

Strategies for Avoiding Misunderstanding in English L2 Conversations

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To contribute to existing research that describes how L2 speakers avoid misunderstanding during conversation, the current study examines the strategies used by university students in Canada. The students ($N = 104$) were audio-recorded while carrying out two communicative tasks in pairs: Exchanging personal experiences about moving to Canada and discussing academic research studies. Transcripts were coded for the occurrence of speaker strategies (e.g., comprehension check, elaboration) and listener strategies (e.g., confirmation check, clarification request) for avoiding misunderstanding. Their use of speaker and listener strategies was compared overall and by conversational topic (i.e., personal or academic). The results indicated that the students used more speaker strategies than listener strategies and produced more speaker strategies during the academic discussion than the personal topic. Implications for L2 teaching are highlighted.

Introduction

Within the more general category of communication breakdowns, misunderstanding occurs when a listener incorrectly interprets a speaker's message and that misinterpretation becomes apparent retrospectively (see Pietikäinen 2018, for additional types of communication breakdowns). For example, a university student in our data described his experience nearly missing a flight while in transit in Korea. After discussing several other topics, toward the end of the conversation his partner returned to the travel

topic and asked where he had gone on holiday in Korea. It was only when he replied that he had been in transit back to Canada that she realized her initial interpretation (i.e., he almost missed a domestic flight while on holiday in Korea) had been incorrect. Whereas this example illustrates misunderstanding in a low-stakes context, university students may experience them in contexts with potentially higher consequences, such as discussing academic content, negotiating tasks with classmates, or setting appointments with staff and faculty. Because misunderstanding can carry consequences, university students (like all language users), may deploy a variety of strategies to monitor communicative success, facilitate understanding, and engage in remediation to resolve breakdowns in the communication of meaning with their strategy choices influenced by the communicative situation.

Previous studies have shown that speakers work to pre-empt communication breakdowns by using repetition, reformulation, comprehension checks, explanations, and making intended meaning explicit. In addition to these pre-emptive speaker strategies, listeners may also initiate negotiation work to resolve nonunderstanding episodes, which occur when a listener does not understand a speaker's utterance. Although listeners may "let it pass" (Firth, 1996) when nonunderstanding occurs, they also may choose to engage in remediation strategies such as requesting clarification. For example, students in the current dataset were discussing how instrumental and integrative motivation have played a role in their English language learning experiences. After a speaker stated that although both types were important, instrumental had been more important, the listener requested clarification by asking "sorry which one?" The speaker replied that instrumental motivation

complexity (Bui 2014; Qiu 2020). When describing familiar topics, L2 speakers produced more elaborated clauses and fewer self-initiated modifications (Bui and Hang 2018; Qiu *ibid*). In self-report data, they commented that topic familiarity helped them access and organize information and allowed them to include more details and explanations (Qiu and Lo 2017). Additional self-report data from Korean L2 English university students indicated that they were motivated by conversational topics related to their personal experiences with real-life relevance and to advice giving rather than abstract, complex, serious, or controversial topics (Poupore 2015). Taken together, this body of work has demonstrated that university students are influenced by task topic and that it affects their motivation, provision of information, and use of elaboration and self-repair.

To link the prior research about strategies for avoiding misunderstanding with task research, the current study compares the speaker and listener strategies employed by university students in Canada while discussing personal and academic topics. The research question was “What strategies do English L2 university students use to avoid misunderstandings when talking about personal and academic topics?”

Method

English L2 Conversations

The conversations came from a corpus of paired interactions between English L2 university students in Montreal, Canada. The students carried out three, 10-minute communicative tasks: sharing personal experiences, exchanging close-call narratives, and

discussing academic research studies. Because the close-call narratives did not elicit interactive discourse (i.e., each student narrated their story with few listener responses), we compare the students' language use during the personal experience and academic discussion tasks. For the personal task, the students discussed challenges or problems faced by international students when moving to Montreal and brainstormed strategies for overcoming those challenges. For the academic task, the students read a short synopsis of a research study about one of four topics (motivation, medical ethics, advertising, or nature vs. nurture). After summarizing the study for their partner, they discussed questions related to the two research studies.

For the analysis, we selected 104 students from same-gender and mixed-gender conversational pairs. These students spoke 26 different first languages (L1s) with the most frequently occurring L1s including Mandarin (15%), Arabic (11%), Farsi (11%), Hindi (11%), Bengali (9%), Spanish (9%), Tamil (5%), French (4%), and Vietnamese (4%). Their mean age was 24.0 years ($SD = 3.6$) and they had lived in Canada for a mean of 4.7 years ($SD = 5.9$).

Data Coding

The second researcher coded transcripts of the students' conversations to identify speaker and listener strategies for avoiding misunderstanding that were described in previous research (Mauranen 2006; Pietikäinen op. cit.).¹ Speaker strategies included steps taken by the speaker to check listener comprehension, modify their utterances, and elaborate. Listener strategies involved efforts to confirm speaker utterances and request clarification.

Initially the listener strategy of recasting was included, but it was removed from the analysis as only four recasts occurred in the entire dataset. Definitions and examples of the coding categories are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Strategies for avoiding misunderstanding*

Category	Definition	Example
Speaker strategies		
Comprehension check	Speaker asks whether listener has understood	<i>you know what I mean?</i>
Self-initiated modification	Speaker initiates a modification of their prior utterance	200 dollars to buy uh um <i>I'm--I'm sorry 2,000 dollars</i>
Elaboration	Speaker provides additional information about a prior utterance, such as giving examples, specifying the meaning of a word or phrase, often preceded by <i>you know</i> , <i>I mean</i> , or <i>like</i>	one day if I come across someone <i>like just if I'm shopping outside I'm talking to the cashier</i>
Listener strategies		
Confirmation check	Listener checks understanding by repeating something the speaker said, may occur with rising intonation or <i>do you mean</i> ; Speaker response does not contain a modification of the original utterance.	Speaker: in Korea everything is different than here Listener: right Speaker: eventually you like it actually Listener: <i>you like it?</i> Speaker: yeah starting out it was confusing but eventually you will enjoy the food and the people
Clarification request	Listener asks speaker to clarify through an open-ended or specific request, or an or-choice question.	Speaker: you moved here with your parents? Listener: <i>Sorry?</i> Speaker: You moved with your parents from China? Listener: uh they are still in China

Because the roles of speaker and listener continually shift throughout a conversation, each student could engage in both strategy types. An example of a student, Daiyu, using both speaker and listener strategies is provided in Example 1. In this excerpt, Aavi begins the conversation by describing the research study he had read about a twin experiment. Daiyu employs a listener strategy (clarification request) in Turn 2 to ask whether it was about identical twins. After confirming, Aavi describes the study further and they continue discussing it for several turns. In Turn 17, Daiyu begins to tell Aavi about the twin research study she had read. She uses a speaker strategy (elaboration) to provide more details about what she meant by the twins having “similar thoughts.” In their conversations, the students moved between the roles of listener and speaker using both types of strategies.

Example 1. Illustrating speaker and listener strategy use

Turn	Student	Dialogue
1	Aavi	Yeah my study is an interesting experiment where in the 1990s they conducted a study on hundred twins separating after their birth. So they separated hundred twins as soon as they were born.
2	Daiyu	<i>Is it identical twins or?</i>
3	Aavi	Uh it's identical, exactly yeah, so they wanted to study what happens after a few years like one in one separate country and one in other country and how they grew up. So they studied about many similarities they found out.
17	Daiyu	Okay so my study is about twin study as well, but they want to see whether the twins have similar thought for cartoons-- <i>like for humour whether the cartoon is very interesting or not</i>

Results

The research question asked if there were differences in English L2 university students' use of strategies for avoiding misunderstanding when discussing personal and academic topics. To answer the question, we first compared the total number of speaker and listener strategies across both topics. As shown in Table 2, these students produced more speaker strategies than listener strategies with most of the speaker strategies occurring as self-initiated modification and elaboration. Within the category of listener strategies, confirmation checks and clarification requests occurred nearly equally. To account for variation in how much each student talked, we divided their strategy use by their total turns. A paired-samples *t* test indicated that the proportion of speaker strategies ($M = .24$, $SD = .15$) was significantly higher than that of listener strategies ($M = .01$, $SD = .01$): $t(1,103) = 15.41$, $p < .001$ with a large effect size ($d = 2.20$) based on benchmarks for applied linguistics research (Plonsky and Oswald 2014).

Table 2
Total Strategies by Type

Category	Frequency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Speaker strategies			
Comprehension check	7	.07	.29
Self-initiated modification	2293	22.05	15.63
Elaboration	1112	10.69	6.84
(total = 3412)			
Listener strategies			
Confirmation check	76	.73	1.32
Clarification request	66	.63	1.12
(total = 142)			

To identify whether strategy use differed by topic, we compared speaker and listener strategies for the academic and personal tasks separately. As shown in Table 3, the proportion of speaker strategies by turn was higher when discussing the academic topic than the personal topic, but the proportion of listener strategies was identical for both topics. Paired-samples *t* tests indicated that the speakers used significantly more speaker strategies when talking about the academic topic than the personal topic, but they did not differ in their use of listener strategies. The effect size for speaker strategies (.25) failed to reach the benchmark for a small effect, which is .60 (Plonsky and Oswald *ibid*).

Table 3
Proportion of Strategies by Type and Topic

Strategy type	Academic topic		Personal topic		Comparison		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Speaker	.28	.23	.23	.16	2.79	.006	0.25
Listener	.01	.02	.01	.01	1.35	.090	0.00

Discussion

To summarize the findings, these L2 English university students used more speaker strategies than listener strategies for avoiding misunderstanding during conversation, which is in line with prior research with university students (Mauranen 2007; Kaur 2012) and the preference for self-initiated repair documented in conversation analysis research since Schegloff's seminal work (1977). However, unlike Björkman (2014), who found that listener strategies occurred more frequently than speaker strategies, our university students rarely engaged in listener strategies. Those students, however, were carrying out class assignments with a required final product, which may have created greater need to

engage in remediation. In contrast, our students were in a low-stakes setting, which may have increased their willingness to ignore nonunderstanding.

In terms of topic differences, the students used more speaker strategies during the academic topic than the personal topic. Variation in speaker strategies by topic extends the findings of prior task research that identified monologic task performance differences based on topic familiarity, specifically the tendency for speakers to modify their own utterances more frequently when talking about less familiar topics (Bui and Hang op. cit.; Qiu op. cit.). The academic task may have elicited more speaker strategies due to the need to ensure mutual understanding of the research studies to successfully compare them and discuss their implications. In other words, the students used speaker strategies to achieve the level of mutual understanding necessary to accomplish the task.

During the academic task, the students may have used elaboration to ensure that they were being understood, such as if they were not confident about a vocabulary word or expression. For example, the student in (2) was comparing the decision-making abilities of children and adults when he used the word “impulsion” instead of “impulsive.”

(2) Yeah compared to adults children make more uh like impulsion
impulsion decisions uh while adults may think about other things maybe the
price or if we really need it or not but children it's just if it's attractive yeah

Immediately after saying the phrase “impulsion decisions” the student elaborated by explaining how adults evaluate factors like price and need before making purchases, but children simply react to the item without thinking. By providing examples, the student pre-

empted any potential nonunderstanding created by the word *impulsion* instead of *impulsive*. Similarly, the student in (3) used the expression “were born separate” when describing twins. After trying to describe what that meant (i.e., logically how could twins be born separate?), the student chose to start over by explaining that the twins were separated four months after they were born.

(3) So um my story is about like two twins who were born separate—like they were not attached to each other when they were born. But they were twins born at same time. So so I will start again. So this is about uh...two twins...who were separated when they were four weeks old.

These examples suggest that students may have used speaker strategies during the academic task if they were not confident that their word choice expressed their intended meaning or communicated the content of the research reports accurately.

Implications for L2 teaching

We provide some pedagogical implications from the findings that these L2 university students preferred speaker strategies for avoiding misunderstanding and deployed them more frequently during the academic discussion task. As shown in Examples 2 and 3, these university students used an elaboration strategy to avoid a possible misunderstanding when talking about academic content. The ability to pre-empt misunderstanding can be demonstrated in classrooms by showing such excerpts to students. After raising students' awareness of elaboration as a strategy for avoiding misunderstanding, teachers can provide additional information about speaker (and listener) strategies including when and

how to use them. For example, students can be taught explicitly about the preference for self-initiated repair and elaboration. Students can also practice how to elaborate their speech, such as by explaining a word, to avoid misunderstanding. By combining awareness raising with explicit instruction, instructors can help prepare students for academic discussion.

An important consideration is how to sequence pedagogical activities to help students learn how to pre-empt misunderstandings. As suggested by Murray (2012), pragmatics instruction should focus on empirically-based strategies to identify ones that should be targeted through instruction versus ones that might be de-emphasized. Our empirical analysis of university student conversations has identified a clear preference for speaker strategies for avoiding miscommunication as opposed to listener strategies. For example, the following sequence of activities may be useful for raising students' awareness of speaker strategies for avoiding misunderstanding. (1) First, some awareness-raising questions can be used, such as: Do you change your speech or give more details during conversation? How often do you do that? How important is it for you to make sure people understand what you're saying in different settings? (2) Then, instructors can play video clips or provide transcripts that contain examples of the speaker strategies of self-modification and elaboration. (3) After reviewing the materials, students can discuss questions such as: Do you think the speakers understood each other? What did they do to make sure they were understood? (4) Next, students can share their answers with the class and create a table with strategies. (5) Instructors can review the list and elicit comments about when students might use the strategies while adding additional suggestions to the list. The instructor can also highlight why people might prefer speaker strategies and how

listener strategies might make their partner uncomfortable. (6) Finally, students might carry out a role-play task to practice using the strategies or observe interactions in their daily life to identify strategies that occur in different contexts (e.g., in service encounters, between classmates, with professors).

An additional pedagogical implication is the importance of helping students actively monitor their communicative success. Along with knowledge about speaker strategies, instructors can also provide students with information about how to recognize when listeners are experiencing difficulty understanding. For example, prior research about nonverbal communication has shown that holds (which are a temporary pause of dynamic movement) occur when listeners have not understood the speaker. After the speaker provides more information and understanding is reached, the listener releases the hold and returns to dynamic movement. Awareness-raising activities, such as comparing video-clips of listeners who have and have not understood the speaker, can be used to help L2 students detect nonverbal cues for recognizing when their conversational partner is having difficulty. Once they become more adept at recognizing the nonverbal cues, they can elaborate and modify, so that the listener does not have to choose between ignoring the nonunderstanding or requesting clarification.

A final implication concerns the choice of conversational models to share with students, specifically whether to present excerpts from English L1 or L2 communication. Recently Kordia (2020) advocated for an instructional approach that raises students' awareness about characteristics of English L2 discourse, including those features that may differ from

L1 English communication. Although L1 communication may prioritize economy and efficiency (Kaur 2017), the current data provide additional evidence that L2 students regularly engage in elaboration and modification to ensure explicit and clear communication. Instructors may find it useful to use transcripts from academic corpora in different university settings to highlight areas of similarity and divergence across contexts and help students recognize the strategies associated with different discourse communities. For example, students might identify contexts where they would prefer to elaborate to prevent a communication breakdown, such as during an interview, versus contexts where they would feel comfortable with a listener requesting clarification, such as service encounters. Once their awareness about various strategies has been raised, students may benefit from opportunities to practice deploying those strategies while carrying out a variety of academic tasks, such as discussing disciplinary content and creating group presentations or reports.

Concluding Remarks

Our use of data from an existing corpus of L2 university student interaction allowed us to ensure that we had a balance of pairs with different genders and L1 backgrounds. As the students had just met, their conversations provide insight into strategies that English L2 students use when interacting with peers during a first meeting. However, the corpus contains conversations elicited for research purposes rather than talk in classrooms, study groups, or student-faculty interactions. Future research should explore strategy use in these contexts over a longer timeframe to identify how it evolves as students become more familiar with each other, such as during a semester-long class or over a multi-year degree

program. Longitudinal research would help shed light on the development of strategy use, including how individual speakers deploy those strategies when talking to different interlocutors, about diverse topics, and for a variety of purposes. Finally, future research might test the effectiveness of different pedagogical activities for developing strategy use and elicit students' reasons for using specific strategies at different points in the conversation. Such research can help teachers identify students' decision-making and chart the development of their strategy use over time.

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Note

1. We asked a research assistant to code 15% of the transcripts to check reliability.

Comparison of their coding (two-way, mixed average measures intraclass correlation coefficients) showed that the reliability was .86 for speaker strategies and .90 for listener strategies.