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Misunderstandings in communicating in English as a *lingua franca*: Causes, prevention, and remediation strategies

Resumo. Miskomprenoj dum komunikado en la angla kiel lingvafrankao: kaŭzoj, prevento kaj helpaj strategioj.
Komunikaj malsukcesoj merite altiradis la atenton de esploristoj, ja ili konsistigas gravajn faktorojn influantajn la procezojn de lingvaj interagoj kaj lingvoakiro. Ili ne nur influas la komunikadon per si mem, sed ankaŭ havas aliajn, ofte gravajn konsekvencojn. Specialan atenton necesas doni al la procezo de plenumo – kaj fiasko de plenumo – de kompreno kiam la angla estas parolata kiel vehikla lingvo.
Ni prezentas la rezultojn de la unua larĝskala analizo de la kompleta konversacia subkomponanto de la Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), fokusante al la i) eblaj kaŭzoj de komunikaj paneoj kaj ii) strategioj, aplikataj far la parolantoj por preventi kaj superi tiajn malsukcesojn. Ni kategoriigos kaj montros la distribuon de la fontoj de 122 detektitaj paneoj, same la kompensajn strategiojn aplikatajn far la interparolantoj por sukcese eviti kaj solvi komunikajn problemojn.
La tuta materialo estis analizata serĉante karakterizajn ecojn kaj komunikajn paneojn. Tiuj poste estis analizataj denove detale rilate al la kaŭzoj de la malsukcesoj, kio kaŭzis la paneojn kaj kiel ili estis solvitaj, aŭ kiel la parolanto provis solvi ilin. Fine, la restantaj datumoj estis denove ekzamenataj serĉante preventajn strategiojn.
La ĉapitro konkludas per pedagogiaj rekomendoj.

Abstract. Communication breakdowns have deservedly been attracting the interest of researchers, as they constitute important factors influencing the process of linguistic interaction and language acquisition. Not only do they affect the process of communication *per se*, but also have other, often serious, consequences. Particular interest should be accorded to the process of achieving—and failing to achieve—understanding when English is spoken as a vehicular language.
We present the results of the first comprehensive analysis of the complete conversations subcomponent of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), focusing on the i) possible causes of communication breakdowns, and ii) strategies employed by speakers in order to both prevent and overcome such failures. We categorise and show the distribution of the sources of 122 detected breakdowns as well as the compensatory strategies employed by interlocutors to successfully avert and solve communication problems.
All of the material was examined in search of characteristic features and communication breakdowns. These were then analysed in detail with regard to what caused the failures and how they were resolved, or at least how the speakers attempted to resolve them. Finally, the remaining data were again scrutinised in search of preventative strategies.
The chapter concludes with pedagogical recommendations.

Communication breakdowns in conversations between native speakers of English have been well analysed (e.g. Schegloff et al. 1977; Schegloff 1992); much attention and a great deal of effort have also been devoted to studies of constructing understanding between native and non-native speakers (e.g. Varonis & Gass 1982; Kurhila 2003). Communication in English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), however, was for a long time overlooked, and it is only over the last two decades that research into ELF communication has rapidly developed, resulting in a large number of publications (e.g. Meierkord 1998; Mauranen 2006; Cogo 2009; Paradowski 2013).

In this contribution we present a corpus analysis of ELF conversations, with a focus on communication breakdowns – both the factors causing them, and the ways in which the failures are resolved. The chapter also showcases the kinds of measures taken by ELF speakers to avoid breakdowns and ensure successful communication. The final part presents conclusions drawn from the analysis as well as possible implications for teaching English as a *lingua franca*.

1. Terminology

C*ommunication breakdown* is a point at which the normal flow of interaction is broken due to problem(s) of various (not necessarily linguistic) natures. In this chapter the term refers to a phenomenon which is often also called *non-understanding*, *miscommunication*, or *misunderstanding*.

As noted by Mauranen, "[t]he default assumption in conversation is understanding and normally understanding is not signalled; the smooth progression and expected turns in themselves indicate comprehension of previous turns" (2006: 128). It is impossible to tell exactly to what extent an utterance is understood or misunderstood, so it is not fully justified to label communication failures as *non-understandings*. What *is* possible, however, is to notice a problem, a *communication breakdown*, and to draw conclusions based on observable data. This is one of the reasons why in this chapter the term *communication breakdown* is preferred over the notions *misunderstanding* or *non-understanding*.

One might argue that the term *communication breakdown* implies a complete failure in communication. While it is true that breakdowns either occur or not and that there is no 'partial breakdown', the term does not imply that problems with understanding are irreversible. Complete communication failures occur very rarely, and, as has been observed in many studies, in the great majority of cases communication breakdowns in ELF conversations become resolved (cf. Mauranen 2006; Cogo 2009).

2. ELF research

The current body of research into ELF communication has resulted in a set of terms which may be used to describe this type of interaction. However, scholars often use different labels to describe the same features, or they mean different things by using the same terms. It is therefore necessary for the purpose of this chapter to choose some of these terms and reject others. This is the topic of the following two subsections. For reasons of space, the discussion has to be kept succinct, just as we can only report a fraction of the analyses.

2.1 ELF communication: What speakers do

ELF speakers employ various strategies to enhance communication. One of them is *accommodation*. This fairly broad term refers to speakers' practice of adapting to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of various linguistic and non-linguistic features (Giles & Coupland 1991: 63). Research shows that accommodation is a common practice in ELF communication (e.g. Cogo & Dewey 2006; Cogo 2009; Mauranen 2006, 2012; Kaur 2009; Seidlhofer 2009).

Accommodation should not be confused with *foreigner talk*, which is a simplified register that is often used by native speakers to facilitate understanding in their encounters with non-natives (Ferguson 1971: 143). The term *foreigner talk* implies a gap in competence between speakers and that it is only the more proficient participant that adapts to what s/he thinks the less competent interlocutor is able to process. *Accommodation*, in turn, also encompasses situations in which speakers who have similar levels of language mastery accommodate to each other. In this chapter we restrict the term *accommodation* to situations

where there is an observable initial discrepancy between speakers and where this discrepancy is later reduced.

Another strategy is the *let-it-pass* principle (Firth 1996; House 2002). Although some studies suggest that it is not a very common practice in ELF communication (Pitzl 2005; Mauranen 2006) and should thus not be considered a general feature of ELF, it has been noticed that ELF speakers sometimes ignore or do not reveal their problems with understanding. As corpus analysis allows one only to describe what is salient in the data, the term *let-it-pass* will be used in this chapter only with reference to cases in which it is clear that a given utterance was not understood by the listener.

Another strategy also observed by Firth is the *make-it-normal* principle (1996: 245), which may be viewed as a specific kind of accommodation in which one of the speakers adopts a marked item produced by another speaker and uses it as if it were 'normal'. Unfortunately, corpus data rarely reveal whether the speaker who repeats the marked item is aware of its 'abnormality'. The analysis in the next part is therefore, of necessity, restricted to explicit cases.

A proper analysis of communication breakdowns also cannot overlook *negotiation of meaning*. This refers to various strategies which speakers employ when they encounter problems with understanding or when they try to find a lexical item that best conveys the intended message. Negotiation of meaning may take various shapes, for instance paraphrase or code-switching to other languages (Cogo & Dewey 2006: 66-69).

The final phenomenon which merits attention is the concept of *enhanced explicitness*. It has been observed that in order to facilitate the process of communication, ELF speakers often make their talk very clear. Like the *make-it-normal* principle, enhanced explicitness may also be considered a form of accommodation. It may be achieved in different ways, for instance by repetition, metadiscourse, or negotiation of topic (Mauranen 2012: 51).

What emerges from the presented overview is that the process of ELF communication is highly collaborative and that perhaps this *collaboration* is the most salient feature of ELF, encompassing most other features. Its importance has been emphasised by most ELF researchers and it has also been observed in the corpus data analysed later on.

2.2 ELF communication: How speakers do it

Let us focus on *how* ELF users speak; in other words, how they express their thoughts, what interaction between them looks like, and how they achieve the intended communicative effect.

The first aspect that should be considered when analysing talk-in-interaction is turn-taking. In the 'prototypical' situations, speakers talk after one another with neither overlong gaps nor overlaps; such smooth turn-taking has been called *latching* (Cogo 2010: 310). Sometimes, speakers talk simultaneously. What should be two turns is then realised as one 'double-turn'. The concept of *simultaneous talk* should not be confused with that of *interruption* (Tannen 1983: 120), which has negative connotations, while *simultaneous talk* is not necessarily disadvantageous, and may take different shapes. When simultaneous talk occurs at the end of a 'normal' turn and one speaker starts talking before another has finished (which happens particularly often), it is usually called *overlap*, and may be perceived in terms of reduced transition space (Liddicoat 2011: 113).

There are also situations in which the normal flow of speech is interrupted when no one is talking. Pauses and silence constitute an inherent part of communication. When they occur at the end of turns, they are usually called *gaps*, and may be interpreted as increased transition spaces (Liddicoat 2011: 111).

A phenomenon closely connected with the arrangement of turns is *completion*. Speakers sometimes finish off one another's utterances. Completions may be either

competitive, when speakers 'fight' for the floor, or collaborative, when they try to help each other put the intended message across (Cogo 2010: 298).

Difficulties with communication can be overcome in different ways. *Repair* (Schegloff 1992) is a broad term encompassing practices which do not necessarily aim at correcting 'errors', but whose objective is to repair the trouble source (Liddicoat 2011: 208*f.*). Schegloff et al. (1977) distinguish four types of repair, depending on which speaker initiates it and whose speech is being repaired. In self-initiated self-repair the speaker signals the problem and solves it. In self-initiated other-repair the speaker signals the problem, but it is solved by the listener. In other-initiated self-repair the listener signals the problem and the speaker solves it. In other-initiated other-repair the listener both signals and solves the problem (*ibid.*).

The term *repair* implies that the initial formulation was incorrect or wrong. As speakers employ both remedial and preventative strategies (Kaur 2009: 108*f.*), it might seem more appropriate to replace the name *repair* with *rephrasing* or *paraphrase*. However, paraphrase does not necessarily have to be triggered by a problem and there may be various reasons for using it. *Paraphrase* may have different functions, only one of which is 'repairing' utterances. The term *repair* will then be used in this chapter in a more abstract sense and refer to one of the functions of paraphrase, restricted to instances when there is a problem which is detected and solved, or when there are at least efforts to solve it.

Two final comments should be made about repetitions. Firstly, it is possible to distinguish between *self-* and *other-repetition* (Cogo 2009: 260). Secondly, repetitions may vary in length. As will be presented in the analysis, while repeating long parts of utterances is not common practice, repetitions of shorter parts happen quite often. Particularly frequent are single-word repetitions, which are here called *repeats* (after Mauranen 2012: 206).

A phenomenon which deserves particular attention is *metadiscourse*. The term may be understood in two ways (Ädel & Mauranen 2010: 2). The first interpretation, in line with the *reflexive model*, refers to 'discourse about discourse', that is talking about the ongoing speech, text, or interaction (Ädel 2010: 75). In this sense, examples of metadiscourse include expressions such as 'I mean' or 'what I want to say'. The second interpretation, in line with the *interactive model*, is a broader one and refers to those elements of language which have to do with textual interaction or organization rather than with propositional content. Here, elements that count as metadiscourse will also include phenomena such as hedging, vagueness, and discourse particles (Mauranen 2012: 170). In the following analysis the term *metadiscourse* encompasses both interactive and reflexive elements of speech.

A group of metadiscursive devices which may often be observed in spoken interaction are *discourse particles*. Those which are used by the *speaker* may be described as *cajolers* – tokens such as 'I mean', 'you see', 'you know', which invite the interlocutor to feel sympathy – or *appealers* – such as 'right?' or 'ok?', meant to elicit some signal of understanding (Meierkord 2000). Discourse particles used by the *listener* may take the form of *supportive backchannels*, that is items such as 'mhm' or 'yeah', by which the listener usually signals that s/he is following the speaker's discourse. There are also a number of tokens which simply help to organize talk – items such as 'well', 'so', or 'now'; in this chapter they are referred to as *discourse markers* (Fraser 1999: 931*f.*).

Speakers may refer to both their own discourse and the discourse of their interlocutors. The latter type, *other-oriented metadiscourse,* refers to practices employed by the listener to better understand what was said by the speaker. Mauranen (2012: 175-179) distinguishes between three kinds of other-oriented metadiscourse: *elucidation*, usually a question in which the listener asks the speaker whether s/he has understood the utterance correctly, e.g. 'Are you saying that ...?'; *interpretation* offered by the listener in the form of an explication of what the speaker has said, e.g. 'So you mean that ...?', and *springboard*, which occurs when the recipient paraphrases the speaker's utterance in order to take the floor and start speaking

about something different. *Other-oriented* and *self-oriented discourses* may also manifest themselves as very short items; the cajoler 'I mean' can thus be said to be *self-oriented*, whereas 'you see' is more *other-oriented*.

Another interesting practice present in ELF communication is *code-switching*[1]. What needs to be stressed is that certain items may sound foreign to one person, whereas for another they may be just examples of a style-shift (Seidlhofer 2011: 72). It is therefore not always possible to tell whether a foreign-sounding item is uttered as a code-switch or as a borrowing. It is also difficult to assess how this item is interpreted by the listeners.[2]

There are two final phenomena that should be listed in this overview, namely *hesitation* and *laughter*. These seemingly unimportant features are in fact very important elements of communication and should not be overlooked in an analysis of spoken interactions.

It is finally vital to take into account the context when analysing situations in which speakers refer to the reality that surrounds them. In communication, it is often sufficient to use *deictic devices* such as 'this', 'then', 'there', or 'she'. The referents are not always clear for the analyst, though in some cases, deictic devices are no more meaningful than *vague language* such as 'kind of', 'like', or 'something'. If such referents do not inhibit communication, there is no choice left but to assume that they were understood by the speakers.

It is not feasible to mention all of the observed features in this section. Many are so context-specific that it would be pointless to present them here. It is, nonetheless, necessary to point out that analyses of linguistic interactions should also consider the 'traditional' elements of language. In terms of lexis, it may be interesting to investigate the nature of linguistic innovation (*cf.* Cogo & Dewey 2006); in terms of grammar, one may analyse how modifying word order helps speakers to negotiate topic (*cf.* Lesznyák 2002); in terms of phonology, it may be interesting to look at how comprehensibility is affected by intonation (*cf.* Pickering 2009).

3. Data and methodology

The material analysed for this chapter is part of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), containing transcripts representing naturally-occurring face-to-face ELF interactions varying in length, genre, and topic and whose participants come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (VOICE 2013). For this contribution, we selected all speech events tagged as 'conversation'[3]. After the selection, the reduced corpus comprised 36 speech events (158,071 words), corresponding to approximately 15 hours of spoken interactions, with the shortest conversation less than four minutes long, and the longest almost two hours and a half; the number of participants ranges from 2 to 27. The speakers come from different, mostly European, countries, have different L1s and occupations. Their ages vary from 17 to over 50. The relations between them are fairly symmetrical.

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[1] Code-switching is a narrower concept than the related notion of *translanguaging*, in that the latter does not refer simply to the alternating use of more than one identified language in a particular communicative episode (Li 2018), but leads away from the structuralist Saussurean and Jakobsonian conceptualisation of languages as distinct 'codes' with solid boundaries (Lin 2013) and the focus on shuttling between these, to a usage-based focus on the user, their agency, and their complex fluid sense- and meaning-making practices that cannot be easily assigned to traditional definitions of a language (for an extensive discussion, see Paradowski 2021)

[2] In the corpus data analysed, the task of deciding whether an item or items are code-switches or borrowings has already been carried out by the transcribers, who have marked instances of code-switching and, whenever possible, determined their target languages.

[3] The analyses hence do not consider other speech event types, such as seminar discussions or interviews. For the sake of convenience, whenever the word 'corpus' is used henceforth, it refers not to the entire VOICE corpus but to the selected subcorpus.

The entire data set was first examined in search of characteristic features and communication breakdowns. These were then analysed again in detail with regard to what caused the failures and how they were resolved, or at least how the speakers tried to resolve them. Similar causes and similar strategies were then grouped together and tallied. Finally, the remaining data were again scrutinised in search of pre-emptive strategies.

4. Communication breakdowns in the corpus
The analysed material consisted of 122 instances of communication breakdown. Most of the breakdowns were resolved immediately after any problems with understanding were signalled.

The following two sections will provide examples of the breakdowns taken from the corpus.

4.1 Causes
Many of the analysed breakdowns were caused by multiple, sometimes fairly complex, factors. That is why the numbers given with reference to the groups of causes, when added up, do not equal the number of breakdowns in total (Fig. 1). It also needs emphasising that those numbers do not refer to the *actual* but rather *possible* causes. The following paragraphs will focus on some more specific factors which might have led to the communication problems in the corpus. For the sake of brevity, only a few instances will be discussed[4].
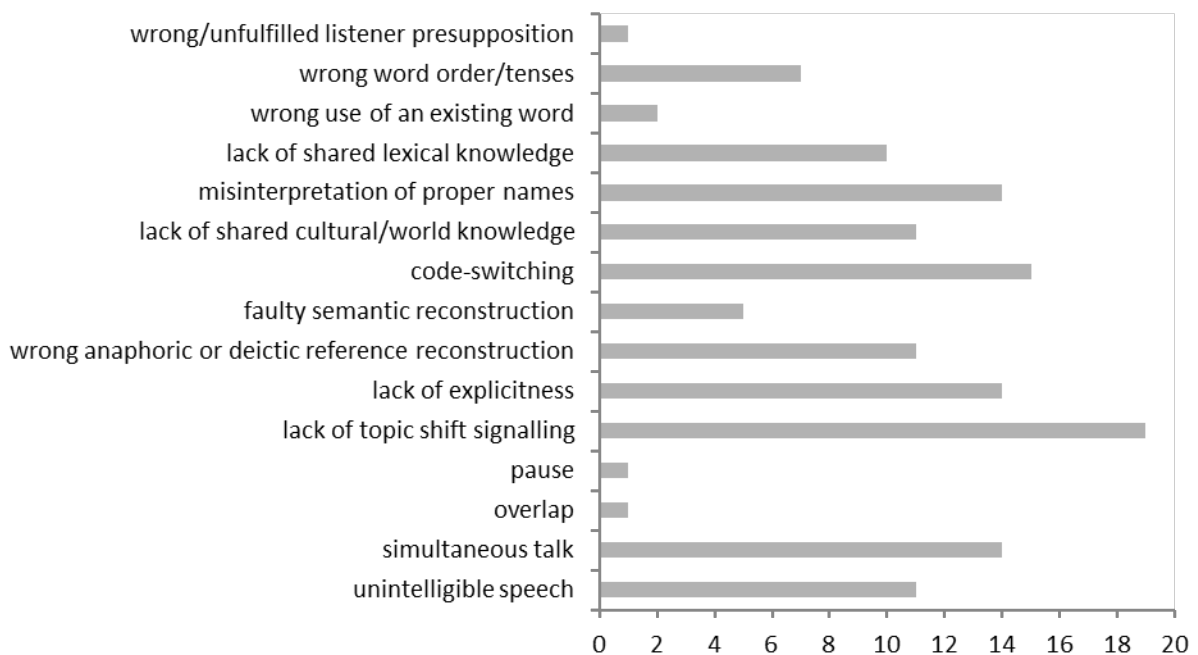

Fig. 1: Major causes of communication breakdowns

Twenty-eight breakdowns were solved immediately by means of repetition in the turn that followed the signalling of a problem. This suggests that they were caused not by the inability to interpret the meaning, but rather problems with aural perception or concentration. Sometimes the speakers spoke in a way unintelligible both to the interlocutors and the transcriber. This was the case in 11 breakdowns. There were also at least 50 other breakdowns which might, too, have been caused by unintelligible items. This number results from the fact

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[4] For the transcription conventions see supplement.

that speakers are not always able to detect the cause of problems; when they decide to paraphrase or add details rather than repeat the utterance, it generally cannot be established whether this was necessary or superfluous and whether the listener could not understand or just hear the utterance properly at the first attempt. Another frequent causal factor was simultaneous talk, leading possibly to 14 breakdowns. Overlap was yet another breakdown-causing feature.

Even gaps could be problematic, as in Example 1. The pause in this conversation has probably lowered S3's concentration, and she probably was not expecting any question directed to her, the more so because for some time she had not been taking part in the conversation.

Ex. 1

S1:[ger-DE]	your japanese girlfriend (.)
S2 [nor-NO]	haeh?
S1	your japane- -se girlfriend (.) do you talk to her because of the <L1ger> lange nacht der wissenschaften? {science night event in vienna} </L1ger> (.)
S2:	haeh?
S5 [ger-AT]:	sorry (.)
S1:	it's okay
S5:	@@ (.)
S2:	erm no i haven't talked to her about that (1)
S1:	but that was last saturday (1) and not er a:h <1><L1ger> lange nacht der museen {museum night event in vienna} </L1ger></1> (1)
S2:	<1><LNger> der wissenschaft {of science} </LNger></1>
S1:	<L1ger> museen {museums} </L1ger> (.)
S2:	er <LNger> nein (.) noch nicht {no not yet} </LNger> **(15)**

{awkward silence as nobody knows what to say}

S2:	**where in italy are you from?** (.)
S3: [ita-IT]	**sorry?**
S2:	**where in italy are you from?**
S3:	erm (.) i study in venice.
S2:	a:h =
S3:	= but i live near venice in city (.) near venice in
S2:	nic:e (1)
S3:	yeah @@ yes

(VOICE 2013: LEcon417)

The speaker does not signal in any way that they want to change the topic. It is reasonable to conclude that responsible for the communication breakdowns here—and in 18 other situations—was the absence of an introduction in the form of metadiscursive devices.

Another source of problems was formulating utterances that were not sufficiently explicit. In at least 14 cases providing additional details might have prevented the breakdowns. Lack of explicitness manifested itself also in the use of deictic and anaphoric references. In some cases, listeners failed to associate such items with what these referred to. Such situations occurred in eleven breakdowns.

Not only deictic devices or anaphoric references have relative meanings; other words with very broad semantic fields (e.g. "home") can also be interpreted in many ways. Their wrong interpretation may have caused at least five breakdowns.

Another feature of the analysed corpus is the rather frequent occurrence of code-switching, which was problematic in 15 cases. It is not known when the listeners were aware that they were hearing non-English code-switches, or when they were attempting to figure out the meanings assuming that the words were in English. Explicit cases, such as the one in Example 2, are very rare; nevertheless, they show that the issue of interpreting code-switches is a very complex one. The interlocutors here are speaking about traditions in the Orthodox Church, and S1 explains to S4 that she had to cover her arms in the church in the past. S2 uses the Maltese word *manki*, which according to him means *sleeve*, but is interpreted by S4 as the English word 'monkey'.

Ex. 2

S1 [mlt-MT]: = uhu uhu er so that it holds (.) onto your arm (.) to cover your arm

S2 [mlt-MT]: <3><L1mlt> (**manki**) {sleeve} </L1mlt></3><un> xxx </un>

S1: <3> it was </3>

S2: a mo- er er we used to <5> call it <L1mlt> (**manki**) {sleeve} </L1mlt></5>

S4 [mlt-MT, eng-MT]: <5> **a monkey?</5>**

S1: <6> a <L1mlt> (**manki**) {sleeve} </L1mlt></6>

S2: <6> a <L1mlt> (**manki**) {sleeve} </L1mlt></6><L1mlt> (manki manki) {sleeve} </L1mlt> means sleeve no?

S4: <7> a:h?</7> all right i thought monkey in english

S3 [scc-RS]: <7> aha </7>

S3: yeah no no no

S1: <1> ma- ma- <L1mlt> (manki) {sleeve} </L1mlt> as in in ita- </1>

S4: <1> as in monkey </1> (.) <L1mlt> xadina {monkey} </L1mlt> @@

S1: in <2> italian </2>

S4: <2><L1mlt> xadina {monkey} </L1mlt> is </2> monkey in maltese the animal

S3: aha (.) <LNmlt> xadina {monkey} </LNmlt>

SS: @@@@@@

(VOICE 2013: LEcon547)

Eleven breakdowns between ELF speakers might have resulted from a lack of shared knowledge about respective cultures or the world in general and 14 others by problems with interpreting proper names. There were also ten breakdowns that might have been caused by lack of shared lexical knowledge. In some situations, speakers seemed to hear the words for the first time; in others, they appeared to know the words but were unaware of all their meanings.

Interestingly, there were no situations in which a breakdown would be caused by using an 'incorrect' or 'non-existing' word. There were, however, at least two cases in which a 'wrongly' used 'existing' English word might have led to a breakdown.

Grammatical issues appeared to be more problematic. There were seven breakdowns which might have been caused by word order that did not comply with prescriptive rules (e.g. Example 3, where it is not even clear at which point, if at all, S4 comes to understand the question, since she withdraws from the conversation).

Ex. 3

S4 [swe-SE]: <L1swe><un> xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx </un></L1swe> (.) hh <soft> @@ (.) making fun of (him) <2> @@ </2></soft>

S3 [dut-NL]: **<2> so you had </2> you did you all have exams also?**

S4:	what? =
S3:	**= before this? (.) w- how many times exams do you have a year (.)**
S5 [rus-RU]:	e:r \<3\> twice \</3\> (.)
SX-f:	\<3\>\<soft\> two times \</soft\>\</3\>
S5:	twice a years (.) tw-
SX-f:	yah
S3:	twice a? (.) \<4\>\<un\> xx \</un\>\</4\> (.)
S5:	\<4\> a year \</4\>

(VOICE 2013: EDcon521)

4.2 Coping/remediation strategies

The previous section provided an overview of the possible causes of communication breakdowns. The following subsections will seek to show how ELF speakers deal with the existing problems and how they try to prevent the potential ones.

In much the same way as a breakdown may be caused by several factors, it may also be solved by many strategies. Therefore, the numbers in this section, when added up, again do not match the number of breakdowns in total.

As many as 97 communication breakdowns were resolved in the turn right after the problem was signalled, whereas only 17 involved speakers trying to solve the problem over several turns. Breakdowns from the first group did not have any strong impact on communication. Breakdowns from the latter category presented more difficulties and were typically resolved by several speakers in a longer and more complicated process.

The speakers' efforts were usually effective. There was no explicit situation in which solving communication problems would end in failure. There were, however, four instances in which there was no final signal of 'understanding', which might suggest that the breakdown remained unresolved. There were also seven situations in which the speakers did not take any measures in response to the problems expressed by the listeners. In three of those cases, however, the listeners seemed to have figured out the meaning on their own.

The most frequent remedial strategy was adding details to the initial formulation or describing and explaining the meanings of the utterances. This enabled speakers to achieve greater explicitness in 44 situations.

Another important strategy was paraphrase. It was employed in 36 instances of the analysed breakdowns. The paraphrases were usually lexical in nature. However, there were also examples of grammatical paraphrases. Example 4 is an instance of both. In this conversation in a restaurant S1 wants to know when S3 came to Vienna. She poses a question which is incomplete since it lacks a predicate. As S3 seems not to understand this question, S1 reformulates it: *how long* becomes *since when*. The paraphrase is not 'correct' according to prescriptive norms, but it is complete in that it has both a subject and a predicate. Unfortunately, despite S1's efforts to make the question more understandable, S3 seems to think that S1 is asking her how long she has been in the restaurant. What seems to inhibit communication in this case is S1's inability to establish the source of the problem. Finally, at the same time as S4 offers a lexical paraphrase, S3 deduces what S1 has meant, and the breakdown is resolved.

Ex. 4

S1 [ger-DE]:	**how long you: (.) here?**
S3 [ita-IT]:	**sorry?** =
S1:	**= since when you are here? (.)**
S3:	**sorry?**
S1:	**\<slow\> since when (.) you are here?\</slow\>**

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S3:              a:h six (now) (1)
S1:              since when (1) when
S3:              a:h i er (.) <4> when i arrive </4>
S4 [ger-AT]:     <4> when did you arrive </4> here? =
S3:              = a:h okay on saturday
S1:              a:h okay (.) we are all since few (1) few days here
(VOICE 2013: LEcon417)
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Another frequent strategy was repetition. It helped overcome 28 breakdowns. There were, however, four situations in which repetition did not solve the initial problems and was followed by other strategies.

Paraphrasing or adding details was sometimes accompanied by metadiscursive expressions. There were 14 instances of breakdowns which were at least partly resolved through metadiscursive devices. Those devices often took the form of short discourse particles which 'framed' the utterances, but sometimes they appeared as longer comments on the communication process. Both types are represented in Example 5. S5 apparently feels compelled to explain what she meant by *date online*. First, she introduces her paraphrase with the cajoler *I meant* – an example of reflexive metadiscourse. Then, she comments that she does not know what she is supposed to say – another example of reflexive metadiscourse. Finally, she uses the discourse marker *so*, which belongs to interactive metadiscourse, to introduce the consequent recapitulation expressed by *yeah that's all*.

Ex. 5
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S1 [eng-GB]:  <soft> all fun </soft> (1) so wha- what has everyone got a plan for the
                 afternoon? (.)
S2 [ger-AT]:  no plans =
S5 [fin-FIN]: = a date in the internet? @@ <6> @ </6>
S1:           <6> sorry?</6> (.)
S5:           date online? @ <7> @@ </7>
S6 [swe-SE]:  <7> o:kay </7>
SX-f:         WOW <1> @@@ </1>
S4:           <1> @@@@ </1> @@@ <2> oh </2>
S5:           <@><2> rea</2>lly a lo- really a lot of plans </@>
S1:           <3> @@@@@@@ </3>
S6:           <3> @@@@@@ </3> starting internet dating <@> (like) </@> @@ (.)
SX-f:         <4> @@@@ </4>
S5:           <4> @@@@@ </4> no i meant i =
S6:           = yah
S5:           <5> i </5> have an APPOINTMENT <6> online @@ </6> @@@ <@>
                 it sounds </@> so stupid <7> i don't know </7> (.)
S1:           <5> yeah </5>
S4 [pol-PL]:  <6> @@@@@@@ </6>
S3:           <6> @@ </6>
S1:           <6> @@@ </6>
S4:           <7> @@ </7>
S5:           HOW what you're <@> supposed to say </@>
S1:           <soft> @@@ </soft>
S5:           @@ so yeah <soft> that's all </soft>
(VOICE 2013: LEcon545)
```

Another strategy, completion, proved successful in overcoming six communication breakdowns. Speakers usually completed their utterances when the listeners employed other-repetition with a rising intonation (e.g. Example 6).

Ex. 6
S2 [spa-ES, cat-ES]: yah (1) but i mean (.) i think <fast> i'm not going </fast> to
                  improve with this weather (1) neither
S4 [dan-DK]: <yawning> no </yawning> (1)
S3 [nor-NO]: **you're not going?** (.)
S2:   **to improve** (.)
S3:   no okay
(VOICE 2013: LEcon560)

Another strategy, which often accompanied others, was dividing one's utterance into smaller parts to facilitate understanding. This was particularly visible in five breakdowns.

In five of the analysed breakdowns, speakers made attempts to solve communication problems but seemed unsatisfied, which they expressed by asking others for assistance. They did so primarily to induce cooperation. This strategy was visible in the previously quoted Example 2, in which S2 is not sure whether the word *manki* means 'sleeve' and asks other speakers for confirmation by means of the metadiscursive device *mean,* the translation *sleeve* and the question tag *no?*

Deictic devices can have the potential to overcome breakdowns when they add information to initial statements – this scenario was found in three situations, as can be seen in Example 7. S2 addresses S4 by using the personal pronoun *you*, a deictic device. S4 is not sure whether the question is directed to her, so it may be said that in this case using a deictic reference has inhibited the process of communication. In the next turns, however, S4 says that she lives outside Copenhagen, but S2 wanted to know where S4 lives in Vienna. S4 realises that she has misinterpreted the question and asks S2 *you mean here?*, which helps the speakers establish the right reference point.

Ex. 7
S2 [spa-ES, cat-ES]: {S1 joins the parallel conversation of S3 and S7}<soft> and
                        where do **you** live.</soft> (1)
S4 [dan-DK]:   <4> **me?**</4>
S2:   <soft><4> where </4> do you live?</soft>
S4:   right e:r outside copenhagen (1)
S2:   where? (.)
S4:   right outside copenh- o:h you mean **here**? (.)
S2:   yeah (.)
S4:   all right (.) way outside on the other side of vienna (.) [place13]
       =
(VOICE 2013: LEcon560)

As shown earlier, several miscommunications may have been caused by code-switching. Three of such breakdowns were resolved by translating the problematic items into English. The remaining ones were usually overcome by explaining the meanings of the foreign words. There was also one example in which a code-switch into a language other than English was employed as a strategy to overcome a communication problem. A numeric breakdown of the detected remediation strategies is provided in Fig. 2.
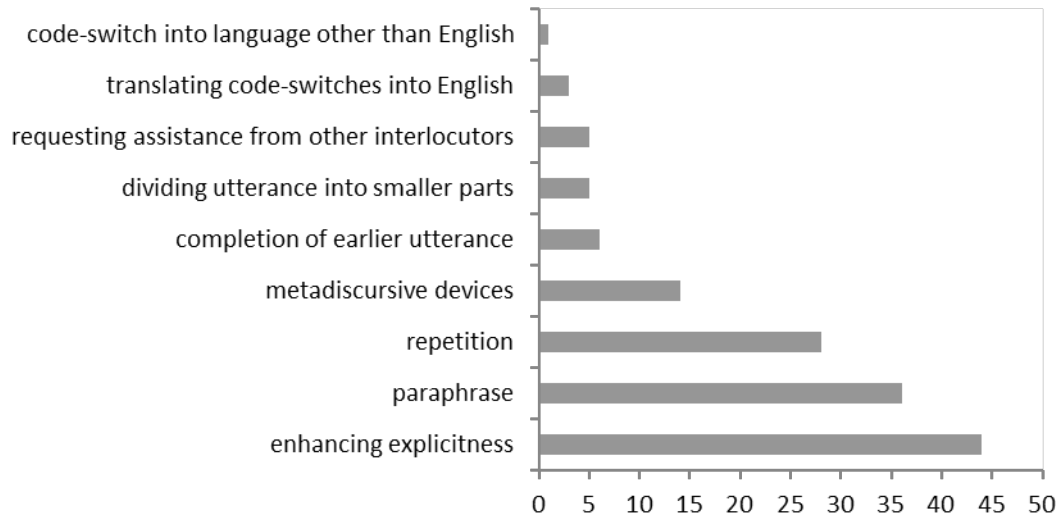
Fig. 2: Successful remediation strategies

Many strategies can be employed by ELF speakers pre-emptively in order to *avoid* breakdowns. Again, only the most significant ones will be presented in order to show how ELF speakers collaborate to achieve communication success.

Example 8 is a conversation between computer scientists. In its course, S6 explains to S5 issues connected with working at a university in Germany. He apparently tries to segment the pieces of information by means of topicalisation and resumptive pronouns. Instead of saying *the associate professorships are,* he says *the associate professorships they are*, which enables him to place emphasis on the topic of the sentence and facilitate understanding.

Ex. 8

S6 [ger-DE]:   typically you you apply for (associate) professorships (.) and only the (associate) professorships they are er (.) and the full professorships hh they're for a lifetime positions (1)

S5 [kor-KR]:   \<soft> a:h \</soft>

S6:   so all the other are (2) only for some (.) how how do you call that in english? (1)

SX-m: @ (.) @@ (1)

S7 [ger-DE]:   \<L1ger> was meinen (sie) = {what do you mean} \</L1ger>

S6:   \<L1ger> = zeitvertraege? {fixed-term contracts} \</L1ger> (2)

S7:   erm (2) time-limited? =

S6:   = time-limited?

S5:   @@ \<5> @@ \</5>

S6:   \<5> @@ \</5> @@ okay =

S5:   = so er are you HAVE to opp- (.) the \<6>\<un> xxx xx \</un>\</6> (.)

S6:   \<6>\<coughs>\</6>

S5:   by the deadline (1)

S7:   yes (.)

(VOICE 2013: PRcon599)

In his second turn, S6 has problems conveying the intended message because he lacks the term *fixed-term contract*. This is first signalled by pauses and then by admitting explicitly to not knowing the word. After he uses the metadiscursive expression, S7 comes to his aid. He starts to negotiate the meaning by code-switching into German, asks S6 for clarification, and

then offers an approximate translation. The rising intonation signals that he himself is not sure whether the translation was correct. As it seems, S6 is not sure either. However, the 'tension' resulting from this uncertainty becomes relieved by S5, who starts laughing and then probably recapitulates what he has learnt in the form of interpretation introduced by the discourse marker *so*.

The code-switch/translanguaging used by S7 may also be considered an instance of accommodation. S7 notices that S6 does not know the word in English, and knowing that S6 also speaks German, he adapts to S6 by drawing on their shared linguistic knowledge.

Example 9 is a conversation between higher education professionals. The speakers talk mainly about work-related topics, but they also make digressions. At some point S1 notices that most people in the group are speakers of Finno-Ugric languages (which belong to the Uralic language family). He does not, however, use either of the names, and instead says that Hungarian and Finnish are Urdu languages. This factual error interestingly does not lead to any overt communication breakdown. S1 does not pretend that he is sure that Hungarian and Finnish are 'Urdu languages'; on the contrary, he first tries to avoid giving the term and, instead, quite extensively describes what he has in mind. That this is not an easy task for him is signalled by hesitations and pauses. These hesitations and pauses are in fact very useful – they induce other speakers to help S1, or, at least, to signal that they understand him.

Ex. 9
S1 [dan-DK]: okay <6> we better </6> resume (.)
S2 [cat-ES]: <6> so </6>
S1:   our discussions i suddenly realize [S3] that (2) a majority of the (1) group will
         now (.) be: er representatives of actually er (.) a linguistic (.) strain coming out
         of the
S2:   @ @ @ =
S4 [hun-HU]: = <7> mhm </7> (.)
S1:   = <7> far </7> asiatic steppes <8> e:r </8> a thousand years ago the magyars
         hh e:r <un> xx </un> (.)
SX-m: <8><soft> @ </soft></8>
S1:   you know the finnish are the (.) what's it called urdu? (.) linguistic tradi<1>tion
         </1>
S6 [fin-FI]: <1> u- </1> e:r (.)
S1:   it's <2> called </2> urdu <3> er </3><4> yes </4><5> urdu </5><un> x </un>
         and but there is a linkage bet<6>ween </6> magyar and finnish e:r =
S3 [ger-AT]: <2> yeah </2>
S6:   <3> okay </3><4> okay </4><5> yeah </5>
S3:   <4> yah </4>
S3:   <6> yeah </6>
S3:   = @ @ =
S1:   = e:r
S6:   <whispering><un> xxx </un></whispering>
S1:   yah (1)
S5 [fin-FI]: <soft> o:h </soft>
S1:   yes =
S2:   = <soft> @ @ @ </soft>
S4:   we have some common words <7> (<L1hun>x</L1hun>) </7>
S1:   <7> yes?</7>
S6:   @ @ @ <1> yes </1>
(VOICE 2013: POcon543)

S1 tries to make his utterance more explicit; for instance, he wants to communicate to his interlocutors that what he means is a group of languages. He apparently lacks the word 'language family', but he tries to express the notion in other ways. First, he uses the word *strain*. This 'mistake' seems to be unproblematic to the other speakers, and they signal understanding by offering supportive backchannels. Another attempt to make the utterance more explicit can be observed when S1 describes the 'Urdu languages' as a *linguistic tradition*.

S1 also uses other-oriented metadiscourse (*you know*) as well as a metadiscursive question (*what's it called*). Only after framing his utterance with metadiscursive expressions does he pronounce the word *Urdu*. It seems that he is not satisfied with the word. The other speakers, however, assure him that they know what he means, so it may be assumed that despite the 'wrong' lexical choices and the factual error the communication was successful.

It may also be interesting to analyse the behaviour of S6, who is the one that appears to notice the factual mistake. After S1 has said that Finnish and Hungarian belong to the 'Urdu linguistic tradition', S6 seems to make an attempt to correct him, but in the next turn he agrees with S1 and provides supportive backchannels (*okay, okay yeah*). S6 probably knows that S1 made an error but decides not to correct him. It may thus be supposed that in this case S6 follows a type of the *let-it-pass* principle in which the ignored item is not so much misunderstood but inaccurate.

5. Implications for the 21st-century English-language classroom

What follows from the corpus analysis is that many communication breakdowns could have been avoided had the participants been paying more attention to producing intelligible utterances. It may thus be advantageous to sensitise learners to this problem and make them aware that an intelligible way of speaking is not only a matter of politeness and respect for the interlocutor, but also a matter of communicative efficiency.

Learners should be made aware that in ELF communication they may talk to people with different interactional styles and with different levels of proficiency, so they should learn how to adjust their speech to their interlocutors. This may be implemented in the classroom for example by dividing learners into working groups with mixed linguistic abilities and, in the case of the increasing numbers of multilingual classrooms (Paradowski 2017:221–6, 2021; Paradowski & Bator 2018), into groups of learners with various L1s.

It may also be useful to encourage learners to organise their utterances with the help of metadiscursive expressions. Even though frequent use of metadiscourse may seem unnatural or superfluous to a native speaker, the analysis revealed that employing it was one of the chief strategies to solve or prevent communication problems and that its absence might in many cases have led to communication breakdowns. In ELF interactions it is more important to achieve communicative success than to speak like a native speaker. It would thus be useful to equip learners with metadiscoursive vocabulary which might help them organise their talk, and to practise this in real-life conversations.

Teaching metadiscourse should not be restricted to the interactive type, but also include the reflexive type. The analysed data showed that ELF speakers often found themselves in situations in which they talked either about the process of communication they were engaged in, or about language or languages in general. It appears to be useful to instil certain awareness of language as a system and to teach learners to be able to speak *about* it.

It also seems vital to draw learners' attention to the importance of active listening. The corpus data showed that supportive backchannels, repetitions, and other signals of understanding were viewed positively by speakers, and that the absence of such signals sometimes made speakers assume that their listeners did not understand them. It is thus

advantageous to practise active listening skills. This may be done for instance by means of dialogues in which both the speaker and the listener are assigned 'tasks' to fulfil. In such exercises the listeners could show their interest and understanding (or lack thereof), and the speakers should pay attention to the listeners' reactions.

The analysed data suggest that more communication breakdowns resulted from a lack of clarity of formulations than from the 'incorrectness' of the utterances. It may thus be useful to teach learners to express their thoughts in a clear way, as well as encourage them to provide enough detail and to make their utterance explicit. The desired level of explicitness naturally depends on the situation and on the interlocutors' skills. It is therefore crucial for language classroom to emphasise the role of context as well as the necessity to be 'flexible' and 'open' to other speakers.

One of the most frequent strategies employed by ELF speakers in the analysed corpus was paraphrase. It seems reasonable to devote much attention to practising this skill in the classroom. Having a rich vocabulary and knowledge of various grammatical structures to express the same proposition may prove very useful in ELF communication. However, learners should be made aware that in ELF communication it is good to adapt to one's interlocutor and not to insist on using language which may not be understandable to them.

It is also important to help learners overcome their insecurity about their linguistic knowledge and skills. In the corpus, there were a considerable number of items diverging from native speaker norms, but they rarely caused communication problems. While departures from NS norms should not necessarily be promoted, the teacher should encourage each attempt to speak, even with 'errors'.

The ELF speakers in the analysis often hesitated, made pauses, and exhibited other signals of problems. Those signals did not generally hinder the process of communication; quite the opposite, their presence often induced the listeners to help. Teachers may help learners overcome their insecurities and make them more confident, but they should not discourage them from speaking by criticising hesitations or other minor disfluencies.

The corpus data showed that several examples of communication breakdowns were caused by grammar issues. This suggests that, contrary to popular beliefs, teaching grammar should not be marginalised. It would be useful to analyse more situations for the kinds of grammatical 'errors' that are most likely to cause miscommunications; what emerges from the present analysis is that several communication breakdowns have been caused by 'wrong' tense choice or word order, whereas 'inappropriate' use of articles appeared to be entirely unproblematic.

Overall, the English-language classroom whose students will use the language to communicate with other *non*-native users like themselves should give them the opportunity to engage in real-life interactions and expose them to the language as it is used by speakers with different L1s. This may be done by using recordings of non-native speakers of English, but also by giving learners an opportunity for intercultural contact and communication with people from various linguistic backgrounds. Likewise, the topics of learning materials should be chosen to reflect scenarios that the students will need to navigate in the future and that they can relate to, and these may be quite distant from inner circle-based themes.

Acknowledgments

Transcription Conventions
Source: VOICE Mark-up conventions 2007[5]

?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
THIS	emphasis
(.)	short pause
(2)	two-second pause
<1> he </1>	simultaneous talk
<1> uhu </1>	
=	latching
:	lengthening the sound
@ @ @	laughter
(all)	uncertain transcription
<pvc> liquidy </pvc>	'invented' words
<L1ger> auflauf {casserole} </L1ger>	code-switch from speaker's L1
<LNmlt> xadina {monkey} </LNmlt>	code-switch from language other than L1 with English translation
<un>xxx</un>	unintelligible speech
<L1hun>x</L1hun>	unintelligible speech in speaker's L1
<spel> t v?</spel>	spelling out
<fast> world map i think </fast>	speaking mode
<loud> </loud>	
<imitating> </imitating>	
hh	noticeable breathing
<coughs>	speaker noises
<coughs (6)>	speaker noise with duration
<shakes head>	non-verbal feedback
[S3]	S3's name
[last name 3]	non-participant's last name
[place13]	place
{S7 enters room}	contextual events
<to S1> you're right </to S1>	addressing one speaker

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[5] http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/documents/VOICE_mark-up_conventions_v2-1.pdf