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Modifying English for non-native speakers: lessons in 'rough tuning' from the language classroom

Academic biography

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Abstract

Initial training courses and textbooks for English language teachers place a strong emphasis on the importance of appropriately graded 'teacher talk'. However, typically little or no specific advice is given as to how exactly an English teacher should go about modifying his or her language in the classroom. This skill appears to be fed by the assumption that effective teacher talk comes from a mixture of intuition and experience, and does not require any technical elaboration. In and outside the field of English language teaching, unfortunate comparisons have been made with both infant-directed speech and 'plain English'; this article takes the view that these analogies are misguided, and explores the fragmentary research on the topic of so-called foreigner-directed speech, then provides some tentative guidance to new English language teachers. Much remains to be done to develop this area of research, which largely fell out of fashion after the 1980s, as its benefits could extend far outside of the language classroom. The UK government, for example, discourages the translation of official documents for the benefit of migrants, suggesting that 'plain English' versions be used instead. In reality, the nature of such 'plain English' is far more complex than assumed.

Keywords: Teacher talk; foreigner-directed speech; rough-tuning; graded language; input modification, TESOL, English language teaching

As immigration has become one of the most significant political issues in the United Kingdom, concerns over language have also risen to prominence. For example, in March 2013, the Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, advised councils not to publish translated materials in order to save public money, encourage migrants to learn English, and to foster greater cultural integration:

> Stopping the automatic use of translation and interpretation services into foreign languages will provide further incentive for all migrant communities to learn English, which is the basis for an individual's ability to progress in British society (Commons Hansard, 2013: 6WS).

While the Communities Secretary's written statement mentions that in some cases there might be a need for 'the use of plain English, easy read versions of documents and using pictures instead of translation', he framed this quite narrowly, aiming at 'groups who may have poor levels of literacy or learning difficulties' (Ibid). This recommendation came in the context of a wider recent tightening of Britain's immigration policies, including changes to the English language requirements required for general student visas in 2010 and a similar measure for those entering the UK on spouse visas (UK Border Agency(a) d.u and UK Border Agency(b) d.u.).

The Home Office's UK Border Agency accepts several forms of evidence of English language ability: minimum scores are provided from a range of tests; nationals of majority-English-speaking countries are accepted; and applicants can also pass if they have completed a degree course in English. However, while the requirements may in reality be more nuanced, politicians and the media tend to discuss the ability to speak English as if it were a binary matter, according to which one either *can* or *cannot* speak English. The reality is, of course, rather more complicated. As Graddol (2006) has pointed out, non-native speakers are often capable of conducting complex business meetings in English with each other, but struggle when native speakers become part of the proceedings. It has also been observed that friction and/or misunderstandings can occur when native speakers are unwilling or unable to modify their English for non-native audiences. Sweeney and Hua (2010: 481) provide an overview of this so-called 'native speaker problem', which can encompass linguistic, paralinguistic, and broader cultural issues.

Statistics suggest that those who are worried about the status of English in the UK can breathe a little easier. According to the 2011 Census, 8% of UK residents report speaking a main language other than English (or Welsh in the case of Wales). Of this 8%, "79 per cent (3.3 million) could speak English very well or well". However, 'less than half a per cent (138,000) of all usual residents aged three years and over [self-reported that they] could not speak English' (Office of National Statistics 2011). It seems, while the self-reported categories of speaking English 'well' and 'very well' are open to much interpretation, one can safely conclude that the overwhelming majority of UK residents can speak the language to some extent. Nevertheless, the government appears to be increasingly bullish in its insistence upon the primacy, indeed universality, of the English language in Britain.

Outside of the UK, the global status of English is subject to contradictory trends. On one hand, the global number of native speakers of English is declining in absolute and relative terms, yet on the other hand the importance of English for international business is only

growing, as increasing numbers of non-native speakers use English as a lingua franca for their negotiations and transactions (Graddol 1997). As Graddol put it:

> Native speakers may feel the language belongs to them, but it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future (Ibid: 10).

Since Seidlhofer's (2001) influential article drew attention to the relative lack of linguistic research into English as a lingua franca, it has grown into a vibrant field of study (for overviews, see Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer, 2008; or Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011). English as a lingua franca sees non-native English as a valid variety of the language in itself, 'without over-deference to native-speaker norms' (Ibid: 27) and sees users as *speakers* in their own right, rather than simply *learners*.

The need for greater language awareness

The 2011 Census was the first to ask detailed questions about language in the UK, but relatively high recent levels of immigration suggest that the number of non-native English-speaking residents in the UK will have grown considerably. This in turn suggests that many native English speakers in the UK will have come into greater contact with non-native speakers in their professional lives in recent years; the aforementioned studies of English as a lingua franca suggest that these interactions are likely to be causing challenges for both parties. This article will take the view that communicating successfully with non-native English speakers is not simply a matter of 'common sense'. Also, it will be maintained, analogies with speaking to children are problematic, as is the notion that effective communication with non-native speakers is reducible to speaking 'plain English'. The 'native speaker problem', as found in English-speaking countries or lingua franca settings, may be partially alleviated if native speakers can learn how to grade their language for non-native audiences.

The concept of 'rough-tuning' in teacher talk

In this environment, it would seem likely that the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) would be able to provide useful insights and guidance to help native speakers communicate effectively with non-native speakers. English language teachers, especially those who subscribe to an 'English only' approach either through outlook or necessity, have an everyday need to 'rough tune' their language, as Harmer (2007) terms it. Indeed, this rough tuning is widely accepted to be an essential skill, featuring in initial training courses and practical guidebooks for aspiring teachers (e.g. Harmer, 2007; Riddell, 2003; and Scrivener, 2011). As Riddell (2003: 19) points out, grading one's language 'does not mean speaking at an unnaturally slow pace, or raising your voice'. Instead, he suggests that teachers should couple *economy* of language with appropriate *grading* in order to be understood. This advice may seem to be common sense to many readers, but experience of holidays in Europe suggest that not every British person has discovered that 'WHERE. IS. THE. TOILET?!' is no more understandable to the locals than a 'Where is the toilet?'

However, beyond such general advice and one or two examples, little more specific guidance is given in textbooks for English language teachers. It seems that, at first glance, the profession has surprisingly little to say on the matter. Ivanova (2011) surveyed 10 English language teaching textbooks and found that only two provided any explicit information about teacher talk in the language classroom. Harmer's (2007) teaching guide, widely used in initial ELT training courses, treats the topic in a typically cursory way, arguing that:

> The way that teachers talk to students … is one of the crucial teacher skills, but it does not demand technical expertise (Ibid: 37).

Harmer later describes the ability as 'subconscious' for teachers, likening it to parents' abilities to talk to young children. He does concede, however, that new teachers 'need to pay attention to their students' comprehension and use it as a yardstick by which to measure their own speaking style in the classroom' (Ibid). However, this researcher takes the view, after having observed hundreds of 1:1 English lessons in Japan between 2007 and 2011, that rough-tuning one's written and spoken English effectively is far less self-explanatory than its lack of attention by the English-language-teaching profession suggests.

A complicating factor is the overlapping terminology which has been used in textbooks and research: a non-exhaustive list includes 'foreigner talk' (e.g. Ferguson 1981), 'foreigner-directed speech' (e.g. Scarborough 2007), 'input modification' (e.g. Mousavi, 2011), 'simplification of input' (e.g. Chaudron, 1983), 'fine-tuning' (e.g. Biersack et al., 2005), 'rough-tuning' (Harmer, 2007), and 'classroom English' (Dickey and Han 1999). It is acknowledged that, in each case, these terms are chosen for justifiable reasons, and they are not of course interchangeable, yet it seems likely that there is enough overlap to warrant a shared vocabulary. Nevertheless, by considering the topic under its many guises we can see that several studies of rough-tuning have been undertaken, many in the 1970s and 1980s. After that time, as Tsui (2001) suggests, it seems that the research agenda largely moved towards learner talk, teacher-learner interaction, and various 'unobservables' such as psychological states. Moreover, many of the studies that were conducted treated 'foreigner talk' as a dependent variable; unfortunately, those which *did* assess its effects on non-native audiences tended to produce contradictory results (Ibid: 121). It seems that anyone hoping for helpful practical advice for modifying their speech and writing for non-native speakers is likely to be disappointed!

If rough-tuning for the benefit of non-native speakers could be dismissed as 'second nature' or 'common-

sense', the lack of definitive, evidence-based guidance would not be a practical problem. However the contradictory results from prior studies serve to confirm that it is not a simple matter at all. Indeed, the deceptively difficult nature of rough-tuning has been raised by scholars of business communication. In their study of the English accommodation strategies of native speakers involved in business negotiations with non-native speakers, Sweeney and Hua (2010) discuss the manner in which the former try to avoid 'complex' words:

> …[T]his raises the question of what complex words are. Often more formal words are derived from Latin and Greek and are therefore understandable to large numbers of non-native speakers of English. In addition, many non-native speakers are familiar with the technical language of their jobs but struggle with more informal language, such as phrasal verbs (Sweeney and Hua, 2010: 498).

When Harmer (2007) analogises the rough-tuning of language for non-native speakers with simplifying one's language for children, he is likely to be referring mainly to the manner in which these skills become second nature. However, Sweeney and Hua's insight reminds us to be careful to avoid giving the impression that English language teachers should rough-tune in exactly the same way for both these disparate audiences.

How to rough tune one's English

From reflection on my own teaching practice, which has involved teaching mainly 1:1 English language lessons for around six years, I would like to suggest some practical ways in which native speakers can rough-tune their English for the benefit of non-native listeners. Let us assume that we wish to communicate with pre-intermediate or intermediate English speakers. This advice is supplemented with relevant evidence – where such studies exist – from primary research. These are to be considered simply as 'jumping off' points, and have been written with the non-expert in mind.

Phonology

By questioning the extent to which effective rough-tuning can be considered 'common sense', I do not mean to suggest that all of our basic intuitions should be cast aside. Of course, the most obvious 'common-sense' measure is to slow down a little, and support for this assumption can be found in research. For example, Kelch's experiment found that reducing the speed of a lecture from 200 words per minute to 130 words per minute resulted in significantly greater success in a dictation exercise among non-native English learners (Kelch 1985). What might be a little more enlightening are studies which show that greater speech recognition differences occur when the listening conditions are more challenging. Bradlow and Alexander (2007) note that:

> Several studies have shown that in the presence of background noise or reverberation, non-native listeners who had attained a very high level of proficiency in English were less accurate at speech recognition than native listeners (Ibid: 2339).

They add that when the listening conditions improve, the speech recognition accuracy of highly proficient non-native English learners tends to be roughly comparable to that of native listeners, an observation supported by their own experiment. Therefore, one potentially fruitful idea for native speaker who is struggling to communicate with a non-native listener is to try to either reduce the background noise, or continue your conversation in a quieter place.

Simplification and elaboration

Research suggests that English language teachers modify their speech by using shorter sentences with simpler syntactic structures. Declarative sentences, interrogatives and imperatives tend to appear more often, and fewer idioms are used (e.g. Freed, 1981; Chaudron, 1983; Hatch, 1983; Tsui, 2001). Linguistic simplification is sometimes necessary, but it can be subject to two criticisms: firstly, it can remove important detail and nuance from the text or speech, and secondly it deprives non-native speakers of an opportunity to be exposed to a more authentic form of the language. With this is mind, it might be helpful to consider 'elaboration' as an alternative. Elaboration has been defined as 'any enhancement of information which clarifies or specifies the relationship between the information to be learned and related information, i.e. a learner's prior knowledge and experience or contiguously presented information' (Mousavi, 2011: 37). Positive results have been reported: Chaudron (1983) found that the repetition of nouns, which restated the topic during a lecture, had a significant beneficial effect on the recall and recognition scores of an audience of non-native listeners. For example, instead of variously referring to 'the Governor' as 'he' or using a synonym such as 'Hutchinson', he simply repeated the word 'the Governor' in the lecture. (He also experimented with other methods of topic reinstatement, namely rhetorical questions and if-clauses.) In a reading experiment, Mousavi (2011) found that simplifying texts and elaborating them were similarly effective in raising non-native readers' comprehension scores. A practical benefit of elaboration for those who liaise regularly with non-native speakers is that, by investing a little extra time and effort to elaborate a text, you can help the reader learn some of the authentic vocabulary they will need to make their communication with your organisation smoother in the future.

Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs (for example, *to get on*, *to make up*, or *to put across*) consist of a verb and at least one other word, which is typically a preposition or an adverb. Many

native speakers are likely to consider phrasal verbs very straightforward, natural and unpretentious, and therefore perfectly suitable to use with a non-native speaker. Indeed, the Plain English Campaign recommends in its 'A to Z of Alternative Words' that writers use phrasal verbs a lot. For example, *put off*, *point out*, and *set up,* are preferred to *defer*, *designate*, and *establish*, respectively, although they do provide non-phrasal alternatives (The Plain English Campaign, 2001). To my knowledge, no studies of the effects of native speakers' use of phrasal verbs on the intelligibility or comprehension of non-native listeners have been reported. However, some disputed evidence exists that L2 learners sometimes avoid producing phrasal verbs themselves, depending on various factors (see Dagut and Laufer, 1985; and Liao and Fukuya, 2002). Reflection on my own experience supports Sweeney and Hua's assertion that phrasal verbs are in fact a common cause of confusion among non-native English speakers, particularly those from Japan with whom most of my experience has been based. Firstly, many phrasal verbs are sometimes idiomatic, meaning that their meaning cannot always be deduced even by someone who can define all of the individual words. For example, understanding the respective meanings of 'get' and 'up' does not help one to understand a sentence like 'Did you get up to anything nice last weekend?' Secondly, if the phrasal verb is separable, the verb and other element(s) become separated, making the sentence potentially challenging to follow for non-native speakers: 'He **turned** the TV **down** to **let** her **know** that he had **turned** the job **down**'.

Common meanings vs. common words

According to data from the Oxford English Corpus (OEC), in order to account for 99% of the English in use, one would need to learn more than 1,000,000 dictionary headwords (Butterfield, 2008: 19), which are normally referred to as 'lemmas'. Estimates of the size of the typical vocabulary of a native speaker vary greatly, with Pinker (1994: 51) endorsing a minimum figure of somewhere between 45,000 and 60,000 lemmas for a typical American high school graduate. However, despite our language's rich store of vocabulary, English speakers seem to get by on relatively few words day to day. Just 1000 lemmas account for 75% of the content of the Oxford English Corpus; 7000 lemmas account for 90% (Oxford Dictionaries(a) d.u.). This is possible because the more common words tend to have a broader range of meanings than the more unusual ones. Butterfield points out that:

> Meanings are distributed in a similar way to lemmas. The commoner meanings are often much more frequent than the less common ones: for instance, *rich* country occurs fourteen times more often than *rich* sauce … (Butterfield, 2008: 20).

This is why it is helpful to consider the simplicity of our rough-tuned language in a somewhat counter-intuitive way. It is not necessarily the size of the word that matters, nor even its frequency of use. Rather, the speaker should be concerned with the particular *meaning* of the particular word and its likely familiarity to the listener.

For example, I have observed teachers asking questions like this on several occasions: 'How do you find the supermarkets in England?' It is often misunderstood, probably because from their private or classroom study many students are likely to have encountered the verb 'to find' only in the sense of 'to discover'. Similarly, a good English language teacher would be unlikely to call an end to an activity with the statement, 'That will do', because the use of 'do' is a rather obscure use of that word, even if the word itself is one of the first verbs the students would have learned. Therefore, when it comes to choosing appropriate words (primarily verbs and adjectives), it may be advisable to select those which are intuitively 'intermediate level' if the alternative is a secondary use of a more common, simpler verb. Rather than imagining that you are talking to a child, imagine you are trapped in a Leslie Nielsen comedy in which everything that *can* be misinterpreted *will* be misinterpreted:

> Steve: Johnny, what can you make out of this?
> [Hands Steve a paper weather report]
> Johnny: This? Why, I can make a hat or a brooch or a pterodactyl ... ! (Airplane! 1980)

Steve could have avoided this problem by asking Johnny to *analyse* or perhaps *explain* the report. It is important to realise that the point is not to use advanced or technical words unnecessarily. It is simply to re-think our understanding of what we mean by 'simple' and 'advanced' words.

Polite structures

A desire to be polite encourages native speakers to use indirect and unnecessarily complex structures when simple imperatives will often suffice. These examples are from written and spoken 'real world' English:

> 'I would appreciate it if you didn't smoke so close to the building.'
> 'If you would like to come this way?'
> 'Please could you take a seat over there?'
> 'In the interest of public safety, customers are politely requested not to block the fire exits.'
> 'Our staff would be happy to oblige your reasonable request for assistance.'

The subtleties that make these utterances polite to native speakers are often lost on non-native audiences, for whom the 'magic word', 'please' is usually sufficient. 'Please' used at *the start* of an imperative is particularly effective as it prepares the listener to receive an order or request. Similarly, complex phrasal modifiers such as 'I am afraid that … or 'I regret to inform you …' can usually be replaced with a single adverb like 'Unfortunately'.

Language changes

New English words often receive attention in popular culture, particularly when they are adopted into the Oxford English Dictionary or singled out by its editors in publicity materials. Oxford Dictionaries' 2013 International Word of the Year was 'selfie', chosen from a shortlist which included 'binge-watch', 'schmeat' and 'twerk' among others (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013) and the Dictionary's annual updates have become a significant media event. However, while many native speakers might have an intuitive awareness that such words are likely to be unfamiliar to non-native speakers, that might not be the case when it comes to changing uses of existing words. Such changes can be subtle; for example, according to Google's n-grams viewer, the word 'task' was commonly used as a verb in the 19th century but almost disappeared in the 1940s in that form, before making a return throughout the 1980s. To most native speakers, a sentence like 'We have been tasked with tackling serious crime" would seem perfectly natural, but could easily confuse a non-native speaker of English who learnt English at the wrong time.

To take a related example that will undoubtedly be familiar with teachers in the United Kingdom, the word 'satisfactory' has been on an interesting journey. To many non-native speakers of English, 'satisfactory' means something like 'sufficient', 'acceptable' or 'good enough'. However, OFSTED, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, operates a four-level grading system, in which 'Good' appears above 'Satisfactory' – implying that being 'good' is actually better than being 'good enough'. The situation became even more confusing when Sir Michael Wilshaw HMCI, announced he was dropping the 'Satisfactory' label in 2012:

> There are too many coasting schools not providing an acceptable standard of education. Of particular concern are the 3,000 schools educating a million children that have been 'satisfactory' two inspections in a row. This is not good enough (OFSTED, 2012).

Spare a thought for the poor non-native English speakers in Britain who are looking for suitable schools for their children, who now have to make sense of an environment in which 'acceptable' is the opposite of 'satisfactory', and that ultimately 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory' mean the same thing!

Deceptive structures

Some English structures can be deceptive to non-native speakers who are encountering them for the first time, regardless of their level. For example, one of my advanced students was shocked to receive an email from a British colleague of hers which began with the sentence, 'I couldn't agree with you more'. She was horrified that she had offended this person, and wanted me to check her previous email to find out what had caused the problem. I gently explained to her that this is a set phrase, which actually means 'I agree with you completely'. Confusion is also caused when, in the abstract, native speakers would leap to the same conclusion as non-native speakers about the meaning of a word or structure. What, for example, does 'must' mean? Most of us, whether native or non-native speakers of English, would answer that it means something like 'have to' or 'should' as in 'You must tidy your room'. However, when we say 'You must be very excited!' we mean something very different; that is, 'to express the deduction or conclusion that something is certain (Swann, 2005: 333). Similarly with comparatives, in the abstract, 'larger' might sound bigger than 'large', but the utterance, 'this clothes shop caters to larger customers', actually sounds euphemistic. 'Larger' would mean something like 'a little large' or perhaps 'slightly larger than average'. This nuance is likely to be missed by many non-native speakers of English.

Consistency

Those who communicate with non-native speakers regularly – for example, teachers who work in schools whose pupils have non-native English speaking parents – could also consider the consistency of language they use. Returning to an English language classroom setting, Dickey and Han give this advice for planning 'teacher talk':

> In the case of Classroom English, what the teacher chooses to say is often less important than consistency. For instance, many teachers in America 'call attendance' or 'call the roster' instead of 'call the roll'. They could also 'check' or 'mark' instead of 'call'. It's really not important which is chosen. But students should hear the same phrase consistently, so they associate the phrase with the action (Dickey and Han, 1999: 48).

This advice could also be applied outside of the classroom. In the interest of elegance, native speakers often prefer to use a lot of synonyms in their writing and speech, but this can be unhelpful, firstly because it can make individual documents or utterances harder to follow, and secondly because it makes it more difficult for a non-native speaking resident to build up a trustworthy repertoire of words and phrases around which they can build some confidence.

***Speaking* English and *being* English**

'It is raining' is a perfectly good English sentence, but several of my students who have lived in England noticed the same thing: when it is raining, people in England do not say 'it is raining' at all. Quite the opposite. They say: 'Lovely weather isn't it?' or something similar. According to the anthropologist, Kate Fox, the English propensity for irony is often a source of frustration rather than amusement – to non-native English speakers and those from other Anglophone countries alike.

> 'The problem with the English', complained one American visitor, 'is that you never know when they are joking – you never know whether they are being serious or not'. This was a businessman, travelling with a female colleague from Holland. She considered the issue frowningly for a moment, and then concluded, somewhat tentatively, 'I think they are mostly joking, yes?' (Fox, 2005: 65).

Another, closely-related problem Fox mentions is the English tendency to use understatement. If, for example, a native English speaker tells a non-native speaker about a problem and feels offended about the latter's under-reaction, the former would do well to check if he/she has been guilty of such understatement. For example, if you are facing a life-threatening emergency and describe it to a non-native speaker as 'a little spot of bother', then it is hardly fair to accuse the latter of being heartless or uncooperative when she did not do everything in her power to help you! Why should she, when your only problem is 'a little spot of bother'?

ELT's insights

Following Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input hypothesis, English language teachers are often deliberately trying to stretch their students by exposing them to language which is a little above their own productive level. Some are also attempting to model more-or-less authentic language for their students. Therefore, an English language teacher's considerations are likely to differ in part from others whose chief purpose is simply to communicate clearly. This could be one reason for the relative inattention that rough-tuning has received in recent years. A second reason could be the emphasis in ELT training on keeping unnecessary teacher talk to a minimum. Scrivener (2011) set the tone in his text for new teachers:

> They need to learn that 'talking at' the learners does not necessarily mean that learning is taking place; in many cases, TTT (Teacher Talking Time) is actually time when the learners are not doing very much and are not very involved (Ibid: 59).

Harmer (2007: 38) does suggest that Teacher Talking Quality (TTQ) can be as important as TTT; nevertheless, Dickey and Han (1999: 46) are probably right to point out that, while 'there is a high level of dissension about the amount of time students should be speaking, TTT is often viewed suspiciously by the field'. It is no wonder that teacher talk has been so understudied, given this widespread view.

However, for this author, who has spent most of his career teaching 1:1 lessons, it would simply be impossible to do this job without a continual focus on providing economical, appropriately graded teacher talk. One-to-one and small-group lessons in which the teacher says barely anything can quickly feel like invasive interrogations to students; appropriate self-disclosure, opinion sharing, and regular concept-checking questions must therefore form part of the English language teacher's toolkit. Despite the lack of recent research and evidence-based practical guidance in this area, it is surely the case that a great deal of informal expertise regarding how to communicate effectively with non-native speakers exists among English language teachers. This expertise could be enormously useful outside of the language classroom. What remains is to build upon this knowledge, formalise it and distil it in a way which benefits both new English language teachers and others who communicate regularly with non-native speakers.

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