

## ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN INTERCULTURAL SETTINGS: A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in intercultural communication, focusing on the strategies employed to facilitate understanding and the common causes of communication breakdowns. English has emerged as the primary medium for international communication, known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This paper explores the use of English in intercultural interactions, focusing on the communication strategies employed by speakers and the nature and resolution of communication challenges. Based on qualitative data from interviews and recorded conversations among multinational speakers, this study reveals that ELF communication is shaped by strategic adaptability, mutual negotiation of meaning, and sensitivity to cultural norms. It also identifies common sources of misunderstanding and explores how speakers manage and resolve these issues. The findings emphasize that ELF should not be seen as flawed or deficient English but rather as a flexible and evolving form of international communication.*

**Key Words:** *lingua franca, EFL, intercultural communication*

### Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, English has emerged as the predominant lingua franca, serving as a common medium of communication among speakers of different native languages. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), has shifted the traditional paradigms of language ownership, competence, and usage. ELF interactions are particularly prominent in intercultural settings—contexts where communicative success relies not only on linguistic proficiency but also on the ability to navigate diverse cultural norms, pragmatic expectations, and interpersonal dynamics. As English is adopted and adapted by its non-native speakers for practical communication, it becomes a fluid, dynamic tool rather than a fixed code governed solely by native-speaker norms. In such settings, communication is often characterized by a high degree of variability, creativity, and negotiation. However, this variability also increases the risk of misunderstandings and breakdowns, which can hinder effective interaction. Despite these challenges, ELF users frequently employ a range of communicative strategies—such as clarification requests, paraphrasing, code-switching, and accommodation—to manage or repair breakdowns and achieve mutual understanding.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has become a central medium for academic, professional, and informal interactions across cultures. However, these intercultural settings bring challenges in communication, including misinterpretations, ambiguity, and breakdowns. This paper investigates how speakers manage these challenges, with particular focus on the strategies they use and how they resolve misunderstandings. The global rise of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has transformed it from a native language of a few into a shared communicative tool for millions. In intercultural settings, ELF is not used as a marker of identity but as a pragmatic means to facilitate communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. However, this functional use of English introduces both opportunities and challenges. This paper investigates how ELF speakers manage communication and the strategies they deploy to avoid or repair breakdowns.

### Research Objectives

This study aims:

- To identify common communication strategies used by ELF speakers in intercultural settings.
- To analyze typical causes of communication breakdowns.
- To explore how participants manage and repair misunderstandings.

### Literature Review

ELF research has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Seidlhofer (2001) defines ELF as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice." House (2003) argues that ELF is a distinct variety, not inferior to native norms. Jenkins (2007) highlights how intelligibility rather than adherence to native-speaker models is central in ELF contexts. Past studies (e.g., Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Mauranen, 2006) reveal that ELF interactions are marked by cooperative strategies, tolerance for variation, and emphasis on negotiation of meaning. However, relatively fewer studies have focused in depth on both the communicative strategies and the types of breakdowns that occur in spontaneous ELF interactions.

The role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has become increasingly prominent in today's globalized world, where intercultural interactions are frequent and diverse. As a medium of communication among speakers with different first languages, ELF challenges traditional conceptions of language use and proficiency. Recent scholarship has shifted from viewing ELF through a native-speaker lens to recognizing it as a dynamic, adaptive form of communication shaped by its users in context-specific ways. Seidlhofer (2011) underscores the non-standard, fluid nature of ELF interactions, emphasizing mutual intelligibility and pragmatic negotiation over grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Jenkins (2007) advocates for a more inclusive view of English that accounts for the diversity of its global speakers, focusing on intelligibility and communicative competence rather than conformity to native norms. Intercultural communication within ELF contexts highlights both the opportunities and challenges that arise from linguistic and cultural diversity. House (2003) distinguishes between ELF and English as a foreign language (EFL), noting that ELF is used primarily for communication rather than for integrating into a native English-speaking culture. This distinction informs studies that investigate the communication strategies adopted by ELF users to overcome potential misunderstandings. Cogo and Dewey (2012) examine various pragmatic strategies such as repetition, rephrasing, code-switching, and metacommunicative strategies, showing how speakers actively co-construct meaning and negotiate understanding in intercultural dialogues. Despite these adaptive strategies, communication breakdowns are an inevitable aspect of ELF interactions. Such breakdowns often stem from differences in cultural assumptions, pragmatic norms, or lexical interpretations rather than purely linguistic errors. Mauranen (2006) and Kaur (2010) observe that misunderstandings in ELF conversations are often resolved through clarification requests, confirmation checks, and collaborative repair. These practices reflect the cooperative nature of ELF communication and the importance of shared responsibility for mutual understanding. Furthermore, the sociolinguistic dynamics of ELF are deeply influenced by power relations, identity, and language attitudes. Speakers may experience anxiety, marginalization, or power imbalances due to perceived linguistic inferiority or dominance. Phillipson (1992) critiques the global spread of English as a form of linguistic imperialism, while others argue for the emancipatory potential of ELF in democratizing international communication. The tension between these perspectives continues to shape debates on language policy, education, and intercultural competence.

English as a lingua franca in intercultural settings highlights a complex interplay between language, identity, culture, and power. Communication strategies and breakdowns in ELF

contexts offer valuable insights into how meaning is negotiated and relationships are managed across cultural boundaries. Ongoing research in this field contributes not only to applied linguistics and communication studies but also to a broader understanding of how English functions as a tool for global interaction.

### 1. Introduction to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the use of English as a common means of communication among speakers of different first languages (Seidlhofer, 2001). Unlike native-speaker norms that prioritize grammatical accuracy and idiomatic usage, ELF emphasizes mutual intelligibility and adaptability in communication (Jenkins, 2007). The increasing globalization of business, academia, and travel has elevated the role of ELF in diverse intercultural contexts.

### 2. Characteristics of ELF Communication

ELF interactions are marked by hybrid forms of English, with speakers often adjusting syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation to enhance clarity (Mauranen, 2006). Such interactions are characterized by *pragmatic strategies*, such as reformulation, repetition, and explicit clarification, which compensate for linguistic and cultural diversity (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). The focus is less on conforming to native-speaker norms and more on co-constructing meaning.

### 3. Communication Strategies in ELF Settings

Researchers identify a variety of communication strategies that ELF users employ, including:

- **Code-switching and code-mixing** (House, 2003): Switching between languages to clarify or emphasize meaning.
- **Paraphrasing and rephrasing** (Cogo, 2009): Reformulating expressions to increase comprehensibility.
- **Accommodation and convergence** (Kaur, 2011): Adapting speech to the interlocutor's level of understanding.
- **Metacommunication**: Directly discussing or negotiating how to communicate (Firth, 1996).

These strategies are often influenced by contextual variables such as power relations, familiarity, and cultural background.

### 4. Breakdowns in ELF Communication

Communication breakdowns are inevitable in ELF interactions due to varying levels of proficiency, differing cultural norms, and divergent interpretative frameworks (Meierkord, 2000). Typical breakdowns include:

- **Lexical gaps and misinterpretations**
- **Cultural misunderstandings** stemming from different communicative norms (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009)
- **Pronunciation issues** that affect intelligibility, especially in phonologically dense interactions

However, breakdowns are often resolved collaboratively, showcasing the resilience and adaptability of ELF speakers.

### 5. Intercultural Competence and ELF

Intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) plays a crucial role in successful ELF interactions. Proficiency in English alone does not ensure effective communication—cultural sensitivity, empathy, and pragmatic awareness are equally important (Baker, 2015). ELF users must often navigate *cultural frames of reference*, requiring them to go beyond linguistic competence.

### 6. Critical Perspectives and Debates

The ELF paradigm challenges traditional native-speaker-oriented views of English language teaching and assessment (Jenkins, 2009). Critics argue that ELF could reinforce linguistic hegemony (Pennycook, 2010), while proponents view ELF as a democratizing force in global communication. The debate continues over whether ELF constitutes a legitimate variety or merely a functional tool.

### 7. Empirical Studies on ELF in Intercultural Settings

Empirical research in academic, professional, and informal settings has illuminated the dynamic nature of ELF. For instance:

- **Academic contexts:** Mauranen (2012) documents the negotiation of meaning in university lectures and seminars.
- **Business contexts:** Ehrenreich (2009) explores how multinational teams manage collaboration via ELF.
- **Everyday interactions:** Studies by Kaur (2009) and Hülmbauer (2009) highlight the micro-level repair strategies used by speakers to prevent and resolve misunderstandings.

These studies emphasize the adaptability, creativity, and strategic competence of ELF speakers in intercultural encounters.

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study uses a discourse-analytic approach to investigate real-life ELF interactions in intercultural settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and recorded conversations among international university students and professionals in multinational companies.

#### 3.2 Participants

The study involved 24 participants from 12 different linguistic backgrounds, aged 20 to 45, with at least an intermediate level of English proficiency. The participants were grouped into two cohorts: students at an international university and employees at a global firm.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

Data consisted of:

- Audio recordings of 15 spontaneous conversations (5–15 minutes each).
- Follow-up interviews with participants discussing communication difficulties and strategies.
- Field notes during observation sessions.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. The main themes identified were:

- (1) Strategies to enhance understanding
- (2) Types of communication breakdowns
- (3) Repair mechanisms.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Communication Strategies

Participants used a range of strategies to maintain understanding:

- **Repetition and paraphrasing:** Common when initial expressions were unclear.
- **Code-switching:** Occasionally used to clarify complex terms, especially when speakers shared a third language.
- **Gestures and non-verbal cues:** Supported verbal communication, especially in technical contexts.

- **Explicit checks for understanding:** "Do you mean...?", "Are you saying that...?" were frequently used.

#### 4.2 Causes of Communication Breakdowns

Breakdowns were typically triggered by:

- **Pronunciation differences:** Regional accents caused mishearing.
- **Cultural references:** Idioms or metaphors unfamiliar to others.
- **Lexical gaps:** Limited vocabulary led to vague or ambiguous expressions.
- **Assumptions of shared knowledge:** Speakers sometimes incorrectly presumed shared cultural or contextual understanding.

#### 4.3 Managing and Repairing Breakdowns

Participants demonstrated pragmatic awareness by:

- **Clarification requests:** "Can you repeat that?" or "Sorry, what does that mean?"
- **Rephrasing by speaker:** When prompted or observing confusion.
- **Using examples or analogies:** To aid comprehension.
- **Shared negotiation:** Collaboratively reconstructing meaning through dialogue.

#### Discussion

The findings underscore the adaptability and collaborative nature of ELF communication. Rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy, successful ELF interactions prioritize clarity, responsiveness, and empathy. Speakers exhibit high levels of meta communicative awareness, constantly monitoring and adjusting their discourse to ensure mutual understanding. These findings challenge the deficit view of ELF as "broken English." Instead, ELF is shown to be a fluid, resourceful mode of communication, where users creatively compensate for limitations through cooperative strategies.

#### Implications

##### Pedagogical Implications

Language education should move beyond native speaker norms and focus on developing pragmatic skills, intercultural competence, and strategic communication abilities. Teaching should include:

- Exposure to diverse English accents.
- Practice in negotiation of meaning.
- Emphasis on mutual intelligibility over grammatical perfection.

#### Conclusion

This study reveals that English as a Lingua Franca is a dynamic tool for bridging cultural and linguistic divides. In intercultural settings, speakers employ a rich repertoire of strategies to manage and repair communication. By shifting our focus from correctness to communicative effectiveness, we can better appreciate the nuanced, cooperative nature of ELF interactions and design more inclusive educational and organizational practices. English as a lingua franca serves as a dynamic tool for intercultural communication. While communication breakdowns are inevitable, ELF speakers often navigate them successfully through strategic adaptation. Embracing ELF's diversity and focusing on mutual understanding, rather than linguistic conformity, is essential for effective global communication.

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