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The “Native Speaker Problem” in English-medium Instruction

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**A. Handout for students**

Guidelines for class discussion and presentations in English as a lingua franca (ELF)

# For everyone

## Students in this class come from many nations and language backgrounds. The class is conducted in English but the norm is not any variety of native-speaker English (Australian, British, etc.) but rather English as a lingua franca or common language.

## The important point is mutual understanding, not conformity to the norms of any particular variety or dialect of English.

## For speakers, the best way to achieve mutual understanding is to use strategies such as:

### Speaking slowly and clearly.

### Pronouncing words carefully.

### Repeating, including repeating the same meaning in different words.

### Checking that others understand you by asking questions.

### Avoiding culture-based humor, idioms, and references to your home culture that others may not understand.

## For listeners, the following strategies will be useful:

### Indicating/signaling when you do not understand.

### Asking questions for clarification.

### Requesting repetition or rephrasing.

### Checking your understanding.

# For native speakers of English, these strategies will help to avoid miscommunication:

## Keeping in mind that not all students in the class are native speakers of English.

## Speaking slowly and clearly.

## Avoiding colloquialisms and culture-based humor.

## Avoiding specific references to your home culture.

## Using repetition and paraphrase.

## Avoiding low frequency vocabulary.

## **B. Research on the “native speaker problem” in English as a lingua franca**

## “In many international fora, competent speakers of English as a second language are more comprehensible than native speakers, because they can be better at adjusting their language for people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Phillipson, 2003, p. 167).

## “Research is also beginning to show how bad some native speakers are at using English for international communication. It may be that elements of an ELF syllabus could usefully be taught within a mother tongue curriculum” (Graddol, 2006, p. 87).

## “Increasingly, the problem may be that few native speakers belong to the community of practice which is developing amongst lingua franca users. Their presence hinders communication” (ibid., p. 115).

“Ironically, the only cases of miscommunication House (2003) observed in her research were in the interactions of multilingual speakers with those individuals for whom English is native or sole language. This miscommunication in native-nonnative talk is easy to explain, as NSs would fail to negotiate, treating their norms as universally applicable” (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 929).

## “Native speakers ‘tend to be less competent than many NNSs in their acquisition and use of accommodation strategies, and instead expect NNSs to make all the adjustments’” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 53).

“All of these problems concern the potentially problematic role of the native speaker. Many writers and researchers…have alluded to what they call “the native speaker problem,” meaning that native speakers of English can often be the cause of miscommunication and misunderstanding in intercultural interactions. It is argued that native speakers, when interacting with lingua franca speakers, continue to speak idiomatically, using complicated or obscure vocabulary, and bringing with them their cultural communication norms. The language is often difficult for the lingua franca speaker to understand and the communication norms are something they do not share with the native speaker” (Sweeney & Hua, 2010, p. 4).

## “In fact, the prevailing assumption among many inner circle English NSs that they speak a universally intelligible and appropriate English, coupled with their rampant monolingualism, is likely in the near future to seriously disadvantage them in their attempts at global communication…” (Dewey & Jenkins, 2010, p. 73).

## “Charles & Marschan-Piekkari (2002), for instance, demonstrate that English NSs are particularly problematic in international business communication because they are more difficult to understand than speakers of other varieties of English….Such studies concur in recommending that NSEs should be trained in intercultural communication skills” (Jenkins, et al., 2011, pp. 298-299).

## “Nevertheless, ELF research has already demonstrated that native English speakers, particularly the monolingual majority, are less effective than non-native speakers in international communication. Among the reasons that have been documented are that they are less likely to be able to code-switch, less good at making use of accommodation strategies, and less free and flexible in their use of English than non-native speakers, who ‘are not influenced by standardising forces to the same extent’ (Humbauer, 2007:9)” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 934).

“It is not the ELF speaker’s non-adherence to EML norms that makes the reported communication problematic, but rather the ENL speaker’s inability to alter existing preconceptions about a conversation in English” (Cogo & Dewey, 2012, p. 106).

### “From a cultural viewpoint, respondents signalled a particular problem they had observed with English native speakers in their programmes: such students’ accents, speaking speed, and the subtle nuances they could make seemed to increase the problems for both peers and the teachers (perceived by some as increased anxiety” (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 3).

**C. Training Native Speakers in ELF**

“The perhaps unpalatable truth for ‘NSs’ is that if they wish to participate in international communication in the 21st Century, they too will have to learn EIL” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 227).

“Our findings seem to be in line with Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002), who suggested that NSs of English should be trained in the practices of NNSs accents” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, p. 401).

“One area in which we feel the EU could make definitive recommendations, and one which is generally ignored altogether, is the monolingual native English speaker issue. While native speakers do not have to make the same degree of effort as their non-native mainland European counterparts in learning English for lingua franca use, they nevertheless need to be educated to understand that ELF is not the same as British English, and be helped to acquire the kinds of intercultural pragmatic skills that non-native English speakers tend to acquire as part of their English and other language learning” (Cogo & Jenkins, 2010, p. 289).

“Moreover, ELF speakers’ natural and spontaneous supportive behavior, offered in a contextually relevant and appropriate way, can serve as a model for NSs who wish to optimize their communication skills in ELF settings” (Carey, 2010, p. 96).

“To participate effectively in ELF communication, NSs of English therefore need to observe ELF norms and employ ELF strategies such as accommodation in the same ways and to the same extent as do its non-native speakers (NNSs) in the expanding circle. In fact, the prevailing assumption among many inner circle English NSs that they speak a universally intelligible and appropriate English, coupled with their rampant monolingualism, is likely in the near future to seriously disadvantage them in their attempts at global communication…” (Dewey & Jenkins, 2010, p, 73).

“Developing the intercultural competence of native speakers may not only be cheaper and easier than providing ongoing English lessons but, at least in some cases, may be more effective in improving international students’ English language competence” (Fraser, 2011, p. A-118).

“For example, what message do we send when we require international students to undertake cross-cultural skills training as part of orientation but we do not require home students to do the same? Are they more competent than international students in this area? Or perhaps it is not their responsibility to adapt their communication style to the needs of their international peers?” (Leask, 2013, p. 5).

“Home students and/or staff need some kind of training in intercultural communication. This…would enable NESs to understand the English of NNESs more easily, to appreciate what it means to study in a foreign language…, and to learn how to adjust their own speech (speak more slowly, avoid local idiomatic language, etc.) so as to be more intelligible to NNES students. One participant even argued that home students should have to take a two- or three-week pre-sessional course in intercultural communication…” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 180).

**D. Communication and Accommodation Strategies for ELF**

(S: for speakers; L: for listeners; S/L: for both)

A. Phonologic (sound)

1. Slow speech rate [S]

2. Articulate clearly, avoiding some assimilations and elisions [S]

2. Tone down regional accents [S]

3. Use phonological accommodation (converge towards your interlocutor’s pronunciation/speech patterns) [S]

4. Use latching (timed taking of the turn by the interlocutor signaling attention to the talk) [L]

5. Use backchannels such as “mhm,” “ok,” “I see” to support the conversation without taking over the turn [L]

6. Avoid contractions and weak forms [S]

7. Accommodate to syllable-timed rhythm [S]

B. Syntactic (form)

1. Avoid complex sentence structure [S]

2. Spell out new or difficult words [S]

C. Semantic (meaning)

1. Use redundancies, reformulations, and glosses [S]

2. Avoid idioms (unilateral idiomaticity), phrasal verbs, metaphors, slang, and low-frequency vocabulary [S]

D. Pragmatic (use)

1. Establish rapport by using personal pronouns [S]

2. Avoid jokes [S]

3. Be sensitive to the variety of cultural communication norms in the group [S]

4. Aid verbal communication through nonverbal communication [S/L]

5. Address miscommunication preventively and responsively [S/L]

6. Use elicitation markers (questions to get response: “What do you think?”) [S]

7. Signal or question when you do not understand [L]

8. Request repetition or clarification [L]

9. Avoid foreigner talk (over-accommodation) [sounds patronizing] [S]