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Shaping Cross-Cultural Awareness in Aviation English Communication

ABSTRACT

The paper provides a comprehensive overview of intercultural communication in the context of aviation. Having realised that covering all relevant aspects is not possible, a selection has to be made. The Author focuses on the English language ownership and subsequently on native speakers of English who are no longer models of 'a kind of English' used in aviation communication. It seems that they should be aware of multicultural settings. Furthermore, there are non-native speakers of Aviation English who now seem to 'own' the language also called the *lingua franca* of aviation. However, as the participants of intercultural communication are of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and have no prescribed linguistic model to follow, numerous sublanguages of Aviation English seem to exist. The paper presents the Polish perspective on the global use of Aviation English as well as indicates possible future research.

Key words: Aviation English, aviation communication, intercultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, *lingua franca*, native speakers of English

Successful aviation English communication is crucial for aviation safety. Thus, special attention should be drawn to all its possible aspects and it should not be devoid of proper care at any time. Some may say that this is only aviation language as a language for specific purposes to be supervised, however, nowadays it seems not to be enough. There are other components of aviation English communication that should be taken into consideration, namely its participants with their various cultural backgrounds as well as their cross-

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[1] Dr. Anna Borowska has been an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warsaw since 2008. She is not only a tutor, but also an editor. Her current scholarly interests focus on specialist languages, particularly linguistic description of aviation English and Polish and teaching English for special purposes. She was astonished when in 2008 she noticed a huge gap in linguistic description of one of the languages for specific purposes, namely Aviation English. As an aviation enthusiast, she often heard about problems in aviation communication caused by not sufficient knowledge of English among air traffic controllers and pilots. Soon after she found out about the incident with Polish pilots who were unable to land for two hours at Heathrow airport due to the lack of understanding of British ATCO's message provided in a strong native British dialect. Therefore, she decided to focus her research on pilot-controller communication as crucial for aviation safety, though not always correct.

cultural awareness and intercultural competence. All those elements, when present in a speech act, lead to successful communication.

Following Varner and Beamer (2005: 40) we should not forget that:

> Language is culture – culture is language. Culture and languages are intertwined and shape each other. The two are inseparable because language is not a matter of neutral codes and grammatical rules. Each time we send messages, we also make cultural choices.

The kind of communication in question is definitely not a standard one and its characteristic features include: no access to visual cues, facial expressions or gestures, and no face to face interaction. Instead of all these comfortable elements of communication, aviation discourse must accept noise and other disturbances and enjoy only one communicative tool – speech. And this is only through the speech act that a speaker's culture is usually communicated in the aviation context. If the receiver of a message is not aware of this fact, the communication does not have to be successful. They can treat their conversation partner as being of the same or similar cultural background as their own and then the threat that the communication will fail due to misleading expectations of interpreting various issues may arise. As a result, we may face serious consequences in aviation safety. Therefore, as the context for the aviation environment is global, cross-cultural awareness should be, first of all, shaped and later supported.

The importance of intercultural aviation communication is thus steadily growing, and so is the role of English worldwide. Here we face not only the necessity of *linguistic competence* as an obligatory component of cross-cultural communication, but also *intercultural awareness* and *intercultural competence*. By *intercultural awareness* I understand being aware of another culture's existence in the communication process that brings with it the possibility of various interpretations and references, as well as existing linguistic habits. However, it leads automatically to *intercultural competence* which means possessing some knowledge of various cultures and their products, having a proper attitude - namely openness and tolerance towards our

conversation partner, the interpretation of other culture utterances, and finally interaction that we can call the ability to use the knowledge, attitude and interpretation together. Importantly, all of that must be present under the constraints of real-time aviation communication. On the one hand, intercultural awareness should be increased in order to interpret utterances better; on the other hand, intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts can be only gained through aviation communication experience (Bennett and Bennett 2004:149).

The perception of Aviation English also has to be modified as it is no longer a language that should be associated only with native users of it. By native users of English I mean those who were born with the language. It is obvious that Aviation English communication is not only between native speakers. As a matter of fact, they constitute now only a small percentage of all users of Aviation English. Actually, non-native speakers of English outnumber English native speakers by 4:1, and one may safely assume that the vast majority of interactions where English is used as a foreign language take place in the absence of native speakers. English is thus no longer owned by them, but instead shows a strong tendency towards further, more rapid de-owning (House 2010: 364). The result is an increasing degree of diversification of the English language through hybridization, acculturation and nativisation processes that we actually cannot stop. Hence, after noticing and being aware of such phenomena, it is time to react to them properly.

Although native speakers of English may still feel that English belongs to them, even when it is used by the whole world, this is only superficial thinking. As a matter of fact, by observation of the speaking habits among non-native speakers, the native speakers of English should become aware of the fact that their accents and dialects are not the only models to be followed and they should adapt to the current state of affairs. As English is a global language, it is not possible to accept only one variant of it because it does not guarantee successful communication. Actually, there is no longer standard American

English nor Received Pronunciation to be followed. Linguists say it is still American English that is in common global use, but not in the Aviation English environment where communication takes place among speakers with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and strong native accents of their mother tongues.

Moreover, native users of English should not concentrate on the language itself, but go deeper into the communication process and take into consideration the fact that language does not exist without culture. The one who sends a message in English, sends us a piece of his or her culture, but only expressed with the help of English words. Communication is thus expressed not through languages, but through cultures! People refer to the concepts represented by linguistic signs in their brains. This is also culture, in that it signifies how an individual thinks, acts and feels as a member of a given group.

Another important aim of intercultural communication that native speakers should take into consideration is to avoid disagreement and hostility towards those who use their native accent, and again to be tolerant of cultural differences. A non-native accent is no longer less valid than a native one, as long as it is understood. Analogically, linguistic fluency means not only the knowledge of the language, but also communicative and cultural competence. The national identity of every speaker can be safe and preserved. One may claim that as there are many cultures in the world, there are many sublanguages involved in communication process. It means that now it is not enough to follow conversational routines, but rather be aware of what utterances are culturally more appropriate and what sort of behaviour we can expect, e.g. which nationalities are more talkative, reserved etc.

In the Aviation English environment we face a growing number of international non-native – non-native English interactions that have come to be called 'lingua franca communication'. The definition of English as a *lingua franca* that best suits the aviation context can be the one presented by Firth (1996: 237): "a contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue

nor a common national culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication". In our context, we can only alter the past participle 'chosen' into 'imposed'. Speakers (including native speakers) taking part in a given speech act must negotiate their own *lingua franca*, their own medium that can be given substance with different national, regional, local and individual cultural identities. In this aspect, Aviation English is not only global, but also flexible and open to foreign forms. Conversation partners are supposed to choose generally accepted and often heard forms and phrases. However fixed, there is still a place for human interactive elements such as cross-cultural generalisation, e.g. making contact, establishing identity, exchanging information, or closing. In this case, intercultural competence is a must. Otherwise, smart support for global communication could be a common core of all possible cultures, but as it exists only in theory, we can observe and analyse the outcome of as many cultures as possible and then make the results of such observations public.

The problem may be illustrated by the results of observations conducted on a sample aeronautical dialogue. There were two conversation partners, one an American ATCO, the other a Polish (pilot) who used plain Aviation English as the situation required during their non-routine aeronautical discourse. First of all, the style of communication differed. The controller's messages were full of informal expressions (mainly phrasal verbs) that were mainly the source for miscommunication in the described case. The Polish interlocutor could not understand all the phrases, so he had to paraphrase the meaning. Contrary to the Polish pilot, American controller was talking a lot and seemed to ignore if he was understood or not.

Following Gudykunst (1998), we can refer here to low- and high-context communication styles connected with the directness and indirectness of interaction. High-context communication can be characterised as being indirect, avoiding saying 'no', relationship-building and understated with speakers being reserved and sensitive to listeners. Moreover, group harmony is

more important for its users than individuals. Low-context communication, in contrast, can be characterised as being direct, verbal, explicit, open, precise and consistent with one's feelings (Gudykunst 1998: 180). Individuals seem to be more important than the group. The controller did not adapt to the non-native communication context, nor did he notice comprehension problems though the pilot paraphrased the message. This interaction was ruled by culture-specific expectations. The controller expected his interlocutor to be linguistically competent in English. If he is not, he may have problems. Polish pilots, on the other hand, are used to the fact that Americans lead the conversation, so they adapt to the situation as they cannot change the cultural features of the communication leading interlocutor. Therefore, we can assume that in this case, the controller represents a low-context (direct) culture and the pilot, though pressed for time, used high-context messages and paraphrased the meaning.

Obviously, numerous problems may also appear when non-native speakers transfer vocabulary or grammar inappropriately from their first language. They are easily identified by native speakers and may be judged negatively as rude rather than perceived as having made an error of proficiency (Yates 2010: 288). As for grammar rules, Polish speakers of Aviation English tend to forget about many complex grammar structures, e.g. conditional sentences. However, similar types of mistakes may be accepted in intercultural communication if they do not interfere with the general comprehension of the message and do not change the meaning of the utterance.

To be aware of the cross-cultural environment, non-native speakers are supposed to learn prevailing norms and expectations in order to exist within the culture of the language they use. Nevertheless, the rule works both ways. Native users of Aviation English should resign especially from phrases such as idioms, sophisticated phrasal verbs and grammar in order to avoid potential misunderstanding.

The above discussion leads to the conclusion that the acceptable use of Aviation English as *lingua franca* requires a redefinition. Therefore, there is a need for research in every possible context of global aviation communication. In this context, issues of intercultural communication remain highly relevant. The norm is not the monolingual native speaker, but rather the expert multilingual user. In different societies there are different culture-specific practices and interactional norms, and the different ways of speaking prevailing in different societies are linked with, and make sense in terms of, different local cultural values, or at least, different cultural priorities as far as values are concerned (Wierzbicka 2010: 47).

In order to shape cross-cultural awareness, we need some general, clear rules to follow. As Aviation English is mainly spoken, it seems it is better to concentrate on what we can hear, so pronunciation, intonation, stress, and accent. It would be perfect if the pronunciation can imitate generally acceptable standard English, however, the possibly low degree of alien accent should be acceptable. In this context, language in use, as it is the only readily available communication tool, must head towards comfortable intelligibility. A foreign accent is thus not bad, but it must be comprehensible. In this way, speakers retain their national identity by marking their language with it. For example, Jenkins (2007) suggests that some priorities such as proper voicing of consonants and the length of vowels, lack of articles, plural for uncountable nouns, should be accepted. Such ideas may simplify the communication task for non-native speakers, yet it may still be possible for native speakers to understand the message.

Lastly, recommended further research should focus on a common core for interaction, i.e. the most common structures and acceptable pronunciation as well as observation on conversational partners' communication styles and preferences. If Aviation English speakers are aware of the multicultural elements in cross-cultural communication, it means that they have well developed strategic competence, enormous functional flexibility, and openness to foreign forms.

The cross-cultural awareness we are to shape requires the willingness to modify existing communicative conventions, the ability to identify and accept foreign culture, a readiness to deal with communicative difficulties by using communication strategies such as seeking clarification, negotiating meaning, and being tolerant and attentive to foreign accents. All of that seems to be the easiest way to expect people to become capable of higher standards and to remove language barriers in the high risk environment.

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