to be achieved.

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Extract 12: S, K and M talk about the salaries received by teachers in their respective countries

01 S: we paid only... (2.7) twenty five dollar
02 M: twenty=
03 S: =per month ... (0.5) twenty five
04 M: twenty five how much is it in: US dollar?
05 S: twenty five [US dollar
06 K: twenty five [US dollar per month
07 M: ah twenty five US dollar per [month ah
08 S: more than Burma.=
09 S: [yes

Although S specifies the amount of salary received by teachers in his country in ‘dollars’ (line 1), M seeks clarification of this point in line 4. It is possible that M has either failed to perceive the word ‘dollar’ in S’s prior utterance or is uncertain about this point given that the term ‘dollar’ is not restricted to the currency of the United States. Her request for clarification elicits responses from both S and K, which succeeds in resolving the problem.

While various question forms allow the speaker to elicit clarification of meaning, some forms are more effective than others in this regard, as illustrated above. Questioning repeats and single wh-question words for instance can sometimes be misinterpreted as the meaning they convey may seem ambiguous. More direct clarification questions on the other hand make the speaker’s need for clarification of meaning explicit and tend to lead to immediate clarification in the next turn. What is also obvious in the extracts above is the participants’ ability to substitute one procedure with another more transparent or explicit one when the former fails to elicit the required information. The process of arriving at shared understanding, far from being a straightforward matter, calls for fine-tuned negotiation and collaboration between participants with the help of common interactional procedures.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis above illustrates how speakers of different lingua-cultural backgrounds, communicating in an international context, negotiate and achieve understanding in the medium of English. While misunderstanding and partial or non-understanding occur in such interactions, actual breakdown in communication is rare; there are in fact only two instances in the entire corpus where a topic is abandoned due to non-understanding. This can be attributed to the participants’ use of strategies like repetition, paraphrase and different confirmation and clarification practices to address and resolve problems of understanding when they occur. As the extracts above display, the participants are attuned to various indications and suggestions of trouble in understanding, for example, lack of uptake and the use of ‘open’ class repair initiators, and are able to employ suitable procedures to jointly arrive at shared understanding.

Repetition and paraphrase for instance are used to increase the comprehensibility and accessibility of prior talk by providing the recipient with redundant material or with additional or more specific information. By making meaning transparent and explicit or simply
by allowing the recipient the opportunity to re-hear the problematic turn, the speaker is able to enhance and secure the recipient’s understanding. Confirmation-seeking procedures further allow the participants to monitor their understanding of the unfolding talk and to check on the accuracy of their interpretation of problematic segments of talk. The participants also use different types of question forms to elicit clarification of meaning or to obtain additional information about the prior turn(s) so that mutual understanding can be achieved. Confirmation and clarification requests, respectively, lead to a confirmation of understanding and a clarification sequence in which meaning is explicated and/or amplified. The aforementioned practices facilitate the process of negotiating and constructing shared understanding and contribute towards successful communication in ELF.

The analysis above, which highlights the collaborative and negotiated nature of the process of constructing shared understanding, provides support for the findings of Mauranen (2006) and Pitzl (2005), who have addressed the question of understanding in ELF. As previously established, and as further evidenced in the extracts above, understanding problems are jointly addressed and resolved by both speaker and recipient in interaction. The speaker for instance employs repetition and paraphrase in response to displays of trouble in understanding on the part of the recipient. The recipient, on the other hand, signals his or her difficulty in understanding by using various forms of repair initiation. In some instances, a single repair move is all that is needed to establish mutual understanding; in others, both participants have to engage in active negotiation over several turns, using a combination of practices, to arrive at an adequate level of shared understanding so that the talk can move forward.

The use of the aforementioned practices is by no means exclusive to ELF speakers, as native speakers utilize these same practices, in similar ways and for similar purposes, when misunderstanding or non-understanding threatens intersubjectivity (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1990). Varonis and Gass (1985), however, observe that the use of these practices in negotiating meaning is by far more common in non-native speaker-non-native speaker interaction, as in the case of ELF, than in interactions involving native speakers. They attribute this to the non-native speakers’ ‘shared incompetence’ (Varonis and Gass 1985: 84) in the language, which not only minimizes the embarrassment and loss of face that can arise in such situations but also promotes greater collaborative effort and acceptance of interruptions to the flow of conversation. Further, it appears that achieving and maintaining mutual understanding in a language that is non-native to the speakers concerned is not a matter that is taken for granted; it is in fact something that is worked at and pursued by the participants throughout the interaction as a result of ‘the natural commonsense assumption that it is not easy to achieve [mutual understanding] without special effort’ (Mauranen, 2006: 147), particularly when communicating in a lingua franca.

Also, while utterances are marked by disfluencies and ungrammaticalities, these appear to be of little concern to the participants, as achieving mutual understanding takes precedence (Berns 2009). The participants in fact are able to successfully compensate their lack of linguistic competence with increased use of the aforementioned practices to arrive at mutual understanding. The ability and skill with which the practices are used to resolve problems of understanding and to restore shared understanding constitutes the participants’ ‘interactional competence’ (Gramkow 2001: 159). As the extracts above illustrate, the participants, when choosing a procedure to address a problem, take into account the nature of the problem. If the chosen procedure fails to bring about shared understanding, an alternative procedure is then employed. This suggests a reassessment of the problem.
and a strategic move to employ a procedure that may be more effective in resolving the problem. Extensive and adept use of these interactional practices thus allows the participants to overcome whatever limitations they may face in their linguistic knowledge of the language. What counts ultimately is the accomplishment of communicative goals and in this regard the skills and the abilities that allow participants to achieve those goals constitute an integral part of their competence.

In addition to providing some insights into the process of negotiating mutual understanding in ELF, the analysis above also reflects the kind of qualitative work being conducted by researchers interested in the use of English as a lingua franca. While others examine the formal features of the Englishes used in the lingua franca context, such work must be seen to complement the kind of research that this paper reports on. After all, the features of ELF are not being studied for their own sake but rather as a means of determining if and whether non-native speakers of English do things to the language when using it as a lingua franca. Cogo and Dewey (2006) for instance observe that lexico-grammatical innovations in ELF, such as dropping the –s in the 3rd person singular present verb form, can be attributed to the speaker’s need for greater efficiency in communication. Such efficiency no doubt contributes to the process of arriving at mutual understanding in the language. Thus, while the study of English as a lingua franca is in essence a study of the function of English in lingua franca contexts, a concomitant focus on the forms it takes seems necessary if the phenomenon of English as a lingua franca is to be understood in all its complexities.

NOTE

1. The data was collected for my doctoral research on ‘The co-construction of understanding in English as a lingua franca’. The extracts analysed in this paper, however, do not appear in my thesis.

APPENDIX 1

Participants According to Nationality, Mother Tongue and Position (Kaur 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Mother tongue</th>
<th>Position</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. Lao</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 2

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
. . . (0.4) a numeral placed within parentheses following three dots marks a pause of 0.4 seconds 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 preceded by a dot marks audible inhalation
hhh a series of ‘h’s not preceded by a dot marks audible exhalation
◦soft◦ degree signs mark speech that is relatively softer than the surrounding talk

REFERENCES


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