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ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF) IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: FINDINGS FROM ELF ONLINE PROJECTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ELT IN TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of the internet enables people to communicate at a low cost. Moreover, as English continues to spread globally within educational systems in various countries, the language barrier between speakers of a different fist language is gradually fading. People of a different first language now use English as a lingua franca (ELF) to communicate with each other. In the past, most studies on intercultural communication involved native-speakers and non-native speakers of a language (Sharifian, 2009a, p.4). There was insufficient attention to intercultural communication in a lingua franca setting when both sides use a second language to communicate. This paper draws from the findings from five ELF intercultural projects conducted by the author to discuss how cultural frameworks in ELF settings influence students' online written communication. Students' email and forum records as well as their reflections of the experience participating in the project were qualitatively analyzed to identify communication gaps. Preconceptions derived from the students' own culture, stereotypes about their partner's culture, influence from the students' L1, and incongruent understanding of certain English words were found to play key roles in ELF intercultural communication. Issues in ELF intercultural communication and its implications for ELT in Taiwan are discussed.

Key Words: ELF, intercultural communication, online communication, EIL

INTRODUCTION

As the world continues to be inter-connected by emerging technologies and the integration of global economy, interactions among people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds also keep

intensifying. Language as one of the most important communication medium plays a critical role in various intercultural interactions, and English, as it now stands as a global language, is the latest 'lingua franca' (Ostler, 2010) used by speakers of other languages. One major characteristic of a lingua franca is that the language only serves instrumental functions to convey messages for the language users (Knapp & Meierkord, 2002). Users of English as a lingua franca (ELF), defined as both interlocutors having another first language and using English as the common language, use English to communicate, not to represent themselves. Another feature of ELF is that in most cases, ELF users 'think' in their first language (L1), with their own cultural conceptualization (Sharifian, 2009b), and often *appropriate* English to create various nonstandard 'Englishes' (see Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2006; Pennycook, 2007). Thus ELF intercultural communication differs in many ways from foreign language intercultural communication, or the communication between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of a language.

Traditionally, intercultural communication studies, with the majority of its scholars being English native speakers, focus on cultural issues arising in NS-NNS intercultural communication (Sharifian, 2009a). Language problems and obstacles in intercultural communication are relegated to language educators who are supposed to assist English learners to master the language by following all of the NS forms and norms. It might be true that two decades ago the majority of intercultural communication occurred between NS and NNS. However, the internet and globalization have transformed the world to make lingua franca intercultural communication more common. Given the fundamental differences between ELF and NS-NNS intercultural communication, there is a great need for research into ELF intercultural communication. The findings from such research may provide English teachers around the world with new directions to teach English in a way that accommodates the new reality of ELF as the main form of English usage. In the past, (and it remains so for most countries) the goal of English language education in non-English-speaking countries was to teach students how to use English to communicate with native speakers and understand 'English' cultures (American, British, the so-called Anglophone cultures). As a result, to cope with the surging needs of ELF communication, English language education has to adjust.

In the traditional EFL paradigm, students are taught to follow NS

norms and mimic the English usages of NS. Even non-native English teachers from non-English-speaking cultures are regarded as disseminators of an English language and its associated Anglo-American culture. Students learn standard American or British English in order to communicate with NS in the future. The emergence of ELF dramatically alters this assumption and thus creates a new global English paradigm (Pakir, 2009) in which ELF serves as the foundation. If the purpose of learning English is to communicate with other ELF users, then our ELT should focus more on intelligibility instead of on NS-based language forms. More attention and time should be allocated to improve students' intercultural communication competence in English (for more discussions and comparisons of the two paradigms, see Graddol, 2006, p.81-101; Ke & Suzuki, 2011, p.170-172; Yano, 2009).

Despite the urgent need and increasing consensus to incorporate ELF into TESOL, most discussions remain too abstract and theoretical (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011, p.333). The ideas seem reasonable, but TESOL scholars are still striving to identify realistic and practical approaches to implement them in real settings. To contribute to the understanding of the pedagogical aspects of the emergent ELF and global English paradigm, the current study reports findings from five online ELF intercultural communication projects regarding the difficulties, obstacles, linguistic features, communication styles, discourse differences, cultural influence, and other relevant issues with the purpose to present the real situations in ELF intercultural communication between university students of intermediate English proficiency. The study of these real situations shall provide teachers who intend to bring ELF activities into their practice some contextualized knowledge while highlighting critical pedagogical issues so that teachers may be better able to deal with them.

Theoretical backgrounds of the concepts of ELF, culture, and intercultural communication are first presented, followed by a brief introduction of the online projects conducted by the author. Data collection and analysis protocols are then presented. After summarizing the findings, I discuss issues related to English education in Taiwan in the context of ELF.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ELF

As Sharifian (2009a, p.4) states, "the bulk of research in the area of intercultural communication has focused on English as a medium of communication". The fact that most studies focused on NS-NNS interactions reflects the traditional intercultural communication landscape: most such communications occurred between NS and NNS. One party in the communication had to learn the language of the other party. However, in the last two decades as globalization has accelerated and the global spread of English has perpetuated, more and more intercultural communication occurs in ELF situations in which both sides use English as a lingua franca. As a result, studies in this field have flourished and provide us more understanding into the phenomenon of ELF intercultural communication (see Knapp & Meierkord, 2002; Mauranen & Ranta, 2009).

As far as the concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC) is concerned, the issue of language is often marginally discussed. As one of the most cited authors when culture is the topic, Hofstede (2001) conceives ICC as a capacity to be learned by raising cultural awareness, gaining cultural knowledge, and developing intercultural communication skills. Wiseman (2003) emphasizes the importance of knowledge, motivation, and skills in ICC. Linguistic competence is part of cultural knowledge, with the implicit assumption that if you want to know more about culture X, you need to learn language X as part and parcel of culture X. The relationship between language and culture was regarded as straightforward and inseparable. Linguistic barriers were acknowledged in intercultural communication, but with native English speakers dominating the field, non-native speakers were expected to overcome the barriers by mastering the English language and the norms and forms used by native speakers. The linguistic norms are usually culturally oriented: most idioms, metaphors, and proverbs are embedded in the cultures of the main L1 speech community. Understanding these cultures is the prerequisite for understanding the language use by the NS.

The emergence of ELF has brought an impact on the intercultural communication field, particularly in terms of the requirement of linguistic competence. Cultural understanding, empathy, and sensitivity remain critical, but the actual use of English in the communication process deserves more attention since increasingly both parties are 'English as a foreign or second language (EFL or ESL)' users. The linguistic norms and cultural norms are negotiated and developed during

the process, unlike in NS-NNS situations. Plenty of uncertainties exist in the process of ELF communication.

Findings from previous studies in ELF intercultural communication suggest that most ELF users are able to communicate at an effective level (Firth, 1996). In some cases, the interaction and process are described as 'better than NS-NNS' (Kaur, 2009). The main reason may be attributed to the fact that both sides take a more cooperative attitude to adjust and accommodate due to their lack of proficiency in English. ELF users possess empathy in the communication process, and they work actively to find or construct common ground during the process (Lesznyak, 2002). ELF users have been English learners themselves and understand the difficulties in expressing ideas in English for other ELF users of various proficiency levels, and unlike native speakers most of whom seldom show this empathy, more proficient ELF users *would* and *could* adjust their productions of English forms to facilitate the communication process.

Firth (1996) found several useful strategies that ELF users adopted to facilitate intercultural communication. Among the most cited is the 'let-it-pass' strategy; when one is unable to understand the utterance by the other ELF user, and if the message is not directly related to the core purpose of communication, most ELF users would just ignore the 'undecodable' utterance and keep the conversation flowing smoothly. Sometimes the unclear utterance would become understood as more information and contextual cues follow the utterance, and in other cases, the utterance may be totally ignored as the conversation shifts to other different topics. Moreover, ELF participants with a higher level of linguistic competence are able to tolerate the anomalous usage in another's talk. They appear to "normalize" the awkward usages, or L1-influenced English productions. They would treat these nonstandard forms as normal, since they themselves also produce such forms in some circumstances. This is one way to co-construct a common ground for communication.

Cogo (2009) identified two major accommodation strategies that ELF users adopted: repetition and code-switching. Repeating the same utterance is common for ELF users, both for the speakers to repeat the same utterance and for the hearer to repeat what s/he hears as a confirmation. Since ELF users need more time to process the received utterance, this repetition strategy facilitates mutual understanding. In addition, most ELF users have several linguistic repertoires, usually

owning various levels of linguistic knowledge of 'regional' languages. For example, most Europeans usually know several European languages, and many East Asian ELF users (usually also more educated and of higher social economic status) also have some knowledge of the major regional languages like Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Because most ELF interactions occur within the same region, ELF users may use more than one language in their communication. They utilize not only English but often the first language of one of the interlocutors or another regional lingua franca in which they might not have the same proficiency level as their English. ELF users utilize all possible media or resources to achieve the purpose of communication: not only linguistic resources, but also visual or audio aids such as real objects, images, and music to facilitate communication.

In sum, ELF users realize clearly that effort is necessary to achieve intercultural communication, and tolerate or even expect failure at the first attempt. Successful ELF users engage in the meaning-negotiating, common-ground-constructing, and rapport-building process during their interactions. Unsuccessful ELF users, on the other hand, may attribute their failure to their own or their interlocutor's personal communication style and the lack of knowledge of the requisite English. They usually would not realize that cultural awareness and discourse awareness also play a significant role. Most future ELF users, now English learners, are not instructed on how to achieve ELF intercultural communication, and most successful ELF users develop their competence by learning from (failing) experience. Thus, it is high time to include ELF intercultural communication in English education worldwide.

CULTURES IN ELF

Culture as Most People Know It

Culture is an abstract concept, with numerous definitions. Here I start by describing culture in the traditional definition, which is the essentialist view of culture as national or ethnical culture. When culture is regarded as 'national culture', such as American culture, Chinese culture, and so on, in ELF intercultural communication, the English language use may be culturally stripped or incorporate all possible cultures depending on the cultural background of the ELF users (Meierkord, 2002). Since a lingua franca functions solely as an

instrument, no national culture should be associated with the instrument.

This 'culture-free' ELF perspective seems too radical for most scholars. Medgyes (1999) doubts whether any language use could be culture-free. In ELF intercultural communication, indeed we may forget our *linguistic* identity as NNS because both sides use English as L2. But we are still very aware, if not more aware of our cultural or ethnic identity as speaking to an 'other' keeps reminding us of the difference and of our particular identity. ELF users bring their respective cultures to the scene, but they may not be able to drop their own cultures, and not necessarily have to intentionally take a culture-free stance. L1 cultural identity may not always be assumed in ELF, because ELF speakers usually are aware of several different cultures, to various extents including English (Anglo-American) cultural norms because it is normal in the traditional EFL paradigm to learn English cultures when learning English. At least three different national cultures may be relevant here, and often some understanding of all three cultures would greatly enhance the effectiveness in communication (Meierkord, 2002).

Discourse vs. Culture

If we see culture as a meaningless word, too broad, too confusing and controversial to be useful, then a non-essentialist dynamic view of culture may provide meaningful implications for ELF intercultural communication. Culture often denotes group identity and macro-level homogeneity. However, in reality, intercultural communication resembles more to interpersonal communication than to intercultural communication, because "cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do" (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p.125). The concept of discourse is more proper than the omnipotent idea of culture in intercultural communication. Baker (2009) also highlights the dynamic, fluid, and hybrid nature of the cultures in ELF intercultural communication. Discourse community seems a better term to reflect the complexity in the context of ELF intercultural communication. This conceptual adjustment transcends the traditional notion of culture as nationally or ethnically determined, and also accounts for other possible cultural attributes such as gender, age, and occupation.

If the concept of discourse instead of culture is adopted here, students engaging in online ELF intercultural communication are actually negotiating and developing their particular discourse, drawing

on respective cultural references and resources, in addition to their common knowledge of each other's cultures. Consequently, what matters more is not to what extent the participants in the intercultural communication understand each other's cultures and English cultures, but rather the participants' ability to learn about the particular intercultural discourse that they are engaged in. Discourse strategies in intercultural communication such as cooperative behaviors (e.g., laughter& back-channeling) and clarification utterances (see Bae, 2002) would offer great potential to enhance the process of intercultural interactions.

ONLINE ELF COMMUNICATION PROJECTS

Realizing the necessity to bring ELF into TESOL, I purposefully sought potential partners by attending TESOL conferences in Asia and successfully recruited several teachers from other Asian countries. It is my belief that at least the exposure to ELF would prompt my students to comprehend the new reality that the majority of their future English use would probably be with other non-native speakers and start to adjust how they learn and use English.

From March 2010 to December 2011, five projects were carried out between my Taiwanese students and students in another non-English speaking country. Most of the Taiwanese students were freshmen when they participated in the projects. The main purpose of these projects was to provide an authentic opportunity for my English-learning students to use English with students from another cultural and linguistic background. The students had a taste of ELF communication and learned how to use English to communicate with another non-native English learner. Before engaging in real communication, I offered instructions on (1) netiquette, or proper manners when interacting in online forums and emails, (2) intercultural respect and empathy, and (3) suggestions on English use, reminding them that their partners were also English learners and that they should try to use simple English and avoid using slangs or idioms. In three projects the participants were recruited voluntarily, while in the other two projects all of the course takers were required to participate in the project and their participation accounted for 15% of the course grades. More details on each project are provided below.

Between March and June 2010, twenty-three Taiwanese students

communicated via emails with twenty-three Turkish college students to learn about cultural similarities and differences on both sides. The details of the project were presented in my earlier publication (Ke, 2011). In the Fall semester of 2010, my English reading class connected with two English classes in Indonesia using both emails and forums to practice their English and make intercultural friends. Students were assigned into pairs and communicated on the assigned topic via emails first, and then were required to report what they have learned about their partner in public forums. Also in the Fall semester of 2010, I experimented with an Iranian teacher on using online intercultural peer editing to improve students' English writing. Only five students from each side volunteered to participate, and they corresponded by email. They each wrote an essay on a self-chosen topic related to cultural comparison and peer-edited each other's essay. In the 2011 Spring semester, two projects were carried out. The project with Indonesian students continued on a smaller scale, with only 24 students from each side. The format was similar, but topics were different. The second project involved 19 Japanese students, who shared their opinions with Taiwanese students after reading an article titled '*English as an Asian language'* by Kirkpatrick (2000). Students interacted on a forum set up by the Japanese university. Eight Japanese students visited our campus in September 2011 to meet the members of their forum group and presented their ideas relating to English as a lingua franca and Asian Englishes. Table below summarizes the projects that the study draws upon.

Table

A List of Online ELF Projects Conducted by the Researcher in 2010 and 2011

Time	Partners	Communication Format	Topics of Discussion
2010. March-June	23 Turkish ⇔23 Taiwanese (Voluntary)	Email	Family, hospitality, food, cultural items and values, stereotypes
2010 Sep.-Dec.	48 Indonesians ⇔ 60 Taiwanese (Required)	Email+Forum	Meanings of L1 name, school life
2010 Oct.-Dec	5 Iranians ⇔ 3 Taiwanese juniors and 2 seniors (Voluntary)	Email	Peer-review English writing
2011 March-June	24 Indonesians ⇔24 Taiwanese (Required)	Email+Forum	English learning, idol or role model, religion
2011 May-June	19 Japanese ⇔ 27 Taiwanese (Voluntary)	Forum	English as an Asian language and lingua franca

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

While the projects may differ in its particular context, they share a core commonality: they are all ELF online communication projects between university students under teachers' guidance. The main reason to include multiple projects in this study is because the amount of data from a single project does not yield sufficient nuances and diversities. By examining more data, more detailed and varied real situations of ELF communication may be presented.

Data collected from these projects include students' communication records (emails and forum posts) and their reflections on the experience. Grounded theory (Charmaz, 1983; Corbin & Strauss, 1990) serves as the guiding methodology for the qualitative analysis on the collected data. Communication records were carefully read to identify the interaction patterns and common ways of English use. After general patterns of interaction were identified through constant comparisons of different cases, the focus shifted to examining critical communication incidents. Communication gaps were extracted after carefully reading through the records, and then later analyzed for possible sources that led to the occurrences of the gaps. Findings of students' reflections were compared and synthesized with the communication records to understand the sources of the communication gaps. The interpretations of these gaps were formed from immersing in the qualitative data to gauge students' perceptions and conceptions during the ELF intercultural communication process. Students' reflections consist of answers to the teacher's questions, which focus on their communication experience, language use, and what they learned in the project. These answers were categorized and coded to calculate prevalent patterns. Critical passages, or sentences that reveal students' particular perceptions and conceptions related to ELF or intercultural communication, were identified and further analyzed. All of the analyses were then synthesized and organized to be presented in the following findings section with the intention to provide contextualized narratives for readers to relate to their own world. I do not claim my interpretations to be correct but they serve as a foundation for the dialogue between the author and the reader. Due to space limit, only those issues with wider implications are presented.

FINDINGS

This section is organized by the main themes identified from the emails and the students' reflections on the intercultural experience. In general, students' motivation and attitude seemed to play a more critical role than their English proficiency level. In projects with voluntary participants, there were more interactions and the communication tended to have a reciprocal flavor as interpersonal bonds developed between the participants. When participants were *required* to participate, the lukewarm or sometimes indifferent attitude prevented any sincere communication from occurring. In most cases there were only initial superficial greeting and information exchanges. Thus mentality is more important than communication and linguistic skills.

On the other hand, lower English level did influence some participants in regard to their capacity for understanding and in expressing themselves. Take Kelly, a Taiwanese student, for example. Kelly's emails with two different partners show that proficiency level does influence the extent to which one can express one's own ideas. Her interaction with Dwi, the Indonesian student with competent English, was much more lively and personal, touching on deeper issues than her exchange with another partner with a lower proficiency level. Kelly even opened up her heart to tell a very personal story to Dwi. I was touched by the story, too. Sometimes, we tend to reveal personal secrets to foreigners who would not appear in our daily life such as Kelly's case in the project. Knowing that they are not part of our normal life, and that they have another life with a different language and culture in another place, we feel less pressured when telling secrets. Kelly was a shy girl in class, but her writing is good. She showed that she can use English well to express herself. She answered most questions from Dwi, and they maintained a good relationship. Her interaction with the other partner, in contrast, did not develop because she had difficulties understanding her and her partner's low proficiency level prevented her from sharing much experience with Kelly. Consequently, sufficient proficiency level remains necessary for successful ELF communication, even though the priority in such communication is not linguistic knowledge.

In addition to the issue of students' proficiency level, students' use of English, issues of cultural differences, ethnocentrism, and stereotype are presented in this section.

Students' Use of English

In these projects, all of the students used English as a lingua franca to communicate. Their insufficiency of lexical knowledge in English is another barrier to communication. This is particularly apparent when *idioms or metaphorical expressions* were used:

> Sometimes I couldn't understand what he was talking about, and he couldn't understand me either. So we have to make a further explanation. I felt it's a bit tiring. For example, when I mentioned about puppy love, and then he asked, 'What's puppy love? Puppy=dog's child?' I was totally stunned. At first, we chatted frequently, then fewer and fewer. (Jan's reflection on her email exchanges with her Indonesian partner)

In the reflection Jan complained about the extra effort needed to 'explain everything'. She was not considerate and assumed that her partner know the meaning of an idiom or words that have meanings other than literal meanings. Her example exemplifies the problem of sticking to NS norms, the problem caused by NS culture-based usage 'puppy love'. If Jan were communicating with a NS, this definitely would not be a problem. But in an ELF situation, such cases may be common. If Jan does not adjust her attitude, then predictably, her future use of ELF in intercultural communication will remain difficult. This is definitely not a desirable outcome for teachers.

When students are not aware that the phrase they use is an idiom, but treat it as a normal word, they would then regard their partner's inability to understand such a normal word as showing insufficient proficiency in English. They do not realize that the use of idiomatic expressions may cause problems even among native speakers. That students treat idioms similarly with all other words is a symptom of the traditional ELT paradigm that teaches students NS norms, assuming NS as students' future interlocutors. Some teachers even believe that the more idioms one knows, the higher one's English proficiency. They would never expect that their students' use of idioms would lead to detrimental effects in ELF intercultural communication!

What is more troublesome is that some students, while unaware of their own comprehension and production problems (they do not read English words carefully nor write carefully), would blame their partner's

low proficiency, which is judged by whether they can understand their partner's English or not. When their partner misunderstood their sentences, they failed to adjust their ways of writing, but instead only recognized the difference:

> They couldn't know what we said because sometimes they misunderstood our meanings. For example, I only said that our school's buildings were constructed by the designers, but my partner thought we students build our classrooms. Education aside, I think it just because what we good at is different. Maybe they are good at this part and we are good at the other. (May's reflection in Indonesia project)

After analyzing May's emails with her partner, I find that she herself also misinterpreted many phrases and words written by her partner. Her emails contain many typos and a large amount of Chinese syntax, and these made the emails quite difficult to understand. The lesson is that students should be prompted to examine their own language productions; otherwise, they will continue to produce confusing utterances.

Another common problem with students' use of certain English words is that many students used translating devices (either an electronic dictionary or online websites) to express certain ideas. Successful translation requires more than linguistic knowledge, so if one trusts translating devices only, breakdowns in communication might occur. Most words have different meanings in different contexts, and many words are not translatable. When a student writes English by translating directly from her first language, some intriguing words would puzzle their partners, like '*resemble rule*' in "I think in Taiwan, we have the resemble rule on the education" (May's email).

Key words often cause problems, especially borrowed words, either from L1 into English, or the other way from English to L1 but with a different spelling.

> I didn't hear of futsal before. And our country doesn't have this kind of sports. So I was confused about it. Then I asked him what the sports is and he told me that it is mini football, but it is playing indoor. (Victoria's reflection in Indonesia project)

Similar situations also arose in the Turkish project, since both Indonesian

and Turkish apply a Romanized spelling system, so naturally they mixed in Romanized L1. Taiwanese students may not be aware of their partner's L1 language system, and may confuse their partner's L1 as English words. On the other hand this helps raise students' awareness of the linguistic differences.

Another issue is misspelling and typo; the former means that the students simply learned the wrong spelling for a word, while the latter denotes that students know the correct spelling, but just type it wrong without being aware of it. Both created problems for the email readers, particularly when they occurred in the case of key words such as the subject and verb of a sentence or the topic. After all of the spelling errors were examined, most cases were found to be typos, meaning that students knew the correct spelling, but just typed it incorrectly.

Formality is another interesting issue. Some students used mixed forms of expression, some quite informal, others formal. They were not clear or sensitive about style, register, and formality: when greeting his partner for the first time, one student used "Okay dude!" He was imitating what he saw on TV, not knowing when and how to use the expression.

ELF users are found to be 'direct' and sometimes 'rude', or considered not paying attention to politeness (Firth, 1996). Students habitually use 'I' as the subject and start their sentences with 'I think…', 'I will…', 'I have…', 'I really want to know…', which may appear to be a too 'direct style' for English native speakers. But for ELF speakers, at least most of my students did *not* feel offended at all when their partners always used 'I' as the subject to directly state their intention (I want you…). While most students have been accustomed to NS norms learning English in the traditional ELT paradigm, they showed different reactions from NS. Some were able to understand that their partner lacked the knowledge of formality, but others showed impatience and sometimes negative reaction or judgment (their English is poor). This again exemplifies why better English proficiency does not directly translate into better ELF communication. In some cases high proficiency level may hinder communication if the students care too much about NS norms and language forms.

ELF users commonly use 'localized' or 'nativized' English, i.e., English with L1 grammar or vocabulary. This phenomenon is quite common. Below are some examples from the project with Indonesian students:

How you old? (Sendi)
Thank you, you want reply my message. (Wah)
I want we can continue communicate. (Rajh)

Fortunately, the 'Indonesian English' remains intelligible, so do the Taiwanese English examples by the Taiwanese students from other excerpts. However, low-level students might have a difficult time understanding these sentences. It would take more time and adjustment for the students because they only receive standard English in their textbooks. They might confuse erroneous forms as the correct syntax, or misunderstand the meaning when they reorganize the word order incorrectly. For intermediate students, these sentences work like a mirror because some would also make similar mistakes, and they may become more aware of these grammatical errors. For advanced students, they may develop tolerance to Englishes, which better prepares them for future encounters with various forms of Englishes.

Cultural Clash

Most Taiwanese students grow up in a so-called 'listening culture' (Lewis, 2006), and are not used to initiating topics with strangers from another culture. Many English teachers, particularly native-speaking westerners, have expressed their concerns on the 'passivity' of East Asian students (for example, Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Many students are afraid to take the initiative or ask questions even though they are curious because they believe or suspect that such actions would offend their partner. In email or online forum exchanges, students had only one medium of communication, the written form of English. Without immediate feedback, most students behaved hesitantly, and sometimes were too careful to spark any interaction. Without self-revelation, the interactions would remain at a superficial level.

Gender differences further complicated the rapport-building process. Among the five projects, three projects had same-gender pairing policy (Turkish, Iranian, and the second Indonesian project) while the first Indonesian project applied cross-gender pairing policy. The Japanese project had group-to-group pairing policy, in which most groups contained both male and female students. Males tend to be less sensitive to interpersonal nuances such as face and considerateness while most females place a higher value on maintaining relationships. For most

Taiwanese college students, they are not mature enough to be aware of the differences in gender cultures, and communicating with the opposite sex from a different culture creates greater challenge for them than communicating with someone of the same sex as shown in the only project that applied a cross-gender pairing policy. The ice-breaking stage took longer and often the positive mentality and exciting feelings for befriending a foreigner were worn out during this initial stage. The contrast appears the sharpest in the case of the female students, many of which interacted vehemently with their female partners while failing to create much rapport with male partners. The differences were not so conspicuous in the case of the male students.

In addition to the influence of gender cultures, students' interactions with partners from different countries also showed different patterns. With the Japanese, though most Taiwanese students were familiar with Japanese culture, it was still difficult to build friendship as both sides were quite hesitant. But with Indonesian or Turkish students, while most Taiwanese were unfamiliar with their partners' culture, they seemed curious to learn more at first. However, this curiosity was often short-lived, as most students lost interest when the topic developed deeper into unfamiliar realms.

Another interesting issue is the difference in the cultural knowledge of the participants in the projects. The lack of equality in cultural familiarity between Japan and Taiwan, namely, that most of the Taiwanese students were familiar with Japanese culture while most of the Japanese students knew little about Taiwanese culture, made the interactions somewhat lopsided, with most topics focusing on the Japanese context. Similarly, in the project with the Indonesian students, more Indonesian students were familiar with Taiwanese popular culture, while Taiwanese students basically had little knowledge about Indonesia at all. The project with the Turkish students was the most equal in terms of cultural knowledge; both sides were unfamiliar with each other's culture. And it turned out to be the most successful. Students in the Turkish project actually found that Taiwanese culture resembles Turkish culture, and they share many commonalities. Moreover, the fact that the project focuses on cultural comparisons might have facilitated students' becoming more aware of cultural issues in their communication, thus creating better exchanges.

Since ELF communication may involve people from various cultures, each encounter is unique. This also means that ELF users must adjust

themselves to different interlocutors, taking a slightly different approach for each encounter. Such uncertainty also renders ELF communication dynamic and exciting, which might relates to the fact that most students reported to have become more motivated to learn both the English language and the world after participating in several such projects.

Perspective-Taking and Ethnocentrism

For most teenagers it is not easy to develop a different perspective as they still perceive the world (and their partner) through their own ethnocentric lens. They are accustomed to interpret the world within their own cultural conceptualization (Sharifian, 2009b). This has been a common problem in intercultural communication. To become aware of our own ethnocentric ways of thinking takes critical encounters and a reflective mind. Most students were not aware of their ethnocentrism and self-centered perspective, and often this was how stereotypes, misconceptions, misunderstandings, and often negative impressions are formed in the intercultural communication process.

Some students were not aware that their partner came from another totally different culture, speaking a totally different language. They acted as if they were conversing with their peers from the same culture. Vivi's case illustrates this. Below is an excerpt from Vivi's email to her Indonesian partner Syfia when she introduced her Chinese name, 'Fang Chie', which sounds like the pronunciation of tomato in Chinese:

> Do you know why people call me tomato? haha~because it sounds like fang chie. And my whole name is Li Fang Chie. Does it sounds like similar? so my friends like to call me tomato !! This nickname is more rememberable.

Here Vivi forgot that her partner does not speak Chinese. Apparently her partner Syifa did not seem to understand the humor, so she just let it pass without giving any feedback on this, a common ELF strategy to keep the flow smooth (Firth, 1996). Since this joke was not directly related to the task, Syifa just moved onto explaining the meaning of her own name to stay on track.

Afterward they shared less and less about themselves, as the misunderstanding might have caused some strange feelings. Vivi got too comfortable that she acted as if she was writing to her fellow Taiwanese.

Without the awareness of the lack of a common cultural foundation, the interaction was doomed to sour. In their remaining exchanges they just asked questions without answering much.

Vivi's example may not be an ethnocentric case, but her writing shows that she did not consider her partner's background. She was just too self-centered and too accustomed to her own cultural surroundings. She was not able to take the perspective of her partner, thus failing to develop a further intercultural relationship.

In another example from the Iran project, Sunny, a Taiwanese student wrote about her college life and used the word 'KTV' without explaining it. Her Iranian partner Sarry wrote back:

> I didn't get what you mean by KTV and "A necessary or a supplementary for college live"? (From Sarry's email to Sunny)

Sunny did not explain the term KTV, probably assuming that the term is understandable or a common English word, while in fact it is a nativized English word. KTV can be seen as a Chinese word expressed in the form of English as many Taiwanese use the word KTV in their Chinese conversation. Many students were not clear about their interlocutor's cultural knowledge, nor were they aware that they were interacting with someone not familiar with their culture. In other words, students had insufficient knowledge about the special characteristics of their own culture; consequently, they assumed some aspects of their culture to be universally applicable.

Beyond language, different cultural values sometimes caused problems. An example is that when students discussed their family, a Turkish student mentioned that 'when our father or mother comes to room, we straighten if we are lying down on bed,' and her Taiwanese partner Yan was quite surprised because she interpreted it as parents being strict in Turkey. Yan grew up in a liberal family and for her such behavior naturally seemed authoritative based on her family cultural values. The Turkish student later explained that the behavior was performed out of respect, but it looked like that Yan was not able to fully understand the deeper value behind the word respect in her Turkish partner's context. Yan could not understand why her partner did that to show respect to her parents.

Stereotypes and Language Ideology

From the students' participation in the five projects, it gradually became clear that certain images existed among students toward people from different countries. Many students had positive stereotypes about the Japanese, slightly negative ones on Indonesians, and almost no stereotypes about Turkish and Iranians due to their relatively little knowledge of the two peoples. They were curious about Muslim culture, and seemed well aware of the stereotypes depicted in mass media.

In addition to cultural stereotypes, the more interesting stereotype involves English proficiency level. When some students found out that their partner's level was lower than theirs, they formed a particular stereotype. The example below shows a Taiwanese student possessing a negative impression of her Indonesian partners when asked of whether she encountered any miscommunication during the project:

> No. I haven't such a stupid problem when talking with them because I think I won't worse than them . Some of them that cheat with me in private that make me so annoying because their English is too bad to communicate with . Not pointing all of them but most of them are not pretty good in English. I cannot speak loudly that I am pretty good in speaking English but if they can't understand my English I don't think that is my problem but they are too bad in this part. I can loudly say " It won't be my problem". (Darby's reflection)

It seems ironical because Darby's English level was among the bottom in the class. The reflection above also suggests that her English writing has great room for improvement (I won't worse than them. Some of them that 'cheat' (chat) with me…). Perhaps Darby had suffered prejudice from peers or teachers who judged her by her English level, and she finally had the opportunity to boast her English level here. Her attitude showed that she evaluated such ELF communication in terms of English proficiency level where those with a lower level are supposed to take the blame for failure in a communication.

DISCUSSIONS

Darby's case above manifests the reproduction of linguistic hierarchy (English level equals to how good a person is), which is

prevalent in school when academic achievements are regarded as the indicators of a student's overall merit. Darby's reaction also reminds us of the linguistic inequality in NS-NNS communication: when a communication breakdown occurs, the NNS often takes the blame for not having learned the NS norms (Ke & Suzuki, 2011). 'Native speakerism' (Holliday, 2005) further strengthens such notion. Such stereotype about low-level English users creates stigmatization that is detrimental to everyone involved in the intercultural communication. ELF communication is supposed to alleviate inequality, but if one of the interlocutors still holds such a perspective then the problem would persist. This highlights the importance of cultivating a healthy mentality in intercultural communication, echoing the observation made at the beginning of this section on the critical role that motivation and attitude play.

ELF projects are supposed to transform the traditional language ideology that positions Standard English as the benchmark and equating closeness to NS norms to proficiency level. Fedderholdt's (2001) ELF email study attributes less stress in writing to NNS than to NS as the key to success. Teachers learn to focus more on students' strengths instead of their errors. Similarly in the current study, with Darby's case as an exception, most students realized that the important issue is to be able to communicate rather than focusing on their proficiency level of English or their partner's. With the teacher's guidance and illumination, most students had started to cultivate an open mind toward language standards and proficiency level.

English proficiency level, compared to language ideology, may not be a barrier for proficient ELF users as in Firth's study (1996), but a certain level of proficiency is necessary to go beyond transactional level into deeper cultural communication. Most ELF studies (e.g., Kaur, 2009; Mauranen & Ranta, 2009) focus on proficient ELF users, not learners. Therefore the issue of proficiency level is more relevant for studies on ELF learners because for learners, proficiency level connects to their confidence, attitude toward different cultures, and their own cultural identities (see Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). All these factors play important roles in intercultural communication.

Observations from the current projects reveal that higher proficiency level did not necessarily translate into better communication. Willingness to communication (WTC, see MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels, 1998) seems to play a more important role than proficiency level. There

were, however, some students who had difficulties expressing themselves in English due to their insufficient proficiency level, but generally speaking, the proficiency threshold for successful intercultural communication need not be too high, probably A2 in the *Common European Framework of Reference*. The key is the ability to use English effectively as Nerriere and Hon (2009) argue in their advocate for Globish.

The crucial step bridging learning English and learning to use English would be pragmatic competence. Students often only learn the literal meaning, not the *social* semantic meaning. If ELF users try to use English by imitating NS usages, just like the student who used 'dude' to address his partner upon the first contact (see the section on students' use of English), then disasters may occur when the interlocutor is not familiar with NS norms. The safest strategy is to adopt neutral language, avoiding slang and idioms to prevent any possible problems. Teachers need to focus more on teaching pragmatic meanings in various social contexts in their lessons.

Besides language proficiency, intercultural discourse strategies may also be quite important. Discourse strategies in use English as a lingua franca have been touted as a useful tool (Baker, 2009), but since until now most ELF studies have focused on oral synchronous communication, the use of such discourse strategies for asynchronous written EFL communication has not been examined in detail. Though the different cultural backgrounds of their partners create different discourses in their intercultural communication, there are still some discourse strategies that work across various intercultural discourses. The strategies observed in the current study to build rapport include the use of emoticons and textual representations of sound of laughter like haha or hehe, greeting in their partner's first language, and mentioning one of the topics from the last email or forum post.

It was not uncommon to see students' emails or forum posts filled with confusing typos and grammatical errors. This shows that students had not developed a habit of proofreading their email before they clicked 'send' or 'post'. Another possibility is that they did check again, but could not identify the error. Fortunately, most typos did not cause great miscommunication, but some did lead to confusions. Consequently, teachers need to assist students in developing the proofreading capacity, which is important in written intercultural communication.

The application of discourse strategies is intertwined with the extent

to which both sides understand each other's culture, the degree of which may strongly affect students' motivation and attitude. Often one side in the project had more cultural knowledge about the other side, while the other side usually knew little about their partner's culture. This is probably quite common as people look up to more developed countries and absorbing their cultures via the mass media. In the Japanese project, the Japanese partners' lower proficiency level and lack of cultural knowledge about Taiwan limited the interactions between the students, even though most Taiwanese students had competent English level and cultural knowledge about Japan. In contrast, in the case of Indonesian projects, lower English level by the Indonesian students did not prevent some students from engaging in genuine interaction because many Indonesian students had abundant cultural knowledge about Taiwan through media and personal connections. Unfortunately most Taiwanese students' lack of cultural knowledge and motivation to learn more about Indonesian cultures impaired further intercultural communication. The best case is the Turkey epal project in which both groups knew very little about each other's cultures, so the interaction was more equal, though the fact that the partners had equivalent English levels also helped. In the Iran project, both sides were unfamiliar with each other, but it was a voluntary project, not part of a course, so the participation was not satisfactory. Students were not willing to invest much time and effort into it. At first they thought it interesting and fun, but after they started to communicate, they found that the work involved was much harder than they originally thought. Consequently they were not able to sustain the communication intensity.

The dynamic of different cultural encounters in ELF intercultural communication also leads to Taiwanese students performing differently with different partners. In collectivist cultures, it takes a long time for new acquaintances to become true friends, or 'in-group' (Hofstede, 2001). But Taiwanese students behaved more aggressively compared with their participation in other projects. It may be argued that Taiwanese culture as a listening culture is constructed on the interaction with western 'speaking culture'. When interacting among 'listening Asians', they are not so passive, especially with a person from a culture in which they are very interested. The concept of 'performativity' (Denzin, 2003) seems to apply here as people behave differently according to specific discourses, contexts and interlocutors. Thus pursuing universal rules for successful intercultural communication may be fruitless; instead,

understanding deeper on how people 'perform' in such circumstances would be more helpful if we can incorporate such understandings into our pedagogy.

In sum, the best combination for a successful online intercultural project includes the followings: (1) the participation should be voluntary, but also serves as one of the course requirements so as the provide incentives for students, and others not interested in the project are allowed to engage in other tasks. (2) The project should allow participants to establish personal bonds, such as email partners, through which participants have one-on-one interactions. Forums are convenient for teachers to monitor participation, but are not an ideal facilitator for participants to build rapport.

IMPLICATIONS

In this section suggestions for teachers in light of the findings are provided. To incorporate ELF project into ELT courses, teachers should be aware of these critical issues.

Learn our culture: In recent English as an International language (EIL) movement, teaching students how to introduce their own culture in English is advocated (Matsuda, 2012). Students take their own culture for granted and often are not able to become actively aware of where their ELF partner comes from. Learning deeper about their own culture is the first step to realize the existence of ethnocentrism. Calling for attention to the topic of ethnocentrism would greatly benefit students in the long run. Teachers should encourage students to take their partner's perspective and examine their own English production to identify places where more cultural explanations are necessary.

Build common ground: We should teach students how to construct common ground since it serves as significant foundation in ELF communication (Kaur, 2009). Common ground is built on common topics that they can relate to each other. They need to learn more about what has happened or is happening in their partner's country. Such knowledge would help them find common topics. Moreover, same gender pairs have been shown to be more productive in terms of interactions in the online projects for university students. If two persons share more similarities, they'll have more common topics. Particularly at the college age, the awkwardness between the opposite sexes still exists.

Develop empathy: Another important target that teachers should

develop in students is an empathic mentality in ELF intercultural communication. This mentality does not correlate with students' English level, as seen earlier where both high-level and low-level students showed indifferent attitudes toward their partner's inability to understand their English production. Students growing up immersed in the traditional EFL learning environment in which only NS norms serve as the standard tend to perceive that the key to successful communication in English lies in using English based on NS norms. If they produce NS-based English, and their interlocutor cannot understand, the receiver takes the blame for the failure. If teachers can remind students of their painful experience in which they had difficulties understanding English as a NNS, and arouse their empathy for their partner, then students may be able to realize that successful communication requires effort on both sides and that one's English level only accounts for a small portion of such success.

Utilize communication tools: Ways to overcome English insufficiency include using pictures, web links, discourse markers, social-bonding techniques, clarification strategies, and multimodal channels, among others. Nerriere and Hon (2009) believe that with simple English (knowledge of 1500 core English words) and the capacity to utilize various multimodal resources available, any one can communicate successfully in ELF. Studies on the cases of low-level students achieving good communication in the current projects reveal that these students had better discourse capacity. They read the contextual cues correctly and used emoticons, asked personal questions, revealed their own stories and experience, and wrote short but frequent emails to establish the rapport with their partner.

Understand 'Englishes': The last issue related to ELF is that teachers should help students understand L1-influenced 'Englishes', not just standard English. Traditionally students only have exposure to the correct forms as all materials are written or spoken in standard American or British English. The underlying assumption is that students will be using English with native speakers who mostly use standard forms. However, if the assumption is that students will mostly encounter other non-native English speakers in ELF contexts, then the ability to understand nonstandard Englishes would be critical. Of course teachers do not 'teach' such nonstandard or even erroneous English use, but rather, students should learn to decode and reorganize the nonstandard Englishes to conjecture possible meanings behind the incomplete or

L1-influenced English productions. This may sound radical or even unimaginable for most English teachers in Taiwan because in the traditional EFL paradigm teachers focus on teaching correct language forms first, not language use first. The assumption is that after students learn the standard forms, they will be able to decode nonstandard forms automatically, so it is not necessary to explicitly teach students how to understand nonstandard L1-influenced Englishes. While for some students this may be true, for others it is not the case. Just like grammar teaching, explicit instruction would benefit certain types of students who would otherwise not be able to pick up the skills on their own. This is also a promising field for future research (how to understand L1-influenced Englishes) with imminent practical implications since ELF use is increasing exponentially.

CONCLUSION

Through participation in these ELF online projects, students gained first-hand experience as ELF users, and as a teacher I also identified many places for improvement or modification in light of the urgent needs arising from the new ELF paradigm. A few points here serve as the conclusion: (1) first, English teachers in Taiwan should not neglect the trend of ELF; instead, modifying their teaching to help students adjust to the need for future ELF use would benefit students in the long run. (2) Culture remains indispensible for ELT, but instead of teaching Anglo-American cultures or other national cultures, teachers should raise students' cultural awareness and develop their intercultural communication competence (Wiseman, 2003). (3) Providing students of intermediate level or above the opportunity to use English in ELF situations leads to learning and growth that few other classroom activities can do. The priority should be placed on cultivating positive mentality and empathy that constitute the foundation of successful intercultural communication. (4) Most teachers are aware that students' confidence in using English is the key but have difficulties boosting it. In addition to providing opportunities for ELF use, which has been shown to be helpful in boosting students' confidence (Fedderholdt, 2001; Ke & Suzuki, 2011), examining English language ideology in our daily discourses may help students (and teachers alike) realize how our lack of confidence in English is rooted in our identity marker 'NNS'; as NNS we are always deficient English users (Jenkins, 2006). We can adopt a

different identity label: ELF user. We are those who use English as a lingua franca to communicate. English proficiency level should not be used to judge a person, especially in intercultural communication. Without these understandings, we (both Taiwanese students and teachers) will always lack confidence when using English.

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以英語為共通語之線上跨文化溝通:實際交流之研究發現及對台灣英語教學之啟發

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由於網路與英語普及，過去溝通障礙逐漸消失，因此跨文化溝通日益增加。過去跨文化溝通研究大多關注母語和非母語者間的交流(Sharifian, 2009a)，研究彼此母語都非英語的情況(以英語為共通語-ELF)並不多。作者於過去三年內，在課堂中共進行了五個 ELF 線 上非同步跨文化溝通交流計畫，而本研究以此為基礎，分析學生電子郵件、線上討論區留言、參與交流之心得，探討此類交流中之溝通現象，發現學生常以自身文化 的角度產生特定先入為主的觀念，並對交流對象有文化刻板印象，此外，學生的英語使用的確影響交流，由於交流雙方都受到自己母語的影響，且對英語語言詞意掌 握度不佳，在表達及理解上都可能產生問題。最後本研究討論以英語為共通語之跨文化溝通相關議題及對台灣英語教學的啟示。

關鍵字：英語為共通語、跨文化溝通、線上交流、英語為國際語