Strategies for promoting collaboration and mutual support in academic English as a Lingua Franca

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Background

Group discussion tasks are common academic activities in higher education but can sometimes pose significant strategic and pragmatic communication challenges to students, especially those from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds who are using English as a lingua franca (ELF). It is estimated that more than 70% of the world’s English users are non-native speakers of English (Statista, 2016). Thus, how to prepare ESL or EFL learners to communicate effectively in such ELF environments is a major concern for research and practice in applied linguistics.

Communication strategies (CSs) play an important role in a speaker’s oral competence and have therefore attracted considerable research interest. From a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective, CSs have been considered largely as devices for problem solving. However, this conceptualization does not adequately capture the complexity of what actually happens in authentic contexts when ELF speakers from different backgrounds use a range of means and strategies to enhance communication and mutual understanding. Latterly, therefore, there has been an increased focus on CSs from the perspective of ELF pragmatics (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018). Studies on ELF have suggested that CSs are characterized by their collaborative and supportive nature, as ELF speakers use a range of devices to accommodate their speech and pre-empt or resolve understanding problems. They use repetition, paraphrase or questions to check comprehension or use verbal or non-verbal backchannels, utterance completion and overlapping talk to support each other in negotiating meaning or smoothing the way toward conversation (Björkman, 2011, 2014; Bjørge, 2010; Cogo & House, 2017; Firth, 1996, 2009; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Kalocsaï, 2011; Kaur, 2010, 2011, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Mauranen, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2012; Pietikäinen, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2001; Wolfartsberger, 2011).

Despite this interest in their collaborative nature, descriptions of “cooperative” CSs in ELF communication are still in incomplete. Moreover, while many studies have focused on the achievement of mutual understanding in conversation, this is not...
always the primary goal for speakers in academic discussions. Discussions in these contexts can be high stakes as participants streamline their efforts towards achieving shared task outcomes, such as a group presentation, a research project, etc. In addition, while most studies have explored ELF pragmatics or CSs in European, or, more recently, in Asian contexts, the focus in this study is ELF communication in the English-speaking academic environment of the Australian higher education classroom, where a significant number of both staff and students are ELF users who are operating in a wider university environment that is English dominant. Our aim in this study is therefore to provide insight into how ELF speakers collaboratively support each other as they communicate in the achievement of authentic academic tasks in this context.

The study

In this paper, we draw on a subset of data from a larger study investigating the use of CSs among students in Australian higher education. We take a qualitative approach to investigate how students use CSs strategically and pragmatically to build cooperation and mutual support with peers in their academic communication. The data comprised 10 video-recordings of authentic small-group communication among students from 10 different disciplines at an Australian university. The study involved 31 students including 9 native and 22 non-native speakers who were undergraduate or postgraduate students at the time of data collection. They were recorded discussing topics taken from their units of study for different authentic purposes: preparing for group oral presentations or writing assignments, improving a research proposal, etc. The assessment of the success of a discussion was made based on whether the task goals were achieved. The data were analysed qualitatively for the use of CS following the general principles of a Conversational Analytic approach.

Results

In our study, we did indeed find that many participants were highly collaborative and supportive in their communication behaviours. They used many of the strategies previously seen in the in the literature to arrive at mutual understanding, maintain or develop the smooth flow of talk or solve task goals. These included repetition (self-repetition and other-repetition), paraphrase (self-paraphrase and other-paraphrase), different kinds of question strategies, verbal and non-verbal backchannels, utterance completion, and overlapping talk. However, in the nine successful academic discussions in our data, we also found that participants supported each other in pursuit of their academic goals through the explicit use of different topic management techniques in skilful and effective ways. They supported each other to achieve their shared goals through the way they introduced topics or signalled topic change, thus ensuring all the topics or sub-topics were covered in their discussions and that the discussions remained on track. These strategies could take a variety of forms including direct questions, requests for summary, combinations of a summary or the supply of an interpretation of previous point together with a question, or statements inviting joint action introduced by “Let’s”. In the tenth academic discussion, however, participants did not manage to control the discussion of different sub-topics in the conversation and did not manage to achieve their goals in a collaborative manner. Thus, our findings illustrate how the “cooperative” nature of ELF communication extends beyond the notion of assistance at the word level to reach mutual understanding to notions of collaboration and support at the
discourse level as participants pursue their shared academic goals. We therefore propose a revised taxonomy of CSs that take collaboration at this broader level into account.

Conclusion

This exploration of how students build collaboration and mutual support in academic ELF interaction makes an important contribution to both theory and practice. On a theoretical level, the study has been able to illuminate exactly how “cooperativeness” works in ELF academic interaction and to specify some of the CSs used by the participants to show cooperation, support, and involvement as they achieve their discussion goals. Practically, the taxonomy developed on the basis of this analysis has the potential to make an important contribution to the evidence base from which pedagogical interventions and materials addressing the needs of future ELF can be developed.

References


