CHANGING ENGLISH

Pre-empting and signalling non-understanding in ELF

Alessia Cogo and Marie-Luise Pitzl

‘Changing English’ aims to illustrate the diversity of English in the world today and to ask whether, and how, ELT practitioners might accommodate such variation. Focusing on a particular language issue in each article, the series will explore how English varies between places and spaces, over time, and between groups of speakers, and will reflect on the possible implications of this for ELT practitioners.

In this article, Alessia Cogo and Marie-Luise Pitzl consider how users of English as a Lingua Franca might pre-empt and navigate non-understanding in spoken interactions.

Understanding: not just a receptive skill

We all know that, in real-life situations, understanding is, in fact, not just a receptive ability; it is not something that someone needs to ‘possess’ or know; it is not just the listener’s job. When we interact with others in different situations, achieving shared understanding is a joint, dynamic, and interactive process that participants continuously engage in and work towards.

English as a lingua franca

While this also holds true for L1 communication, research has shown this to be especially relevant for situations where speakers have different first languages and cultural backgrounds and use English as their common lingua franca (ELF). ELF speakers use a range of implicit and explicit pragmatic strategies to monitor understanding and to negotiate meaning when they perceive a lack of, or an uncertainty in, understanding, i.e. when they notice a non-understanding. Making learners aware of the different pragmatic strategies that speakers successfully use in real-life situations to indicate and resolve non-understandings would seem to be well-invested classroom time. Yet, the issue of pre-empting and signalling non-understanding is hardly addressed in ELT materials.

Non-understanding versus misunderstanding

An important distinction that tends to be overlooked in the teaching literature (and by some researchers), but is crucial in order to equip learners with the interactive pragmatic strategies that successful ELF communicators use, is the difference between non-understanding and misunderstanding (see, for example, Bremer 1996; Pitzl 2010; Cogo and Dewey 2012). A non-understanding refers to those instances in communication where one or more participants in a conversation realize(s) that there is a gap in understanding, i.e. someone notices that understanding is not shared by all participants. Since at least one participant in an interaction is aware of this, speakers have the choice to indicate a non-understanding at the time it occurs, a fact that is vital from a language teaching perspective, as we shall discuss later. A misunderstanding, in contrast, usually refers to an understanding problem that only surfaces retrospectively, by accident (if at all). It cannot be indicated or negotiated immediately because no participant is aware of its existence when it happens.

Pre-empting strategies

For successful communication to take place, participants need to constantly monitor talk, which implies paying attention to interlocutors’ implicit signals of non-understanding (such as long pauses or prolonged sequences where only minimal feedback like ‘mhm’ or ‘yeah’is provided instead of more elaborate contributions). For instance, if your interlocutor does not pick up on your contribution or seems unsure, there are certain strategies that can be used to facilitate understanding or pre-empt non-understanding. These strategies can also be used when there are no clear signals of non-understanding, but you may want to disambiguate your message. It is also important to be aware that, to a certain extent, both these signals of non-understanding and the strategies used to address them are determined by the socio-cultural background, context, and individual preferences of the participants, and they may be used or interpreted differently by the participants.

Partial repetition or paraphrase

One common strategy that can be used in different ways is **partial repetition** or **paraphrase**. Extract 1 is one example (adapted from Björkman 2014: 130) that shows how repetition (lines 3 and 5) and paraphrase (line 4) are used as proactive strategies to disambiguate a possible non-understanding (see the Appendix for transcription conventions used in all extracts):

Extract 1

* S2: the flow and so really like what he told us at the same time

2 S1: buy two

3 S2: yeah two xx two xx two, what did he say about the distance

* S1: it will be double, I mean two times
* S2: two two continuous xx
* S1: yeah

In line 4, S1 uses the term ‘double’ and immediately paraphrases it and simplifies it by explicitly adding ‘two times’. All these strategies are used to increase explicitness, and in this case it is clear that S1 displays a proactive attitude by anticipating a possible confusion or non-understanding of the word ‘double’. It is less clear, at least from S2’s response in line 5, if the meaning of ‘double’ from S1’s repetition and paraphrase was understood. But what is interesting is that S2 is also trying to disambiguate the issue by again paraphrasing by saying ‘two continuous’.

Self-repetition in an ongoing turn

Not only is it useful to repeat somebody else’s words, but clarity can also be enhanced through **self-repetition in an ongoing turn** (Kaur 2012). This can be done as parallel phrasing, that is using phrases that are syntactically identical but that change in one item. For example, in Extract 2 (adapted from Kaur ibid.: 600–1), V takes great care to pre-empt any possible non-understanding:

Extract 2

1 V: wherever their target groups are: located it is no longer

2 S: °uhhuh°

3 V: er distance is no longer a barrier,

4 S: yeah

5 V: distance is no longer an impedi[ment,

6 S: [yes

7 V: it is no longer an obstruction,

8 S: °uhhuh°=

9 V: =you understand? because no matter where you are you’ll get the

10 information.

In line 3, V starts with a rephrasing and disambiguation of the pronoun ‘it’ and then continues with parallel phrasing by using two different synonyms of ‘barrier’: ‘impediment’ and ‘obstruction’. While these Latin-derived words may seem difficult to a general English student (though this really depends on the background of the student), in this conversation V and S are likely to have them as part of their repertoire of common vocabulary, since they share the same area of expertise (they are students discussing an issue concerning e-trade, which is part of their university course, and thus it is highly possible that they also know and share the meaning of the synonyms used in the parallel phrasing). None the less, parallel phrasing can also be done by code-switching to another language and accommodating to the socio-linguistic background of another participant in the conversation (cf. Cogo 2009, 2010).

Spelling out potentially ambiguous terms

Other explicitation strategies, such as **spelling out potentially ambiguous terms**, are also used for pre-empting purposes. For example, in the utterance (from Cogo’s own data) ‘We are going to have to increase our prices by 13% one three’*,* the speaker may view the pronunciation of the number 13 as potentially problematic, because it can easily be confused with 30, and therefore continues the utterance by spelling out the numbers (‘one three’). A similar strategy to spelling out is disambiguating pronunciation, for example by extending contractions or by introducing a variation in the utterance. In Extract 3 (adapted from Cogo and Dewey op.cit.: 122), both S1 (in line 62) and S2 (in line 59) try to disambiguate their utterances.

Extract 3

58 S1: they want to offer me a contract

59 S2: they will not?

60 S1: they want (.) they want

61 S2: ah they want=

62 S1: =they do want [but

63 S2: [how much?

In line 59, S2 shows awareness of the possible confusion between the pronunciation of ‘want’ and ‘won’t’ and attempts to disambiguate the previous utterance by extending the possible and imagined contraction ‘won’t’ to ‘will not’. S1, too, tries to disambiguate the utterance even further by introducing a dummy ‘do’ in line 62. The speakers’ awareness of possible ambiguity probably comes from the context they work in, where ‘they want to offer me a contract’ and ‘they won’t offer me a contract’ are both plausible statements. Much like ‘can’and ‘can’t’, ‘want’and ‘won’t’are polar opposites in meaning (affirming versus negating), but both pairs are potentially difficult to distinguish in spoken language delivered at a fast pace. In many situations, linguistic context will only support one of these meanings, but for situations where both affirmation and negation could apply, learners might be made aware of frequent near-homophones like ‘want’/‘won’t’or ‘can’/‘can’t’ and be equipped with strategies (such as explicit repetition and paraphrasing) that can be used to disambiguate these items.

It is important to remember that the ELF speakers in these extracts are doing their daily work or study; they do not necessarily see themselves as ‘learners’. This means that they tend to prioritize content and effective communication over correctness within a normative model. What their communication can tell us is how paraphrasing, repetitions, and similar strategies can be used to prevent a possible non-understanding. However, they may attend to form more explicitly, as in the last extract, when doing so can help to clarify meaning and disambiguate a previous formulation of the utterance. In the classroom too, an emphasis on strategies for pre-empting non-understanding can be very beneficial to students, who can also be invited to reflect on the equal responsibility of speaker and listener to work towards achieving understanding.

Signalling and resolving non-understanding

With non-understanding being a graded phenomenon that can vary from a total lack of understanding to more or less complete understanding, speakers can not only use pre-emptive strategies, but can also employ a ‘continuum of procedures’ to signal non-understanding and start a negotiation sequence (see Vasseur, Broeder, and Roberts 1996: 73–90). It is obvious that such sequences vary in length and salience, depending on the type and depth of the non-understanding, the indicating procedure used, and the responses provided by interlocutors.

While prolonged silences, lack of uptake, or turn sequences in which a speaker only provides minimal feedback can be ‘symptoms’ of a non-understanding and also prompt negotiation, it is the more explicit signalling strategies that can particularly be practised in teaching contexts. Crucially, the strategies that ELF speakers use in real-world interactions are rather different from textbook formulae like ‘Excuse me, could you …?’ and ‘I beg your pardon?’. Although elaborate formulae are also used occasionally, the strategies for indicating a non-understanding used by ELF speakers tend to be polite, but less verbose and more efficient (for example with regard to indicating the source of trouble) than typical ‘textbook English’. Crucially, this is observable regardless of traditional measures of ELF speakers’ ‘English’ proficiency.

Repetition with interrogatory intonation

**Repetition**, for example, which can be used as a pre-emptive strategy, can also be used to signal a non-understanding explicitly when a speaker repeats a lexical item (or part of an utterance) **with interrogatory intonation** in order to indicate the need for clarification. This is shown in Extract 4 (adapted from Pitzl 2005: 64; VOICE 2013: PBmtg3):

Extract 4

1 S4: *na ja* if (.) if i m- may erm (.) make a comment there

2 S2: mhm (1)

3 S4: the (.) impulse channel (.) erm

4 S1: impulse chann[el? [🡨 *signal of non-understanding* ]

5 S4: [the] impulse channel or the C V S [er channel (.)

6 S2: [mhm

As shown in this extract, the repetition of the term ‘impulse channel’with rising intonation by S1 in line 4 is an effective means of requesting further clarification and immediately leads S4 to provide a synonym (‘C V S channel’) that has already been used frequently in the same meeting and hence will be understood by all speakers. The effectiveness of the strategy of repeating a word or phrase to indicate non-understanding lies both in its explicitness as well as its specificity, as S1 indicates clearly which item triggered the problem.

Explicit minimal query

Less specific, but even more **explicit**, Extract 5 (adapted from Pitzl 2005: 66; VOICE ibid.: PBmtg300) shows how S2 uses the **minimal** **query** ‘again?’ to indicate a general non-understanding of the previous utterance:

Extract 5

1 S3: =@ (1) [are you] serving some some more destinations e:r in the

2 middle east?

3 S2: [even if

4 S2: again? [🡨 *signal of non-understanding* ]

5 S3: er do you have some more destinations in the middle east? or it's

6 purely dubai

7 S2: yes . i promised you actually i've sorry

In this case, the non-understanding is also cleared up immediately by the other speaker (S3) through a repetition with a small paraphrase (‘do you have’instead of ‘are you serving’) and a short additional comment (‘or it’s purely dubai’). So although S2’s ‘again?’is quite different from the elaborate formulae found in textbooks and might therefore be dismissed as too direct, too short, somewhat impolite, or unusual from a traditional native speaker-oriented perspective by ELT practitioners, it is completely unmarked in the ELF business context in which it is used and is efficient in clearing up the non-understanding. The point to make here is that what is considered acceptable and appropriate depends on each particular ELF context. In negotiating understanding and resolving non-understanding, ELF speakers tend to focus on efficiency and build on the shared assumption that every participant contributes to successful communication, making sure the actual content gets across and that understanding is shared.

Conclusions

We have attempted to show that for learners to become efficient ELF users is not only a matter of learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Successful communication, very importantly, involves and depends on the use of strategies for negotiating and monitoring understanding, signalling non-understanding, and pre-empting potential communicative problems, which are used quite independently of notions of grammatical correctness. A focus on grammar is certainly relevant, but learners can benefit enormously by concentrating on meaning and by practising interactive strategies of pre-empting, signalling, and resolving non-understanding.

In order to do this, teachers and students can profit from analysing ELF conversations and focusing particularly on those pragmatic strategies that can help them enhance meaning, disambiguate their own (and others’) messages, and increase explicitness, while at the same time maintaining the flow of conversation and social relationships. Some strategies may be appropriate in some contexts and not others, but noticing them in naturally occurring conversations and reflecting on their use and function may help raise awareness of the central role of pragmatics in language teaching.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

= latching (i.e. speech following the previous turn without a pause)

(.) short pause

(1) pause length in seconds

[ beginning of overlapping speech

] end of overlapping speech within turn

? rising intonation

, continuing intonation

xx unintelligible passage

°s° softer speech than the surrounding talk

*ja* code-switching/non-English words

@ laughter