English for International Communication :
What Goes Wrong And Why

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The paper identifies certain features of English as the language of communication at a group discussion involving participants from many different linguistic backgrounds. Problems of accent, vocabulary, tone, impact and co-ordination are discussed. These subjectively derived factors are compared with survey and experimental evidence on EIC from AIT, particularly in the area of accent and intelligibility.

There was an interesting example of English for international communication recently, which I was lucky enough to take part in. It was a working session of an international forum, its objective to suggest guidelines for a new educational programme. Twenty people were in the group, very international indeed as they were from no fewer than twelve countries, in Asia, the Pacific, Europe and North America. The status and roles of English in the twelve countries differ considerably. Six have English as a foreign language, not used as a medium of communication in normal social or educational life, but studied as a school subject. In four of the countries represented in the group, English is a second language, used as a medium of instruction in secondary and/or tertiary education and also, in some cases, as an intra-national language, for communication between people from the same country but with different first languages. Two countries with English as their mother tongue were also represented. So, we had EFL, ESL and L1 speakers of English, all on this occasion using EIC or EIL (English as an international language). No one had actually laid down any rule that this working group discussion should be in English; it is very unlikely, however, that any other language was common to all twenty participants. No doubt there were significant differences in levels of communicative competence in English among the speakers, but the choice of any other language would almost certainly have meant that some of us could not have communicated at all.

It seemed an interesting example of the topic of this seminar; a typical EIL event, combining English 'at international conferences', 'international aid programmes', 'for academic purposes' and even, perhaps, 'in diplomacy' (all examples of EIC which are mentioned in the rationale of this CULI national seminar). As a participant in the group discussion, I was aware of things that were probably happening *because* of the influence of English in its role as a language for international communication. Of course, language is a complex thing, influenced by and influencing all kinds of social, psychological and political factors in its context. Yet one of the influences can be EIC itself, people having to communicate through a lot of different Englishes. If we can identify some of the things that typically happen in EIC circumstances we may be able to help language learners and teachers (including ourselves, as both) to work out ways of handling EIC better. The points discussed here struck me during the working group session. Afterwards I borrowed the reporting secretary's recording of the proceedings and listened again several times. So my subjective comments are based on both first and later impressions.

One of the most common topics when people, whether language specialists or not, discuss different Englishes and their intelligibility is the question of *accent*. On more than one occasion during the meeting I attended, accent seemed to present problems, judging by participants' reactions at the time and by later comment. Just a few seconds after the start of one speaker's contribution, the chairman, sensing a fairly general concern, asked the speaker to 'speak up'. It was not obvious that volume was the problem here rather than accent. Even when the speaker spoke more loudly, there still seemed to be intelligibility difficulties among the listeners, LI as well as ESL and EFL. The speaker's own English was very fluent but the main points made were not taken up by the chairman or other participants. Accent or other production factors hindering the perception or intelligibility of a speaker by hearers can be quite a complicated matter in EIC. Are we really sure when problems are caused by accent or when by some *other* intelligibility factor (loudness, speed, etc)? Are other linguistic features (grammar, vocabulary, coherence, etc.) more or less important for understanding? Are some accents more difficult to understand than others, and are different accents easier or more difficult for different listeners? In the EIC context, none of these questions is about 'standards' of English in an evaluative sense, but about factors helping or hindering intelligibility among speakers from different places using a common language because they have a topic they need to discuss. Some more objective evidence on the question of accents is discussed in the last part of this paper.

Vocabulary, even at the level of individual words, caused various problems at the meeting. In one or two cases speakers were unable to produce a particular technical word when it was needed. Once, for instance, at the end of an important contribution, a key word just would not come to the speaker (an experience we must all have had some time when trying to communicate in a language that is not our own). Another participant kindly supplied a possible word to fill the gap, the speaker made no further comment and the discussion continued. The trouble is that the substitute word was not the one the original speaker was searching for. His true message and its impact were lost and the meeting was now continuing under a misunderstanding. In other instances speakers used particular words in ways unusual enough to carry meanings which differed from the meanings other participants gave them. Sometimes the mismatch between intended and perceived meaning was substantive, part of the conceptual argument of the meeting. Where, for example, different speakers intended different meanings for words like 'formation', 'core', 'approach'.

On other occasions the effect of unusual usage was on attitudinal tone rather than information content, but no less important for that. Misunderstandings of tone can, of course, be especially worrying at international discussions. Consider for instance the negative effect of 'even' in this utterance :

"Without this component the new program will be even weaker than the existing program". Such misunderstandings, of omission and commission, are more likely in EIC than in all native-speaker communication.

At a broader pragmatic level also, there were events at this working group meeting that are worth investigating further. If they are found to be typical of EIC activities, they might well be worth training or educating for. We may categorise them under two headings : *missed impact* and *missing coherence*.

The success of speakers in ensuring their points have an impact on the discussion may make the difference between the acceptance and the rejection of an idea. In the EIC discussion here, impact seemed to be lost sometimes because points were presented less directly, more embedded (Goffman, 1981) than they would have been in an all-native-speaker group. There seemed to be an unusually frequent number of statements such as :

"I would like to state that I would like to see..."
"It seems to me that it would be better, I think, to..."

Does not such over-tentativeness often come rather from lack of confidence in one's command of the language of communication than in the point being made ? Certainly, impact tends to be lessened because the speaker seems less committed to his point. In addition, the discussion process is slowed down quite considerably.

Another communicative feature which reduces the impact and pace of international language argument is the missed or delayed entry. It is only natural that the crucial language tone and timing of a turn-taking or seizing should be more difficult in a foreign or second language. There were examples in this working group and, of course, they altered the impacts (and possibly the overall weight) of the discussion. Points are likely to be taken up by the next fluent speaker rather than by the participant feeling most strongly about the idea being discussed. This also happens in L1, but the effect is probably exaggerated in EIC.

The problem of who speaks when and why is related to the general pattern of an EIC discussion. 'Pattern' here refers to 'an activity organised in terms of mutually held "procedures" for facilitating the co-ordinated action of the participants' (Duncan 1982), a definition from conversation analysis (e.g. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). In EIC such procedures are less likely to be 'mutually' held, of course, and there may be more narrowly linguistic pre-occupations which lessen participants' attention to 'co-ordinated action'. It is a tendency, for example, for a potential contributor in a language other than the first, to rehearse his or her contribution right up to the moment of delivery. This can reduce attention to what other contributors are saying, and mean that the connections between successive utterances are less clear than in a shared first language discussion. It is possible to detect points being made in a sequence dictated more by individual readiness than by the timing of group discussion logic. Of course, the key co-ordinating task of the chair figure in such discussions is to help ensure a reasonable ordering, sharing and timing of participation. Chairing a discussion, a difficult enough job in *any* language, is made considerably more difficult in EIC. More than usual mis-summarising and less than usual coherence and co-ordination can therefore be expected.

So from my experience at this one EIC meeting, certain communicative features emerge as problematic :

> *accent* and related factors of the intelligibility of what we actually hear ;

> differing intended and perceived *meanings ; impact* lost through embedding or missed

> entries ;

> slowness, *reduced coordination*, and mis-summary.

These features might well figure in course designs for EIC.

But in case all this sounds too subjective, it might be appropriate to mention briefly here some related research carried out at the Language Centre, AIT, and reported on in Hall and Hawkey (1987). With its students coming from all over Asia, its faculty from all over Asia, Europe, Australia and North America, and with English as the medium for all communication, AIT is a strongly EIL/EIC community. Given the interesting (and often contradictory) findings on accent and attitude (e.g. Elsenslein 1986) ; accent familiarity (e.g. Ortmeyer and Boyle 1983, Smith and Rafiqzad 1979, Smith and Bisazza 1982) ; and accent and other variables (e.g. Eisenstein and Verdi 1985), our investigation, which is still at an early stage, addressed the following areas :

> the perceived and actual recognisability and importance of accents in understanding

> English ;

> the perceived and actual relative importance of accents and other linguistic factors

> in understanding English.

Our main survey findings so far are as follows:

1. a very strong proportion of students surveyed consider accents important in understanding English;

2. some accents are considered more difficult than others, native-speaker accents less difficult than most other accents, but the English accents of people from one's own country the least difficult;

3. other factors, however, are considered significantly more important to understanding than accent; i.e. speed, vocabulary, organisation and topic, but not grammar;

Our controlled experiments suggest the following:

4. various English accents are not easy to identify;

5. variables other than accent very easily intervene, for example speed of delivery and even the slightest variations in the difficulty of text.

Our investigation continues. Given the subjective evidence described above, of the importance in EIC discussion groups of the meanings of particular words, lost impact and co-ordination, we may experiment, using this genre (rather than a dictation) as our text.

In teaching programs with an EIC focus, it would seem important to design in activities giving learners plenty of exposure to different Englishes; help and experience in developing floor-gaining and floor-maintaining strategies; the opportunity to analyse and develop communicative impact, and insights into the effective organisation and co-ordination of their own and others' ideas.

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