Development of discursive practices for the intelligibility of Thai English in interaction: Sequence and categories as contextual resources

Sangki Kim

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Intelligibility research has substantially advanced our understanding of how second-language (L2) English intelligibility is influenced by characteristics of the L2 speaker's pronunciation and experience and by listener-related variables. Comparatively few studies, however, have investigated the influence of contextual factors on intelligibility. This study aims to address this lack with an analysis of how one Thai learner of L2 English increasingly utilized context for constructing L2 English intelligibility in interactions. The focal participant was a Thai college student attending an eight-week business English course at a Thai university. The data for this study came from a series of one-on-one conversations, alternating among six instructors with diverse first language backgrounds and discussions during regular office hours. Applying the methodology of membership categorization analysis (MCA) and conversation analysis (CA), the analysis revealed that the focal participant increasingly used sequential organization and descriptors in order to proactively construct an intelligible pronunciation of the job referent term that she used. The findings add to our understanding of how context supports the interactive construction of L2 English intelligibility. They also support the use of (M)CA as an innovative methodology for intelligibility research and, further, suggest teaching implications for ensuring L2 English intelligibility in interaction.

1. Introduction

Intelligibility has become an important instructional goal in the teaching of second-language (L2) English pronunciation, an essential element in successful communication. At least three strands of research—i.e., English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes (WE), and pronunciation research—have helped us better understand the phenomenon of intelligibility of L2 English, including that L2 accents do not necessarily degrade the actual understanding of L2 English utterances (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 2011). This in turn has led to more effective methods for teaching English pronunciation (e.g., Low, 2015).

Intelligibility has come to be viewed as a multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced not only by speaker factors (i.e., features of L2 production and L2 speaker experience) and listener factors (e.g., listener familiarity, experience in L2 English) but also by contextual factors (e.g., preceding context, world knowledge) as elaborated in Munro's (2008) heuristic model of intelligibility. To date, however, few studies have looked at how *contextual* factors contribute to the intelligibility of L2 English utterances in interaction. Studies that actually have investigated contextual factors have tended to treat context as a static element and as falling among listeners' resources (Gass & Varonis, 1984; Jenkins, 2000; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008). A notable exception is Matsumoto (2011), who documented an ELF user's use of semantic description that facilitated the

intelligibility of an English word. A better understanding of the role of context in intelligibility should allow us to suggest a more interactive approach to improving L2 English intelligibility (Rajadurai, 2007).

This study aims to fill this need by focusing on how a Thai college student increasingly uses the immediate sequential context and descriptors as resources to construct an intelligible Thai English utterance in ELF interactions occurring over a period of eight weeks. While the study aims to enhance our understanding of contextual factors in L2 English intelligibility, it also is an example of membership categorization analysis (MCA) and conversation analysis (CA) as productive methodologies for systematically investigating how context demonstrably contributes to the intelligibility of L2 English utterances used in naturally occurring interactions.

In what follows, I first discuss the literature on L2 intelligibility and outline a CA and MCA perspective on context and intelligibility in interaction. I then describe the data and procedures, followed by the analysis. The study concludes with implications for investigating intelligibility during ELF interactions and teaching English as an international language.

2. Literature review

2.1. Speaker, listener, and contextual factors in intelligibility research

Most intelligibility studies have focused on the L2 speaker. These studies, taking either a pronunciation feature-based (e.g., Jenkins, 2000; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006) or an English variety-based approach (e.g., Kirkpatrick, Deterding, & Wong, 2008), have identified the (supra)segmental features of L2 English responsible for reducing English intelligibility (e.g., Maastricht, Krahmer, & Swerts, 2016; Munro, Derwing, & Thomson, 2015) and described the association between L2 English users' experience and intelligibility (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2013; Saito, 2015). This speaker-centered approach to investigating intelligibility, however, has been criticized as a static, ideologically based approach (Berns, 2008; Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Levis, 2005; Munro, 2011; Rajadurai, 2007; Rajagopalan, 2010; Sewell, 2010).

Recognizing the importance of listener contributions to intelligibility, a growing number of studies have adopted a listener-centered perspective on intelligibility—that is, investigating listener factors such as the listener's familiarity or communicative experience with different varieties of L2 English (Gass & Varonis, 1984; Kim, 2017); listening strategies (Zielinski, 2008); and attitude toward L2 English varieties (Lindemann, 2010; Lindemann & Subtirelu, 2013).

How contextual factors affect comprehension of native English varieties has been investigated mainly by research on L2 listening. In this line of research, contextual factors are understood as co-text (i.e., preceding content) or world knowledge. Studies have convincingly demonstrated that L2 listeners use not only perceptual linguistic information (e.g., phonemes) but also non-linguistic information generated in and through context (e.g., Field, 2004).

Three studies have examined the role of contextual factors in native or L2 English listeners' understanding of L2 English varieties. The findings from these studies, however, appear to be mixed. Gass and Varonis (1984) and Kennedy and Trofimovich (2008) confirmed the facilitative role of context in making L2 English sentences intelligible for native English listeners. Jenkins (2000), however, argued that L2 English listeners are "less able to make use of context and co-text" (p. 118) than are native English listeners.

One reason for the mixed findings on the role of context in the intelligibility of L2 English varieties may be the diverse ways in which the researchers conceptualized context. As shown in Table 1, the operationalization of context varied: (1) presence or absence of information (i.e., the North Wind story or information about the L2 English sentences being true or false) related to the L2 English sentences prior to the transcription task; or (2) common sense that listeners were expected to have accumulated based on which they could judge the L2 English sentences as true or false or they could recognize the L2 English sentences as familiar or unfamiliar.

In addition, Kennedy and Trofimovich (2008) added meaningfulness or meaninglessness of the L2 English sentences as contextual cues (e.g., *A caring doctor helps the sick patients* [meaningful sentence]; *A loud kiss shapes a dead ball* [meaningless

Table 1
Operationalization of context and study claims.

Study	Types of (semantic) context	Claim
Gass and Varonis (1984)	1. The presence or absence of a story ("North Wind") prior to listening to L2 English sentences relevant to the story 2. Real-world knowledge (i.e.,whether the sentences are familiar or not)	The presence of context contributes to native listeners' understanding of L2 English sentences.
Jenkins (2000)	1. Object (i.e., task-related pictures) 2. Interlocutors' L1 backgrounds 3. Preceding conversation (co-text)	Contextual information plays a role in interactions between native English speakers, but does not influence interlanguage talk between non-native English speakers.
Kennedy and Trofimovich (2008)	1. Explicit characterization of the L2 English sentences as true or false 2. Meaningfulness or meaninglessness of the L2 English sentences 3. Real-world knowledge (i.e., real-world expectation of the sentences being true or false)	The semantic context available to L1 listeners contributes to understanding the L2 English sentences spoken by four L1 groups.