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How L2 English pronunciation contributes to miscommunication in two French/English tandem conversation tasks

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The paper is a contribution to the study of miscommunication in native–non-native speaker (NS–NNS) conversations. It analyses pronunciation-induced communication breakdowns (CBs) found in video-recorded face-to-face tandem conversations held in English by 21 pairs of students, each consisting of a native speaker of English and a native speaker of French (SITAF tandem corpus; Horgues & Scheuer, 2015). These NS–NNS interactions are shaped by specific linguistic, discursive, intercultural, and psycho-affective characteristics of the Tandem learning framework.

We draw on our previous research which showed that pronunciation was the single most important linguistic factor behind CBs arising from the speech of the NNS in a debating task. We now aim to look for possible task effects on the frequency and nature of the CBs by comparing two collaborative speaking tasks in English.

Our results confirm that the amount and types of CBs are indeed shaped by the tandem learning setting and tasks, and that pronunciation is the main impediment to the intelligibility of NNS English speech in the corpus. We hope our study contributes to a better understanding of the communicative impact of L2 pronunciation in authentic NS–NNS exchanges.

Keywords: L2 intelligibility, L2 pronunciation, tandem learning, NS–NNS communication, communication breakdowns



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1 Introduction

Conversations between a native speaker (NS) and a non-native speaker (NNS) are generally described as presenting more opportunity for miscommunication than NS–NS exchanges (Varonis & Gass, 1985b), because the former setting presents a wider language proficiency and intercultural gap between interactants. *Miscommunication* has been used as an umbrella term to describe various kinds of “communicative turbulence” (Mauranen, 2006, p. 128), or instances of the flow of communication getting broken and therefore requiring some kind of reparation (repair negotiation in Nakahama et al., 2001). In the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) framework, miscommunication is often studied as the comprehension component of negotiation of meaning (NoM) (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Gass, 2003; Varonis & Gass, 1985a, 1985b) or of language-related episodes (LREs). The latter are defined by Swain and Lapkin (1998) as moments in an interaction when participants “talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 326), which involve the interactants attending to both mutual comprehension difficulties arising in conversation and non-target like language use through negative evidence (corrective feedback).

For the sake of clarity, we will use the term communication breakdown (CB) as a synonym for miscommunication or unintelligibility (taken in a broad sense, see §2), therefore including cases of non-understanding, misunderstanding or problematic comprehension. We will look at cases where communication breakdown is signalled (verbally, vocally or visually) by at least one of the interactants, and collaboratively attended to.

One particular context fostering NS–NNS communication is that of language tandem learning, which consists of non-formal spoken exchanges between two NSs of two different languages, who collaborate through regular, autonomous, spoken interactions to learn each other’s language and culture (Brammerts & Calvert, 2003). Depending on which language is spoken in the tandem conversation, each participant takes on the role of the (relative) expert in the L1 language and culture, while the NNS partner is a (relative) novice or less proficient language user. What makes the tandem setting particularly fruitful is that the expert-novice relationship is fluid, dynamic, and reversible. The latter aspect refers to the role reversal resulting from the language switch, which allows for what Vassallo and Telles (2006) describe as a symmetrisation process (which they term *global symmetry*) reducing the local asymmetries in linguistic and cultural expertise between tandem participants (p. 95). The relationship between the two tandem interactants is, therefore, much more symmetrical, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical than in formal instructed language learning, or even in other NS–NNS conversations naturally occurring in daily life. These linguistic, intercultural, communicative and socio/psycho-affective characteristics of tandem learning will certainly play a key role in shaping the emergence and resolution of miscommunication in the course of tandem exchanges. Tandem partners may, on the one hand, be excessively charitable (Dascal, 1999; Varonis & Gass, 1985b) with their conversation partner and therefore downplay any communicative issues, but, on the other hand, such a non-threatening environment may encourage them to more readily signal miscommunication and engage in its management.

In this paper we focus on the emergence of CBs triggered (in part) by pronunciation issues (henceforth pronunciation-induced CBs) in the output produced by the NNS in the course of a tandem conversation in English with a NS partner. We aim to explore whether the speaking task may affect the quantity and quality of such miscommunication instances.

2 Previous research

Many studies that looked at how L2 speech may affect communication focus either on intelligibility or comprehensibility. With respect to the effects of L2 pronunciation in particular, the experimental method generally consists in submitting selected audio excerpts taken from L2 speech to (asynchronous) perceptive evaluation by NS listeners (see Wheeler & Saito, 2022, for a recent review of various intelligibility measurement techniques). This method tests how much verbal content these listeners can decode (word recognition level – narrow definition of intelligibility) or gauges how much processing effort is required of these listeners (definition of comprehensibility; see for instance, Levis, 2018; Munro & Derwing, 1995). It appears that not only segmental (Suzukida & Saito, 2019; Zielinski, 2008) but also – and sometimes predominantly – suprasegmental deviations in NNS speech (Henderson, 2008; Kang, 2010) hamper intelligibility and/or comprehensibility for NS interlocutors. These results need to be put into perspective, as the perceptual evaluation techniques and learners' L1 backgrounds are not directly comparable across studies. In line with Bamgbose (1998) who defined intelligibility as “a complex of factors comprising recognizing an expression, knowing its meaning, and knowing what that meaning signifies in the sociocultural context” (p. 11), we take a broader view on (un-)intelligibility, encompassing subconcepts such as intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability because, although these levels can be teased apart in (quasi-)experimental perceptual designs, they are closely intertwined in situated, authentic interaction.

In experimental research, the evaluation of the predicted effects and gravity of L2 phonological deviations is often operationalised using the functional load principle, which takes a *theoretical* approach to the interpretation of lexical confusion (Munro & Derwing, 2006; Suzukida & Saito, 2019). However, the *actual* impact of such deviations on real-life interactions has been understudied and authors such as Henderson (2008) have also pointed out the necessity to take the sociolinguistic (not just functional) weighting of pronunciation errors into account as well. On the other hand, in research exploring NS–NNS miscommunication from an interactionist point of view (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Nakahama et al., 2001; Strawbridge, 2021; Varonis & Gass, 1985a, 1985b), pronunciation issues are generally given very little or no detailed attention. In his study of Spanish/English e-tandem exchanges, Strawbridge (2021) determined that 21% of the Reactive LRE triggers were phonetic (33% lexical, 33% global, 14% morphosyntactic). However, this proportion merged both L2 Spanish and L2 English speech results and his global category did not specify the contribution of pronunciation-related errors. Our previous study (Scheuer & Horgues, 2021) showed that in a selected part of our tandem corpus (Game 2 in English, see §3), L2 pronunciation represented the single most crucial CB trigger emerging from the speech of French learners of English addressed to NSs (ahead of lexical or morphosyntactic triggers). There were also more suprasegmental (especially word stress-related) than segmental triggers. We would now like to extend this study to explore potential task effects on the role of L2 pronunciation on NS/NNS communication.

In previous studies exploring these kinds of effects, task-types are often distinguished in terms of planning, structuration, control, and predictability of the speakers' output. These tasks vary from unplanned open-ended conversations resulting in basic “information exchange” (Strawbridge, 2021), to information-gap activities (e.g., picture description, map tasks, spot-the-difference) or academic lectures. Compared to controlled speech, less planned speech may be expected to present more comprehension difficulty (by virtue of being unpredictable and unstructured). On the other hand, it is also characterised by lower lexical density and fewer polysyllabic words (Henderson, 2008). Furthermore, it allows speakers to drop or avoid problematic topics (Nakahama et al., 2001). Nakahama et al. (2001) found that task-type not

only influenced the quantity of miscommunication events (fewer in uncontrolled conversations) but also their quality; there were more mechanical, local management and resolution events in the information gap-activity compared to the conversation task. Looking at pronunciation more specifically, contrary to Crowther et al., (2015), Suzukida and Saito (2019) found no task effect in their comparison of the contribution of L1 Japanese L2 English on NSs' comprehensibility ratings. High functional load consonant substitutions hampered comprehensibility equally in their two tasks (picture description task vs. unstructured IELTS¹ long-turn interview). Differences in the types of speech analysed (monologic vs. interactive), L1/L2 configurations, specifics of the learners' L1 phonology, but also in the methods used to compare speaking tasks or investigate L2 intelligibility/comprehensibility may explain the mixed results obtained in these studies.

Most previous research has focused on raters' indirect and *a posteriori* evaluation of the communicative impact of L2 pronunciation, where speaking materials and perceptual tasks are often not naturalistic or contextualised. It is, however, important to explore L2 intelligibility in action (i.e., in interaction) by focusing on its real-life *in-situ* effects. Therefore, we have adopted a methodology observing interactants' actual communicative behaviour in the course of authentic NS–NNS conversations. Exploiting a video-recorded corpus also makes it easier to examine the main speaker's and their interlocutor's non-verbal reactions, which are otherwise absent from any audio analysis. This was pointed out by Wheeler and Saito (2022) who regret that “the vast majority of L2 intelligibility research relies on audio-only stimuli” (p. 429).

2.1 Research questions

Our overarching research question is: does communicative task-type have an effect on how a NNS's output (especially L2 pronunciation) may generate miscommunication with a NS interlocutor? We will address it by raising the following sub-questions:

- RQ1:** Are CB episodes more, or less, prevalent in the narrative vs. the debating task in this tandem setting?
- RQ2:** What is the relative contribution of pronunciation issues compared to other types of triggers in these two tasks?
- RQ3:** What is the relative contribution of segmental vs. suprasegmental errors to the pronunciation-induced CBs?

3 Research methodology

The SITAF corpus (Horgues & Scheuer, 2015) consists of video-recorded face-to-face tandem conversations held in English and French by 21 pairs of students, each tandem being formed by a NS of English and a NS of French. All participants were undergraduate students at Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 University and their self-reported L2 proficiency level ranged from intermediate to advanced. The 21 Anglophones were speakers of different English varieties (British, American, Irish, Canadian, Australian) and the Francophones were French students majoring primarily in English studies. The tandem pairs met weekly for autonomous tandem conversations over one academic semester. They were recorded twice, performing the exact same speaking tasks in the two languages (two collaborative game-like activities and one monitored reading task) at the beginning of their tandem experience (session 1) and then three

¹ International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

months later (session 2). This study only concerns miscommunication arising in the semi-spontaneous activities held in English. Game 1 (story-telling) consists in the L2 speaker narrating a personal story integrating three lies which their interlocutor tries to elucidate by asking questions. The narrative performed by the NNS is monologic for the most part, albeit interactive at times. Game 2 (debating) consisted in the two interactants giving their opinion about a set of controversial topics, in order to then decide on the degree of like-mindedness between them. It is characterised overall by more symmetry (the NS and the NNS's speaking times and contributions to discourse) than Game 1.

We will look at cases where communication breakdown is signalled (verbally, vocally or visually) and resolved through interactional work. We will therefore exclude cases where breakdowns are prevented from happening through anticipation (Preemptive LREs; Strawbridge, 2021) or where a speaker self-resolves comprehension issues individually or avoids engaging in miscommunication management (let-it-pass strategy). To determine a case of CB, the two authors inspected all video-recorded sequences independently and followed the same perspective as Nakahama et al. (2001) in relying on the observation of the *interlocutor's* verbal, vocal, and visual reactions to problematic NNS speech, i.e., when the recipient demonstrably had difficulty, or was incapable of, grasping the meaning of an utterance as seemingly intended by the speaker. We agreed in our identification and classification of 80% of CB cases and then discussed the remaining 20%, to reach a consensual decision after further and joint reviewing of the debatable multimedia sequences. We study CB sequences using Varonis and Gass (1985a)'s overall structure: Trigger (Speaker), Indicator or Signal (Hearer), Response (Speaker), Reaction to Response (Hearer). In this study, we are mostly interested in defining the type of trigger (pronunciation, morphosyntactic, lexical, pragmatic, cultural, or a mix of any of these) emerging from NNS output (i.e., the French learner of L2 English being the initiator). Example (1) is an instance of a CB sequence from Game 1, where the main trigger was L2 pronunciation:

- (1) NNS: [There were] Hens (['ɛns]) [TRIGGER]
NS: (silence at first) Ants? [SIGNAL]
NNS: (makes a clucking sound and a gesture of flapping wings) [RESPONSE]
NS: Chickens? [REACTION TO RESPONSE]

We also quantified the amount of speech produced by the native and the non-native speakers by counting the number of words produced by each interactant during a collaborative speaking task. This was done through automatic extraction (Unix/Linux script) of word counts from the manual transcriptions prepared by the SITAF team members (Transcriber programme).

4 Data analysis and results

4.1 Communication breakdowns (CBs) in narrative vs. debating task in tandem setting (RQ1)

In total, the narrative Game 1 generated more CBs than the debating Game 2 (see Table 1 for a summary) – 39 tokens as opposed to 21 respectively, which represents an increase by a factor of nearly 1.9. The difference very nearly reaches statistical significance, although it needs to be considered in context. The two tasks differed significantly in length, understood as the number of words produced by the NNS; on average, 831 words in Game 1 and 501 in Game 2. The fact that, lengthwise, the narrative exceeded the debate by a factor of nearly 1.7 means that there were, proportionally, more communication breakdowns in Game 1 than in Game 2, although the difference between the CB-to-word ratios in the two tasks was not statistically

significant. It should therefore be concluded that no tangible task effect was found on the relative frequency of CB episodes generated by NNS discourse.

Table 1

Length and Communication Breakdowns Frequency: Game 1 vs. Game 2

	Game 1	Game 2	<i>p</i>
Total number of CBs in NNS discourse	39	21	.0537
Average number of words produced by NNS	831	501	***.00012
CB-to-word ratio in NNS discourse	0.0024	0.0015	.36
Average number of words produced by both partners (NS + NNS)	1174	1063	.2

Note. All the word counts and ratios were calculated on a sample – deemed representative – of 15 pairs for which transcriptions were fully exploitable.

To further put our results in context, the relative contribution of the NS – i.e., the mis- or non-understander – to the conversation is worth mentioning. As expected, the nature of Game 1 gave more speaking time to the learner. This resulted in the NNS uttering on average 2.4 times more words than their NS partner (831 words vs. 343; very highly significant). Game 2, conversely, presented a fairly symmetrical picture, with the NS actually producing marginally more speech on average than the NNS (562 words vs. 501; non-significant). Game 1 was somewhat longer than Game 2 in terms of the average number of words produced by both tandem partners, i.e., the NS and the NNS: 1175 words in Game 1 vs. 1063 in Game 2 (non-significant). It should be clarified that, as per the task instructions, the two games were intended to be roughly of the same length (5 mins each).

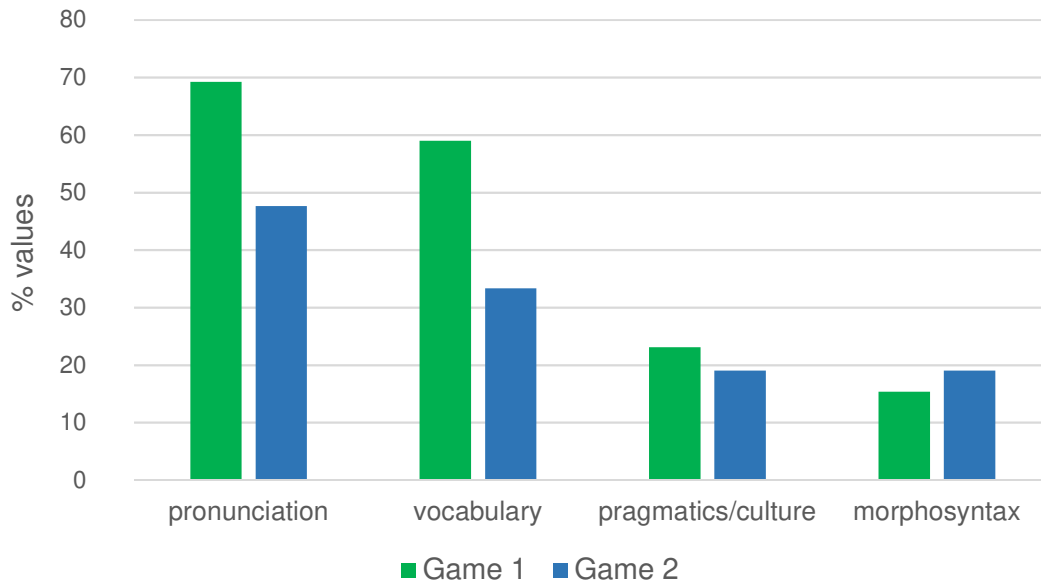
Finally, it should be noted that there were marked differences between individual pairs, both in terms of word counts and, especially, the number of signalled CBs arising during the two tasks. While some tandems consistently showed no CBs in either game or session, one (Pair 09) contributed 9 tokens, i.e., 15% of the total of 60 found in the corpus.

4.2 Relative contribution of pronunciation issues as triggers (RQ2)

As previously mentioned, pronunciation was identified as the most important trigger of CBs in Game 2, accounting, at least partially, for 10 out of the 21 CBs in the debating task (48%). There are, proportionally, even more pronunciation-induced CBs in Game 1: 27 out of 39 (69%). These numbers include the more complex mixed cases, where pronunciation was identified as one of the linguistic factors. Even though the difference is not statistically significant, pronunciation once again surpassed vocabulary, as well as the other triggers explored (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Communication Breakdowns by Trigger Type



Note. The mixed cases are included in each applicable category. Therefore, some CB instances appear more than once in the above data, which accounts for % values which add up to more than 100.

Example (2) illustrates a mixed CB trigger, involving and counting as both pronunciation and vocabulary (wrong preposition):

- (2) NNS: I went in Latvia [*'lad'vja]
NS: You went where?

4.3 Relative contribution of segmental vs. suprasegmental errors to the pronunciation-induced CBs (RQ3)

While the vast majority of the pronunciation-induced CBs in Game 2 had a suprasegmental overlay (9 out of 10), this was not the case in Game 1. In the narrative task, suprasegmentals were identified as playing a role in 14 out of the 27 instances, some of which were also compounded by segmental inaccuracies. Word stress emerged as the key issue among the suprasegmentals, featuring in 11 CB cases in Game 1. This is shown in the following exchange in example (3), where the stress problem was accompanied by a lexical one, at least from the American NS's perspective:

- (3) NNS: I'm going to talk you about my last summer va... holiDAYS
NS: Summer...? (*forward movement of head / trunk*)
NNS: Summer vacation
NS: Vacation, yeah.

The remaining three suprasegmental items concerned incorrect syllable count (i.e., deletion or addition), as illustrated by example (4), where the NS's comprehension is compromised by a missing syllable:

- (4) NNS: It was great. I was the sixtith [*'sɪkstiθ] err floor
NS: sixth floor (*nod*)?
NNS: yeah, err...sixteenth...err sixty (*hand gesture for height*)
NS: sixtieth floor?
NNS: yeah!

5 Discussion

The present analysis of the narrative Game 1 complements the existing picture of miscommunication in the English conversational data of the SITAF corpus. The tendency for this largely monologic task to generate more CBs than the dialogic Game 2 (RQ1), even after adjusting for length differences, is perhaps not altogether surprising. Game 1 revolved around the NNS's individual conceptualisation and encoding of their own personal story (life anecdotes unknown to the interlocutor). Since there was no common background set by the task instructions, most of the content was initiated solely by the NNS, who was therefore the only 'knower'. The NS, being largely the recipient of the story, may therefore have had a more difficult job trying to interpret their partner's L2 output than in Game 2, where there was a set, imposed topic, and therefore more room for collaborative structuring of the debate dynamics. Examples (2) and (3), which occurred at the beginning of Game 1, show how this 'out-of-the-blue' effect may have contributed to the lack of understanding: the NS was not primed to process *Latvia* or *summer holidays*, whose rendition was – additionally – imperfect. The task rules and goals of Game 1 may also have created a stronger need for the NS to understand the details of the NNS discourse than that of Game 2, and therefore a need to overtly signal communicative turbulence. Given that the NS was meant to identify the three lies incorporated into their partner's story, there was probably less room for the let-it-pass strategy, whereby the listener can choose to simply ignore certain processing difficulties. These possible task effects are not directly comparable to what previous studies found, as – although characterised by a convergent goal and outcome – the speaking tasks in our corpus are neither as open-ended and unplanned as free conversations (Strawbridge, 2021) nor as controlled and limiting as a map-task or spot-the-difference activity (Nakahama et al., 2001).

The findings relating to the linguistic triggers of communication breakdowns (RQ2) point to the powerful role played by L2 pronunciation problems in impeding intelligibility. This is true for both tasks, but the trend is even stronger in Game 1 than Game 2 (69% vs. 48%). The reasons may tie in with the interpretations previously offered: L2 mispronunciations have vast potential for blurring the word's identity, but this becomes an even more acute problem when the context is largely unknown and unpredictable, compared to a dialogue where the interlocutors usually build on each other's contributions. The fact that Game 1 provided more extensive data than Game 2 (both in terms of length and total number of CBs) testifies perhaps even more strongly to the true weight of pronunciation in maintaining smooth NS–NNS communication, relative to other linguistic domains such as vocabulary or morphosyntax.

Comparisons between the two tasks should, however, be drawn with caution, due to the sometimes-low number of tokens involved. This becomes particularly relevant when interpreting data from RQ3, with suprasegmental problems coming strongly to the fore in Game 2 but not as much in Game 1. Another complication stems from the fact that it is often difficult to disentangle suprasegmentals from segmentals. For example, stress and vowel quality are usually intertwined, to the extent that “nonstandard English word stress is largely

defined by the presence or absence of vowel errors” (Richards, 2016, p. 105). Despite such methodological issues, it is likely that the nature of the task played a role in shaping the results. The NNS, being in charge of the narrative in Game 1, may have been more successful in avoiding complex polysyllabic words than in Game 2, which resulted in the scope for suprasegmental errors being somewhat reduced in the former. Conversely, this may have enhanced the importance of segmental details in Game 1, as single segmental errors have a larger effect on reducing intelligibility in monosyllabic than in polysyllabic words (Wheeler & Saito, 2022).

6 Conclusion and implications

The SITAF miscommunication data, now complemented by the analysis of the narrative task, point to pronunciation as the principal trigger of CBs arising in connection with non-native English speech. Yet, pronunciation is often viewed as an optional component of L2 teaching, an “add it on if we have time” feature (Levis, 2018, p. 1). This is in contrast to morphosyntax, which tends to be a long-standing favourite in the EFL classroom, but which actually ranked last among the four linguistic triggers in our CB data. Importantly, our findings demonstrate the potential of seemingly minor (from the student’s perspective) pronunciation errors for generating miscommunication, such as the missing /h/ in example (1), and the rightward stress shift in (3). The latter are characteristic of L1 French learners of English and their communicative impact should be brought to their attention. More general pedagogical implications suggest L2 learners should be taught how to develop strategies to manage these CBs effectively (rather than avoiding them altogether) in NS/NNS interactions. Our study also points towards some effect of task type and this should be investigated further to account for the emergence, type and resolution of pronunciation-induced CBs in our corpus. We hope our study contributes to a better understanding of the communicative impact of L2 pronunciation in authentic, real-life NS–NNS exchanges.

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