

## Is It All Greek to You? An Analysis of Communication Strategies among Erasmus Students

### ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to investigate English as a lingua franca (ELF), a phenomenon that has attracted much attention in the last twenty years. Specifically, it aims to analyse the communicative strategies non-native speakers of English employ with a view to securing understanding. To achieve this, informal ELF conversations among Erasmus students at the University of Graz are investigated. This study deploys qualitative methods, i.e., semi-structured interviews with Erasmus students were tape-recorded and transcribed. Therefore, communication strategies that contribute to mutual understanding are presented along with examples and their frequency of usage in the data. Furthermore, the numerous functions of communication strategies are mentioned along with possible explanations of their use. The findings show that Erasmus students employ various strategies with the aim of achieving mutual understanding and preventing possible communication problems.

**Keywords:** English as a lingua franca, Erasmus students, self-initiated communicative strategies, other-initiated communicative strategies

## Ali me sploh kaj razumeš? Analiza sporazumevalnih strategij med študenti v okviru programa Erasmus

### IZVLEČEK

Predmet raziskave je angleščina kot lingua franca (ALF) – pojav, ki je v zadnjih dvajsetih letih pritegnil pozornost jezikoslovcev. Cilj raziskave je analiza sporazumevalnih strategij, ki jih za potrebe razumevanja uporabljajo nematerni govorci angleščine. V ta namen smo analizirali neformalne pogovore v ALF med študenti v okviru programa Erasmus na Univerzi v Gradcu. Uporabili smo kvalitativne metode: polstrukturirane intervjuje s študenti smo posneli in transkribirali. V članku so na podlagi analize predstavljene sporazumevalne strategije, ki prispevajo k vzajemnemu razumevanju, skupaj z zgledi in pogostostjo rabe. Omenjene so številne funkcije komunikacijskih strategij z možnimi razlagami njihove uporabe. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da študenti v okviru programa Erasmus uporabljajo različne strategije z namenom doseganja vzajemnega razumevanja in preprečevanja morebitnih težav pri sporazumevanju.

**Ključne besede:** angleščina kot lingua franca, študenti v okviru programa Erasmus, samoiniciativne sporazumevalne strategije, sporazumevalne strategije na pobudo drugih

# 1 Introduction

The fact that English has been used internationally as a lingua franca for centuries does not represent an astonishing discovery. However, its unique position today means that English is now being used globally to an extent far surpassing its earlier reach. Moreover, the situation becomes increasingly complicated as the number of speakers of English continues to rise exponentially. As a result, the last two decades have led to a rapid expansion in the field of linguistics exploring this particular state of affairs. A considerable body of research has been published on English as a lingua franca (ELF) (e.g., Jenkins 2000; Mauranen and Ranta 2009; Seidlhofer 2011). What could be inferred from these studies is that misunderstandings represent a rare occurrence due to the “effort ELF users put in so as to prevent such problems” and their collaboration (Jokić 2017, 16). This stands in contrast with the popular belief that the different levels of proficiency and wide range of accents could cause a breakdown in communication among international users of English.

While previous ELF research concentrated more on identifying phonological or morphosyntactic features, more recent literature has emerged dealing with pragmatic strategies and their functions (e.g., Björkman 2014). It should be noted that the reason for this could be because pragmatic features have long been thought of as somewhat challenging to pinpoint compared to phonological or lexico-grammatical features.

The concept of a communication strategy (CS) was formulated in Selinker’s (1972) seminal article on interlanguage as one of the five fundamental processes used in L2 communication. In 1977, Tarone published a paper in which she provided a taxonomy that is still regarded as one of the most authoritative in CS research. However, it was Váradi (1980) who carried out the first CS analysis, which focused on message adjustment.

In the 1980 and 1990s, several studies were conducted with the aim of determining and categorizing CSs (Bialystok 1990; Cook 1993; Poulish 1987). A selection of the most influential papers, edited by Faerch and Kasper (1983), had the same goal. Similarly, a group of scholars at Nijmegen University undertook a study that proposed a new set of strategies (Kellerman et al. 1990). Lastly, another project that brought together the most important papers at the time was Kasper and Kellerman (1997). This collection was significant because it widened the scope of CSs research by including papers that perceived L2 acquisition not only as a cognitive but also as a social phenomenon.

As far as the definition of CSs is concerned, a literature review reveals that most call attention to “problematicity” or “problem-orientedness” (Dörnyei and Scott 1997, 182). ELF scholars have suggested that the issue of “problematicity” needs to be tackled in the ELF field as well. In ELF conversations, there is a wide range of different accents and proficiency levels, such that the participants often seem to use “pro-active” strategies in order to avoid potential misunderstandings. The characteristic of being prepared for a potential misunderstanding and knowing how to handle it represents the quality of ELF conversations and is a recurrent theme in ELF research (Björkman 2014, 124).

Furthermore, Björkman (2014, 125) mentions that the only reference to the communicative strategies’ framework related to ELF settings is Kirkpatrick’s study (2007). However, she

criticizes the way CSs have been classified. Kirkpatrick divided all strategies into speaker and listener, which, according to Björkman, might be complicated when it comes to assigning the roles in a conversation since the moment a listener replies to a speaker, they become a speaker as well. Therefore, she proposes another categorization that is already known from CA: “self-initiated” and “other-initiated” strategies (Björkman 2014, 127).

To the best of our knowledge, Björkman (2014) is the only researcher that has provided a communicative strategies framework within an ELF perspective. She produced a taxonomy of strategies that occurred in ELF interactions in a higher education setting. The present study follows Björkman’s thought process and uses her framework as a starting point, adapting it to different settings, i.e., investigating whether these strategies are to be found in informal conversations between Erasmus students at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz, Austria.

Apart from Kalocsai (2014), who analysed the practices of Erasmus exchange students, there is a general lack of research in communicative strategies in the Erasmus community. Most of the research on communicative strategies pertains to particular strategies analysing them in greater detail (Cogo 2009; Firth 1996; Kaur 2011; Kirkpatrick 2007; Lichtkoppler 2007; Mauranen 2006). In contrast, this paper will review the most frequently recurring strategies in an attempt to build a communicative strategies framework. At this point, it is crucial to emphasize that it is beyond the scope of this study to analyse all communicative strategies mentioned and described in the existing body of literature. What follows is thus a brief explanation of perceived communicative strategies.

As noted by Norrick (1987, 245), “[e]veryday face-to-face conversation thrives, in particular, on repetition”. However, despite its ubiquity, far too little attention has been paid to repetition and its functions in conversations, and only a few scholars have tried to bridge this knowledge gap by portraying its various forms and functions (Bazzanella 1996, 2011; Johnstone 1994; Norrick 1987; Tannen, 1987; 2007).

Paraphrase can be defined as “providing the same content by modifying the previous utterance or ongoing utterance” (Björkman 2014, 131). It is considered by some linguists (Tannen 1987) as an extended repetition. When speaking about paraphrase, we should highlight that its use to pre-empt problems of understanding in ELF conversations has been already documented (Kaur 2009). What Kaur (2009) emphasizes is that a speaker often chooses to employ paraphrase when the problem is in understanding rather than hearing, which she connects to the use of repetition.

Self-repair is described as a strategy that is used “when the speaker corrects the pronunciation, the word selection, or the grammar of what they have just said” (Deterding 2013, 131). The frequency of this in conversation is reported to be high, since speakers deal with any obstacles that occur in the interaction as they go along (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). As regards their function, self-repairs have often been portrayed in the literature as proactive (Mauranen 2006), thus contributing to mutual understanding. In her study, Björkman (2014) included the type of repair referred to as “word replacement” and analysed their instances. In the same vein, Kaur (2011) identified self-repairs on four different levels, namely phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactical.

Comprehension checks have been described in the literature as those strategies that speakers use – and are therefore self-initiated – in order to verify whether the listener understood the previously mentioned utterances (Björkman 2014). It is symptomatic that they often occur in the form of a question or a stressed word. As far as the functions of comprehension checks are concerned, they are of great importance as they allow the speaker to determine the level of understanding in communication and spot any possible misunderstandings.

As regards confirmation checks, this strategy is used when the content of the previous utterance is not precise enough. Speakers usually ask questions (e.g., *Do you mean?*), or they use question repeats (i.e., repeating a word/utterance with a rising intonation) with the purpose of continuing the flow of conversation. Research into confirmation checks in ELF contexts has revealed that they tend to be used proactively in conversations to prevent misunderstandings (Mauranen 2006; Björkman 2014).

Clarification requests are similar to confirmation checks, in that they are also used when inquiring about a previously uttered segment of a conversation. Correspondingly, they are often formed as questions. However, when using clarification requests participants “ask for explanations or more information on something they have not fully understood” (Björkman 2014, 133).

The final strategy, called by Björkman (2014) “co-creating the message/anticipation”, and by Kirkpatrick (2007) “lexical anticipation”, implies that participants finish each other’s utterances, but only in those situations where they cannot deliver their message. Through identifying any potential trouble and enhancing the utterance with the missing elements, co-creation is established. As a result, an utterance is produced that strengthens mutual understanding. In the next section, I will introduce my study and take a closer look at its objectives, research questions, methodology and data.

## 2 Data and Methodology

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how international students talk to each other and overcome linguistic and cultural obstacles in ELF contexts. In analysing their speech, this study sets out to report on communicative strategies that international students – and specifically Erasmus students at the Karl-Franzens University of Graz – employ in order to prevent and overcome misunderstandings in conversation. To that end, a small-range corpus which consists of only non-native speakers of English was built with a view to offering new insights into the communicative effectiveness of ELF use. As has been discussed in major publications on ELF (e.g., Seidlhofer 2011), native speakers are not excluded from ELF, and nor are they from the community of Erasmus/international students. However, this study included only non-native speakers of English since it wanted to report on the use of communicative strategies among speakers whose L1 is not English. Therefore, the focal point of this study rests on Erasmus students’ communication and the suitability of an ELF framework as the best analytical approach from which insights could be gained.

This study is led by one principal research question:

RQ1: What are the strategies Erasmus students use in order to prevent and overcome possible misunderstanding?

A further underlying research question in this study is:

RQ2: To what extent do Erasmus students use communicative strategies?

This research understands the Erasmus community as a “community of practice” (Kalocsai 2014) since it comprises a large pool of international students who experience similar processes, some of these being the adaptation to a new environment, experiencing cultural shock or using English as the primary language of communication, i.e., a lingua franca. As a method of inquiry, group interviews were chosen to gain insights into the communicative strategies employed by ELF speakers due to its advantage of obtaining a comparatively large amount of qualitative data. During the interviews, which were semi-structured, with all the questions set in advance, the participants were asked how they felt in the new surroundings and what things they liked or did not like about Graz. The semi-structured approach is adopted as a balance between structured and unstructured interviews. While on the one hand structured interviews “follow a pre-prepared, elaborate interview schedule” and often lead to the lack of spontaneity, unstructured interviews represent the total opposite, allowing “maximum flexibility to follow the interviewee in unpredictable directions” (Dörnyei 2007, 135). Using the semi-structured type of interview enables not only the possibility to pose open-ended questions, but also offers the advantage of encouraging participants to explicate whatever seems relevant to them.

As far as my role of the interviewer is concerned, not only was I able to be an observer, but also a participant, which helped immensely in reaching valuable conclusions. Engaging in interviews also enabled me to ask about and share the participants’ experiences, albeit to a limited extent. Moreover, while the interviews were held I took brief notes, which I thought could be of importance in the data analysis.

The data reported in this study include seventeen group interviews ranging approximately from 40 to 65 minutes and resulting in 15 hours and 35 minutes of conversational data. Of the 39 participants, 14 were male and 25 female. The group sizes ranged from two to three speakers, except in one case where there were five speakers. All of the participants were aged between 20 and 28. As regards the linguistic context, it includes 18 different backgrounds: most of the participants spoke Romance languages as their L1s (Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian), followed by Slavic (Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Bosnian, Czech, Ukrainian), Germanic (Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish), Hellenic (Greek) and Finno-Ugric languages (Finnish, Hungarian).

The conversations were transcribed by using the VoiceScribe editor and adapted VOICE mark-up and spelling transcription conventions ([http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/documents/VOICE\\_mark-up\\_conventions\\_v2-1.pdf](http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/documents/VOICE_mark-up_conventions_v2-1.pdf)). In this study, transcribing interviews itself represents part of the qualitative data analysis alongside identifying and categorizing

communicative strategies, which is strengthened by quantification, namely finding out about their frequencies. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that this study adopts a Conversation Analysis (CA) framework in its broadest sense to map the usage of interactional strategies (Firth 1996). The discourse was studied by taking into account the turn-taking system so that the classification of communicative strategies would be easier. Given that the participants had as a goal to reach mutual understanding, the CA approach was used to identify instances of misunderstanding and the way the interviewees dealt with it. Moreover, apart from the turn-taking system, this study includes details on overlaps and pauses when they are of importance.

### 3 Results

The following is a systematic account of communication strategies that the Erasmus students in this study used in their interactions. Overall, this study reveals that the bulk of communicative strategies belong to the self-initiated category with 562 instances (90%), whereas other-initiated communicative strategies were found in 65 instances and account for 10% of the total number of instances. What follows is a visual overview of my taxonomy in Figure 1 and a detailed theoretical outline of these strategies illustrated with examples from the corpus.

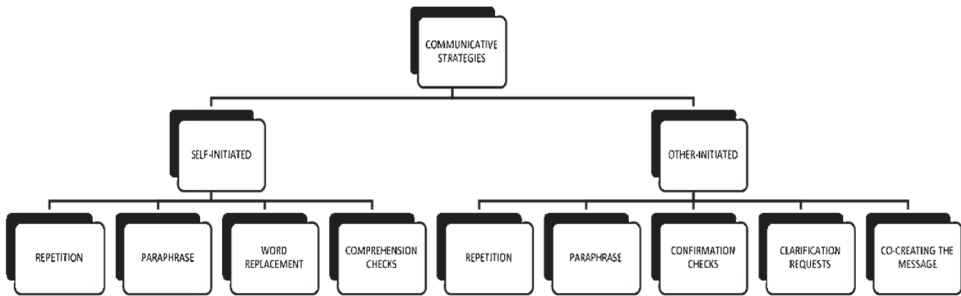


FIGURE 1. Taxonomy of communicative strategies observed in the study.

#### 3.1 Self-Initiated Communicative Strategies

According to a definition proposed Björkman (2014, 129), self-initiated communicative strategies “are those where the speaker himself/herself initiates the use of a CS for a variety of communicative purposes.” She proceeds to say that the reason for doing this could be explained by the speakers’ decision to “enhance the explicitness of a statement they feel may be potentially risky, to check the comprehension of an utterance, or to replace a word that may not be transparent to the other speakers” (Björkman 2014, 129). The current study revealed that four different self-initiated communicative strategies were used among the Erasmus students under investigation. These were repetition, paraphrase, self-repair and comprehension checks. The frequency of these strategies is illustrated below (Figure 2).

This study found 562 tokens of self-initiated communicative strategies in the corpus. From the data in Figure 2, it is apparent that self-initiated repetition is by far the most frequent self-initiated communicative strategy employed among the Erasmus students. Thereafter, the instances of self-initiated word replacement and self-initiated paraphrase are found to

## NUMBER OF SELF-INITIATED COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

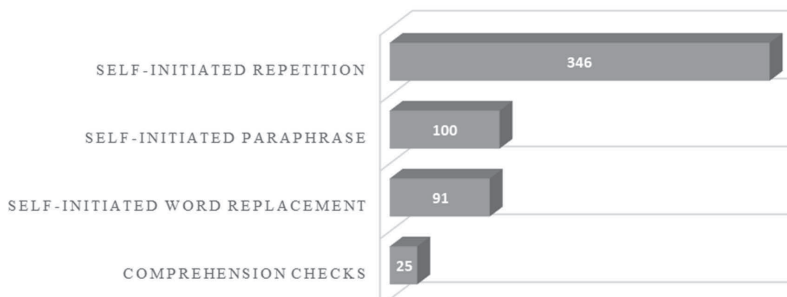


FIGURE 2. Number of self-initiated communicative strategies (562/627 instances).

be comparatively similar to each other in terms of their occurrence. Moreover, the results obtained demonstrate that comprehension checks constitute the minority and are the least frequent self-initiated communicative strategy.

### 3.1.1 Self-Initiated Repetition

Self-initiated repetition entails a speaker reiterating their words. In order to accurately identify repetition in ELF talk, certain criteria had to be applied in the analysis of the data. Firstly, the original linguistic unit of the repetition needed to be identified in the transcribed text. Secondly, a methodological decision was made prior to the analysis that neither repetition due to disfluencies (e.g., *I like...I like...I like*) nor repetition used for backchannelling purposes (e.g., *yeah yeah*) were to be of considerable significance for this study. Thirdly, it is essential to acknowledge that even though repetitions can be found on several levels, this study has as its focus only those that occur on a lexical or syntactic level since further elaboration would go beyond the scope this paper.

As regards the time of occurrence, repetition can be classified into immediate and delayed. Bearing in mind how previous researchers (Lichtkoppler 2007; Tannen 2007) dealt with this issue, it was decided that immediate self-initiated repetition should be defined as one that appears immediately after the original utterance or in the same turn (Extract 1). On the other hand, delayed self-initiated repetition was considered as such when there was at least one turn between the original and repeated element (Extract 2). Throughout the paper, the relevant parts in the extracts are given in bold.

Extract 1

- 1 S3: no **i have seen i have seen**
- 2 S1: you have okay (.) what do you think about that
- 3 S3: it's **it's strange** yeah **it's strange** but i like it because i like dogs @@



## Extract 2

- 1 S3: today **the woman was very rude at the shop**
- 2 S2: they they (1)
- 3 S3: she was like <L1pt> a:h </L1pt>
- 4 S1: that is an interesting thing to talk about
- 5 S3: she **was really rude at the shop**

It is apparent from Figure 3 below that the majority of self-initiated repetition instances appeared immediately after the original or in the same turn. In contrast, slightly more than a quarter of all self-initiated repetitions were classified as delayed. A comparison of the results indicates the participants' preference to repeat themselves in the same turn, thus offering an explanation that they wished to enhance their peers' understanding.

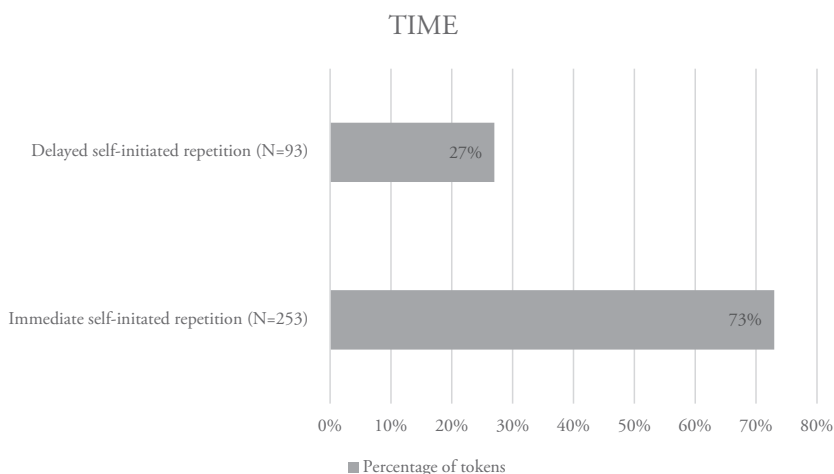


FIGURE 3. Self-initiated repetitions according to time of occurrence.

As far as the scale of fixity is concerned, a few of preconditions needed to be set out so that the obtained results were reliable. First, exact repetition implied precise wording, whereas repetition with variation included minor or major changes at the lexico-grammar level. The case when all the elements were changed without altering the idea constituted a paraphrase which is viewed as a distinct strategy in this study. Furthermore, an important factor in deciding between exact repetition and repetition with variation was a pause. If participants took a pause after the repetition of an original phrase or utterance, this would be classified as an exact repetition and the following elements would not constitute any variation (Extract 3). On the other hand, if the pause was taken immediately after the original phrase or utterance and the repetition ensued, then that would represent the example of repetition with variation (Extract 4).



## Extract 3

- 1 S2: **the only the only** (.) part where when things are international are these students
- 2 parties or students happenings or whatever...

## Extract 4

- 1 S2: they all seem yeah i mean but but one was from serbia @@@ i did not know that so yeah
- 2 but so **she was very** (.) **she was very relaxed** and yeah my mentor here is also very friendly

It should also be borne in mind that there is a significant difference between exact repetitions and repetitions of disfluencies. As seen in Extract 3, the speaker does not repeat the segments just because he/she is not able to produce an utterance, but rather for the purposes of emphasis and considerable relevance for the rest of the conversation.

With respect to the question of the usage of self-initiated repetitions in terms of form, this study finds that slightly more than half of all the instances are repetitions with variation (Figure 4). Taken together, these results provide valuable insights into the use of self-initiated repetition, therefore suggesting that the participants employ it so as to ensure understanding.

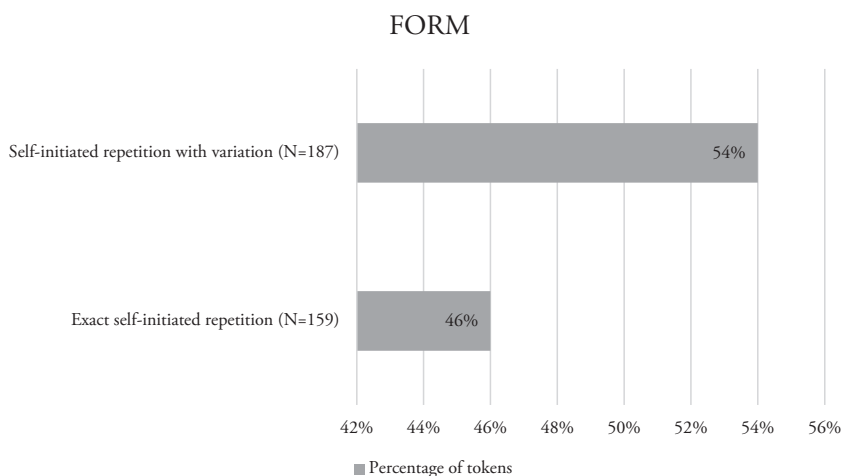


FIGURE 4. Self-initiated repetition according to form.

### 3.1.2 Self-Initiated Paraphrase

Self-initiated paraphrase is defined as a strategy employed when a speaker wants to rephrase a previous utterance without changing the content or idea. The results of this study show that self-initiated paraphrase is found in 100 instances in the corpus. With regard to the time of occurrence, self-initiated paraphrase can be classified into immediate and delayed. As with repetition, an immediate self-initiated paraphrase was defined as one that appears immediately after the original utterance or in the same turn (Extract 5). Conversely, delayed self-initiated paraphrase was considered as when there was at least one turn between the original segment and paraphrase (Extract 6).

Extract 5

- 1 S2: @@@ i **spend on food really really and also on travels** because i think that's worthy i i
- 2 don't want to care about money right now because i wanna live the erasmus ss experience so
- 3 **i'm going on trips and i'm buying the food** that i like

Extract 6

- 1 S3: probably because I I don't know why but in the next town they speak different than I do (.)  
you can basically say **by the way a person speaks** where they where the person is from
- 2 S2: mhm
- 3 S3: just **by listening to a person**

Figure 5 provides a summary of self-initiated paraphrase in the data as far as time of occurrence is concerned.

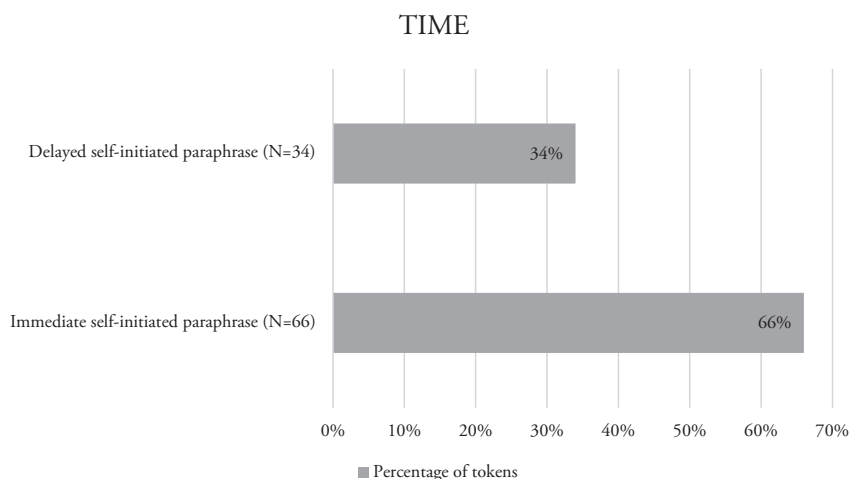


FIGURE 5. Self-initiated paraphrase according to time of occurrence.

As can be seen in Figure 5, the majority of instances of self-initiated paraphrase tend to appear within the same turn, whereas slightly more than one third are found later in the conversation. Overall, these results show that self-initiated paraphrase is, in this study, utilized in informal interactions among the Erasmus students as the second most frequent communicative strategy.

### 3.1.3 Self-Initiated Word Replacement

Self-initiated word replacement represents a type of self-repair that occurs at the lexical level. The current study finds that there are 91 instances of self-initiated word replacement in the corpus. As Figure 6 shows, the word choice category seems to be the most frequent, constituting half of all instances of self-initiated word replacement. The insertion of a lexical item takes the second place with slightly more than a third of all instances, whereas pronoun replacement represents the least frequent category of word replacement. Even though pronoun replacement might be incorporated in the word choice category, this study distinguishes it as a separate category due to its specific use.

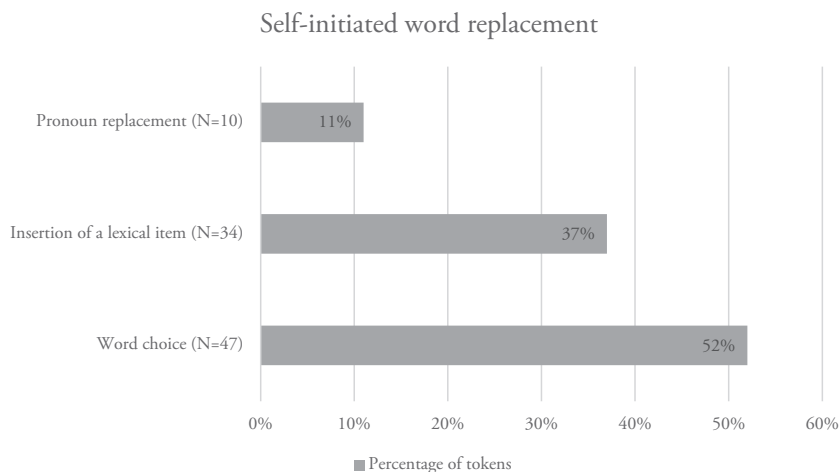


FIGURE 6. Categories and frequency of self-initiated word replacement.

Word choice represents a category of word replacement where a speaker self-corrects themselves and chooses another word that best describes the current situation. There are 47 such occurrences in the corpus. What the examples in this category have in common is the fact that the speakers decided to perform a word replacement in search of a better word to describe the concept in question. For example, in Extract 7, S2 describes the first impressions of living in another country and in the second line they replace the word *nature* with *parks*, which shows the intention of this speaker to enhance clarity and avoid any vagueness. Furthermore, this successful attempt at minimizing ambiguity reveals one more characteristic, namely the speaker's practice to replace a general term with a more specific one.

Extract 7

- 1 S2: I was actually maybe a little bit depressed at beginning because I thought that that they have
- 2 **no nature (.) no parks** cause I am really I am really used to going to the woods every day...

In addition, the research findings reveal that the insertion of lexical items is found in thirty-four examples in the corpus. In Extract 8, when referring to bars and cafes, S2 realises that mentioning that it is a thing would probably not be precise enough for the participants in the conversation, which prompts this speaker to insert *Austrian* in order to pre-empt any communication problems.

Extract 8

- 1 S2: mhm so maybe bars or cafes is **a thing is an austrian thing** but not nightlife

The third category of self-initiated word replacement is pronoun replacement, found in ten instances in the corpus. What these instances have in common is that speakers could be aware of the fact that the use of pronouns may lead to ambiguity. Therefore, they opt to pre-empt it by replacing them with their referents. In Extract 9, S3 immediately realises that the pronoun

*us* may be too ambiguous, which is why it is followed by a prepositional phrase that makes it more specific what this speaker had in mind.

Extract 9

- 1 S3: yes yes **for us (.) for students** it is not good but if you work here it's amazing

In view of what has been discussed with respect to self-initiated word replacement above, it can be summarized that this strategy aims to minimize and pre-empt any ambiguity in understanding that might occur by either replacing words or inserting lexical items.

### 3.1.4 Comprehension Checks

Comprehension checks are a type of self-initiated communicative strategy that serves the function of checking the listener's understanding. Overall, twenty-five instances of comprehension checks were observed in the informal Erasmus students' interactions examined here. As Figure 7 shows, the majority of comprehension checks employed were in the form of a stressed word with rising intonation. The second most frequent kind of comprehension check is the minimal check with a rising intonation *okay*, which accounted for 20% of these. Only a fifth of the total number of instances goes to short questions such as *you know?*, *do you know?*, *you know what I mean?* and another minimal check which is *yeah*. For the purposes of this article, only the first two, i.e., the most frequent comprehension checks, will be analysed.

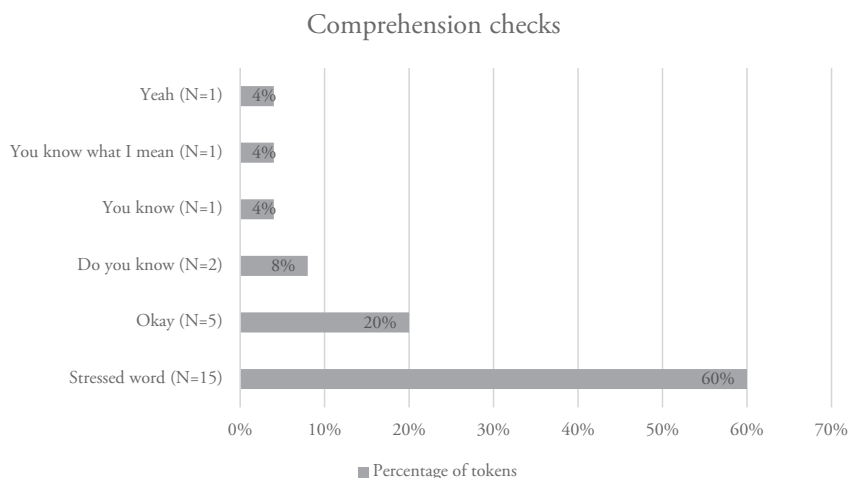


FIGURE 7. Forms and frequency of comprehension checks.

Regarding the use of *okay*, it occurs five times in the corpus in the function of a comprehension check, namely in a rising intonation pattern. In Extract 10, S3 offers their opinion on the power distance in the relationship between professors and students at their home university and the University of Graz. The statement about professors who are seen as gods, seemingly the main message, is further elaborated in line four. Here, it is emphasized that it is not only the professors themselves who play a crucial role in the outcome of this relationship but that it also depends on the courses. In order to verify whether participants understood the intent

fully, this speaker utilizes a minimal check at the end of their utterance. It is of significance here that the speaker waits for confirmation so that they may continue with the original topic.

#### Extract 10

- 1 S3: I like the relationship between the professor (1) and us so er I came from a big university
- 2 and professors are (2) gods @@@ and (1) you feel alone and very far from professors
- 3 S1: mhm
- 4 S3: so I think it's (.) yeah maybe (4) it depends from the professors but from the course **okay?**
- 5 (.)
- 6 S1: mhm
- 7 S3: but here we have (.) so I speak I speak for me for mathematician we have erm <L1it> poqi
- 8 </L1it> <LNde> weniger </LNde> okay so we have the possibility to speak with professor and
- 9 ermmm

By far the most frequent form of a comprehension check is the use of a stressed word. In a total of fifteen instances, it occurs with rising intonation with the aim of further checking understanding. The most striking observation to emerge from these examples is that they tend to occur at the end of an utterance. In Extract 11, the speaker used tonic stress with rising intonation on the word. This is done with a view to checking whether the participants in the conversation understood the message (in this case a word) so that the line of conversation can resume.

#### Extract 11

- 1 S4: and it was like past six pm and everything was closed and I was completely shocked because
- 2 in Croatia I could buy cigarettes at one am if I wanted to and here nothing worked and then (.)
- 3 erm I found like those like **machines?**
- 4 S2: yeah
- 5 S3: mhm

In summary, these results show that Erasmus students in this study use comprehension checks in various forms. Whether they are structured as long or short questions, minimal checks or stressed words, comprehension checks are employed in order to increase the efficiency of understanding.

### 3.2 Other-Initiated Communicative Strategies

Other-initiated communicative strategies are those that the speaker uses “after another speaker expresses a communicative need and marks the discourse for this communicative need, such as asking about part(s) of the preceding utterance” (Björkman 2014, 132). In this study, repetition and paraphrase also represent part of the scope of communicative strategies Erasmus students use in order to overcome and prevent misunderstanding, alongside confirmation checks, clarification requests and co-creating the message. Figure 8 provides the breakdown of other-initiated communicative strategies according to their frequency.

## NUMBER OF OTHER-INITIATED COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

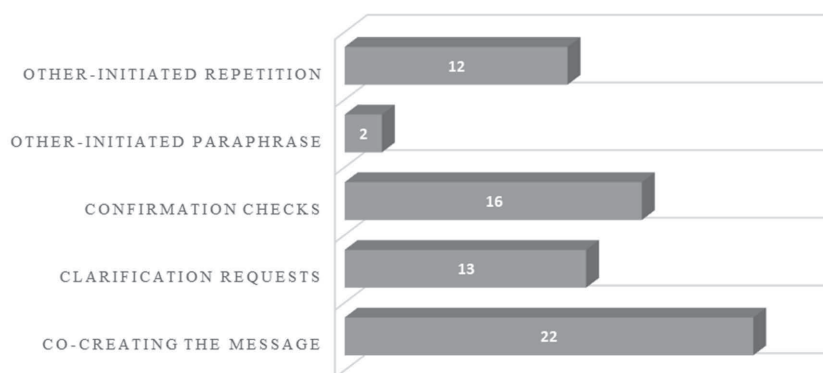


FIGURE 8. Number of other-initiated communicative strategies.

As shown in Figure 8, the data from this study reveal that co-creating the message is the most frequent other-initiated communicative strategy employed among the Erasmus students. The instances of confirmation checks, clarification requests and other-initiated repetition are rather similar in terms of their occurrence. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that Erasmus students utilized other-initiated paraphrase a few times. In the following section I will provide a detailed description of other-initiated communicative strategies illustrated with the examples taken from the corpus.

### 3.2.1 Other-Initiated Repetition

Other-initiated repetition is defined as a repetition by the same speaker that is prompted by another speaker's wish to check on comprehension. As such, it should be distinguished from other-repetition, which implies repetition by another speaker. In the results there are 12 instances of other-initiated repetition. In connection with its linguistic form, Figure 9 shows that more than half of other-initiated repetition instances belong to the exact repetition rather than the repetition with variation category. Both types can be observed in the following extracts.

Extract 12 exemplifies exact repetition as employed by the Erasmus students. S4's clarification request *what* prompts the choice of opting for exact repetition. A similar thing occurs in Extract 13, where S2 decides to change a couple of words with a view to securing mutual understanding when prompted by S3 (*hm?*). As noted above, if there is at least one part of the repetition that is changed in comparison to the original utterance, which was classified here as repetition with variation.

Extract 12

- 1 S4: [...] german with long words and it's very sometimes complicated to have a fluid language
- 2 S2: yeah

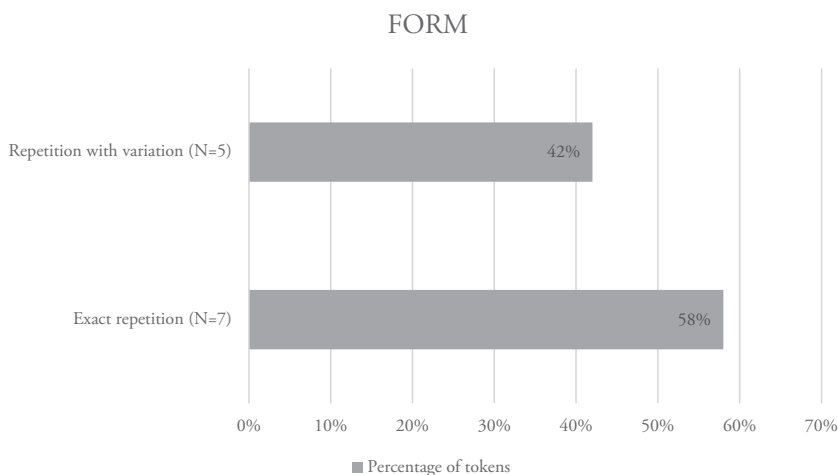


FIGURE 9. Other-initiated repetition according to form.

- 3 S4: so  
 4 S2: and **did you improve your german**  
 5 S4: what?  
 6 S2: **did you improve your german**  
 7 S4: I think I think yeah but

Extract 13

- 1 S2: **few dialects from your region**  
 2 S3: hm?  
 3 S2: **so there are several dialects in your region**  
 4 S3: yeah it basically changes every town  
 5 S2: okay

Another important finding is that other-initiated repetition is employed among the Erasmus students due to hearing problems. Extract 14 touches upon the topic of English knowledge among Austrians. In line two, S3 expresses their belief that this is not the case with the older generations, and they do this by repeating it twice. S1 repeats in the next line what they heard with rising intonation, which initiates S3 to employ exact repetition. By reiterating their words, S3 focuses on the achievement of shared understanding in the interest of preventing any communication issues.

Extract 14

- 1 S1: but do you think that they know english au<1> strains </1>  
 2 S3: <1> **old** </1> **er people don't older people don't**  
 3 S1: all all the people?



- 4 S3: **older people don't**
- 5 S2: yeah they don't

### 3.2.2 Other-Initiated Paraphrase

Even though there were only two instances of other-initiated paraphrase in the corpus, this study shows that the participants employ it when they want to reformulate their own previous utterances after a need for modifying has been expressed. In the conversation below (Extract 15), the participants were asked whether they liked people in Austria. However, S3 expresses their opinion by stating that they do not believe in stereotypes. When asked to elaborate on what they meant, S3 chooses to paraphrase the previously uttered part of a sentence. Despite the fact that there is a general acknowledgement by S2 in line four and S1 in line seven, S3 opts to employ paraphrase in the next turn one more time, only in this case self-initiated, so as to secure understanding and emphasize their message. This example indicates that other-initiated paraphrase is used to enhance clarity and resolve any potential ambiguity that might occur.

Extract 15

- 1 S3: **I don't think it's possible to say the austrian people are like that or they aren't**
- 2 S1: what what do you mean
- 3 S3: **you cannot generalise in that way I think**
- 4 S2: <1> yeah that's it </1>
- 5 S1: <1> yeah but </1>
- 6 S3: <1> global </1> isation and and everyone can choose to own lifestyle and
- 7 S1: that's true
- 8 S3: **people are individuals not stereotypes**

### 3.2.3 Confirmation Checks

Confirmation checks are employed to confirm the understanding of previously uttered statements, remarks, comments or opinions. Since these fall into the category of other-initiated strategies, what is common is that they too need a trigger word or phrase in order to be utilized. Evidence of this will be illustrated by the extracts that follow in this section. Figure 10 below shows the breakdown of some of the most frequent confirmation checks found used by the Erasmus students.

There were 16 instances of confirmation checks in total in the data. It can be seen from the figure above that slightly less than two-thirds of the total number of instances are question repeats, i.e., repetitions of a word with question intonation. They are followed by *you mean* and *do you mean*, at 31% and 6% respectively.

Regarding *you mean*, the corpus shows that it is found five times. In Extract 16, the speakers are comparing transport infrastructure in Austria with that in their home countries. S3 seems somewhat confused by the use of the phrase *make business*, which S2 considers very important, and they demonstrate this by repeating it twice (line seven). Consequently, in line

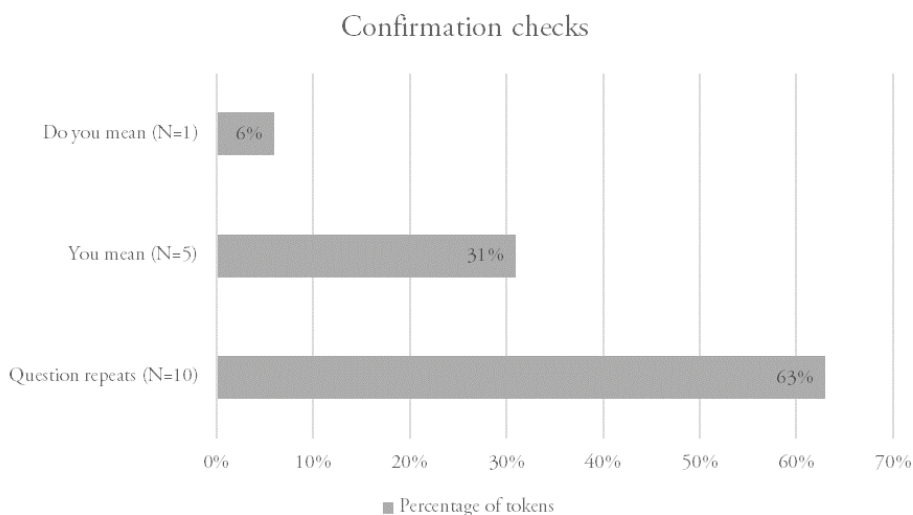


FIGURE 10. Forms and frequency of confirmation checks.

nine S3 paraphrases and uses a confirmation check in order to reinforce and contribute to mutual understanding, which is further enhanced by S2's confirmation in line ten.

#### Extract 16

- 1 S3: and trains here are much better than than in the balkans <3> in croatia especially </3>
- 2 S1: <3> that's true </3>
- 3 S3: because the buses and the trains there are (.) slow and also not very modern and not very
- 4 <4> neat inside </4>
- 5 S2: <4> yeah but you need </4> you need <5> to think also </5>
- 6 S3: <5> stuff like that </5>
- 7 S2: about making business with the train I mean nowadays nowadays to make business between
- 8 barcelona madrid the two big cities the trains are always full (.) and that is because
- 9 S3: if you go to work **you mean?**
- 10 S2: exactly they go they run every half an hour there is a train to madrid and in two hours and
- 11 twenty minutes you are from city to city and there are six hundred and fifty km

This research has shown that in their conversations the Erasmus students, as far as confirmation checks are concerned, tend to use question repeats as a way to confirm whether previous parts have been correctly understood. In Extract 17, S5 wants to point out the price of a kebab by repeating it twice in one turn. When S3 decides to use a confirmation check in the next turn in order to validate the previously uttered phrase, S5 repeats the number again and confirms the essential information. What is interesting in this example is that this participant repeats the information in a rising intonation. What follows in the next turn is the confirmation of the essential information in the form of repetition.

## Extract 17

- 1 S5: like we bought a kebab and it was
- 2 S2: <un> xxx </un>
- 3 S5: what was it se seven euros per each seven
- 4 S3: **seven?**
- 5 S5: seven
- 6 S2: then you did the bad deal come on

Overall, the results in this section indicate that the speakers used various forms of confirmation checks in order to confirm understanding and negotiate meaning.

### 3.2.4 Clarification Requests

Another other-initiated communicative strategy noted among the Erasmus students is clarification request. In this study, clarification requests are defined as strategies speakers utilize in order to request clarifications that may solve a comprehension problem. Figure 11 represents the relative frequency of all the forms of clarification requests found in interactions in the data.

In total, there are 13 instances of clarification requests. As can be seen from Figure 11, the short question *what* accounts for nearly half of the instances, whereas question repeats make up only half of that number. More extended questions such as *what do you mean*, and *what does it mean*, comprise less than a fifth of the whole chart, while the least frequent clarification requests are *did you say* and *yeah* at 8% each.

Overall, clarification requests directly address potential comprehension problems by introducing questions. In Extract 18, the participants are talking about differences in educational systems. S2 mentions (line one) that universities in their country make use of

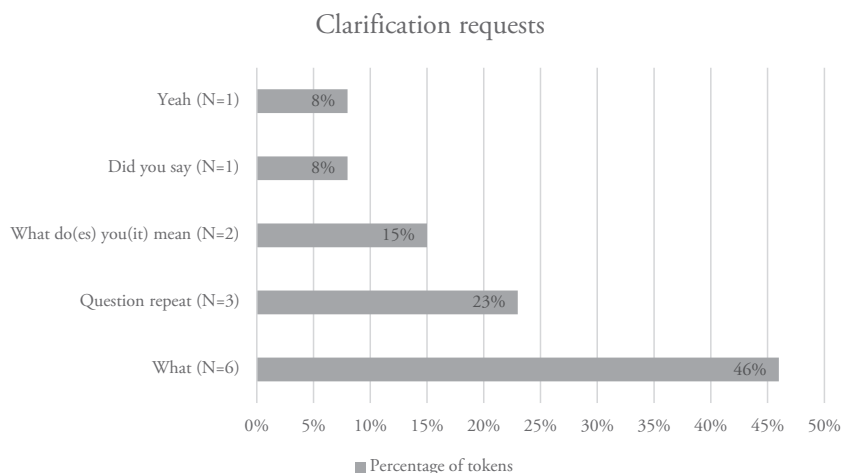


FIGURE 11. Forms and frequency of clarification requests.

continuous evaluation. However, S3 still finds this puzzling and needs the meaning of the term “continuous evaluation” to be refined, which is why they ask the question *what do you mean* (line nine). What makes this example interesting is that the participant provides a synonym, i.e., *assessment*, alongside their interpretation. This direct clarification request leads to a full explanation of what S2 had in mind. As a result, shared understanding is accomplished, which can be seen by the use of a minimal response in line fourteen.

#### Extract 18

- 1 S2: it's a continuous evaluation so basically if you fail you need to restart the course
- 2 S3: that depends <2> on <un> xxx </un> that's that's </2>
- 3 S1: <2> but how many times can you try </2>
- 4 S2: four
- 5 S1: four
- 6 S3:<3> that's in </3>
- 7 S1: <3> oh we can try six times </3>
- 8 S2: really
- 9 S3: we can try three times in croatia but **what do you mean** by continuous assessment like <4>
- 10 finishing </4>
- 11 S1: <4> yes </4>
- 12 S3: a course without a <5> without the final exam </5>
- 13 S2: <5> it means that the final the final exam </5> it's only forty percent of the grade
- 14 S3: yeah <6> it's the same for us in croatia </6>

A similar use is noticed in Extract 19, where Erasmus students used *what*, and a question repeat in order to clarify and request more information. In this example, the participants discuss the advantages and disadvantages of larger and smaller cities as far as studying is concerned. S5 makes inquiries into this, but the very formulation of the question prompts S3 to use a clarification request (line eight). This example is also interesting because in the next turn another speaker uses a question repeat in order to request more information. In line ten, we can see that S5 corrects themselves and provides further clarification through an exemplification. At this point, it should be mentioned that the reason both S2 and S3 initially use a clarification request could be due to poor hearing, or S5's rapid speaking.

#### Extract 19

- 1 S5: but do you like more the touristic people or international environment of the international
- 2 students city
- 3 S3: <1> well </1>
- 4 S2: <1> what </1> was the first thing
- 5 S3: yeah

- 6 S5: @@@ I don't know anymore @@@ do you like more like international environment with  
 7 students or whether touristic environment with  
 8 S3: **what**  
 9 S2: **artistic environment**  
 10 S5: touristic like vienna for example  
 11 S3: aaaaa noo <un> xxx </un> the first one <un> xxx </un>  
 12 S2: yeah  
 13 S3: I would not like tourists <2> <un> xxx </un> </2>  
 14 S2: <2> today there were </2> a lot of tourists only croatians (.) entire schlossberg was full of it

Together the results provide insights into the function of clarification requests and suggest that the Erasmus students make use of them to elicit the information necessary for successful communication.

### 3.2.5 Co-Creating the Message

Co-creating the message seems to be one of the strategies that the Erasmus students tend to use in their interactions in order to avoid communication problems. The principle of this strategy is that participants jointly produce an utterance in a communication event. This reveals the collaborative nature and cooperation through which shared understanding is maintained. The reason why this strategy is perceived more as a collaboration than interruption is that the participants are involved in the turn-construction process. They use the information that was mentioned before and try to guess what the previous speaker meant.

In this study, co-creating the message occurs in 22 instances. It seems that a pattern typically occurs when a participant pauses at the end of their turn, which seems to have the function of a request for help. This can be seen in the following example.

Extract 20

- 1 S4: I don't think so it was properly about habits but I have observed that Austrian has a strange  
 2 reason of life during week they wake up **very** (.)  
 3 S2: **early** yeah  
 4 S4: early and fi and and open and and close their business very soon in the night <1> for  
 5 example at when you are </1>  
 6 S2: <1> yeah the secondary school </1>  
 7 S4: when it is a six or seven <2> most of the business </2> are closed  
 8 S3: <2> yeah <un> xxx </un> </2>

In Extract 20, the speakers talk about the habits of Austrians they have observed. S4 wishes to draw attention to the fact that Austrians get up earlier in the morning than other people. However, what we can notice is the brief pause (up to a half of a second in line two), after which S2 provides a lexical suggestion based on the previously mentioned information

(line three). In the next turn, S4 accepts this suggestion by repeating it and continues the conversation.

Regarding the type of phrase that is employed, there are 14 examples that use a lexical suggestion in the corpus as opposed to eight instances that use longer phrases. The previously discussed Extract 20 shows how other participants may contribute to the conversation by providing a word. Figure 12 below presents the forms of co-creating the message and their relative frequency.

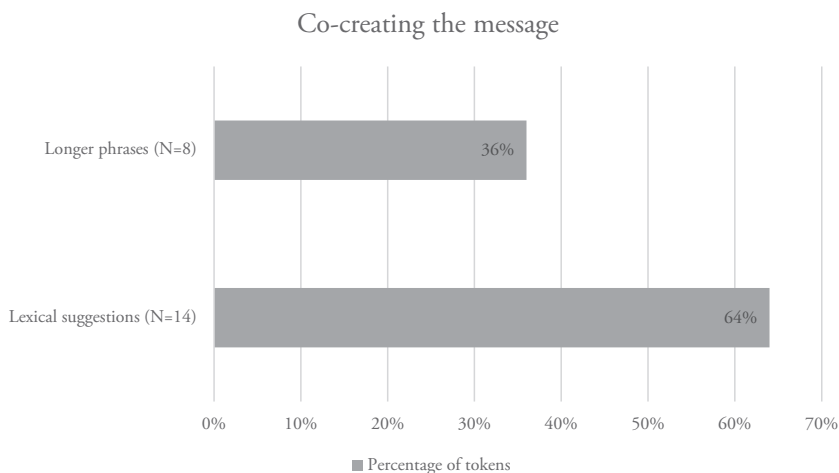


FIGURE 12. Forms and frequency of co-creating the message.

As can be seen in Figure 12, the use of a lexical suggestion makes up approximately two-thirds of the total number of instances, whereas the remainder goes to longer phrases. The following extract exemplifies longer phrases.

#### Extract 21

- 1 S2: mmm I cannot say because I mean the problem I see here is that you need sometimes to
- 2 find out or figure out yourself **what's a what hooo <1> hooo </1>**
- 3 S3: <1> **what </1> works better for you**
- 4 S2: what works better for yo for you I mean maybe the uni the interface between international
- 5 students and the and the (.) university err is not is not that fluent and
- 6 S3: mhm

In Extract 21, the speakers talk about the differences in their educational systems, particularly what they think about the practice of their host university in allowing students to choose classes as opposed to having a fixed curriculum. S2's argument is that students have to decide on their own what seems to be best for them. However, S2 appears to struggle to finish the utterance, which prompts S3 (line three) to provide a suggestion that helps to establish understanding and carry on the conversation. The proof that the completion is successful is the repetition by S2 in the next line.

The results in this section indicate that Erasmus students use the strategy of co-creating the message with the aim of preventing and also alleviating problems in communication. It is interesting to note that by completing each other's utterances the interactants enrich the communication process and contribute to enhancing mutual understanding.

## 4 Discussion

As regards RQ1, this study has revealed that Erasmus students take advantage of communicative strategies in order to achieve understanding. Four self-initiated communicative strategies were found in informal discourse – self-initiated repetition, paraphrase, word replacement and comprehension checks. As far as other-initiated communicative strategies are concerned, this study shows cases of other-initiated repetition, paraphrase, confirmation checks, clarification requests and co-creating the message.

With respect to the question of frequency, this study found 562 instances (90%) of self-initiated communicative strategies in the corpus. A possible explanation for the significantly larger number in comparison to other-initiated communicative strategies may be the speakers' attempt to be more explicit or pre-empt problems either by repeating, rephrasing, repairing themselves, or checking comprehension.

As far as self-initiated repetition is concerned, the findings in this study reveal that the Erasmus students prefer to employ it in the same turn (immediate self-initiated repetition) for the purposes of emphasis and considerable relevance for the rest of the conversation. The results concerning the form of repetition show that repetition with variation and exact repetition are similar in terms of frequency. Regarding the functions of repetition, the present findings accord with Björkman's (2014) account of self-initiated repetition used as an explicitness strategy to strengthen understanding of a key piece of information.

As regards paraphrase, the current study finds that the participants often employ it, and preferably in the same turn rather than a few turns after. Furthermore, the use of paraphrase as a means to obtain clarity and prevent communication problems is found at both lexical and sentence levels, which is in line with research carried out by Kaur (2009).

It has been demonstrated that self-initiated word replacement has an important role in reducing the risk of ambiguity. Three categories spring from the analysis showing how they contribute to successful communication: word choice, the insertion of a lexical item, and pronoun replacement.

Regarding comprehension checks, it is observed that the Erasmus students use them to confirm understanding. Comprehension checks are performed through the use of long or short questions (*you know what I mean?*, *do you know?*, *you know?*), minimal checks (*okay?*, *yeah?*) or stressed words. The literature also enumerates examples with *Are you with me?*, *Do you follow/understand?*, *Do you know what I am saying?*, and many others (Jamshidnejad 2011; Vettorel 2019). However, this study did not find any instances of the abovementioned questions.

In comparison to self-initiated communicative strategies, other-initiated communicative strategies are not as prominent, appearing in only 65 instances (10%) in informal spoken interactions among the Erasmus students.



Regarding the other-initiated repetition, the participants in this study prefer exact repetition to repetition with variation, which could be explained by the need to put an emphasis on the most critical parts of an utterance. Consequently, it is noteworthy that they may use it in situations where overlapping or hearing problems occur.

In relation to other-initiated paraphrase, it should be mentioned that it is the least frequent strategy in the corpus. Nevertheless, a few of instances that were observed suggest that the Erasmus students employ it to promote understanding. This strategy has been explored to a limited extent in the ELF field, with one such effort being made by Björkman (2014), who illustrates how other-initiated paraphrased segments lead to the promotion of understanding. In the same vein, Putry, Munir and Purwati (2019) reveal that other-initiated paraphrasing is not as frequent as other strategies.

Upon examining confirmation checks, this study reveals that they are to be found in various forms, among which question repeats are the most common. Other forms include *you mean* and *do you mean*. Moreover, the data indicate that the speakers make use of confirmation checks in their interactions so as to mitigate possible vagueness and secure understanding.

As regards clarification requests, what becomes evident from the instances in this study is that after their use, successful communication tends to be ensured. This inquiry has shown that they are found in a variety of forms such as the short question *what*, question repeats, *what do/les you/it mean*, *did you say* and *yeah*. Further research on clarification requests lists other expressions/phrases such as *What do they mean*, *I didn't catch that*, *I'm not with you*, *Could you explain* (Jamshidnejad 2011; Vettorel 2019).

In Björkman's (2014) study, clarification requests are reported to be the most frequent, accounting for almost a third of the other-initiated communicative strategies, and this is in agreement with Putry, Munir and Purwati's (2019) findings which show that asking for an explanation is often employed. In terms of frequency, the findings of this study do not support the previously mentioned research. However, it is important to remember that the differences in the frequency of communicative strategies that are observed could be attributed to different settings (academic vs. informal), which might yield different results.

Finally, co-creating the message is the most frequent other-initiated strategy found among the Erasmus students in this study, demonstrating that they jointly tried to enhance mutual understanding. The study reveals that the participants also preferred to provide a lexical suggestion rather than employ longer phrases. It is difficult to explain this choice, but it might be related to the fact that the speakers did not want to interrupt the other speaker with a long stretch of speech. On the subject of co-creating the message, other studies point out the collaborative nature between participants that leads to sentence completion and the achievement of a communicative goal (Cogo and Dewey 2012; Deterding 2013; Kaur 2011; Kirkpatrick 2010). The findings of the current study seem to be consistent with other research as far as the functions of co-creating the message are concerned. However, in terms of frequency, a contradictory result can be seen in Björkman's (2014) study, which reports only a few instances. The possible interpretation could be that Björkman's participants were involved in close-ended tasks requiring a final product, e.g., the solution of a problem or a report in an academic setting.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper set out to conduct research into the communicative strategies involved in Erasmus students' spoken and informal interactions. The main goal was to provide a taxonomy of strategies in an environment where English is used as a lingua franca, such as among Erasmus students. What needs to be pointed out is that the results may not apply to other contexts. Therefore, when comparing findings, the exact context of this study (the most important one being the nature of informal and casual conversation) need to be taken into account.

Furthermore, this study can be distinguished from others since it shines a light on conversations among Erasmus students, as there is a paucity of research as far as ELF within this community is concerned. Therefore, it could be said that the findings from this project contribute to the existing knowledge of spoken ELF interactions. Further research might investigate different communicative settings alongside the usage of other strategies attested in the literature.

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