Cooperative Meaning-Making Strategies in ELF University Courses

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Abstract
The present paper examines data derived from courses on Marketing Management and European Tourism Law offered by the University of Bergamo, taught by experts coming from various (mainly non-native English speaking) countries and attended by students from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. The paper outlines the main strategies employed by both lecturers and students in the realization of their communicative efforts. In particular, it discusses the strategies adopted by lecturers to overcome the difficulties of comprehension experienced by their students, as well as the constructive work carried out by learners to help their teachers in the explanation of specific topics. The data presented highlights a high degree of cooperativeness on both sides when they interact among themselves so as to guarantee a successful outcome of the specialized communication in which they are involved.
Keywords: ELF; university courses; communicative strategies; cooperative work

1. Introduction

In the process of internationalisation of their teaching programmes, many universities all over the world are now offering courses in English (Wächter and Maiworm 2008; Hellekjær and Räsänen 2010). This is a typical English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) situation in which both lecturers and students – although they are not native speakers of English – use this language as a common means of communication and instruction. Very often the lecturers remain the local ones, who adopt English as a means of instruction, although they are not native speakers of that language. In many cases the teaching of such courses is assigned to foreign lecturers, who are

not chosen specifically for their language competence but rather according to their expertise in the subject they are (supposed) to be teaching. As they are taught in English, these courses attract many students from other countries.

Several studies have taken into consideration the use of ELF in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses organized by universities, some of them investigating formal aspects (Ranta 2006, 2009; Björkman 2008a, 2008b, 2009) while others focus on pragmatic issues (Leznyák 2002; Mauranen 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Cogo 2009; Kaur 2009; Smit 2009; Suviniitty 2010). As regards the latter, Mauranen (2003) has pointed out the adoption of 'self-regulation' strategies, by means of which speakers tend to adapt their way of speaking to the interlocutors' assumed linguistic competence. Another strategy commonly employed is the recourse to 'self-repair', which takes place when words or expressions previously formulated are proposed in a different way by the same person to facilitate the listener's comprehension. A further way to promote understanding is by means of 'self-repetition', which occurs when the lecturer repeats something said earlier to make his concepts clearer (Mauranen 2006b).

The clarification of meaning also implies the adoption of cooperative strategies and 'interactive repair' by both speaker and interlocutors whenever difficulties or non-understanding occurs. Listeners, in particular, resort to 'minimal incomprehension signals' (Mauranen 2006b) or direct questions when they encounter comprehension problems. By means of 'utterance completions' (Seidlhofer 2001) and 'overlaps' (Cogo 2009), they manifest their willingness to cooperate in the fulfilment of the communicative act. Sometimes, instead, minor points of non-comprehension are not raised by the interlocutor, who prefers to adopt a 'let it pass' strategy (Firth 1996) in order not to create unnecessary breaks in the interactive flow, on the assumption that the unclear word or expression will either become clear or redundant as talk progresses.

The present paper examines communicative interactions taking place in such contexts. The data is taken from EMI courses on specialized disciplines offered by the University of Bergamo. The paper outlines the main strategies employed by both lecturers and students in the realization of their communicative efforts. In

particular, it discusses the strategies adopted by lecturers to overcome the difficulties of comprehension – especially of specialized terms and technical concepts – experienced by their students, as well as the constructive work carried out by learners to help their teachers in the explanation of specific topics.

The data examined in this paper is derived from courses on Marketing Management and European Tourism Law offered by the University of Bergamo, taught by experts coming from non-native English speaking countries and attended by students from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. In particular, the corpus consists of the recordings of 21 hours of the Marketing Management course and 27 hours of European Tourism Law classes. One of the two lecturers came from Switzerland and was a German native speaker (although he also spoke French fluently); the other was Italian. The 42 students on the two courses came from nine different countries: Albania (3), Australia (1), Bangladesh (2), Cameroon (1), China (3), Italy (24), Latvia (1), Serbia (2), the USA (5). The lectures were prevalently monologic with the lecturer mainly talking to the students; only part of the lectures were interactive, with the students working in groups or presenting their own work.

The methodology employed for analysis of the data is mainly qualitative, and is based on selected pieces of the lectures recorded and transcribed according to the conve tions adopted in the compilation of the MICASE Corpus (Simpson et al. 2002) and the ELFA Corpus (Mauranen *et al.* 2010)[1].

2. Facilitating strategies

2.1. Checking comprehension

In order to make sure that their teaching is effective, lecturers frequently ask students whether they have understood their explanations. The expressions most commonly used to check comprehension are listed in Table 1.

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[1] I would like to thank Dr Larissa D'Angelo (University of Bergamo) for organising and overseeing the recording and transcription of the lectures.

TABLE 1
Expressions most commonly used to check comprehension

Expressions	Occurrences
Clear?	61
You understand + NP?	46
Okay?	44
Do you understand?	31
You understand?	22
It's clear?	15
Do you understand + NP?	12
Any question(s)?	12
You understand this?	7
Do you understand what is + noun?	3
Do you understand this?	2
Do you understand that?	2
Do you understand + noun?	2
You understand what is + noun?	2
You understand that?	1
Do you understand what it is?	1
You understand what I mean?	1
Other question?	1
It's clear + noun?	1
Is not clear?	1
You understand no?	1
You understand all this is clear?	1

Students usually reply positively, and thus the lecturers continue their teaching activity. Here is an example where the lecturer checks the students' understanding of the concept of time sharing for the use of a flat:

(1) L1[2]: a-at the coast of Spain eh for instance you pay them a certain amount and you can go for twenty-five twenty-five years eh if you pay maybe twenty thousand euro you have a time share you buy a time share that means you buy a week in a given apartment at the given price eh? so always in July the second week or the three week in July you can go there

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[2] L1 = Lecturer 1 (Swiss, German native speaker); L2 = Lecturer 2 (Italian); S = Student; SS = Students; _ = false start.

you are the owner you are the owner of the apartment but only for this period that's time sharing do you understand that?
SS: yes
Lı: really? now that's the classical time share but this time share eh the question is then do the people really go there and is it not a nominee for somebody

At times, though, the lecturer is not sure that all the students have understood a specific concept – particularly when the interlocutors belong to a different culture – and so, in spite of a positive reply, he decides to provide further explanations. This is the case of the word *pope* in the following extract:

(2) Lı: […] the pope <TO CHINESE STUDENT> you know what is the pope?
     S: yes
     Lı: you know in Rome, this man <IMITATING THE POPE'S HAT> <SS LAUGH>

In this case the lecturer resorts to gestures to imitate the Pope's hat so as to convey the meaning of the word he is trying to explain. On other occasions, the lecturer decides to add an example to make sure that the concept has been understood clearly by all students:

(3) Lı: it shows that ownership can be fractional is like in a house I don't know if you have that in Italy can you can you own only a floor of a house? for instance I have a house with three floors do you understand what is a floor?
SS: yes
Lı: and for instance in Switzerland you can own a floor that means you can own in a house an apartment

Another strategy used to explain a concept that has not been understood is rephrasing, by means of which the lecturer uses different words to help the students' comprehension. In the following example, the lecturer first explains that a specific directive compels 'the retailer or the organiser to have the same attitude and the same level of responsibilities or priorities, and then rephrases his explanation by referring to the fact that 'they can't change the application of the rules according to a new disclaimer clause introduced by themselves':

(4) S: I didn't understand very well this thing
L2: what?
S: eh so the retailer or the organiser are obliged by this directive to
L2: to have the same attitude and the same level of responsibilities or priorities … they can't change the application of the rules according to a new disclaimer clause introduced by themselves

A further strategy adopted in order to make the meaning of a term clear is translation. However, since the students come from different linguistic backgrounds, the lecturer tries to cope with their difficulty by using the various equivalents in the languages he knows:

(5) L2: each year from two thousand eight the European commission organises a prize
    S: ah the last word is … commission organises what exactly?
    L2: a prize
    S: ah
    L2: a *concours*, a *premio* a competition

In this way the lecturer exploits his linguistic competences as a multilingual speaker by drawing skilfully on the range of languages he knows, a strategy which has also been observed in other instances of ELF communication (Cogo 2009).

    Sometimes, in order to show that they have understood the concept explained by the lecturer, students answer his question giving a synonym, as in the following case concerning the French word *chauviniste*:

(6) L2: […] for example the most important region for tourism is *île de* eh *île de France* but the French citizens are *chauviniste* you understand the term? It's proud of itself
    S: very nationalistic
    L2: yeah always the best of the world

Although students commonly reply positively when the lecturer checks their comprehension, he sometimes doubts that they really have grasped the concept clearly. In this case he sometimes asks them to repeat the concept in their words, which often proves that they are unable to do so. The following extract shows one of these cases:

(7) L2: it's clear what I mean?
    SS: yeah
    L2: L eh you understand?
    S: yeah
    L2: yeah? You can repeat?
    S: no

To signal incomprehension the most common minimal incomprehension signals are *hm? eh? pardon?* Their occurrences in the corpus are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Minimal incomprehension signals

Expressions	Occurrences
Hm?	29
Eh?	23
Pardon?	12
What?	8

These signals are not only used by the students but also by the lecturers when they do not understand clearly what is said:

(8) L1: I don't know what is the best summer resort in Italy eh let's take one
    S: Sardinia
    L1: eh?
    S: Sardinia
    L1: yes but a resort let's take Rimini for instance

(9) L1: what is the best tour operator with the best reputation in Italy?
    S: Alpitour
    L1: hm?
    S: Alpitour
    L1: Alpitour, ah even they used the name Alps Alpitour

In the second of the quotations above it is interesting to note that the lecturer makes an etymological comment on what he has heard. The fact that the lecturer tries to recognize the origin of the name of the tour operator (Alpitour from Alps) shows that he is willing to build up some common ground with his students.

The corpus sometimes presents turns that show great difficulty in communication in which, however, the lecturer tries to keep the interaction going with his students. In the following extract, for example, the student does not catch the metaphorical usage of the expression *feel at home* as he thinks that reference is made to his own home, which creates great misunderstanding and confusion in the last part of the exchange clearly indicated by the question 'What does that mean?' uttered by the lecturer:

(10) L1: Air Bangladesh exist?
    S: yes, it exists
    L1: what is the exact name?
    S: Bangladesh Biman
    L1: Bangladesh what?
    S: Bangladesh Biman B-I-M-A-N
    L1: BIN what does that mean?
    S: Biman means ah like a flying bird
    L1: flying bird?
    S: flying bird ah
    L1: flying bird <LAUGHS> ah in Bangladesh flying bird
    S: yeah <SS LAUGH>
    L1: that's nice <SS LAUGH> but you feel at home when you fly with
Bangladesh Biman?
    S: in my home?
    L1: yeah you feel at home if you fly this company?
    S: oh is no more modern
    L1: it's not modern?
    S: yes
    L1: what does that mean? <LAUGHS>
    S: okay it's because it's not a familiar real airline sector

Sometimes the comprehension difficulty arises from the fact that the question is not formulated clearly or that the student is asked more than one question, as in the following case:

(11) L2: so we have business model, you can you can say me in one sentence what is a business model? It is an abstraction of what? Is very simple, if I ask you what do you do
    S: a strategy?
    L2: what what? No it doesn't do with a strategy what do you do?
    S: I I work now in

L2: ah you work?
S: yeah
L2: are you a student or do you work?
S: both
L2: ah you are a student who pays the study by working that's the answer

In the first answer ('A strategy') the student is trying to answer the first question asked by the lecturer ('What is a business model?') but the reformulation of the lecturer in the second part of his turn ('is very simple, if I ask you what do you do') suggests instead that he might be inquiring about the student's present employment status. However, in the end the lecturer is able to lead the communicative interaction to a satisfactory completion.

The successful attainment of the communicative interaction is the norm in the corpus examined here. Indeed, the cases in which a 'let it pass' strategy is adopted are rare, which means that lecturers are always keen on explaining concepts that have not been grasped or to correct students' formulations that are not appropriate. The few occurrences that have been found concern minor points that have not been cleared completely but which are not considered so important as to require further negotiation of meaning. One example is the quotation below, in which the discrepancy of the university systems from which the students come does not allow a clear specification of the year the students are in; noticing the difficulty of finding out this information, the lecturer in the end accepts their vague assertion that they are Erasmus students:

(12) L1: also you first year?
     S1: ehm
     S2: we are third_I'm third year
     L1: ah
     S1: but there are four years
     L1: but here? you don't know exactly which level?
     S2: Erasmus we are Erasmus
     L1: you are Erasmus okay good hm

2.2. Self-repairs

In the course of his lecturing activity the speaker sometimes realizes that what he is saying may be too difficult for his interlocutors,

therefore he decides to reformulate the text. In the following extract, for example, the lecturer starts asking for the definition of merger, but when he realizes that this may be too difficult for the students, he switches to the concept of acquisition:

(13) L2: [...] for instance a merger or acquisition, well I must be careful what I ask you what is a merger? merger?... eh easier an acquisition, what is an acquisition? that's when my firm buys another firm. a merger is if you have a business and I have a business we put our forces together but I'm the one boss

As can be seen in the quotation above, when he is not able to obtain a reply, the lecturer provides the answer to his question himself. This is a strategy very frequently adopted in the lessons examined. Some of these questions are not really audience-oriented but rather content-oriented (Thompson 1998), as no response is expected. As Björkman (2010: 87) has rightly asserted, rhetorical questions of this kind – although not meant to elicit direct feedback from the students – "add [...] to the interactivity of the lecture and also serv[e] as signposts for the listener", as they lead students to focus their attention on a specific issue during the lecture. Here are two examples of this teaching strategy:

(14) L1: [...] they can offer better interest rates for loans, you know what is a loan? when I give you money but I tell you you pay me back in ten years

(15) L2: [...] what we call <WRITING ON BOARD> win-win situation have you_is this notion known to you? win-win situation is_I give you something you give me something we both win it's possible this should be the basic principle of cooperation

Another way of facilitating comprehension is by reformulating the text whenever the speaker thinks the expression he has uttered may be too difficult for his interlocutors. This is the case, for example, of the following quotation in which the lecturer first uses the term *physician* and then he shifts to *doctor* subsequently specified as *medical doctor*:

(16) L1: [...] after seven hour a physician a doctor a medical doctor got a heart disease

At times the reformulation is expressed as an explicit paraphrase:

(17) L2: […] the brand normally has a slogan and avis said a ci-_a fantastic slogan in marketing they said avis we try harder do you understand in English? we try harder that means we do it better we do more for you

Particularly in the European Tourism Law lessons, the lecturer at times uses a few Latin words which he considers specialized terms to be learnt as part of his course. In these cases, however, the lecturer accompanies the terms with a translation or a paraphrase in English:

(18) L2: […] what we call in latin *res publica* the state

(19) L2: […] it's as always in commercial relations in *do ut des* I give you something you give me something

(20) L2: this period coming from the day of publications and the date of enter into force according to a Latin proverb is *vacatio legis* which means that we need a period to prepare all the juridical systems at this new legal order

Code-switching in this case is used with the function of introducing a specific concept (Klimpfinger 2009).

3. Cooperative strategies

3.1. Interactive repairs

When difficulties of expression arise on the part of the lecturer, students sometimes adopt some proactive measures and cooperative strategies in order to help avert problems of understanding and thus reach a successful achievement of the communicative interaction. This can be seen, for example, in several cases in which the Swiss lecturer has a problem in mentioning Italian name places. In these cases the Italian students attending the course complete or correct the names referred to:

(21) L1: […] resort like Cortina d'Ampezzo or Ma-Madonna del Cam-
SS: Campiglio
L1: piglio

(22) L1: they have places where they operate eh business business cities like Milano also small ones where there is a business I was eh yes is funny I was in eh in Italian place where where they produce *prosecco* very near to Venice i cannot pronounce it unfortunately in exact yes this I can I can *valdo-*?

SS: *Valdobbiadene*
L1: yeah *Valdobia-*
SS: *-dobbiadene*
S1: *dobiane dobiane* eh i know

The recourse to cooperative strategies can be seen also in those cases in which the lecturer is not able to find the right word in English and directly appeals for assistance. In these cases the students help him by providing the word needed:

(23) L1: […] how do you say ehm the *phoque* this eh arctic animal you see very nice animal eh
    S: seal
    L1: seal seal ah beautiful <SS LAUGH>

The lecturer's repetition of the word does not only imply his acquisition of the term, but also underlines the cooperative process established in class in the construction and sharing of new knowledge. Repetition is thus not only comprehension-oriented but also interaction-oriented (Lichtkoppler 2007) as it serves to highlight participation and solidarity.

    This spirit of cooperation is also present in those cases in which the lecturer is confused in explaining the meaning of an acronym, as is visible in the following extract referring to the concept of ICT:

(24) L1: […] tour operators they have today they largely use ITC_ICT is obvious ICT
    S1: I don' know it
    L1: you don't know? but you use it I'm sure
    S1: ahh
    L1: ITC_ICT
    S2: information and communication technology
    L1: information and communication technology yes

Cooperation is also shown when unplanned breaks are made in the lecture. In the following extract, for example, the lecturer is distracted by the late arrival of a student; the other students help him resume the previous teaching path:

(25) L2: <TO A STUDENT ENTERING THE ROOM> eh I'm talking about eh

S1: transport
L2: transport
S2: strategy for mobility
L2: and strategy for m-mobility sustainable mobility yeah
S3: and requirement
L2: require-_eh a combination of action strategies

3.2. Utterance completion

Utterance completion takes place when students continue the lecturer's sentence by providing fitting words or specific technical terms. To express his approval, the lecturer not only repeats the term but also adds a positive remark (see the highlighted words in the following extracts):

(26) L1: […] we grow internally without buying another enterprise or without ehm I will say cooperation you are becoming bigger and bigger and external growth is then contrary
    S: acquisition
    L1: acquisition and merger *yes good*

(27) L2: food, food is also in some destination is very complicated
    S: water
    L2: water *of course, yes*

When instead the completion words are not the ones expected, the lecturer corrects them by providing the right solution:

(28) L2: […] probably you have travelled to a place then this is a characteristic industry_those who organize travelling
    S: travel agencies
    L2: yes tour operators exactly

In some cases students continue the lecturer's sentences by adding more examples or words in a list:

(29) L1: […] current situation we have a very advanced process of negotiation with Serbia… Croatia … there will be in more time Albania… Montenegro
    S: and Turkey

(30) L2: […] urban centre became most attractive because young people that study in this university Heidelberg Aix-en-Provence

S1: Saint Andrews
S2: Urbino

4. Conclusion

Analysis of the recordings of the lessons taken into consideration shows that the cases of failed comprehension are very few, which confirms the results of previous analyses of ELF data (particularly derived from analysis of large corpora such as ELFA and VOICE, cf. Mauranen 2006a: Mauranen, Hynninen, Ranta 2010; Seidlhofer 2010), according to which speakers using English as a Lingua Franca try to use the language in such a way that facilitates communication and are willing to cooperate so as to favour understanding. Moreover, in teaching situations like the ones examined here interlocutors rarely ignore points of non-understanding and the occurrences of 'let it pass' strategies are very few as the main purpose of the teaching activity is to facilitate the assimilation of new concepts and of their related technical jargon. Also the recourse to code-switching is quite rare as the different linguistic background of the students does not enable the lecturers to refer to another code which all the students can master better than English.

Instead, the lecturers in particular adopt all the strategies available to them to facilitate the flow of information towards their students. Their aim is to make their lessons as participative as possible, as shown by the continuous check of their interlocutors' comprehension of the various concepts introduced in their courses and their willingness to answer questions and provide the explanations required. Moreover, this continuous communicative interaction creates a feeling of strong collaboration within the class, which is deemed particularly important for a successful progress of the course. Furthermore, by increasing interactivity, it is possible to make lectures more dialogic than monologic, creating opportunities for the negotiation of meaning and clarification. Indeed, our analysis has confirmed the results of previous studies (e.g. Hellekjær 2010) that show that the most comprehensible lectures were the ones where the lecturer had made use of a number of different interactive features.

Students, in turn, show great willingness to cooperate with their tutors in accomplishing the communicative purpose of the

interactions in which they are involved. Indeed, the data presented highlights a high degree of cooperativeness on both sides, so as to guarantee a successful outcome of the specialized communication in which they are all involved.

These strategies enable the interlocutors to accomplish their communicative purpose, as lecturers successfully manage to convey their specialized teachings. Their awareness of not being native speakers creates a higher motivation in their adoption of supportive moves than is commonly noticed in settings only involving native speakers. Even the lecturers' occasional problems with the English language are not detrimental to the course, as the students tend to evaluate more their tutors' expertise in the specialized subjects and therefore their learning expectations are not frustrated.

Moreover, the data shows that most problems of comprehension are mainly due to conceptual difficulties rather than lack of linguistic competence, grammar mistakes or pronunciation failures. This confirms the fact that in ELF contexts, such as the EMI courses examined here, communicative effectiveness is prioritised over correctness. As Jenkins aptly remarks, "Proficiency no longer depends on nativeness in the traditional sense, and 'highly proficient' must mean in today's world to be able to communicate well at an *international* level, not only at a *local* one" (Jenkins 2009: 32). As previous studies have pointed out (Hellekjær 2010; Klaassen/ Bos 2010), lecturers that are highly competent in English do not necessarily give good lectures unless they make frequent use of communication-enhancing pragmatic strategies.

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