

**STRIVING FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING:**  
Native English speakers' views on speech modifications in  
intercultural encounters

Bachelor's Thesis  
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>”Foreigner talk” -nimistä ilmiötä on aikaisemmin tutkittu melko laajaltikin eri näkökulmien kautta. Suurin osa tutkimuksesta on tehty 1980-luvulla, jonka jälkeen termin käyttö näyttää hiljalleen vähentyneen. ”Foreigner talk” tarkoittaa muokattua kieltä, jonka tarkoitus on tehdä puheesta ymmärrettävämpää henkilölle, jonka kompetenssi kohdekielellä ei ole toisen puhujan kanssa syystä tai toisesta samalla tasolla: kyseessä voivat olla esimerkiksi kieltä äidinkielenään puhuva henkilö ja kieltä vieraana kielenä puhuva henkilö. Aivan viime aikoina ilmiö näyttää nouseen taas suosioon tutkimuskohteena etenkin osana työympäristöä, jossa kansainväliset kohtaamiset ovat monelle arkipäivää. Siitä huolimatta ilmiö kaipaisi enemmän huomiota, ja sen tarkemmasta tutkimisesta voisi olla hyötyä esimerkiksi opetuksen suunnittelussa ja sitä kautta työelämässä esimerkiksi kielikoulutuksen suunnittelussa.</p> <p>Käsillä olevan tutkielman tarkoitus on selvittää yleisemmällä tasolla, kuinka tietoisia englantia äidinkielenään puhuvat ovat kulttuurienväliseen viestintään liittyvistä mahdollisista ongelmista, ja millainen ymmärrys heillä aiheesta on. Tarkemmin tutkielma keskittyy sen selvittämiseen, muokkaavatko natiivit puhettaan keskustellessaan ei-natiivien kanssa, ja jos muokkaavat, millä tavoin. Toinen tarkempi mielenkiinnon kohde tutkielmassa on se, millaiset asiat vaikuttavat natiivin päätökseen muokata puhettaan kulttuurienvälisissä kohtaamisissa. Tutkielman aineisto koostuu 22:n englantia äidinkielenään puhuvan henkilön vastauksista verkkokyselyyn. Vastausten esittämiseen ja analysointiin käytettiin sekä tilastollisesti kuvaavan analyysin että sisällönanalyysin keinoja.</p> <p>Suurin osa kyselyyn vastaajista raportoi muokkaavansa puhetta edes välillä keskustellessaan ei-natiivien kanssa. Tärkeimmäksi vaikuttajaksi koettiin ei-natiivin kielitaidot: tämä osoittautui syyksi sekä puheen muokkaamiseen ymmärrettävämmäksi että muokkaamatta jättämiseen. Moni vastaajista myös asettautui ei-natiivin asemaan, eikä halunnut esimerkiksi saada tämän oloa epämukavaksi muokkaamalla puhettaan liikaa silloinkin, kun ei-natiivin kielitaito on erittäin hyvä tai he ovat erittäin halukkaita ja kyvykkäitä oppimaan autenttisia kielen vivahteita. Yleisellä tasolla vastaajat osoittivat erittäin hyvää tietoisuutta ja pohdintaa kulttuurienväliseen kommunikaatioon liittyvistä mahdollisista ongelmista.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

“Foreigner talk” as a phenomenon has been studied as long as from the 1960s, and especially actively it was researched in the 1980s. Since then, however, the term seems to have fallen out of use, even though the phenomenon has been researched; if fairly limitedly and in slightly different forms. For the sake of clarity, the term “foreigner talk” will be used, when applicable, in the study at hand. The concept, introduced by Charles Ferguson in 1971, quintessentially means a simplified register which is used primarily with addressees who do not possess full native competence, or possibly no competence at all, of the target language (Ferguson 1981: 10). Thus, features of foreigner talk (FT) are the adjustments that native speakers (NS) of a certain language make to their language use in spoken interaction with non-native speakers (NNS) of that language in order to make their speech more comprehensible to the NNSs. Several types of adjustments have been recognized to occur in foreigner talk discourse (FTD), which means the interaction between a native speaker and a non-native speaker in which foreigner talk is used. Adjustments are made both in the form of the language, for example, sentence structure and vocabulary, and in the discourse itself, i.e. the structure of the conversation. Features of FT are not modifications that only occur in NS-NNS interaction; rather, they are features that occur more frequently in FTD when compared to NS-NS interaction: the issue is quantitative rather than qualitative (Long 1981: 136; Long 1983a: 183). Furthermore, this type of speech accommodation is, of course, likely to occur in other types of situations, as well, than strictly between a NS and a NNS: for example, between two NNSs, where one interlocutor is more competent in English than the other. However, for the purposes of this paper, only modifications in NS-NNS interaction will be addressed.

Native speakers modify their speech when talking to non-native speakers to avoid communication errors and to repair these errors when they occur. Many factors may affect the level and types of modifications the NS makes, even though the adjustments made are the same. For instance, the NNS’s proficiency in the target language, the context in which NS-NNS interaction occurs, the NS’s personality and previous intercultural experience and so on may impact the use of FT (see e.g. Hirvonen 1996: 170–172). Today, when contact between different cultures is frequent and learning foreign languages is ever more common, a new need for studying FTD arises. Understanding features

of FT and NSs' awareness of issues related to FT would help plan suitable outlines for teaching languages as well as communicating efficiently in intercultural settings.

The focus of the present study is on foreigner talk from the point of view of the native speakers. The study sought to investigate NSs' awareness of issues regarding FT through two main research questions: do NSs modify their speech in interaction with NNSs and if so, how; and, what factors influence their decision to do so? First, earlier research on foreigner talk will be discussed (section 2). A short overview of when, how and from which viewpoints it has been studied in the past will be given. The most salient features of FT found, based on studies conducted in the past, will also be presented. Second, methods of data collection and analysis will be explained (section 3). Third, the analysis of the data will be presented, divided into sections concerning intercultural experience, speech modifications and motivations to modify or not to modify speech (section 4). Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the information gained from the study (section 5).

## **2 FOREIGNER TALK**

This section gives an overview of previous research on FT. Furthermore, to give a foundation to understanding the present study and its results, the actual modifications NSs make in their language use in NS-NNS communication are discussed: on a concrete level, it is shown what kinds of modifications native speakers have been found to make to their speech to make it more comprehensible to NNSs. Modifications are divided and discussed in categories including the form of the language, i.e. features of actual speech, morphological and syntactic features, semantic features, and features of discourse. However, a clear categorization of modifications proves sometimes to be difficult since many linguistic features interact strongly with each other.

### **2.1 Research on foreigner talk**

The adjustments native speakers make when addressing non-native speakers have been researched for a few decades now; foreigner talk and closely related phenomena have been covered in a large number of studies since the 1960s. Particularly popular research on FT was in the 1980s, but the term seems to have become deprecated since; it is used only in a handful of research papers from the beginning of the millennium onwards. Research on FT has been done in different kinds of settings, with people from

different age groups and with the focus on different areas of linguistics. Studies have been conducted with both children and adults and most of the findings seem to hold across the age groups (Long 1983a: 177).

In the early phases the focus of research was mainly on second language acquisition (SLA). The phenomenon under observation there was how the adjustments made by the NS affect the NNS's language acquisition and studies have been conducted both in and out of classroom. This perspective is valid also today as foreign languages are increasingly studied: studying the modifications made and their effect on language acquisition could help in planning teaching materials, methods and whole plans for teaching foreign languages. The aim of research later gradually shifted to success in communication rather than only success in learning (Bremer et al. 1996: 159.) Furthermore, as Wesche (1994: 219) explains, in time the area of interest has expanded from simply modifications to language phonologically, lexically and structurally to also conversational interaction patterns, for example, discourse features. Studies have later begun to consider also the cultural aspects adopted through communication in NS-NNS interaction. More recently, FT as a phenomenon seems to have been an area of interest especially in the business environment. For example, Sweeney and Hua (2010) and Rogerson-Revell (2010) have studied native English speakers' communication accommodation strategies toward non-native speakers in international business settings.

As mentioned above, the term "foreigner talk" seems to have become deprecated since the 1980s: the term is used less and less frequently in research after the end of the decade. The term may be considered outmoded today, when interaction between cultures is considered ordinary rather than unordinary: the word 'foreigner' carries connotations about something utterly strange and possibly even threatening that no longer apply. However, the phenomenon itself has been studied, if in slightly different forms and under different terminology. Probably the best known theory in intercultural communication studies that foreigner talk is related to is Howard Coupland's Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) from the 1970s, which was later revised to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). According to CAT, speakers have different strategies and motives for accommodating their speech. One strategy is to *converge* to the conversational partner/s, i.e. to make some aspect/s of one's speech more like those of the other interlocutor. The other strategy is to *diverge* from the other interlocutor, i.e. to make one's speech more different than that of the conversational partner.

*Maintaining* one's own speech style is also recognized as a speech strategy in CAT, but it is usually identified as divergence. According to CAT, the main speaker motivations behind the use of these strategies are to gain approval, to show distinctiveness, and to achieve clearer or smoother communication. (Gallois et al. 1995: 117.) In short, FT and CAT are both concerned with speech accommodation, and in part also with the speaker's intention to make his or her speech more understandable to the other interlocutor and so achieve mutual understanding. CAT does, however, have a more holistic view on and interest in speech accommodation than FT research. CAT argues for both the speaker's and the listener's willingness to adapt, whereas FT is exclusively about the native speaker's way of accommodating to the situation. Furthermore, the different accommodation strategies and motives proposed by CAT do not all agree with FT: it is not a strategy to speak more like or unlike the other interlocutor, but more comprehensibly, and so achieving clearer and smoother communication is the main motive behind its use.

Today, more and more people encounter intercultural situations in, for example, business settings. As Sweeney and Hua (2010: 500) show, understanding intercultural issues and being able to accommodate one's speech according to the language competence of the interlocutor may be essential when striving for mutual understanding. It would be beneficial for NSs to be aware of the language issues in intercultural settings and have an understanding of what kinds of modifications in their language use actually are helpful in creating language that is comprehensible to NNSs. As Rogerson-Revell (2010: 436) argues, communicative efficiency as a motivation to modify one's speech is relevant to situations where English is used as an international language; more relevant than other motivations suggested in CAT. She continues to argue that even more relevant it is in business context, "where speakers come together from different language and cultural backgrounds to accomplish a particular, mutually beneficial task." (ibid.) Furthermore, Sweeney and Hua (2010: 480) argue that native speakers of English can often be the cause of misunderstanding and miscommunication in intercultural encounters, as they continue to speak in a way that is not comprehensible to the *lingua franca* users: for example, using complicated vocabulary or communication norms not shared by all of the interlocutors. Researching and understanding communicative modifications made in NS-NNS interaction, and NSs' awareness of this issue gives valuable information for many areas of linguistics, as well as education and, for example, business life.

The problematic nature of this area of research has to be considered and understood when drawing conclusions, although some consistencies in NSs' speech accommodation can be seen. Firstly, the context may have a major influence on the use of FT. In intercultural business settings, for example, the participants claim to avoid, for example, colloquial words (Sweeney and Hua 2010: 496.) This may be an attempt to create language more comprehensible to a NNS, but it may also be the result of an environment in which colloquial words would not be seen as appropriate. Secondly, modifications made seem to vary drastically depending on the speaker: for example, one's personality, willingness to communicate successfully with a NNS and one's previous intercultural experience may impact the way in which FT is used. Sweeney and Hua (2010: 492) found that some individuals did not make any adjustments, some made only minor adjustments, and others adjusted their speech drastically. However, adjustments were not necessarily made consistently even though the NS accommodated his or her speech. Thirdly, the NNS's proficiency in the target language seems to be one of the most important factors influencing also the level and types of adjustments a NS makes (see e.g. Hirvonen 1996). The aim of the study at hand is to get an overview of native English speakers' level of awareness regarding foreigner talk: how native speakers themselves see the issue. In this, the aspects mentioned above are addressed. There are a great number of factors that may impact NSs' speech accommodation and these factors may make it impossible to predict their modification patterns in NS-NNS interaction, yet they do not make it fruitless to study this matter.

## 2.2 Modifications in form

Worth noting here, before looking at the actual devices NSs use to make their speech more comprehensible to NNSs, is that the use of such devices is not what distinguishes FTD from NS-NS interaction; it is their significantly higher frequency of use in FTD (Long 1983a: 183). Therefore, the differences in FTD and NS-NS interaction are quantitative rather than qualitative: the features probably occur also in NS-NS interaction, but they occur more frequently in FTD.

The first type of modifications in the form of the NSs' language that will be looked at are modifications to actual speech, such as stress and pauses. Long (1983a: 182) noticed that when introducing topics in FTD, native speakers would use stress and/or a pause before topic words more often than in NS-NS interaction to highlight the key words and thus make the message of the utterance clearer:

NS: Did you ° **like** San Diego?

This example from Long (ibid.) shows how a new topic is being introduced by stressing the topic word and having a pause before it, the pause being indicated with a ball and the stressed word here being in bold. A type of pause that also seems to occur in FTD is a longer pause the NS may make to give room for the NNS to formulate his or her utterance or to indicate it is the NNS's turn to speak (Bremer et al. 1996: 164). Hirvonen (1996: 132) found that NSs may talk to NNSs at a slower pace than to other NSs. Furthermore, several participants in Sweeney and Hua's study (2010: 498) reported that they slow the pace of their speech because the non-native speakers they communicate with are well-educated professionals and problems with the actual language are not likely to cause significant problems.

Another feature of FT concerning the form of the language includes modifications in the morphological and syntactic features. Such modifications include adjustments in linguistic complexity, sentence length and vocabulary. Modifications in morphological and syntactic features often result in ungrammatical language, as reducing linguistic complexity means, for example, omitting prepositions, subject pronouns, inflectional morphology, conjunctions or articles from the speech: in other words, using ungrammatical forms of language to simplify it for the NNS as such features of language might confuse him or her. (Long 1983a: 178). An example of omission could be modifying the clause *He has lived in Japan for three years* into *He live three year Japan*. The difference between the clauses is highly noticeable, and the modified version is ungrammatical as it lacks all prepositions as well as the inflection marking the plural form. Another syntactic feature NSs often modify in interaction with NNSs is the length of utterances. Sweeney and Hua (2010: 492), for instance, found that, compared to NS-NS interaction, the average length of utterances was slightly shorter in NS-NNS interaction. Shortening the overall length of responses makes it easier for the NNS to extract from the speech the words that are relevant to the meaning of the utterance.

Modifying one's vocabulary has also proven to be a common way of simplifying one's speech. Multiple studies have shown that NSs tend to avoid colloquial words, idioms, overly formal or ambiguous words or phrases: practically all vocabulary they believe to be problematic to NNSs (see e.g. Sweeney and Hua 2010: 496). For example, one participant in a study concerning language accommodation reported avoiding words the participant usually uses like *esoteric*, *philanthropic* and *alacrity* and using *hard to understand*, *generous* and *skilful* instead (Sweeney and Hua 2010: 497). The NSs' vocabulary in FTD is thus in general less varied than the vocabulary they use in NS-NS

interaction. Another way NSs seem to modify vocabulary in FTD is, as described by Wesche (1994: 227), to restate information with different words than what were originally used. A feature of modified vocabulary is also the increased use of present tense with verbs, which is noted to be strikingly common in FTD. For example, Long (1983a: 180) reports the focus to the “here and now” in FTD, which, again, is an attempt to simplify the structure of the utterances as it is also a feature of morphology. The example given above (*He live three year Japan*) demonstrates the use of present tense, in addition to omission.

The last feature of FTD looked at in terms of form are modifications in the semantic features of speech. Studies in the past have found that in NS-NNS interaction, NSs use, for example, increased directness. From the respondents’ own answers to a question on speech accommodation strategies, Sweeney and Hua (2010: 498) learned that increased directness in speech is executed by, for example, the use of negatives. In other words, the NS may construct a negative response more directly to a NNS than to another NS. The function of the use of increased directness is to avoid using words that may be unnecessary to the quintessential message of the utterance and that, thus, may confuse the NNS.

### **2.3 Modifications in interaction**

In creating comprehensible input to NNSs, at least as important as modifications in the form of the language are also modifications to the interactional structure of the conversation (Long 1983b: 126). Modifications regarding the topic include the depth and detail of discussion of topics, topic initiations and acceptance of unintentional topic changes. Firstly, viewing the ratio of topic-continuing to topic-initiating moves, Long (1981: 147) found that the depth and detail in which different topics were discussed differ. In other words, in NS-NNS interaction, the NS seems to be more likely to cover more topics very briefly and with little information changing hands than in NS-NS interaction. Secondly, and probably in relation to the superficial treatment of topics in FTD, topic-initiating moves seem to be significantly different in NS-NNS interaction in contrast to NS-NS interaction. Long (1981: 148) shows that NSs prefer questions over statements when introducing new topics in a conversation with NNSs and suggests that this preference may be motivated by the fact that questions encourage NNSs to participate, because answers to questions are expected, whereas statements do not necessarily require a response. The following extract from Long (1981: 148-149) demonstrates both features of topic treatment in FTD discussed above:

- NS: How do you how do you get around in Los Angeles?  
 NNS: By bus  
 NS: By bus?  
 NNS: Yeah  
 NS: Good . Yeah that's a good way to uh to s- see people, I think . see all different kinds of people . . Where do you live in Los Angeles?

The NS closes down one topic and introduces a new one in the space of only five short turns. The NS also succeeds in drawing the NNS into the conversation with direct questions, whereas his statements are unsuccessful in this respect. Lastly, as found by Long (1983a: 181), NSs are more likely to accept unintentional topic-switches in interaction with NNSs than in NS-NS interaction. These kinds of topic changes may occur as a result of a communication breakdown and the NS may treat an inappropriate response as a topic-nomination, thereby repairing the discourse and assuring the continuity of the conversation (ibid.):

- NS: Are you going to visit San Francisco? Or Las Vegas?  
 NNS: Yes I went to Disneyland and to Knotts Berry Farm  
 NS: Oh yeah?

This extract from Long (ibid.) shows how the NS repairs the discourse after a communication breakdown by treating the NNS's inappropriate answer as a topic-nomination.

In addition to the topic-related features of FTD, there are several other conversational adjustments that seem to frequently occur in FTD: comprehension checks, confirmation checks, self- and other-repetition and clarification requests. (see e.g. Long 1983b: 136–138). Comprehension checks, such as *Right?* or *Do you understand?* are a clear effort from the NS to anticipate and avoid a communication breakdown. They are used to confirm the NNS has understood the NS's preceding utterance. In contrast, confirmation checks are used by NSs to ascertain that the other interlocutor's utterance has been correctly heard or understood. Self- and other-repetitions are used by both the NS and the NNS and are significantly more common in FTD than in NS-NS interaction. Repetitions can be both partial and complete, as well as exact or semantic (i.e. paraphrase). (Long 1983b: 138). Hirvonen (1996: 136) points out that even though the two kinds of repetitions are defined in the same way, they have different functions: the speaker repeats other's utterances to confirm his or her own comprehension, whereas self-repetition is used to check the other interlocutor's comprehension. Clarification requests are defined by Long (1983b: 137) as expressions that are designed to ascertain clarification of the message of the other speaker's preceding utterance. According to Long (ibid.), clarification requests are

usually questions but they may also be statements like *I don't follow* or imperatives like *Try again*. All of the devices described above are used to confirm the message of an utterance was understood correctly on the behalf of both participants. The more frequent use of these devices in FTD compared to NS-NS interaction changes the structure of the conversation drastically. The proportion of questions and statements overall has also been noted to differ significantly between FTD and NS-NS interaction (see e.g. Wesche 1994: 229). The preference of questions as topic-initiation moves in FTD, as discussed above, is a plausible explanation for the higher proportion of questions in FTD compared to NS-NS discourse.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

In this section, the research problem and questions, the data along with the process of data collection, and the methods of analysis of the present study are presented.

#### **3.1 Research problem**

The main research questions of the present study are as follows:

1. Do native speakers of English modify their speech in interaction with non-native speakers and if they do, how?
2. What factors influence their decision to do so?

Through these questions, I hoped to get an idea of NSs' awareness of issues related to speech modifications in intercultural interaction. Speech modifications made by native speakers of English, as well as those of other languages, have been studied in different fields in the past. More recently, however, the topic has not been as popular in research: for example Rogerson-Revell (2010: 436) points out that a relatively limited amount of research regarding FT exists. Furthermore, in the studies made the focus seems to have been mostly on the actual modifications made but very little information of NSs' awareness of the issue is found. With intercultural contact growing ever more common, an idea of NSs' understanding of issues with language use in intercultural settings becomes more and more useful: it could give valuable information on whether or not NSs should be taught about issues related to intercultural communication to enhance mutual understanding between people with different native tongues. English being widely chosen as the medium of communication in intercultural business

settings, its native speakers are in an important position in improving communication methods. Hence, the present study was conducted.

### **3.2 Data**

The data were collected during January and February of 2016 with an online questionnaire (see Appendix), which consisted of nine questions in total: four multiple choice questions, two multiple choice questions on the Likert scale, and three open questions. The questionnaire was constructed mainly on the basis of the results from previous studies on foreigner talk (see sections 2.1 and 2.2). For example, Question 4, which is a multiple choice question on the actual speech modifications the respondent uses with NNSs, is entirely based on previous research on the features of FT (see sections 2.1 and 2.2). However, the respondents were also given the opportunity to state their own views in their own words on the topic in open questions. The questionnaire was piloted in January 2016 with the help of a few of my personal contacts and was revised accordingly.

The request to distribute the questionnaire among students was sent to three universities: University of Limerick in Ireland, and Keele University and University of Chester in the UK. These three universities were randomly chosen from the collaborative universities of my home university, University of Jyväskylä. This was considered to potentially increase the universities' willingness to participate in the study. The universities were chosen from two different English-speaking countries to get a more versatile sample. University students were chosen as the target group for this study, because the desirable target group included people with intercultural experience and students at this level of education often have encountered intercultural situations because of exchange programmes in universities. However, no participants were actually reached by contacting these universities: after multiple requests, only one person that was contacted (from University of Limerick) replied and apologised for not being able to distribute the online questionnaire among the students of the university as he is not allowed to send out private links to students. From the other two universities, no responses were got, even though multiple different people were contacted more than once. Finally, the data for the present study were collected via my personal contacts, who spread the questionnaire on their Facebook page and contacted their acquaintances personally asking them to take the survey. The 22 respondents reached through these channels consist of both Irish and British people.

A questionnaire was chosen as the data collection method for the present study, as it is a quick way to gather a large number of responses. Holmes et al. (2013: 195) argue that in order to describe and model the patterns in language use, one needs a quantitative apparatus that is drawn from mathematics and statistics. Moreover, Dörnyei (2009: 5) suggests that questionnaires can yield three types of data: factual, behavioural and attitudinal. The present study sought to reveal the respondents' behaviour concerning the use of English, so behavioural data were collected. Furthermore, as the goal was to specifically find out English-speaking people's self-reported behaviour as opposed to their actual behaviour, there was no need to conduct interviews which would then have been analysed. Interviews would also have been difficult to arrange, whereas an online survey allowed me to reach my target group. It is worth noting, however, that questionnaires have some limitations: the respondent may misunderstand a question and thus answer it inappropriately, as the researcher does not have the opportunity to clarify the contents of the survey to the respondent. Furthermore, the respondent may report carelessly; not use time in forming well-structured answers, which becomes a problem with open-ended questions (Dörnyei 2009: 12).

### **3.3 Methods**

The questionnaire used for data collection was conducted with Google Forms. The program automatically stored the data into a computer file and created a summary of the responses. The responses to the multiple choice questions of the survey will be presented by the means of descriptive statistics, which, according to Dörnyei (2009: 96–97), are used to “summarize numerical data in order to conserve time and space”, describing the answers of the respondents by providing the mean and the range of a variable. He emphasises, however, that these statistics do not allow drawing any general conclusions: the statistics are applicable only within the range of this particular sample. The data gained from open-ended questions was analysed by the means of content analysis, which Dörnyei (2009: 99) describes as “reducing the pool of diverse responses... to a handful of key issues in a reliable manner”. He divides this process into two phases: “1. Taking each person's response in turn and marking in them any distinct content elements, substantive statements, or key points” and “2. Based on the ideas and concepts highlighted in the texts (see Phase 1), forming broader categories to describe the content of the response in a way that allows for comparisons with other responses.” The results of the present study were thus analysed using mixed methods: both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed.

## 4 SPEECH MODIFICATION IN ACTION

The following section presents the findings of the present study. The section is divided into three sub-sections, which are based on the categorization made for the questions in the questionnaire conducted for collecting the data: intercultural experience (section 4.1), speech modifications (section 4.2), and motivations to modify or not to modify speech (section 4.3).

### 4.1 Intercultural experience

All of the 22 respondents had previous intercultural experience. This was the desired outcome, as intercultural experience is needed to consider one's behaviour in a situation where foreigner talk might occur. On average, the respondents claimed to encounter intercultural situations quite frequently: Figure 1 presents the percentages of the frequency of intercultural encounters as reported by the respondents. The option *I never* was not included in the chart, as none of the respondents chose that option.

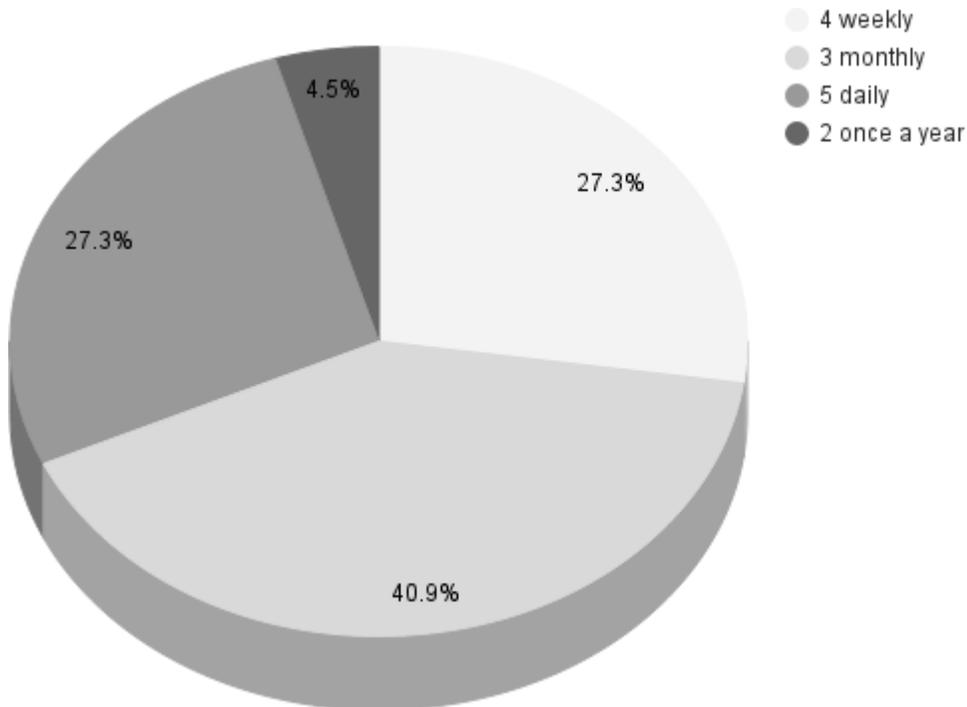


Figure 1

As approximately 96% of the respondents face intercultural situations at least monthly, it can be assumed that the results are quite reliable: the participants can be assumed to have quite a lot of intercultural experience and have had opportunities to reflect on issues related to interaction with non-native speakers of English. The answers to the open questions of the survey also support this assumption: many of them show quite a deep level of understanding and consideration of issues in intercultural encounters. However, because there were only few or none respondents with no or very little intercultural experience, it is difficult if not impossible to draw conclusions of whether the amount of intercultural experience affects the NSs' use of FT or their awareness of this issue.

## 4.2 Speech modifications

This section addresses the results gained on the respondents' speech modifications in interaction with non-native speakers of English: do they modify their speech and if they do, in what ways? The majority of the respondents claimed to use speech modifications in intercultural encounters: when asked *Do you modify your speech in any way in interaction with non-native speakers of English?* 54.5% replied *sometimes*, 36.4% replied *yes* and 4.5% replied *often*. Only 4.5% chose the option *I haven't thought about it* and none said they do not modify their speech at all. From the results on this question alone, it could be considered that the act of modifying one's speech depends also on other issues than the mother tongue of the NNS alone. For approximately half of the respondents to claim they sometimes modify their speech in interaction with NNSs, some of it must be due to context-related aspects; if they modified their speech in all intercultural encounters, not taking into consideration any case-specific aspects, they would most likely have responded simply *yes*.

The second question about speech modifications in the questionnaire addressed the actual modifications made in interaction with NNSs. Table 1 shows the list of modification features given as options in the questionnaire, and both the number and percentage of respondents who chose a particular option. As can be seen, stressing a key word, slower pace of speech, avoiding problematic vocabulary, and comprehension checks were used in NS-NNS interaction a lot; around 65% to 80% of the respondents claimed to use these features of FT. Shorter sentences, increased directness, accepting inappropriate responses, confirmation checks, and clarification requests were also proved to be used quite prominently by the respondents: about half of them claimed to use these features in interaction

with NNSs. Or, these features were perhaps held the most helpful ones by the respondents: as the survey only gives results of the respondents' self-reported behaviour, it cannot be said which features are actually used the most, but which the NSs claim to use the most. Ungrammatical forms of language were chosen the least. Also, modifications in the interaction itself seem to be more evenly popular: there is more drastic variation between modifications to the form of the language. Both of these notions could indicate that most of the respondents would perhaps rather speak as authentically as possible and only modify the structure of the conversation and the auditive aspects of language, i.e. the volume and pace of speech, if anything. This could be a result of the consideration of the language learning possibility of the NNS, which will be discussed further in section 4.3 as the SLA point of view on FT.

*Table 1*

Modification feature	No.	%
... stressing a key word (a central word important to understanding the message)	16	72.7
... pausing before a key word (to stress it)	5	22.7
... speaking in a slower pace	18	81.8
... omitting prepositions, articles, conjunctions, subject pronouns or inflectional morphology (i.e. using ungrammatical forms of language)	5	22.7
... using shorter sentences	11	50
... avoiding vocabulary that I believe to be problematic to the other person (e.g. idioms, colloquial words, overly formal words, etc.)	14	63.6
... using present tense more (even when talking about the past)	3	13.6
... being more direct	11	50
... discussing topics more superficially; in less detail	8	36.4
... using questions rather than statements in introducing new topics	7	31.8
... accepting inappropriate responses	11	50
... checking the other person has understood me correctly	15	68.2
... checking I have understood the other person correctly	10	45.5
... repeating myself or the other interlocutor	8	36.4
... requesting clarification to something the other person has said	10	45.5
Other	3	13.6

Responses to the *Other* option included “better vocabulary” and “making sure my pronunciation is correct”. One respondent also said she/he would dismiss an entire conversation with a NNS, if the NS’s question was too difficult for the NNS, and in the open questions one respondent said she/he would try to “talk about something simple, that you can both relate to, to overcome the language barrier”.

### 4.3 Motivations to modify or not to modify speech

This section presents the most prominent findings on the factors that influence the NS’ decision to modify or not to modify their speech.

#### 4.3.1 NNS’s language competence

The non-native speaker’s language competence is the quality that clearly has the strongest influence on modifying or not modifying one’s speech. When asked to assess on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*) how much a particular quality of the NNS influences the NSs’ decision to accommodate their speech, 40.9% said the estimated language competence of the NNS influences their decision *a lot* when none of the respondents answered *not at all*. All of the other qualities given resulted in at least a few *not at all* answers. Furthermore, when asked an open question *If you do not modify your speech when speaking with non-native speakers, why?* one respondent brought up the other interlocutor’s language competence here as well, saying s/he would not modify if s/he had already heard the NNS speak and realised s/he was very competent in English. Thus, the NNS’s high level of proficiency in English seems to be as much a reason to not modify one’s speech, as a poorer level of language competence is to modify one’s speech. The open question *Anything else you would like to say about speech modification in intercultural settings?* also resulted in a thought about the NNS’s language competence (Example 1).

- (1) It just depends on what you think their understanding of your language is, and also if the spoken language is very poor then you presume the understanding of the language is poor too. So modify. (R18)

Other answers to the open questions also indicate serious consideration of the NNS’s proficiency in the target language. For instance, a few respondents said they modify their speech if the other interlocutor does not understand them the first time or after several attempts. This could result in a subconscious estimation that the other interlocutor’s competence in English is on a level that requires some modifications to the speech in order for them to understand the native speaker. Also, when asked about reasons for not modifying one’s speech, one respondent said s/he does not modify her/his speech if s/he

has already noticed the other interlocutor can understand her/him when s/he speaks normally, even with a strong accent. The fact that the issue was brought up also elsewhere than only when specifically asked about the effect of the NNS's language competence strongly suggests that it is considered a very important factor in triggering the use of foreigner talk. This finding corresponds to much of previous research on FT, where language competence has been found to be an important contributing factor resulting in the use of FT (see e.g. Hirvonen: 1996).

#### 4.3.2 NNS's ethnicity

Whereas the NNS's language competence seems to have a major influence on the NSs' decision to modify their speech, the NNS's ethnicity was not reported as important at all in making that decision. When asked how much the NNS's ethnicity contributes to the decision to modify one's speech, 72.7% of the respondents answered *not at all*, 18.2% answered *a little*, and both *undecided* and *somewhat* were chosen by 4.5% of the respondents. One respondent even particularly mentioned that in general s/he tries to treat all ethnicities equally and be sensitive to their culture and language (Example 4). However, ethnicity as a motivation to modify one's speech was indicated in some responses, even though the respondents' self-reported behaviour did not indicate it to be important, as in Example 2. This respondent seems to take into consideration the home country of the NNS and the language family of the NNS's mother tongue. Therefore, it can be assumed that the NNS's ethnicity has some influence on this respondent's decision to use FT in interaction with NNSs. Furthermore, one respondent said s/he modifies her/his speech "when talking to a group of non-native English speakers from across the globe". As the NS has, in this type of situation, first assessed the group of NNSs' ethnic background, it is indicated that ethnicity has some influence on her/his speech modification. The reason behind this contradiction between self-reported and possible actual behaviour could be that the NS does not want to seem prejudiced, or do not see her-/himself making a direct link between the NNS's ethnicity and the decision to use FT, but makes the decision subconsciously.

- (2) It also depends (sometimes) where their language comes from, generally speaking some countries rather than others find it easier to understand each others (depending on: dialect, geographical influence, rule over other countries, etc). (R7)

#### 4.3.3 Context

The question about how much motivation to complete a task of some sort, which is an aspect of the context the interlocutors are in, contributes to the NS's decision to modify their speech did not result in

any clear preference. 22.7% were *undecided*, and *not at all* (27.3%) and *somewhat* (31.8%) were chosen by almost an equal number of the respondents. Both *a little* and *a lot* were chosen by 9.1% of the respondents. However, context was mentioned as an influence to modify speech in the open question *Other qualities that might influence your decision to make your speech more understandable to a non-native speaker of English?* as shown in Example 3. This respondent assessed the context has *a lot* (5) of influence on her/his speech modification. The same respondent brought this issue up also in the last open question where the respondents had the opportunity to share their own views on the topic (Example 4). To this respondent in particular, context is extremely important in terms of modified speech, as another person's life could be endangered if mutual understanding was not reached between the interlocutors.

- (3) While at work if I need some important information and I need them to understand me completely as the information must be correct. (R5)
- (4) I work as a midwife and with growing numbers of multicultural women, we must make sure that we are understood well and they understand the information they are given, as this could seriously impact on their health. However in general I try not to treat people of other ethnicities differently as I like to be sensitive to their culture and language and treat them with equality. (R5)

#### 4.3.4 Considering the NNS's stand

In answering open questions, many of the respondents brought up also matters of intercultural communication that were not addressed in the questionnaire. A significant number of the respondents mentioned the NNS's desire to learn English as a reason not to modify their speech: many of them seem to feel it is better not to modify one's speech for the NNS to learn English properly with all its unique and situation-related vocabulary and cultural aspects. This opinion is presented well in Examples 5, 6, and 7. The examples also show how the respondents have also considered the NNS's feelings. This was quite common a point to bring up in the open questions as well: many of the respondents seem eager to save the NNS's face. They do not want to offend NNSs by assuming that they have poor language skills only because they are not native speakers of English, but similarly they do not want to make them feel bad or insecure about themselves if their language competence actually is weaker. When asked an open question about qualities that may influence the NNS's decision to modify their speech when talking with a NNS, one respondent mentioned the NNS's "want to learn English" and assessed that this quality influences her/his decision to modify *a lot* (5).

- (5) As a general rule I would say it's better to alter your speech as little as possible when speaking to someone who is learning English, as this is the way they will best improve their language skills. However, this is not always possible, and sometimes in certain situations it is better to simplify your language in order to get your point across and to improve their confidence in speaking to a native speaker. (R2)
- (6) I think it makes me realise how fast I talk and that I should probably slow down my speech a bit especially with non natives particularly when im abroad. However a lot of non natives in ireland are actually very fluent in english, so I wouldnt want to come accross as being rude or insensitive for talking slowly when they are well capable of understanding me. It may make them feel imbarressed or annoyed as I know a lot of people would tend to do that, as I have experienced my self from other people dealing with non-native speakers. (R14)
- (7) If they are talking to me in English it is often that they would like to become more competent with the language, therefore I speak as I usually would so they can pick up certain common phrases, some slang and just get to grips with how people talk in the country that they are in. (R1)

These considerations are well related to the SLA point of view that has been a significant focus area in foreigner talk research in the past (see section 2), and it seems this matter is still relevant as it was brought up by several respondents, even though language learning was in no way mentioned in the questionnaire.

#### **4.3.5 Individual differences**

Even though the study at hand did not seek to go deeper into finding reasons for individual differences in the use of FT, apart from the possible effect of the NS's previous intercultural experience, it must be briefly mentioned that the NS's personality obviously influences the types and level with which speech modifications are used. This has been addressed in, for example, Hirvonen (1996). The variation in the responses to this survey only supports this argument: the responses are not identical. For example, many respondents in the present study were concerned of saving the NNS's face, as explained above, but not all people are equally sensitive to these types of issues. However, as already mentioned, this was not meant to be focused on in the present study, so the matter will not be discussed further.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The present study aimed at discovering native English speakers' awareness of issues related to speech modifications in reaching mutual understanding in intercultural settings, i.e. in interaction with non-native speakers of English. Other aims were to find out what kinds of modifications, if any, native

speakers use in intercultural encounters, and what motivates their decision to modify or not to modify their speech. To reach these goals, data were collected with a short questionnaire, which resulted in 22 responses, all of which were used in the analysis. The data were presented and analysed with means of descriptive statistics and content analysis.

All of the respondents had previous intercultural experience, the majority of them encounter intercultural situations about once a month, and the vast majority claimed to modify their speech in intercultural situations. However, speech modifications did not seem to be used in every intercultural encounter, but rather depending on the situation. Other questions in the survey also resulted in replies indicating that the usage of foreigner talk is context-related; the level of accommodation depends on various situational aspects. The NNS's proficiency in English seems to be the most prominent reason for modifying one's speech: the respondents claimed to assess their use of speech modifications in accordance to the NNS's language competence. The NNS's ethnicity was not ranked as an important factor by the respondents, but some answers to open-ended questions suggested that it was still considered when making a decision to modify one's speech. Many of the respondents also seem to take into consideration both the language learning process and feelings of the NNS when facing intercultural encounters: it seems that many NSs want to speak in a way that helps the NNSs to improve their language skills. Depending on the NNS's language competence, this could mean either heavier use of speech modifications, or avoiding modifying as much as possible; speaking authentically to provide the NNS with an opportunity to adopt cultural aspects of language use, for example. Some of the respondents also seem inclined to save the NNSs' face, in terms of not making them feel embarrassed of their language competence, and at the same time do not want to seem abrupt by modifying their speech when the NNS actually is very competent in English. The sheer differences in the respondents' answers, as well as previous research, suggest that the NS's personality has an effect on how, when and why features of FT are used.

The results correspond well to the research questions: the questionnaire served well as a data collection method in the present study. Some of the questions were answered purely with quantitative data, and the open-ended questions resulted in good insights on the matter as well as support for the assumptions that could be made based on answers on the multiple choice questions. With a larger sample, perhaps more generalisations could have been made, but for the purposes of a study of this scale, the present

sample was adequate. Some aspects could also have been analysed with a larger and a slightly different kind of sample: possible effect of intercultural experience on the use of FT was left unanswered, as there was not enough variation between the amount of the respondents' intercultural experience to make any comparisons. A lot of the findings correspond with earlier research, at least as far as the same matters have been studied. For example, the NNS's language competence has been proved to be a prominent reason for speech modifications also in previous research (see e.g. Hirvonen 1996).

Overall, based on the present study, it seems that issues of miscommunication and misunderstandings between native speakers and non-native speakers of English are recognised by native speakers quite well: even if they do not know what kinds of speech modifications would best prevent misunderstandings, it seems that they are aware that they can affect the situation with their choices. This gives a good basis to study this issue further: a similar study could be conducted with a larger sample to get a more truthful picture of English speakers' attitudes and behaviour of matters of intercultural communication. Furthermore, future research and comparison of which features are held most helpful by NSs and which features NNSs actually find most helpful could be used in, for example, training for employees in business contexts. However, mere awareness of the issues in communication discussed throughout this thesis is a big step forward in striving for mutual understanding between native speakers and non-native speakers, regardless of the context.

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## APPENDIX: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

### Intercultural experience

1. Do you have previous intercultural experience?

(Any experiences where you have interacted with people from a different culture and with a different mother tongue)

Options: Yes / No / I'm not sure

2. On a scale from 1 to 5, approximately how often do you encounter intercultural situations?

Options: 1 never / 2 once a year / 3 monthly / 4 weekly / 5 daily

### Speech modifications

3. Do you modify your speech in any way when interacting with non-native speakers of English?

Options: Yes / No / Often / Sometimes / I haven't thought about it

4. If so, how? You can choose as many options as you like.

Please note that you probably use the following features in your speech with other native speakers of English, as well – try and think about features you use **MORE FREQUENTLY** with non-native speakers. I modify my speech with non-native speakers by...

Options:

... stressing a key word (a central word important to understanding the message)

... pausing before a key word (to stress it)

... speaking in a slower pace

... omitting prepositions, articles, conjunctions, subject pronouns or inflectional morphology (i.e. using ungrammatical forms of language)

... using shorter sentences

... avoiding vocabulary that I believe to be problematic to the other person (e.g. idioms, colloquial words, overly formal words, etc.)

... using present tense more (even when talking about the past)

... being more direct

- ... discussing topics more superficially; in less detail
- ... using questions rather than statements in introducing new topics
- ... accepting inappropriate responses
- ... checking the other person has understood me correctly
- ... checking I have understood the other person correctly
- ... repeating myself or the other interlocutor
- ... requesting clarification to something the other person has said

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Motivations to modify speech**

5. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot), how much do the following qualities of the non-native speaker influence your decision to modify your speech with him/her?

1 not at all / 2 a little / 3 undecided / 4 somewhat / 5 a lot

- ... their estimated language competence
- ... their age
- ... their ethnicity
- ... motivation to complete a task of some sort, e.g. a school project

6. Other qualities that might influence your decision to make your speech more understandable to a non-native speaker of English?

Please identify the quality/qualities and rank, on a scale from 1-5 (like above), how much those qualities influence your decision to modify your speech.

7. Do you automatically speak more understandably with non-native speakers of English, even though you do not have an idea of their language competence?

Options: Yes / No / Often / Sometimes / I'm not sure

### **Not modifying your speech**

8. If you do not modify your speech when speaking with non-native speakers, why?

**Share your views!**

9. Anything else you would like to say about speech modification in intercultural settings?