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# Segmental repair and interactional intelligibility: The relationship between consonant deletion, consonant insertion, and pronunciation intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca in Japan

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**Abstract**

This is a qualitative study of the relationship between consonant deletion, consonant insertion, and the pragmatic strategies that maintain mutual intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca (hereafter, ELF) interactions among university and exchange students at a Japanese university (Jenkins, 2000; Matsumoto, 2011; O'Neal, 2015). Some ELF research claims that consonant deletion attenuates mutual intelligibility in ELF interactions, especially if the consonant deletion occurs in word-initial and word-medial consonant clusters or in consonant clusters in syllable onsets and codas (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Deterding, 2013). This study assesses the effect of consonant deletion and consonant insertion on the mutual intelligibility of pronunciation in ELF interactions in Japan. Using conversation analytic methodology to examine a corpus of miscommunications among ELF speakers at a Japanese university, within which miscommunications are defined as repair sequences, this study claims that consonant deletion can attenuate mutual intelligibility, and that the insertion of a deleted consonant into a word can help restore mutual intelligibility. Furthermore, this is true regardless of deviance from or approximation to a native speaker pronunciation standard. This study concludes that segmental repair is an effective strategy with which English speakers can maintain mutual intelligibility.


*Keywords:* Conversation analysis; Intelligibility; ELF; Consonant deletion; Consonant insertion; Segmental repair

## 1. Introduction

This is a qualitative study of the pragmatic strategies utilized to maintain mutual intelligibility in ELF interactions among university and exchange students at a large public Japanese university. Before this study proceeds further, however, a description of the ways in which the terms pragmatics and ELF are used in this study is warranted here. First, the term pragmatics is intentionally used in a limited way. In this study, pragmatics is defined as any use of language to further mutual intelligibility. Second, the term ELF is used in a novel way. A common definition of ELF is the following: the usage of English as the communicative medium of choice among speakers from different first language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2011). Other scholars have characterized ELF beyond just heterogeneous first language backgrounds and the functional

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usage of English as the communicative medium of choice. In fact, some ELF scholars claim that ELF includes emerging morphosyntactic patterns, such as a lack of third person –s verb marking, and a greater willingness to prioritize mutual understanding among its speakers (Jenkins et al., 2011).

However, there are some problems with these characterizations of ELF as different from other types of English communication (Mortensen, 2013). The first problem is that this definition of ELF assumes that first language backgrounds are omnirelevant to the assessment of an English interaction. Although first language backgrounds can be made relevant to an interaction, it is a mistake to assume that they are automatically relevant (Schegloff, 2007; Canagarajah, 2013). Furthermore, the idea that English speakers from different first language backgrounds prioritize mutual understanding more than other types of interactions is demonstrably false; interactions among English speakers from different first language backgrounds can be just as antagonistic and uncooperative as any other type of interaction (Jenks, 2012; Fauzi et al., 2014). If there are differences between English interactions among speakers from different first language backgrounds and English interactions among speakers of the same first language background, this difference is likely one of degree rather than of kind (Mortensen, 2013). Accordingly, the defining characteristics of ELF are not categorically relevant to the assessment of an interaction.

Therefore, a new definition of ELF is warranted. In this study, an ELF interaction is defined as an interaction among English speakers from different first language backgrounds who must adjust, repair, or accommodate their English in order to successfully communicate. That is, ELF is the changing of the English to suit the needs of the interaction. Many scholars have already noted that whenever speakers of two languages or even just two dialects of one language interact, the languages or dialects can be expected to influence one another in proportion to the extent of the contact (Hudson, 1981; Cook, 2012). ELF is both local and ephemeral in this definition: it is local in that the changing of the English might only apply to a single turn of a conversation; it is ephemeral in that the speakers might change the English in use again very rapidly. This definition squarely places the defining characteristic of ELF on the ad hoc, negotiated, extemporized, and impromptu nature of communication.

This definition does not assume that the first language backgrounds of the English speakers are automatically relevant to the pragmatics of the interaction, nor does this definition claim that an ELF interaction is always an ELF interaction from the beginning of the interaction to its conclusion: ELF interactions start when one speaker begins to adjust, repair, or accommodate some aspect of the language; ELF interactions end when the speakers no longer adjust, repair, or accommodate. Therefore, an interaction could become an ELF interaction, and then cease to be an ELF interaction at a later time. Accordingly, this definition does not assume that anything significant happens in English communication among people from different first language backgrounds who never adjust, repair, or accommodate.

This study focuses on the repair of English pronunciation during ELF interactions so that the interaction remains mutually intelligible. The efficacy of English pronunciation during ELF interactions is one of the first topics ELF research covered, and this study intends to build upon that examination (Jenkins, 2000). In particular, this study examines the following questions: Do English speakers in Japan orient to consonant deletion as intelligibility attenuating? Do English speakers in Japan orient to consonant insertion as intelligibility strengthening? How do English speakers in Japan overcome a miscommunication catalyzed by a word that was oriented to as unintelligible?

## 2. Definitions

### *2.1. Intelligibility*

Intelligibility indexes the extent to which the interlocutor understands the speaker's message (Munro et al., 2006; Nelson, 2011). If a speaker pronounces a word or an utterance, and the interlocutor does not understand the pronunciation, then the pronunciation is unintelligible to the interlocutor; if a speaker pronounces a word or an utterance, and the interlocutor does understand the pronunciation, then the pronunciation is intelligible to the interlocutor. Whole utterances that are oriented to as unintelligible are considered instances in which utterance intelligibility was a problem. Single words that are oriented to as unintelligible are considered instances in which word intelligibility was a problem (Nelson, 2011).

It is important, however, to distinguish between understanding the speaker's message and the subjective ease or difficulty of understanding the speaker's message. Intelligibility is not an index of how subjectively easy or difficult the speaker's message is to understand (Isaacs and Trofimovich, 2012). In fact, pronunciation can sound unfamiliar, bizarre, and even dreadful and yet still be highly intelligible. This study focuses only on the intelligibility of pronunciation, not on the subjective aspects of it.

Intelligibility has been assessed in a multitude of ways, and as yet there is no agreed upon method with which to assess it. Most measurements of intelligibility are static: the intelligibility of a pronunciation is assessed only one time, often in unnatural experimental settings, and the speaker is never given an opportunity to adjust his or her pronunciation into more intelligible forms (Brodkey, 1972; Gass and Varonis, 1984; Derwing and Munro, 1997; Munro et al., 2006; Deterding,