A Study on intercultural strategies in English as a lingua franca communication of Naresuan University graduate students

การศึกษากลวิธีระหว่างวัฒนธรรมในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลางของนิสิตระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร[1]

ฐิติรัตน์ สุวรรณสม[2]
Thitirat Suwannasom

บทคัดย่อ

ในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลางในบริบทประชาคมอาเซียนนั้น ความสามารถระหว่างวัฒนธรรม รวมถึงกลวิธีและความตระหนักระหว่างวัฒนธรรมเป็น สิ่งสำคัญสำหรับการเตรียมผู้เรียนให้ประสบความสำเร็จในการสื่อสาร งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษา กลวิธีระหว่างวัฒนธรรมของนิสิตระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาและความคิดเห็นที่มีต่อและปัญหา ในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรม เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยคือแบบ สำรวจกลวิธีระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามคือนิสิตระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาเอก ภาษาอังกฤษมหาวิทยาลัยนเรศวร ประเทศไทย และการสัมภาษณ์กลุ่มโดยนิสิต อาสาสมัครจำนวนเจ็ดคนที่ให้ข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับความคิดเห็นและประสบการณ์การใช้ ภาษาอังกฤษในสถานการณ์การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลาง ผลการสำรวจ พบว่ากลวิธีที่มีการใช้มากที่สุดคือ กลวิธีการอธิบายขยายความเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมให้แก่

วารสารศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตหาดใหญ่
ปีที่ 11 ฉบับที่ 1 เดือนมกราคม - มิถุนายน 2562
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คู่สนทนา และกลวิธีการเลือกหัวข้อที่มีความสนใจหรือพื้นฐานประสบการณ์ร่วมกันใน
การสนทนา ผลการสัมภาษณ์กลุ่มพบว่านิสิตมีความตระหนักเกี่ยวกับความเหมือนและ
ความต่างด้านวัฒนธรรมและต้องการรับข้อมูลและประสบการณ์เพิ่มเกี่ยวกับความ
หลากหลายของภาษาอังกฤษของผู้ที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา ข้อเสนอแนะของการวิจัยคือ
ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลางควรฝึกฝนการใช้กลวิธีระหว่างวัฒนธรรมเพื่อ
เสริมสร้างความเข้าใจร่วมกันในการสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรมได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ

คำสำคัญ: กลวิธีระหว่างวัฒนธรรม การสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรม ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษากลาง

Abstract

In the English as a lingua franca (ELF) settings of the ASEAN context, intercultural competence, strategies, and awareness are crucial for preparing English learners to achieve successful communications. This study investigated graduate students' intercultural strategies and their opinions of challenges in using English as a medium language in cross-cultural communication settings. A survey questionnaire was constructed and administered to the English major graduate students of Naresuan University, Thailand. In the focus group session, seven volunteers were interviewed to elicit their opinions of intercultural experiences of using English in ELF settings. The survey result indicated that the mostly used strategies were clarifying or explaining cultural terms to interlocutors and selecting the conversation topics based on common interests or background experiences. The focus group interview revealed that the participants were aware of some linguistic issues as well as some similarities and differences between cultures, reflecting the need of more exposure to a variety of English used by non-native speakers. Based on the findings, it was suggested that ELF

learners adopt intercultural strategies to accommodate mutual understandings in cross-cultural communications.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, cross-cultural communication, intercultural strategies

Background

With the ease of Information Communication Technology, people from different cultures have more opportunities to communicate without having to cross the borders. Getting to know people from other cultures become more costless and effortless through the fast-developed online tools and social networking applications. Nevertheless, English has remained one of the most essential tools for cross-cultural communication as people often select it as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2006). When people from various backgrounds meet, the ways they communicate and deliver their messages still rooted from their cultural beliefs and first language repertoires. Therefore, when people use English as a lingua franca, some messages in the information can be interpreted as having many different meanings according to interlocutors' backgrounds.

Previous studies in intercultural communication suggested that individuals from different cultural backgrounds select different knowledge and messages to communicate with people from other cultures. In a study by Leung, Lee, and Chiu (2013), an individual would deliberately select a typical message to communicate with a member of a certain culture by applying meta-knowledge of the culture. Therefore, unsuccessful cross-cultural communications may arise not only from the

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lack of motivation to take the perspective of individuals in a foreign culture, but also from inaccurate meta-knowledge of the foreign culture. Misunderstanding is possible when people from different backgrounds involve in an intercultural communication without shared cultural schemas. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, individuals tend to behave in a way that is appropriate to their own cultural norms. Sharifian (2009) stressed that, in English as an International Language (EIL) communications, speakers may use the same English words and sentences while indicating totally different cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors. This phenomenon often leads to cases of 'hidden' miscommunication. Sharifian (2009) also argued in favor of intercultural or metacultural competence that is tied to speakers' familiarity with a variety of systems of cultural conceptualizations, ideally achieved through exposure to a range of different World Englishes. In EIL communicative events, participants would have to understand that their conversational partners may not share the same schema, category, or metaphor in verbal interactions (Sharifian, 2013). Therefore, more attention is needed to address different kinds of cultural schemata of the speakers as well as the body language that is used in non-native English speaking communities. However, it has been documented that many of English instructions neglect to prepare students to use English to interact with other non-native speakers of English in multicultural settings. (Matsuda, 2003; Sharifian, 2009).

Features of English as a lingua franca communications

According to Noam Chomsky (1986), the English of non-native speakers differs from the English of native speakers. ELF has its own features and inherent identity which contains a number of linguistic variations and non-standard forms especially in spoken English. In order to achieve the communicative purpose, ELF speakers are not interested in lexical and structural norms of the native speakers; consequently, they often simplify their language (Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Several studies investigated the ELF phenomenon including the lexicogrammatical, phonological, and pragmatic features used by ELF speakers. For example, Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey (2011) noted that there are certain features that occur in lingua franca interactions. ELF speakers, mostly being bi/multilingual, are influenced by their first language. Therefore, the most common ELF characteristics are code switching, cross-linguistic interactions, and simplification. For simplification, there is a convergence in phonological and grammatical system and often the marked features are replaced by the regular or unmarked alternatives (Mackenzie, 2014). For instance, ELF users have a tendency of dropping third person singular–s (Breiteneder, 2005; Wacker, 2011). Redundancy is found in many cases, i.e. the overuse of progressive form in a relatively high degree (Breiteneder, 2005; Ranta, 2006). A number of research studies found that ELF users are likely to adopt a flexible way to use idiomatic expressions by creating and negotiating phrasal expressions or avoiding idiomatic phrases when participating in intercultural communication (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2009).

วารสารศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตหาดใหญ่
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The above ELF features found in previous studies could be analyzed and taught in English language classroom to raise learners' awareness of intercultural dimension of learning English and the varieties (Jenkins et al., 2011). To be more specific, the ELF phenomenon should be paid more attention in developing English language curriculum since it is how English language is used globally. Indeed, the language of ELF speakers should not be viewed as errors or underdeveloped competence. As Seidlhofer (2011) suggested, those ELF features might be regarded as imperfectness; however, it is not at all inferior to the native speakers' English as the differences can serve as a mediation in the meaning-making process among the ELF speakers who are exploiting their latent knowledge of English to meet the mutual understandings in intercultural settings. This claim has been underpinned by Widdowson (2004) who argued that ELF speakers are capable in expanding the possibility and appropriateness in using English: "...the functional range of the language is not thereby restricted, but on the contrary enhanced, for it enables its users to express themselves more freely without having to conform to norms which represent the sociocultural identity of other people" (p.361). Along the same line, Mauranen (2006) pointed out that ELF speakers are practical users, not merely learners. Therefore, not all second or foreign language users are always aiming to achieve the perfection of the target native norm. They can be learners, and at the same time, they are users who manage to employ the language functionally despite their limitedness. This emerging concept of non-

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standard identity in ELF has called for a new perspective in defining the critical competence in English.

Intercultural Strategies in ELF Contexts

In multicultural communication settings, English speakers usually draw on their language and cultural repertoires to create the most appropriate expression for the particular interlocutors and communicative purposes. The choice of languages that speakers contribute to intercultural communication is therefore flexible and adjustable. In this regard, the degree of effectiveness in intercultural communication does not depend on how it conforms to the original norm but rather how successful it is mediated in the meaning-making process between international speakers. As Seidlhofer (2011) proposed, ELF users should be functionally not formally defined on how they utilize English, and "ELF is not a variety of English but a variable way to use the language" (p. 77).

Regarding competence in ELF settings, the competence of native speakers seems to be at disadvantage due to the lack of practice in intercultural interactions. Actually, Seidlhofer (2004) mentioned that the idiomatic kind of language used by native speakers can appear as obstacles in intercultural communication or even harmful to the success of communication (Gnutzmann, 2000). Therefore, a successful ELF speaker has to adopt new competence and strategies to achieve their communicative goals. It is believed that ELF users are non-dependent and capable of producing norm which is regarded as the multilingualism competency. Although most ELF speakers have learnt English as a

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second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) and are usually perceived as learners with incomplete knowledge through the ESL/EFL lenses, they are not merely developing their skills towards the standard norm. These users are also practicing the language as primary users by incidentally applying the language in various intercultural situations. In this regard, Jenkins (2007, p. 230) explained that in international communications, the ability to accommodate to interlocutors regardless of whether the language production is an 'error' is far more important than the ability to imitate the English of native speakers. As a result, to be a competent speaker, people should feel that they can express their identity and be themselves in cross-cultural communications without being labelled with foreign accents or lacking of idiomatic or cultural specific expressions that belong to the native norm (Mackenzie, 2014, p.5). Learners should develop appropriate 'Intercultural Attitude' which means the openness or readiness to suspend disbelief about others' cultures and being able to relate one's own cultural beliefs to others' (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p.12). Therefore, the most important characteristic of an ELF learner is being one who possesses the appropriate knowledge and attitude and becomes successful in intercultural tasks. What is essential in intercultural communication is that English speakers should feel comfortable and be able to negotiate and manage the communicative situations when speaking the language.

According to David Crystal (2004), the number of non-native English speakers in the 'outer circle' and 'expanding circle' has outnumbered the native speakers or those in the 'inner circle'. It is

found that an overwhelming majority of the interactions done in English happens among non-native speakers of English, who do not necessarily follow the native speaker way of language use (Carter, 2003, p. 97). This phenomenon is taking place in the ASEAN community; there are more NNS using English as a medium of communication. Therefore, to become a successful ELF speakers in the multicultural communities of the ASEAN demands a broader set of language and pragmatic competencies. In this respect, Baker (2012) addressed that ELF speakers need to acquire the intercultural sensitivity or awareness and several communication strategies and skills for negotiation of meaning in lingua franca situations. They should be prepared to employ strategies such as clarification on issues of different cultures or avoiding sensitive topics in multicultural settings. These skills are often neglected in EFL perspectives in comparison to correct grammatical and lexical uses. However, in ELF perspectives, the intercultural skills and awareness have become the major focus of developing English language competence in the globalized settings. Therefore, intercultural competence is critical for developing a competence ELF speaker in cross-cultural communications.

Furthermore, Sharifian (2010) emphasized that if more than 80 per cent of communication in English is now taking place between non-native speakers, instead of exploring phonological and syntactic dimensions of different varieties of English spoken globally, it is crucial to investigate the cultural schemata that these speakers draw on while negotiating their intercultural communication that underlie their semantic and pragmatic

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levels. However, it is questionable whether Thai English language users are prepared and aware of the challenges of using English as a lingua franca.

Regarding the situation of ELF in Thailand, Geerson (2013) argued that the English curriculum should be reconstructed due to the widespread of English as a medium language in the ASEAN community. However, most of the curriculum and classroom instructions in the country were still influenced by the language imperialism. It is necessary to investigate the dynamics of intercultural learning community in the country in order to develop English curriculum and corpora based on non-native interactions. Hence, research into intercultural communication strategies will pave ways to the development of ELF instruction and the preparation for the paradigm shift. Kirkpatrick (2012) pointed out that the goals of English language learning in Asian contexts should reach mutual intelligibility and to develop intercultural competence so that learners can use the language to express their own cultural perspectives and vice versa to understand the local situations and world social phenomena. This is also contributing to the intercultural literacy which is one of the most critical knowledge of individuals in the 21st century, as a fundamental of academic and professional success (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014). Especially for students of the graduate level, they are required to demonstrate a high level of communicative skills in both academic and professional settings.

Therefore, enhancing intercultural strategies of Thai learners of English is crucial to prepare them for the multiculturalism of the modern world. To raise the importance of cross-cultural understandings in English

language learning, this study examined ELF speakers' use of strategies in cross-cultural communication in which English is being used as a Lingua Franca. Intercultural strategies are essential aspects of English language learning in the ELF context since learners are not only encouraged to maintain their native identities but also to understand various cultures of English speaking people, which are not restricted to the native speakers' cultures.

Objectives

1. To investigate Naresuan University graduate students' intercultural strategies in English as a lingua franca communications.

2. To investigate Naresuan University graduate students' opinions in English as a lingua franca communications.

Methodology

Method and Instruments

This study adopted a mixed-method research design to investigate English major graduate students' intercultural strategies used in ELF communicative settings. In so doing, a survey questionnaire and a focus group interview were employed. The questionnaire about intercultural strategies were constructed by drawing on the key features of intercultural awareness and competence that have been widely discussed in the literature. There are, for example, selecting appropriate topics (Leung, Lee, & Chiu, 2013; Sharifian, 2013), asking for repetitions or clarifications (Cogo & Dewey, 2006; Mauranen, 2009), using background knowledge of others' cultures (Byram et al., 2002), using each other's mother tongue or code-switching (Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2007), and

วารสารศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตหาดใหญ่
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avoiding idiomatic vocabulary or expressions (Breiteneder, 2005; Gnutzmann, 2000; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer 2004). According to Baker (2012) and Sharifian (2009; 2013), the abovementioned key strategies are regarded as crucial characteristics of intercultural competence of English speakers in ELF communications.

Since this study aimed to uncover in-depth insights on the participants' attitudes, thoughts, and actions in using English as a lingua franca, a focus group interview was conducted to further discover the contextualized aspects of intercultural strategies and other communication challenges. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), a focus group interview or focused interview can obtain participants' knowledge, reflections, and considerations on a particular topic. Therefore, the tool was employed to explore participants' opinions and experiences which were contextualized and embedded in multi-cultural environments.

To establish the validity of the survey questionnaire, a panel of three experts in applied linguistics evaluated the questionnaire items for the content validity. The index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was analyzed; the score of each item was higher than 0.5 which affirmed that the questionnaire was appropriately constructed. Revisions about wording of items were made according to the experts' comments. For the reliability, the questionnaire was administered to 30 graduate students who were not the sample group of the study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was applied which was at 0.82 ($\alpha \geq 0.7$) indicating the high reliability of the instrument in measuring participants' intercultural strategies. The face validity was also examined to this non-sample group

to determine any possible difficulties in comprehension. The results were used to improve the clarity of the question items including the directions, format, and reordering.

For the qualitative instrument, the focus group interview questions, the validation procedure was conducted with the same experts who evaluated the questionnaire. These questions were also tried out in a 45-minute focus group interview with non-sample students. After finishing the validation and reliability procedures of the instruments, the research information, the consent form and the interview guidelines were prepared for the participants before conducting the survey and interview.

Participants and Procedure

The population of the study were the graduate students of the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University. Selected by the purposive sampling technique, the sample group were 44 graduate students who were studying master and doctoral degree in English in the first semester of the 2016 academic year. There were 44 questionnaires distributed and 41 returned; therefore, the response rate was 93.18%.

Participants responded to the questionnaire which included three sections: participant's information, intercultural strategies used in ELF communications, and opinions of using English in ELF settings. In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants responded to the items about intercultural strategies in ELF communications by rating the 5-point scale items according to the frequency of use ranking from never

วารสารศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตหาดใหญ่
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(0) to always (5). They were also asked to provide additional opinions in the open ended question in the third part.

After that, volunteers were invited to join a 45-minute focus group interview. There were seven master's degree students who were in their first and second year of study. Among the seven volunteers, two people were international students from Indonesia and Vietnam, while the rest of them were Thai students who were studying with international classmates. The researcher asked questions based on their responses and listened not only for the content of focus group discussions, but also for emotions, ironies, contradictions, and tensions. This enabled the researcher to learn or confirm not just the facts (as in survey method), but the meaning behind the facts. The interview also encouraged the participants to share their experiences in interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the interview, all participants were encouraged to contribute their stories and reflections not only when they encounter communication problems, misunderstandings, or difficulties, but also their techniques to overcome those intercultural and linguistic issues.

Findings

Finding 1 Intercultural Strategies Used by Graduate Students
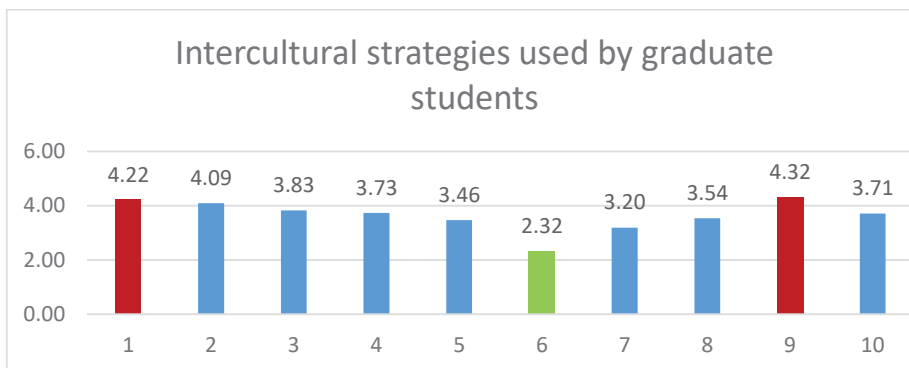
List of strategies 1-10

1. Selecting conversation topics of shared common interests or background.

2. Selecting standard vocabulary or easy expression

3. Asking for clarification on the similarities/ differences of cultural concepts

4. Using your background knowledge of the partner's culture

5. Being careful in using grammatically correct expression

6. Using your mother tongue to facilitate the communication.

7. Using the partner's mother tongue to facilitate the communication.

8. Avoid talking about sensitive issues

9. Clarifying or explaining your cultural terms or topics

10. Asking for repetition on the unclear pronunciation or unfamiliar expression.

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Figure 1 Mean Scores of Intercultural Strategies Used by Graduate Students

In Figure 1, it was demonstrated that clarifying or explaining cultural terms to achieve the communication goal was ranked the highest ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.32) among the ten intercultural strategies. The second most rated strategy was selecting the conversation topic that both interlocutors share common interests or background ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.22).

Other highly used strategies (selecting standard or easy expression, asking for clarification of others' cultural concepts, using background knowledge of others' culture) were ranked at 4.09, 3.83, and 3.73, respectively. Nevertheless, the participants' responses showed that they less employed the strategies of using grammatically correct expression ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.46) or using the partner's mother tongue to facilitate the communication ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.20). Among the participants, the least frequently used strategy was using their own mother tongue to facilitate the ELF conversation ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 2.32).

Finding 2 Students' Opinions from the Focus Group Interview

The following data presented what participants perceived as challenges, characteristics, and strategies in using English as a lingua franca in intercultural communication.

1. Challenges in Using Idioms in Conversations

In ELF conversations, participants reflected that the use of idioms often created misunderstanding. The following were some examples of their experiences:

a. "Do me a favor"

Participant#6 mentioned that she used the idiom "do me a favor" in her daily conversation with other graduate students and found that she later had to rephrase her utterances to indicate that she needed help from the partner.

"….When I used some idioms, it seems that some people just don't get me. For example, I want to ask for help from a friend so I use the idiom "do me a favor", like "Can you do me a favor? but my friend just looked at me and waited if there's something I was going to speak. Instead of saying "What is it?" or "What can I do for you?" Then I know I have to rephrase it, so I said "Can you help me?", and after that I got "Yes" from my friend…"

b. "Let's call it a day"

Participant#5 also shared the same experience when trying to use idioms in ELF settings. She told the researcher that she was familiar with using a lot of common idioms in daily conversations. However, she had to reduce the amount of phrasal expressions including idioms when communicating with other students.

"I remembered one evening when we felt tired after a long day of group work, so I said to my teammates, "OK guys, let's call it a day". They just keep chatting and working on the document. So I repeated it again, "Let's call it a day". Then one of my friend looked at me and said, "Yes, it's Friday." Then I understand that they didn't get me, so I said, "No, let's go. Let's get out of this room." From that

situation, I think it's better to be more careful in using idioms, so I don't have to repeat or rephrase what I speak."

2. Characteristics of Language in ELF Communications

Most of the interview participants agreed that grammatical and structural correctness were not the major concern in intercultural conversations. The following included their remarks on grammatical and lexical issues.

A: Less Focus on Grammatical Correctness

Participants mentioned that they were more relaxed when speaking English with NNSs. Participant#7 shared her thoughts on this issue.

"Among NNSs, I speak English freely and feel more confident in what I said. It's common to make mistakes as it happens all the time. When someone make grammatical mistakes, no one cares to correct it as far as we still understand each other. The conversation is less stressful and I can say whatever I want."

Similarly, participant#1 gave the same evidence that she became less concerned about her language correctness.

"When it comes to conversation with international students, I realize that many times we both make grammatical mistakes but it seems like people are not aware of them."

B: Simplified Language

Both participant#1 and #2 agreed that they adjusted their language when speaking with other NNSs in the university.

Oftentimes, they use easy vocabulary and less complicated expressions when engaged in everyday conversation.

"After having trouble in English conversation with other students, I use more basic terms in my talk. People can understand me faster when I use simple words, not sophisticated words."

"In everyday conversation, we do not use too difficult or too specific words, we use a lot of basic terms which means we don't need to explain much. After a while, we keep using the same expressions that we have already understood each other."

C: Occasional Use of Each Other's Mother Tongue to Enhance Communication

Participant#3 elicited personal details on how using each other's mother tongue could enhance communication in ELF situation.

"These days…when my classmate does not understand something. Instead of asking "Pardon me? or just What?, he deliberately says "Apa?" (Indonesian: What) and it is understood because we've been friends for almost three years and we all know what he means. We also speak Thai to him and often use simple words like "Arai?" (Thai: What?), "Chai" (Thai: Yes), and "Mai" (Thai: No). It's common for us to add a bit of our mother tongue in the conversation, especially for close friends, since we understand some of each other's mother tongue."

3. Strategies for Enhancing ELF Communication

All of the focus group interview participants suggested that English language learners in ELF settings should apply various strategies

to achieve their communicative goals. The strategies they recommended in the interviews were classified into three main types as follows:

3.1 Explore and Expose

Participant#5 mentioned that to enhance English communication among people from different cultural and linguistic background, it is essential to "open up" and "get used" to the varieties of English used by others in ELF settings.

"I think it's important for English learners to know the background of the people they usually talk to. Take me as an example, I find it quite frustrating at the first time I speak English with some international students. I didn't understand what they said at all and they seemed not to understand me as well. But when time passes, we meet every day and we understand each other more…"

Participant#6 stressed that sharing the same cultural background culture helped a great deal in achieving the communication goal.

"Talking to people from neighbor countries or ASEAN countries is quite relaxing for me because I know we share some common values such as paying respect to the elderly, or living in a big family. It is also applied to speaking with some native speakers who spent a long time in this country and understand Thai people and culture. So, it's not just we learn their culture, but they should learn ours as well."

Other participants agreed that the official establishment of the ASEAN community had offered more opportunity to be exposed to English in everyday life. Both at work and university, they were

required to use English as a medium of communication since more classmates and colleagues were from the neighboring countries.

3.2 Acquire and Accept

Participant#6 thought that although there were more opportunities to speak English with NNS than NS, learning the native speakers' cultures is still essential in English learning.

"It's still important to learn about native culture as one day we may come across people whose lives may have been influenced by the native speakers' culture. Since many of NNSs, including us, were trained in school using the native speakers' norms. For instance, American English is on TV programs and many kinds of entertainment media on the Internet. We somehow may share some common knowledge about the native culture and that could be useful in conversation as we need to find some common ground."

For participant#7, learning and teaching native English cultures should be differently addressed in English language lessons. The knowledge of a native culture was not the indicator of communicative language proficiency.

"Learning about native culture like Thanksgiving or Christmas is interesting. However, the knowledge of native culture should not be tested in any kind of proficiency exam. It is still useful to learn those native values and customs, but it was not related to language ability. Actually..., we don't really need those knowledge in everyday conversation..."

3.3 Accommodate and Adjust

Participants employed some strategies that enable them to convey the desirable message. In ELF conversation, being straightforward,

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avoiding idiomatic expressions, and using other communicative tools were all essential to reach the communicative goal.

Participant#2 always put a considerable effort to clarify or elaborate her message to her interlocutors and make sure they understand what she meant.

"When I talk to my friends, I bear in mind that what I said or typed might not be correctly understood by people from other cultures. Many times I repeat and asked for clarification to ensure that we mutually understand each other."

Participant#6 felt more confident to use technology-assisted communicative tool to recheck, back up, or make a summary of the message.

"I prefer using social media tools to re-check if we got it correct. In text messages, the language is more straightforward and we see the same information. I think it helps a lot when face-to-face conversation doesn't go well."

She added that using text messages or emails was convenient to provide more details after verbal conversations. This concurred with what participant#4 had experienced in using social networking tool to enhance ELF conversations.

"I had a friend who was not so good at speaking English. Though, we try to know more about each other by exchanging text messages a lot. He even told me that he couldn't catch up in speaking English with me, but he liked to send text as he had more time when typing..."

Conclusions and Discussions

This study investigated the intercultural strategies used by graduate students in English as a lingua franca communications. The findings from the questionnaire revealed that the mostly employed intercultural strategy by the participants was clarifying or explaining cultural terms to interlocutors in order to achieve the communication goal. Another frequently used strategy was selecting the conversation topic that both conversation partners share the interests or background experiences.

The findings from the first part of the survey show agreement with its qualitative data in the focus group interview in which the participants stated their awareness of the similarities of their own culture and their partners'. The highest ranked strategy used by the participants in this study, which was clarifying or explaining cultural terms to achieve the communication goal, also reflected the importance of intercultural competence of ELF speakers' awareness of not only others' cultural backgrounds but also their own values and beliefs. This yields the ability to establish the points of relevance between the two different cultures which is paramount in being a competent English speakers in multicultural societies as mentioned by previous researchers. According to Jenkins (2007), the ability to accommodate to interlocutors is far more important than the ability to conform to the English as a native language standard. In the same vein, Leung, Lee, and Chiu (2013) confirmed that successful cross-cultural speakers would carefully execute meta-knowledge about other cultures to select appropriate messages to

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communicate with the interlocutors from a certain culture in order to achieve successful intercultural communication.

Although the least frequently used strategy was using one's mother tongue to facilitate the ELF conversation, some interview participants revealed that they sometimes code-switched a particular word in order to convey the specific meaning. This can be explained that the use of code-switching between ELF speakers could be found when they have already been acquainted and learned about each other's common expressions. Code-switching or occasional use of a mother tongue is commonly found in conversations that speakers share mutual experiences and linguistic understandings among different cultures. Using one's native lexical terms or local expression is one way to express cultural identity in cross-cultural communications (Mackenzie, 2014, p.5)

While using idiomatic expressions was reported in the interview as a challenge in intercultural communications, it was found in the survey that choosing easily understood utterances was one of the most frequently used strategies in cross-cultural communications. This implies that ELF speakers are likely to accommodate their language towards their interlocutors who may not familiar with idiomatic or phrasal expressions. This finding also confirms a typical feature found in previous studies that ELF speakers are likely to adopt a number of linguistic variations that may not follow the native speakers' norm (Breiteneder, 2005; Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2009) such as avoiding cultural-specific phrases or idiomatic expressions. The language that they use to communicate

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successfully are also simplified and repeatedly used (Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Therefore, to become a successful ELF speaker, one may need to consider aspects of cross-cultural communication and be able to adopt flexible strategies accordingly. Moreover, the language features used by ELF speakers in daily conversation, namely, using simplified language and avoiding idiomatic expressions, should be regarded as accommodating strategies rather than incompetence. Since the goal of communication can be as well achieved among ELF partners regardless of strict conformity to native speakers' styles. This concurred with Baker (2012), Jenkins (2007), Mackenzie (2014), and Sharifian (2010) who all asserted that the ability to negotiate meanings in cross-cultural communications is more crucial than the ability to imitate the English of native speakers.

However, this does not suggest that the core linguistic features of English will be neglected or undermined. As participants stated that learning the standard English and knowing about native cultures are still useful in some situations. Nevertheless, knowledge of the native culture was may not be as important as the knowledge of the different cultures in multicultural settings. Furthermore, it is also possible for ELF speakers to occasionally code-switch as a way to express more about their cultural identities or to resolve misunderstandings by selecting mutually understood concepts of both conversation parties. The findings of this study also highlight the underlying purpose of intercultural communications in which speakers are all equal in contributing meaning through the use of English as a medium language.

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Recommendations

First of all, English language learners and instructors should be aware of the current situation of English used in this context. Due to the fact that we no longer learn English in order to communicate with only native speakers, ELF speakers do not necessarily imitate native speakers' accent or using cultural specific expressions. Instead, they rather seek for opportunities to experience a wide varieties of English in everyday conversations and at the same time develop the ability to relate their own cultural attributes to others' to become successful in intercultural negotiations. Therefore, intercultural competence should be seriously emphasized and practiced in classrooms. Furthermore, ELF learners should be encouraged to practice ELF communications in various settings with speakers from different cultures. Information and communication technology and social media tools have the potential to support the development of intercultural competence and awareness since more and more cross-cultural interactions are taking place via digital platforms. With the ICT capability, a variety of intercultural language tasks can be facilitated through digital tools for learners to practice negotiations with other ELF speakers. This may encourage leaners to develop appropriate knowledge and attitude to become a competence ELF users in the 21st century.

As mentioned earlier, the intercultural strategies proposed by both previous studies and this study can be used as guidelines for ELF curriculum design in the ASEAN contexts. English should be learned through local and neighboring content so that learners can acquire the language to understand their neighbors' cultures which may relate to

their own. Also, English language teachers may be required to adjust their perspectives in English language teaching. In other words, they should adopt the principles of teaching English as a lingua franca rather than English as a foreign language in order to design their instruction to the interconnected world accordingly. Regardless of conventional English instruction embedded with notions of the native speaker's cultural concepts, English teachers in Thailand and the ASEAN region should introduce intercultural strategies in classroom and include cross-cultural learning in classroom instructions and activities. English lessons need to be adjusted in terms of content diversities from different cultures of English language speakers that learners might experience in current situations.

Lastly, English language learners should never stop learning; the goal of English language learning should go beyond acquiring the native-like communicative competence. What is more important for today's English speakers is to understand others' underlying messages and to adjust and accommodate one's language with whoever they speak English. Strategies, therefore, are as equally essential as abilities when it comes to intercultural encounters.

Nevertheless, some limitations of this study need to be addressed in order to provide opportunities for the future research to fill in the gap. First of all, this study investigated the strategies and opinions of graduate students who were adult learners with extensive English learning experiences. More studies should be conducted with young or beginner learners who are at the early stages of learning, which may

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yield different results. Moreover, case studies are highly recommended to elicit the deeper aspects of strategies used in ELF communications.

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