

Miscommunication in Using English as a Lingua Franca

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Abstract: English is now widely used as a lingua franca in international communication. Communication is a collaboration of all its participants. Although mutual understanding is commonly assumed during interaction, miscommunication is inevitable. ELF communication, with its interactants from diversified lingua-cultural backgrounds, is assumed to be susceptible to communication breakdowns. To verify this assumption, some empirical studies on ELF miscommunication are reviewed. It is found that miscommunication is infrequent in ELF communication and ELF interactants proactively employ communication strategies to preempt and repair understanding problems to ensure mutual understanding.

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1 Introduction

Globalisation and rapid development of information technology have entailed an unprecedentedly large scale of international communication in various domains, such as business, politics and academia. English has established its indisputable status as a lingua franca used by speakers from different lingua-cultural backgrounds to achieve specific communicative goals in international encounters. Seidlhofer (2011) defines ELF as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7).

Collaboration of communicants in co-constructing understanding is accentuated in many human interaction theories (Mustajoki, 2012). Intelligibility is assumed by default; nevertheless, misunderstandings are inevitable (Mauranen, 2006). ELF communication, with its communicants’ various lingua-cultural backgrounds, is commonly assumed to be subjective to miscommunication. To test out if this assumption is true, this study reviews empirical studies on ELF miscommunication.

2 ELF miscommunication

Miscommunication is an umbrella term for different types of communication failures including “misunderstanding”, “non-understanding”, “communication breakdown”, “misconception”, “wrong reference identification”, “mishearing”, “non-hearing”, “non-listening”, “misperception”, “communication disorder”. It is defined as the situation where the recipient’s understanding is different from the producer’s (Ryan and Barnard, 2009: 45, as cited in Mustajoki, 2012). House (1999) defines ELF interactions as “between members of two or more different lingua-cultures in English” (House, 1999, as cited in Deterding, 2013).

2.1 Causes of ELF miscommunication

Regarding factors leading to miscommunication, to identify and explain the sources and nature of misunderstandings in ELF communication, Knapp (2011) audio-recorded and analysed 15 hours of naturally occurring spoken ELF interaction. None of the misunderstandings can be attributed to differences in cultural background. Misunderstandings are due to factors including ambiguity, mishearing and lack of

world knowledge. Anderson (2018) investigates ELF miscommunication in a Japanese university where English serves as a medium language by Japanese students and an instructor who is a native speaker of English. Miscommunication is caused by different classroom interaction norms of the Japanese students and the Inner Circle instructor about turn-taking and address forms.

As for linguistic features entailing misunderstandings in ELF communication, Björkman (2008) examines engineering students' ELF use and its effectiveness. Divergence from morphosyntactic forms of standard English is investigated as a potential factor causing miscommunication. The ELF speakers seem to have developed certain common procedures to communicate effectively. No overt communication breakdown due to divergent morphosyntactic structures is noticed. Athirah and Deterding (2015) investigates the intelligibility of Brunei English for non-Bruneian English speakers. Non-standard grammar scarcely causes misunderstanding. The innovative structure of noun phrases seldom influences the intelligibility of Brunei English in ELF settings. Deterding and Mohamad (2016) explore the influence of vowel quality on intelligibility in ELF communication. Vowel quality appears to rarely cause intelligibility problems, corroborating Jenkins (2000)'s exclusion of vowel quality from the Lingua Franca Core, while misunderstandings are more likely to occur when vowel quality shift is combined with length variation. Despite that ELF's linguistic features being divergent from those of the native-speaker English varieties, misunderstandings or communication breakdowns are rare.

2.2 Communication strategies dealing with ELF miscommunication

Based on the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings corpus, Mauranen (2006) analyses ELF interactants' communication strategies for signaling and avoiding misunderstandings. Misunderstandings in ELFA communication are rare. Considerable joint efforts are made by the interactants to avoid misunderstanding and maintain mutual understanding. When misunderstandings occur, the communicants signal them via specific question, repetition of problematic items and indirect signals. They also employ strategies to

avoid misunderstandings, including confirmation checks, interactive repair and self-repair. Watterson (2008) studies the communication strategies of university students in South Korea to repair non-understandings in ELF interactions. The ELF communicants prefer using repetition to indicate and respond to non-understandings of individual words and they collaborate in repairing non-understandings. House (2009) finds that ELF communicants use strategies such as represents, reinterpretation of discourse markers and topic changes to avoid misunderstandings. Deterding (2013) notes that ELF interlocutors adopt various repair strategies to resolve misunderstandings. He classified repairs according to initiator and executive of the repair. Kwan and Dunworth (2016) investigates ELF interactions between Hong Kongese employers and Filipino employees in the context of domestic workplaces. Challenges experienced by the participants are presented and pragmatic strategies including active and passive strategies adopted by the interactants are identified. Active strategies, such as clarification, repetition and direct questioning, are more successful in achieving effective communication when the interaction objective is to exchange information; whereas passive strategies including ignoring unknown language tend to cause misunderstandings.

To investigate the ways of initiating, negotiating and overcoming misunderstandings, Hanamoto (2016) examines video-recorded ELF interactions of Japanese university students with international students from Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Differing from other studies on ELF communication strategies, the interactants solve understanding problems through multimodal resources other than language when verbal communication strategies are insufficient in facilitating understanding.

Whereas there are many empirical studies on oral ELF communication, relatively limited research attention has been paid to written ELF interactions. Extending the existing research on ELF into email discourse, Ren (2016) investigates the pragmatic strategies employed by Chinese-English bilingual professionals in their emails. The data consists of emails collected from 15 Chinese-English bilingual professionals in Mainland China. Pragmatic strategies for avoiding and resolving non-understandings and misunderstandings are analysed. Non-understanding does not occur, only a number of misunderstandings

appear. When misunderstandings occur, the interactants point them out straightforwardly via metalinguistic comments. Preempting strategies are also used to avoid misunderstandings, such as providing local knowledge and building common ground, confirmation checks and innovative use of questions.

3 Conclusion

Based on the empirical studies on ELF miscommunication, it might be concluded that, overall miscommunications are infrequent and even rare in ELF interactions, except for Knapp (2011), in which he claims that there is a noticeably high possibility for misunderstandings to occur and proposes a pragmatic vision for ELF interactions. Moreover, ELF interaction is largely a cooperative work of all interactants. During ELF communication, the interactants are commonly engaged in active collaboration with each other and co-construction of ELF discourse. They focus on the content or propositional meanings other than the linguistic forms of utterances. When miscommunications do appear, they are first indicated by at least one ELF interactant via signaling strategies, and then different types of repairs and accommodation are initiated to resolve difficulties in understanding. Moreover, ELF interlocutors employ preemptive strategies to avoid miscommunications. They work actively and collaboratively to maintain the effectiveness of ELF communication.

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