

English Applied Linguistics Ph.D. Program
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**Communication Strategies in ELF Interactions:
An Analysis in the ASEAN Context**

Summary of the Ph.D. Dissertation

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1. Introduction

ASEAN, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was founded in 1967 with five member countries from Southeast Asia. Nowadays, ASEAN has ten member countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

ASEAN is a culturally and linguistically diverse region, and linguistic diversity in the region suggests the need for a common language to be used in communicating with each other. Although there are some mutually understandable languages between some member countries, among all the languages spoken in the region, there is no common language which is understandable by all the people in Southeast Asian countries, and therefore English is usually used to communicate with each other. It may be also the reason why English was used as the working language when ASEAN was founded in 1967 with the five founding member countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) and became the de facto lingua franca, then later the official working language of ASEAN when the ASEAN Charter was signed (Kirkpatrick, 2012b; Krasnick, 1995). The choice of English as the language of ASEAN “came out automatically [...] there has been no regulation for the use of English but it has been used in all the actual situations”, and ASEAN member countries “took it for granted” (Kirkpatrick, 2008, p. 27). Since then, English has been used as a common language or a ‘lingua franca’ (ELF) to communicate with each other among ASEAN countries. In the ASEAN charter of 2007, it is stated: “English shall be the working language of ASEAN” (ASEAN, 2020, p. 29).

Although English had been chosen as the language of ASEAN, its member countries have had different experiences with English. In Kachru’s (1997) three circles model, Brunei, Malaysia, The Philippines, and Singapore are classified as the Outer Circle countries, where English is used as their second language, and where the use of English is common in the government sector as well as in the domain of social interaction. Although Brunei, Malaysia, The Philippines, and Singapore were colonized by the Inner Circle countries such as the UK or the USA, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam had not been colonies of any members of the Inner Circle countries and thus are classified as the Expanding Circle countries, where English is included in education as a foreign language for the use of communication with people from the Inner and Outer Circle countries. Concerning Myanmar, whether it is in the Outer or the Expanding Circle is questionable. It had been under British rule till 1948, and even after independence, English had been the primary language in education at the tertiary level until 1964. However, when the government changed the language policy and planned to

reduce Western influence, the role of English changed. Recently the government has started trying to restore the role of English, but the educational system is still under the reformation process (Htet, 2020; Soe, 2015; Soe, Swe, Aye & Mon, 2017). Laos and Cambodia, on the other hand, are former French colonies. Low (2020) states that “English is acquired as a second language within the school system or increasingly as a first language in the Outer Circle countries of Southeast Asia” (p. 152). However, English is taught as a foreign language in the Expanding Circle countries. For these reasons, the role of English is different in ASEAN member countries, and so are the English proficiency levels of the speakers.

As a result of globalization and the official statement in the ASEAN charter, the role of English has become vital in each ASEAN country. English is the working language not only among ASEAN member countries but also in contact with other countries. Thus, it is important for them to understand each other through their interaction in which English is used. Kirkpatrick (2010) states that multilinguals need to be internationally intelligible to be able to communicate successfully with others. Being multilingual and having diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as having various levels of English, multilinguals in the ASEAN context can encounter misunderstanding and non-understanding in their interactions. In order not to involve communication breakdowns and to keep the conversation flowing, speakers use a variety of strategies in their interactions to accomplish this (Deterding, 2013; Kaur, 2011a, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2007b) and this is the main focus of this dissertation.

In ELF interactions which include English speakers with diverse linguistic and cultural as well as social backgrounds, their communicative styles may vary (Kaur, 2010). Not only because of the diverse linguacultural backgrounds of the ASEAN states but also because of the different histories of English language teaching and the different roles of English in different ASEAN member countries, diversity is “[a] key feature of interaction” (Kaur, 2011b, p. 2704) among the ELF speakers in the ASEAN context. Because of this diverse nature, misunderstanding and non-understanding, which occur in any talk, may be frequent in the ASEAN ELF setting. An interesting point is how ELF speakers in the ASEAN context overcome these misunderstandings and non-understanding to reach a shared understanding in their interactions. That is why the present research is focused on the strategies employed in ELF communication among ASEAN English speakers to make them achieve understanding each other when misunderstanding and non-understanding arise.

To my knowledge, in the literature on ELF research, there are very few empirical studies on how ELF speakers in the ASEAN context deal with their misunderstandings and non-understanding in their interactions. Therefore, this research focuses on ASEAN ELF,

particularly on communication strategies used to understand each other in ASEAN ELF interactions, anticipating that this present study will be beneficial for ELF speakers in ASEAN countries and also for other English speakers who communicate with them. Hence the research questions in the present study concern which communication strategies can aid ASEAN ELF speakers to arrive at understanding when misunderstanding and non-understanding arise, and the frequency of those communication strategies employed by ASEAN ELF speakers. The research questions are as follows:

1. Among the communication strategies the ASEAN ELF speakers used in their ELF interactions, which strategies can aid them in achieving understanding with each other? In addition, which non-linguistic strategies are employed by the speakers in the study to aid them in achieving understanding?
 - 1.1. Among the communication strategies employed by the ASEAN ELF speakers, are the ones used by the EFL sub-group the same or similar to those used by the ESL sub-group?
 - 1.2. Are the communication strategies used in the mixed group of EFL and ESL the same or similar to those used in the EFL sub-group or the ESL sub-group?
 - 1.3. Are the communication strategies used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who do not know each other before (i.e., strangers) the same or similar to those used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who know each other well?
2. Among the communication strategies which can help the speakers achieve shared understanding, what is the frequency of their use by the ASEAN ELF speakers?

1.1. Significance of the study

Regarding communication strategies in ELF interactions in the ASEAN context, there are relatively few studies on communication strategies in the ASEAN context such as Deterding's (2013) study, Kaur's (2010, 2011b) studies and Kirkpatrick's (2007) study. In both Deterding's and Kaur's studies, participants include non-ASEAN people. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick's (2007b) study includes only ASEAN ELF speakers but focuses on general communication strategies. Also, none of the previous studies pay attention to the closeness between the speakers except Pietikäinen (2018). Again, the studies do not include the use of non-linguistic strategies like gestures as a useful way to reach understanding among speakers. In addition, the previous studies do not categorize their participants as those

from the ESL sub-group or those from the EFL sub-group. The participants in their studies are a mix of those from ESL and EFL groups.

My study includes only ASEAN ELF speakers and investigates which communication strategies, including non-linguistic strategies, can aid speakers to arrive at understanding in their ELF interactions when misunderstanding and non-understanding arise, taking the familiarity between the speakers as a variable and using only the ASEAN ELF speakers. The study also explores the frequency of those communication strategies employed by ASEAN ELF speakers. In this way, it is hoped that this present study may fill a gap in ELF literature on ASEAN ELF.

1.2. Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation includes seven chapters. In the introductory chapter, the background of the research, research objectives, research questions, and an overview of the methodology are presented. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background of English as a lingua franca, the linguistic context of each ASEAN country mainly focused on how English came to be used and the current situation of English used in each ASEAN country, English as a lingua franca in English language teaching (ELT), and teaching communication strategies to English learners. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical background of communication strategies in general, communication strategies in the ELF context, and previous studies on communication strategies in ASEAN ELF interactions focused on communication strategies which aid understanding among ELF speakers and which are also found in the present research. Chapter 4 is about the research methodology of the present study. Chapter 5 reports the findings on which communication strategies enhance understanding among ASEAN ELF speakers in their ELF interactions. Chapter 6 presents the answers of the research questions, and other findings which are not directly related to the research questions. Chapter 7 ends the dissertation with pedagogical implications of communication strategies in ELT and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

In any communication including ELF interactions, both misunderstanding and non-understanding are possible to occur. In ELF settings, since an important feature of ELF is diversity, speakers having diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, speaking different Englishes, and having different proficiency levels, misunderstanding and non-understanding may occur greatly in ELF interactions (Kaur, 2010, 2011b). In the ELF literature, Mauranen

(2006) and Kaur (2010) state that ELF speakers are good at avoiding misunderstandings and non-understanding, and when there are problems in understanding, ELF speakers use communication strategies to arrive at understanding in their interactions (Watterson, 2008).

Communication strategies are differently viewed and defined by various scholars such as Bialystok (1990), Doqaruni (2013), Dörnyei and Scott (1997), Tarone (1980), and Willems (1987). There are two critical points of communication strategies: firstly, there is a difficulty for a speaker to communicate concerning what he or she wants to say, or there is a difficulty for a listener in understanding what the other speaker says. Secondly, the speaker tries to resolve the problem, or the listener tries to help the speaker understand or not to misunderstand the other speaker.

Many previous studies on ELF communication strategies reveal that the use of communication strategies is vital in ELF communication to resolve the speakers' difficulties in understanding each other and finally arrive at understanding which leads to successful communication in ELF talk (Cogo, 2009; Deterding, 2013; House, 2003; Kaur, 2012; Marra, 2014; Watterson, 2008). These studies suggest that particular strategies are effective for successful ELF communication.

Although ELF speakers use various communication strategies in their ELF communication, not all communication strategies enhance understanding among speakers. Some communication strategies (e.g., Firth's (1996) *let it pass*) help conversation flow smoothly but do not help speakers to arrive at shared understanding. Further communication strategies are needed for speakers to achieve understanding among them. Given this situation, speakers must use further communication strategies such as *direct questions*, *repetition*, and *sorry/pardon* when they want to get *clarification* from their interlocutors, *confirmation checks* (a speaker's confirmation with his/her interlocutor for what the interlocutor has said or the speaker's understanding of what the interlocutor has said) and so on in order to achieve understanding.

Regarding communication strategies in ELF interactions in the ASEAN context, as mentioned earlier, there are relatively few studies on communication strategies in the ASEAN context. Among them, Deterding's (2013) study is mainly on sources of misunderstanding although how ELF speakers repair to achieve understanding is discussed later. Similarly, Kaur's (2011a) study is only about sources of misunderstanding in the ELF context, but her studies (2010, 2011b) are about how ELF speakers manage to arrive at understanding. On the other hand, Kirkpatrick's (2007b) study includes only ASEAN ELF speakers but focuses on general communication strategies.

In my opinion, the fruits of the research on how to overcome problems of misunderstanding and non-understanding are more important and beneficial for English Language Teaching (ELT) in the ASEAN region, especially for the Expanding Circle countries, than classifying the instances of misunderstanding and non-understanding. That is why, in this research, I investigated the communication strategies employed by the ASEAN ELF speakers which facilitated arrival at shared understanding among them and the achievement of successful ELF communication.

Although Deterding (2013), Kaur (2010, 2011a, 2011b), and Kirkpatrick (2007) do not mention anything about the use of *non-linguistic means* as communication strategies which help speakers reach an understanding among each other, Breiteneder, Pitzl, Majewski, and Klimpfinger (2006) state that “nonverbal behavior is an essential part of ELF interactions” (p. 176) in the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) project.

In brief, as mentioned above, there are relatively few studies on communication strategies in the ASEAN context. In addition, none of the previous studies pay attention to the closeness between the speakers, and the studies do not include the use of *non-linguistic strategies* as a useful way to reach an understanding among speakers. In addition, the previous studies do not categorize their participants as those from the ESL sub-group or those from the EFL sub-group. The participants in previous studies are a mix of those from ESL and EFL groups. For these reasons, there is a need for research on communication strategies, including non-linguistic strategies, which can be used to avoid misunderstanding and non-understanding among the speakers, taking the familiarity between the speakers as a variable and using only the ASEAN ELF speakers. That is why, my research project is aimed to fill a gap in the literature in this field.

3. Methodology

This dissertation concerns how English speakers from ASEAN countries resolve misunderstanding and non-understanding arising in their ELF interactions in order to arrive at shared understanding. Findings from the two pilot studies carried out before the main study demonstrate that the use of various communicative strategies helps ASEAN ELF speakers arrive at shared understanding in their ELF interactions. The research design for the present study was based on the experiences from the two pilot studies, and the previous studies on ELF interactions.

The study adopts a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The participants in the main study were 20 ELF speakers in the main study who were from nine ASEAN countries, and they were international students attending bachelor to Ph.D. programs at Hungarian universities. As seen in Table 1, participants were aged between 19 to 39 at the time of the data collection. They speak different L1(s), and most participants are multilingual. Participants manifest a wide range of proficiency levels in English, ranging from competent speakers to less competent speakers. As all of them were university students in Hungary, their language proficiency level was assumed to be at least at a B2 level of English, but some of the participants' (from the ASEAN countries where English is used as a foreign language) spoken English was noticed as lower than B2. For the other languages they speak, participants reported on this themselves.

The data were collected over a period of 14 months, and included about nine hours long video recordings of ELF interactions of each dyad, in which there were two ELF speakers from two different ASEAN countries. Participants in each dyad were engaged in an ordinary social conversation while cooking together. The emphasis lies on their use of communication strategies as tools to arrive at mutual understanding between them.

The data sources mainly include the transcriptions of these video recordings of naturally occurring ELF interactions, the observation notes during these video recordings, audio recordings or handwritten notes of retrospective interviews with participants after the video recordings which were based on the observation notes during the video recording, and also each participant's self-report profile including his/her linguistic background.

To analyze the data, the recordings were transcribed, and the participants' names were coded with the initials of their respective nationalities and a number such as F1 and L1. A close and in-depth analysis was carried out on instances of the communication strategies which enhanced shared understanding between the participants in each dyad. In doing so, the communication strategies, especially from Deterding's (2013) study and Kirkpatrick's (2007) study (if necessary, those from other studies on ELF communication), were focused during the recording, and marked in the observation notes. Later, during the retrospective interviews, they were confirmed with the original users of these communication strategies. Again, the instances of these communication strategies were validated for the arrival of shared understanding with the interlocutors since the emphasis of the research was the communication strategies which enhanced understanding between the ASEAN ELF speakers. Then, the extracts related to this research focus were selected for transcription for conversation analysis, as in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

Table 1*The Profiles of Each Participant in the Study*

Group	Dyad	Code	Gender	Age	Nationality	First language	Second language(s) they use in daily life apart from English	Additional language(s) they have some knowledge of apart from English
EFL	1	B2	M	35	Burmese	Burmese	-	some Hungarian
		V1	F	27	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	-	French, some Russian
	2	B3	F	33	Burmese	Burmese	-	-
		L1	F	20	Laotian	Laotian	-	some Chinese
	3	B2	M	35	Burmese	Burmese	-	some Hungarian
		V2	M	29	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	-	-
ESL	4	I3	F	39	Indonesian	Manado Melayu	Bahasa Indonesia	German, Spanish, Italian, some Hungarian
		L2	M	26	Laotian	Laotian	-	Thai, some Hungarian
	5	C1	M	20	Cambodian	Khmer	-	some French, some Hungarian
		L2	M	26	Laotian	Laotian	-	Thai, some Hungarian
	6	L3	M	31	Laotian	Laotian	-	Thai, some Vietnamese, some French
		T3	M	26	Thai	Thai, English	-	Portuguese, some Spanish, some French, some Hungarian
7	F1	F	34	Filipino	Filipino	-	Tagalog, Ilocano, some Hungarian	
	M1	M	19	Malaysian	English	Malay	Tamil, Malayalam	
8	F2	F	22	Filipino	Cebuano	Filipino	some Hungarian, some Japanese, some Korean, some Spanish	
	S1	M	25	Singaporean	Mandarin Chinese	-	-	
Mixed	9	I4	F	31	Indonesian	Javanese	Bahasa Indonesia	some Hungarian
		M2	M	32	Malaysian	Malay	-	some Arabic, some Thai
	10	I5	F	28	Indonesian	Javanese	Bahasa Indonesia	some Arabic, some German, some Japanese, some Hungarian
		M3	F	27	Malaysian	Malay	-	some Arabic, some Hungarian, some German
	11	C2	M	20	Cambodian	Khmer	-	some Chinese, some Thai
	F3	F	23	Filipino	Tagalog	-	Ilocano	

Investigating the answer to research question 1, to analyze the data on communication strategies which the ASEAN ELF speakers in the research employed to achieve shared understanding between them, qualitative data analysis was utilized, exploring these communication strategies. To answer research question 2, the frequencies of each communication strategies were calculated to investigate which communication strategy was employed by ASEAN ELF speakers in their interactions. In the discussion, descriptive statistics were employed, comparing the frequencies of each communication strategy.

4. Findings and discussion

The analysis indicates that the ASEAN ELF speakers in the main study, as found in the two pilot studies, used different types of communication strategies such as *code-switching*, *asking for clarification*, *lexical support*, and *asking for confirmation*. In previous literature, Kirkpatrick (2007) and Deterding (2013) state that *code-switching* is not common among the ELF speakers in the ASEAN context, but the instances of *code-switching* found in the pilot studies as well as in the main study facilitated the ASEAN ELF speakers in arriving at shared understanding. Regarding other communication strategies which were *asking for clarification*, *lexical support*, and *asking for confirmation*, the data in the pilot studies and also in the main study showed that these communication strategies enhanced the ASEAN ELF speakers arrival at shared understanding.

When using *asking for clarification*, most participants in the main study used *direct questions*, and *repetition with a question intonation*, and some participants used *sorry/pardon* to signal their interlocutors for their non-understanding. Participants' use of these three types of *asking for clarification* helped them get the clarifications they wanted from their interlocutors and arrive at understanding.

In the main study, participants also *asked for confirmation* from their interlocutors to avoid misunderstanding and/or non-understanding in their ELF interactions, by using different types of *asking for confirmation* such as *direct questions*, *repetition*, or a *minimal check*. Their use of these three types of communication strategies facilitated them in avoiding misunderstanding or arriving at understanding between the speakers in each dyad.

In the main study, it was also found that the ASEAN ELF speakers used different types of *non-linguistic communication strategies* which include body language such as *gesture*, *head shaking*, *pointing*, *showing*, and *touching*, and *demonstrations* of how to do things, and the like. Looking at the instances of communication strategies found in the pilot studies as well as in the main study, the data showed that not only the communication

strategies which are in linguistic forms but also those in non-linguistic forms helped the ASEAN ELF speakers understand each other.

To answer research question 1, ASEAN ELF speakers employed communication strategies such as *code-switching*, *asking for clarification*, *lexical support*, and *asking for confirmation* to arrive at shared understanding. They also used different types of *non-linguistic strategies* such as *gesture*, *pointing*, *showing*, and *touching*, and also *demonstration* to enhance understanding between them. It was also found that the communication strategies used by the ESL sub-group and those used by the EFL sub-group found in the main study were generally the same. Also, the communication strategies used in the mixed group of ESL and EFL found in the main study were the same as those used in the ESL and EFL sub-groups found in the main study. In addition, it was also found in the main study that the communication strategies used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who did not know each other before and those used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who knew each other well were also generally the same.

To answer research question 2, in investigating the frequency of each communication strategy which made the ASEAN ELF speakers in the main study achieve understanding each other, *non-linguistic strategies* were found as the most used communication strategies which facilitated the speakers' understanding, followed by *asking for confirmation* as the second most used communication strategy and *asking for clarification* as the third most used communication strategy. Among the *non-linguistic strategies* found in the main study which enhanced arriving at shared understanding between speakers, *pointing at an object* was found as the most used *non-linguistic strategy*.

It should be pointed that although the communication strategies mentioned above were the ones which facilitated the ASEAN ELF speakers arriving at shared understanding, sometimes they did not work. In this kind of situation, the ASEAN ELF speakers used multiple communication strategies at a single time while trying to arrive at mutual understanding between them in their interlocutors. The speakers' use of multiple communication strategies can be either using a single strategy for multiple times or using the combination of different strategies. When *non-linguistic strategies* were used, the ASEAN ELF speakers used them as complementary to another communication strategy or used them accompanied by *deictics*.

Another significant finding in the main study is related to code-switching. Although *code-switching* of the ASEAN ELF speakers in the main study were found as a facilitating communication strategy for understanding among speakers, there were three instances of

code-switching found in the main study which led their interlocutors to misunderstanding or non-understanding. This finding supports Deterding's (2013) argument that *code-switching* can create misunderstanding among ELF speakers. However, even with those instances of misunderstanding and non-understanding, the communication between speakers in each dyad did not break down.

When participants in the main study code-switched, some participants code-switched only in single words whereas others code-switched not only in single words but also in short phrases and long strings of words. This finding supports Grosjean (2010), stating that a speaker may code-switch to another language for a word or for a phrase or for a sentence, then use the base language again. Another finding regarding *code-switching* was in the use of the code-switched language. Some ELF speakers in the main study code-switched to their local language(s), their interlocutors' language(s) as well as other languages they have some knowledge of. Since the ELF speakers in the main study were from nine different ASEAN countries and they were multilingual, there were many different languages found in their code-switches.

5. Conclusions

Before this research was started, the researcher hypothesized that communication strategies used by ELF speakers from the EFL sub-group and from the ESL sub-group might be different. However, the study indicates that the communication strategies used by the EFL sub-group and those used by the ESL sub-group are generally the same. Also, the communication strategies used in the mixed group of EFL and ESL are also the same as those used in the EFL and ESL sub-groups. In addition, the communication strategies used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who did not know each other before and those used by the ASEAN ELF speakers who knew each other well are also generally the same. In terms of frequency, the study indicates that *non-linguistic strategies* are the most used communication strategies which facilitated the speakers' understanding, followed by *asking for confirmation* as the second most used and *asking for clarification* as the third most used. Among the *non-linguistic strategies*, *pointing* is the most used, and in some cases, *non-linguistic strategies* are used as complementary to another communication strategy or used accompanied by deictics.

Regarding incorporating communication strategies into English language teaching, findings are in line with previous literature such as Cogo (2010) and Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer (2008), providing evidence that communication strategies work well in ELF

interactions to help ELF speakers arrive at shared understanding and that ELF speakers prioritize comprehensibility or arriving shared understanding rather than having high competence in English. Findings in the current research are hoped to fill a gap in current ELF research, especially in the ASEAN context, but lead to the conclusion that there is still a need for further research to understand ELF in the ASEAN context with ELF speakers from all ASEAN countries and also in other settings such as business, diplomatic, tourism, scientific or academic settings since this study was conducted with ASEAN ELF speakers only in the academic setting, and in an informal and social context.

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