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Improving the Interactions of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Users and Native Speakers of English

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Abstract

MUN (Model United Nations) simulations and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) have both been described in terms of "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998). MUN simulations can be considered a community of practice since they possess Wenger's three criteria—mutual engagement, a negotiated joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. House (2003) argues that ELF too can be considered a community of practice since "its diffuse alliances and communities of imagination and alignment fits ELF interactions well because ELF participants have heterogeneous backgrounds and diverse social and linguistic expectations" (p. 573).

While acknowledging that traditional native/ non-native speaker dichotomy is not relevant with regards to ELF (Ferguson, 2012), in some cases, "for lack of a better alternative" (Llurda, 2009, p. 120), it may be practical to keep a native/non-native speaker dichotomy as a framework for certain kinds of sociolinguistic research (Haberland, 2011). Speaking English as an L1 offers no guarantee of an ability to interact successfully with a wide variety of interlocutors; there are many varieties of English, many of which are mutually incomprehensible (Ur, 2010) and similarly, native speakers of these many varieties of English are not guaranteed to be successful interlocutors with users of ELF   (Litzenberg, 2013). Indeed, it may really be the case that English native speakers (however one may define the members of this group) are in especially acute need of training to adjust to a lingua franca world (Carey, 2013).

This short paper will report on a small section of ongoing research into MUN interactions. The observations of ELF-speaking MUN delegates from Japan and Germany will be shared in order to get a sense of some of the shortcomings that native speakers display when communicating with ELF speakers in the context of MUN simulations and will make recommendations for their training.

Key words: Model United Nations (MUN) Simulations ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) community of practice, ELT methodology, communication

1. Introduction

For the past several years I have been involved with Model United Nations (MUN) Simulations, both from the side of the preparation of delegates/running the event, and in terms of researching aspects of the experience itself. This short paper will report on a small section of my ongoing research into MUN interactions. The study will consider the sources of comprehension difficulties experienced by ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) users during MUN events and will close with some suggestions for action.

2. Background to the Research

In order to better understand the connections between MUN and ELF, it is necessary to briefly summarize what MUN events are, how they are prepared for and what happens at the events. Then, an explanation of the ways in which MUN events display the characteristics of a community of practice and how this intersects with an ELF community of practice will be presented.

2.1 What is a MUN simulation?

MUN stands for Model United Nations and the participants are called delegates. Each delegate represents a nation state (and when possible that state is some other country than their own). MUN simulations bring together participants to consider and do research on a particular set of world problems in order to produce solutions called resolutions/action plans. Much preparation takes place before the simulation since the delegates must research their country's policies with regard to the topic/agenda at hand and then come up with solutions to the problems defined. The results of research and solution brainstorming will be included in a concise, technically stylized Position Paper, which will provide a starting point for the face-to-face negotiations at the MUN event. Team-building with other delegates who are representing the same country in different committees ensures that the research is deeper and well understood. Delegates also spend time trying to express all the ideas in their position papers verbally and spontaneously in order to increase their abilities to speak about the issues fluently and spontaneously.

At the MUN event there are a number of different interactional genres that the participants need to master: 1) Procedures, by which delegates can shape the direction of the meeting by making motions for a variety of actions (voting, suspension of the meeting) or expressing points of order and information, 2) Formal debate, in which

delegates give timed, formal speeches in front of the meeting assembly to summarize their positions or appeal to other likeminded delegates, 3) Informal debate/caucusing, in which delegates engage in face-to-face negotiation, in an attempt to find allies, persuade adversaries and promote cooperation. Informal debate/caucusing in MUN is a genre of great potential interest to researchers in communication and interaction, particularly in the ELF research world.

2.2 MUN and ELF as Communities of Practice

  MUN simulations can be considered a community of practice since they possess three criteria that according to Wenger (1998), characterize a community of practice—mutual engagement, a negotiated joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.
ELF encounters have also been described in terms of a community of practice:

> The activity-based concept of community of practice with its diffuse alliances and communities of imagination and alignment fits ELF interactions well because ELF participants have heterogeneous backgrounds and diverse social and linguistic expectations. Rather than being characterized by fixed social categories and stable identities, ELF users are agentively involved in the construction of event-specific, interactional styles and frameworks (House, 2003, p. 573)

The complication in the MUN event is that not all the participants/delegates identify as ELF users.   Indeed it is hard to really describe who these speakers are. The traditional native/ non-native speaker dichotomy is not relevant with regards to ELF (Ferguson, 2012), nor should it be when one considers the slipperiness and inadequacy of the term "native speaker" to describe a person's communicative competence. Jenkins (2000) attempts to reimagine the native non-native dichotomy by suggesting concepts like Monolingual English Speaker, Bilingual English Speaker, and Non-Bilingual English Speaker.

Yet in some cases, "for lack of a better alternative" (Llurda, 2009, p. 120), it may be practical to keep a native/non-native speaker dichotomy as a framework for certain kinds of sociolinguistic research (Haberland, 2011) in which neither group is be assumed to be inherently more proficient than the other but their journeys to become users of English have followed differing routes. This will be made relevant later.

Speaking English as an L1 offers no guarantee of an ability to interact successfully with a wide variety of interlocutors; there are many varieties of English, many of which are mutually incomprehensible (Ur, 2010) and similarly, native speakers of these many varieties of English are not guaranteed to be successful interlocutors with users of ELF (Litzenberg, 2013). Indeed, it may really be the case that English native speakers (however one may define the members of this group) are in especially acute need of training to adjust to a lingua franca world (Carey, 2013). It has been reported elsewhere that when monolingual or otherwise communicatively unaware/insensitive English speakers use language that is "too quick, too garbled or overly colloquial" (Skapinker, 2016), it can be argued that they are displaying a lack of communicative competence.

Figure 1 summarizes the student diversity at a recent MUN event held in New York City that hosted 6000 student delegates. The organization collects racial statistics for its US based participants and lumps all of the non-US participants into the category of "International" so our assumptions regarding the proportion of ELF users can only be speculative. Nevertheless, based on personal experience and from a perusal of the conference program, the vast majority of "International" participants come from Europe (especially Germany and Italy) and Asia.
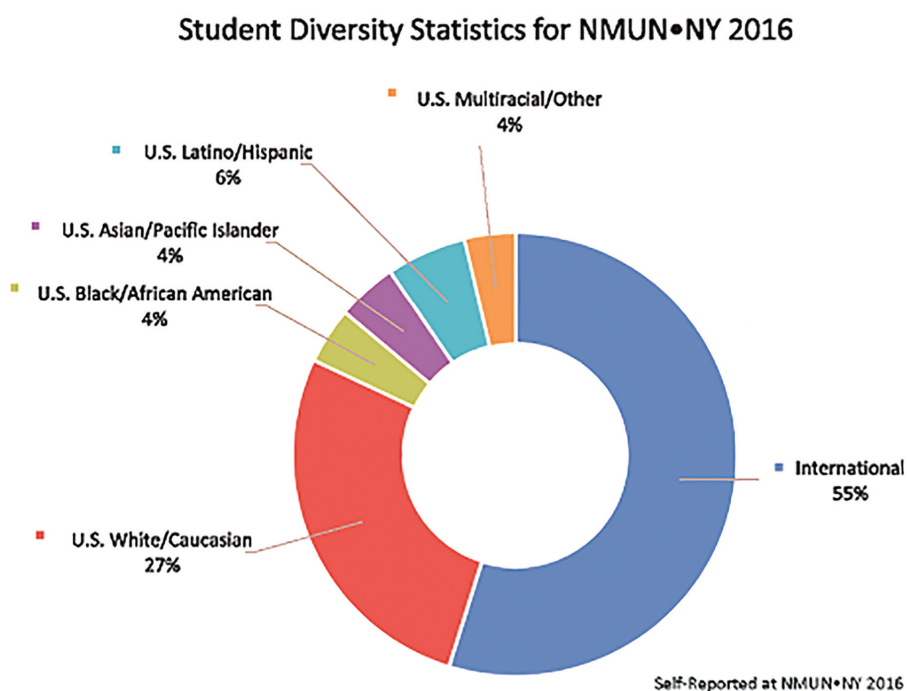

Figure 1. Student diversity statistics

So it is certain that a very large proportion of the speakers at this event are ELF users, even if they are not in the majority. Although other countries may differ, the students who qualify to become delegates from our university in Japan typically have no less than IELTS 7.5 and can be therefore comfortably classified as C2—the highest level of proficient user, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Despite their strong capabilities, over the years our students have struggled to make their voices heard and ensure that their policies and ideas become included into the working papers that form the basis of the important draft resolutions. I began to wonder if the burden of communication, comprehension, and cooperation was being fairly shared between all parties, especially between ELF and non-ELF users. Perhaps it was time to problematize the language behaviors of the native speaker/non-ELF speakers.

This brings us to the research questions for the present study:

1. Do ELF speakers encounter communication/comprehension difficulties when interacting with non-ELF (English native) speakers?
2. What are the sources/causes of these communication/comprehension difficulties?

3. The Study

Observations of ELF-speaking MUN delegates from Japan and Germany were collected through a checklist and open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix A) in order to get a sense of some of the shortcomings that native speakers display when communicating with ELF speakers in the context of MUN simulations.   The checklist items probed possible trouble spots in: conversation management (Q1a, Q1b), cultural knowledge (Q1c, Q1g), manner of delivery (Q1d, Q1e), and lexical knowledge (Q1f, Q1h). The reader is asked to bear in mind that this is just a preliminary pilot study with an extremely small sample aimed at getting an initial glimpse into this area of concern. The observations will later inform a list of recommendations for non-ELF speaker directed communication training.

3.1 The Problems Detected

Based on the results of the checklist, almost all of the delegates indicated that they had experienced communication/comprehension difficulties when interacting with non-ELF (English native) speakers. Only two delegates claimed to have never encountered

comprehension problems related to those items. Table 1. shows the frequencies for each type of difficulty.

The most frequently cited problem areas related to manner of delivery and lexical knowledge. Nearly two-thirds noted that "a Native Speaker used vocabulary words that I had not heard before" and more than half of all respondents claimed experiencing a Native Speaker who "spoke so fast that I could not understand." A solid third of respondents agreed that, "a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me." Less than a quarter of respondents reported any problems attributable to cultural knowledge or humor. No one reported problems with interruptions causing confusion and furthermore, interruptions leading to a feeling of frustration for the inability to finish an utterance, barely registered. Therefore, if one were looking for an instructional target, vocabulary, speed and idiom use would be promising starting points.

Table 1. Questionnaire Responses from NMUN delegates   (*n=10, **n=12)

		J* (%)	G** (%)	J+G (%)
Q1a	a NS interrupted me so I got confused and forgot what I was saying.	0 (0.0)	0 (00.0)	0 (00.0)
Q1b	a NS interrupted me so I was frustrated by not being able to finish.	1 (10)	1 (8.3)	2 (9.1)
Q1c	a NS said something that probably needed cultural or special knowledge in order to understand.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1d	a NS spoke in long, complex sentences so I could not follow the meaning.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1e	a NS spoke so fast that I could not understand.	6 (60)	6 (50.0)	12 (54.5)
Q1f	a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me.	3 (30)	5 (41.7)	8 (36.4)
Q1g	a NS used some kind of humor but I could not get the meaning.	3 (30)	2 (16.7)	5 (22.7)
Q1h	a NS used vocabulary words that I had not heard before.	5 (50)	9 (75.0)	14 (63.6)

These problem areas point specifically at poor skills of accommodation, which can be defined as the "process by which speakers adjust their communicative behavior to that of their interlocuters in order to facilitate communication." (Cogo, 2010, p. 254) and validates the previous calls for and recognition of the need for training in accommodation directed at native speakers of English (Skapinker, 2016; Frendo, 2016).

3.2 Delegate voices (Open-ended Question 2)

Most of the students included a description of their own experiences. Among those that comment on the issue of speed, here is a sampling with commentary, when appropriate.

> *Some delegates wanted to introduce their working papers and policies and I could only understand half because they spoke fast.*

> *A delegate spoke very fast during his speech. I had to focus to understand him.*

In the case of these two delegates, the speech rate of their interlocutor seemed to be an issue for their ability to comprehend. This can be contrasted to the way that speed interferes with conversational management and turn taking.

> *When I was in a working group, NSs are too fast to speak so that it was a bit difficult to fit in the discussion.*

> *Today my working group (not all of them) tried to (or did it) delete my points in our working paper. Thereupon I talked to them and point it [NS spoke too fast] out. Now they implemented my points.*

In the case of the first delegate, the speed interfered with normal turn-taking procedures. However, in the case of the second it appears to veer into more sinister territory—the speed of the interchange precluded an opportunity for the delegate to defend their policy point. Such use of speed to filibuster or discourage discussion may be a type of negative negotiation strategy against which, participants might need or want additional training. Yet, it hardly seems to match the cooperative ideals generally espoused by MUN event organizers.

The following example also involves speed creating a comprehension breakdown, but notice that the delegate interprets this as a function of familiarity with the topic and the fact that the same ideas are repeated many times to different interactional partners. So, it could be natural to get faster as time goes by.

> *I had a delegate explain to me about his policies and who went at it at lightning speed, and it was difficult for me to even come up with questions. I felt that after everyone has had experience explaining policies and stances to many delegates, people will start speaking a bit faster and sometimes omitting details.*

Speed can also be related the way that pauses are interpreted and treated during interactions. When a pause or silent contemplation is interpreted as inability it might be used against the delegate:

> *I was asked by other delegates about our working paper and I said "Let me see" and thought silently for a while because it is natural in Japan that we don't speak aloud when we are thinking and I wanted to make sure what I would answer. But that delegate said "OK, who's your leader? I'll ask him" without any pause. I thought we need to answer instantly rather than perfectly accurate.*

Here are comments that included references to vocabulary comprehension:

> *Some NSs are using words that I never heard so sometimes it was hard to understand.*

> *Some of the delegates use words which I have never heard before which does not bother me.*

> *I often had to ask some NS about their used vocabulary (because I've worked very intense with many Canadians) and at some occasions I felt very dumb but they were very concerned about me getting their point. In some cases they seemed to feel ashamed not to be able to find a way to express theirselves in a different way.--Canadians are great! Britains were often very fast!*

It must be noted that the delegates at this event were highly proficient—solidly C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Furthermore, they had prepared extensively to be familiar with the jargon and technical vocabulary connected to the agenda items for the simulation. Thus, it is extremely likely that any unknown vocabulary would be word choices or expressions that could be considered more a function of personal idiolect rather than a lack of reasonable knowledge for participation in the simulation.

4. Discussion

As Barlett and Johnson stated in 1998, "Native speakers need to become more aware of international business English: to modify their own language, to stop viewing these simplifications as sub-standard forms of English and to realize that they are missing out on an efficient communication tool" (p. 6) and "Whether native or nonnative, communicators need to learn (be taught!) to listen, make situational adjustments, and use sociopragmatic, situational potential to jointly create meanings and operational cultures" (Charles, 2006, cited in Charles, 2007, p. 279).

Frendo (2016) proposes to offer classes to train native speakers and non-native speakers at the same time in an array of business communication skills such as small talk, presentations, negotiations, and meetings. Among the benefits mentioned, the realization "that the native speakers are not necessarily the ones who do best in the negotiation role-plays, or presentations" which may be conversely a huge benefit to ELF speakers. The native speakers "come away with a greater awareness of their own limitations and an improved understanding of the strategies they might use in order to communicate most effectively in an international context [by taking] part in role-plays, discussion etc. where it is what they say that counts, not the fact that they are native speakers."

Although it may be true that some people are able to accommodate to a certain extent without much or any direct training, they might need some help to learn how to better choose or vary their communication strategies (Sweeney & Zhu Hua, 2010).

4.1 Specific Solutions

Recommendations for dealing with Speed (adapted from a list by Halsdorf, 2013):

- Raise NS awareness of:
  - The definitions and effects of speaking either too fast or too slow.
  - Why contractions (which contribute to speed) are confusing and best avoided.
    - Contractions are very difficult to perceive in the midst of conversation.
    - Some NNSs inadvertently delete them from their own speech.
  - The danger of consonant segmental deletion and elision (especially when two NSs start interacting) will result in a net increase in speed. Add to this a mix of local accents, dialects, or slang, the resulting speech stream will offer huge challenges in comprehension with very little communication payoff.
  - The confusion of expressions that create unclear word boundaries because of linking and vowel reduction in commonly reduced phrases that are not consistently taught in language programs (e.g., gonna, shoulda, dijyu).

Recommendations for dealing with Idioms (adapted from a list by Halsdorf, 2013):

- Raise native speaker awareness of
  - what an idiom is.
  - how difficult they can be to understand.
  - how common idioms are.
- Develop Native Speaker accommodation strategies
  - to make an idiom more transparent (if it is important to the discussion).
  - to monitor whether the idiom used is leading to misunderstanding
- Improve Native Speaker skill using a more globalized version of English that uses idioms sparingly.

Recommendations for dealing with vocabulary:

- Raise NS awareness of
  - The effect of their own use of jargon or technical vocabulary on other listeners

- Develop NS accommodation strategies
  - To monitor the effect of their talk on others—to be sensitive to signs of miscomprehension and more proactive in addressing the problem.
  - to make an unfamiliar or technical vocabulary item more transparent through the addition of a paraphrased definition.
  - To paraphrase complex propositions another way
- Improve NS skill using a more globalized version of English that uses jargon and technical vocabulary sparingly or in accordance with the current relevant community of practice.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that during a MUN simulation event it can be asserted that everyone has strengths and everyone has weaknesses. However, it is incumbent upon all participants to learn to appreciate that although communicating effectively may be goal of the event; doing so through mutual respect and cooperation should be the way.

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Appendix A

Communication during MUN Simulations

We are doing some research into the communication experiences of MUN simulation
participants.   Thank you in advance for taking time to answer.

Think back to interactions that you had with <u>delegates</u> who you think were <u>Native
Speakers (NS) of English</u>.

Although you may have enjoyed your conversations, you might have also experienced
some difficulties too. These moments of difficulty in communication are the focus
of this research.

1. Please check (any or all of) the following things you may have experienced:

○   a NS interrupted me so I got confused and forgot what I was saying.

○   a NS interrupted me so I was frustrated by not being able to finish.

○   a NS said something that probably needed cultural or special knowledge in order
to understand.

○   a NS spoke in long, complex sentences so I could not follow the meaning.

○   a NS spoke so fast that I could not understand.

○   a NS used idioms/expressions that were unfamiliar to me.

○   a NS used some kind of humor but I could not get the meaning.

○   a NS used vocabulary words that I had not heard before.

2. Please write about some specific examples with as much detail as you can remember.
Use the back of this sheet if you need.