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After class: Students' social use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

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Abstract

International students have become an integral part of universities worldwide. Despite a number of studies on the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in an academic context, there are still comparatively fewer investigations into students' social use of ELF outside of the classroom. This study investigated language use and self-perceived identities of international students using ELF in social interaction. Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with eight students attending English-medium programs at a private university in Taiwan. Consistent with previous findings, analysis shows that the students perceived themselves as English language users as well as learners. But within relationships of friendship, they used ELF in very individualized and pragmatic ways. They also took guidance from each other and those perceived as more proficient models of English. The study adds valuable insight into self-reports of student social ELF use. As such, pedagogical implications and suggestions are discussed.

Keywords: language identity, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), accommodation

Introduction

Universities all over the world have been aggressively recruiting international students for some time. In some countries, recruiting has taken on an especially pressing need due to a low birthrate and the subsequent decline in domestic student enrollment. As English-taught programs for these students expand, so does the need for continued research into student usage of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (e.g., Jenkins, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2014; Sung, 2017). With a deeper understanding of the subjects themselves, such research can certainly have wide implications.

A large number of studies have been done on ELF in academic contexts. These include descriptions of language use in which findings show a wide range of accommodation and negotiation. The literature on academic ELF also includes self-reported language identity. From this research, it has

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become clear that the speakers of ELF view themselves as both users and learners.

However, there are still relatively few studies about university students' use of ELF. Even fewer focus on social use of ELF outside of the classroom. The present study aims to help fill this gap with qualitative data on international students' social use of ELF at a private university in Taiwan. Both group and individual semi-structured interviews aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do international students describe their use of ELF outside of the classroom?
   a. What are the social contexts (i.e. topics)?
   b. What features of ELF are described?
2. What identities do the students adopt as speakers of ELF?

Analysis of the data sheds more light on how ELF is actually used amongst international students. Understanding their beliefs, perceptions, and language identities can help inform pedagogical practices.

Literature review

The following review summarizes some important aspects of ELF in academic contexts as well as the issue of learner identity. Several studies have sought to describe the English language use of international students. Other researchers have presented findings on the language identity that ELF speakers seem to adopt.

ELF in academic context

There is a fairly expansive body of literature on ELF in academic settings (e.g., Hynnimen, 2010; Kaypak & Ortactepe, 2014; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Lau & Lin, 2014; Park, 2020; Shaw et al., 2010; Sung, 2017; Xu & Van de Poel, 2011). Findings consistently show that student use of ELF is adaptive and flexible to foster successful communication. Students also express cognizance that their ELF use is not always the same as L1 English. Still, native English remains a linguistic goal for them.

The use of ELF amongst international students seems to show evolution toward shared norms and mutual intelligibility. Of course, this is an important indicator that the users perceive themselves as part of a real language community. Shaw, Caudery, and Petersen (2010) conducted a series of interviews with international students in Scandinavia. Picture-description tests were also administered and transcribed from the first and final interviews. The researchers found shared accommodation across proficiency levels, with a shift from more formal conventions. One area of

clear accommodation was discourse markers. There was a decrease in the use of *I think* and *maybe* which correlated with an increase in *well* and *like*. While most of the participants initially used *I think* very frequently, it did not become a part of their lingua franca. Instead, there was a shift that seemed to follow the speech patterns of the more proficient students who were using *well* and *like* more. There was further evidence of accommodation. Those participants reporting low proficiency on arrival to Scandinavia perceived improvement in their English. However, those who reported high proficiency on arrival perceived a regression of their English. This was interpreted as accommodation to a lingua franca environment.

Hynninen (2010), in her study with 13 international university students in Helsinki, focused on self-descriptions of ELF use. The participants reported simplifying their English when speaking with each other. In contrast, they described L1 English as being fast and fluent, thereby making it more difficult to understand. At the same time, the participants looked to L1 speakers as models and guides.

In Asia, Ke and Cahyani (2014) investigated Taiwanese university students' conceptions of ELF after an online communication project with Indonesian counterparts. Most of the communication was asynchronous writing. Many students reported initial difficulty understanding the syntax of their Indonesian partners. Some attributed this to first language influence. As a result, most students adjusted their English use. They dropped focus on form and adopted simpler vocabulary. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that pre and post questionnaires showed significant differences regarding grammar. After two semesters, most students regarded L1 English grammar and form as significantly less important than before. Their aim was "to understand their partner and be understood" (p. 34). However, the majority of students still expressed a desire for L1 English if they were to interact with a native speaker. In particular, L1 accents and pronunciation were perceived as goals when speaking to native speakers.

Kaypak and Ortactepe (2014) explored the ELF perceptions of Turkish exchange students. The participants reported that when using ELF their emphasis was on negotiated meaning. Beliefs about accuracy seemed to shift, with most participants rating it as less important than they previously thought. Yet, most considered native speaker (NS) English as the norm.

Similar findings are echoed in many other inquiries. It is clear that students generally describe their ELF use as centered on meaning-making, intelligibility, and accommodation. Simultaneously, most still look to NS English as a standard.

ELF and language identity

A robust library of data has been generated on ELF and identity (e.g., Baker, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2017; Jenkins, 2007; Panero, 2019; Park, 2020; Sung, 2017; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). In one landmark piece within this library on identity, Jenkins (2007) explored the identities of NNS English teachers in the UK. The teachers attempted to retain some of their L1 identity while also striving for NS accents. In another example, Virkkula and Nikula (2010) looked at Finnish students studying abroad and found that they self-identified as users of English. However, they recognized that their ELF was not always considered to be 'correct' English. The literature has evolved from earlier studies such as these to a focus on variability in language identity. The findings all seem to agree that the language identity of ELF speakers is a dichotomy between user and learner. It is flexible, fluid, and situational.

Park (2020) utilized conversation analysis to investigate ELF interaction in a South Korean university classroom. Data was collected from audiotaped class discussions amongst international and local students. Interestingly, the researcher also asked students to record about 10 minutes of interaction outside of the classroom. The subsequent analysis revealed that although the participants had no difficulty communicating in English, they compared and evaluated each other's phonology. In multiple interactions, both pronunciation and place of birth emerged as points of emulation. Those who were praised on these points became leaders and drivers of conversation. In sum, the speakers did not question their own ability to communicate, but they did show a desire to reach perceived NS standards.

Sung (2017) explored the ELF use of Chinese-English bilinguals at a university in Hong Kong. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen participants on their ELF experiences. The responses clearly showed that the students perceived themselves as both users and learners. But they also reported that their dual identities were often situationally grounded. That is, they perceived themselves as learners in the classroom. But outside of class, a user identity was more salient. Other participants clarified that their user/learner identities sometimes co-existed during ELF interaction. Apparently, the NS/NNS status of an interlocutor had an effect. Many participants saw themselves as English language users when communicating with another NNS. In contrast, they perceived a learner identity when communicating with a NS.

Research methodology

The objective was to find a group of friends who used ELF for communication outside of the classroom. Data collection was comprised of semi-structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed for analysis. This research was fully disclosed to the students and each one gave consent before participating.

The participants were eight undergraduate students majoring in either Global Financial Management or Diplomacy and International Relations, both of which are English-medium programs. All of the participants attended the same private university in Taiwan. The university, like many in Taiwan, has established some English-medium programs in an effort to attract more international students. Of course, these programs are also open to Taiwanese students, many of whom enroll with the belief that the English instruction will make their degree even more in demand. At the time of data collection, each student was in their second year of studies.

Seven of the students were selected because of their social relationship which extended outside of the classroom. This network of friends included two native speakers, hereafter referred to as NS 1 and NS 2. An eighth student, hereafter referred to as S6, was from the diplomacy program but interviewed separately at a different time. Table 1 summarizes the background information.

Table 1

Participant Background Information

Speaker code	*Gender*	*First language*	*Country*
S1	F	Indonesian	Indonesia
S2	F	Indonesian	Indonesia
S3	F	Indonesian	Indonesia
S4	F	Spanish	Dominican Republic
S5	M	Spanish	Spain
NS1	F	English	United States
NS2	F	English	St. Lucia
S6	M	French	France

Note. NS = native speaker

All of the participants except for speaker six met with the researcher as a group. A total of two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each one lasting approximately one hour. As mentioned before, these participants were chosen because they identified as friends and often socialized with one another. The interviews were conducted in a casual

setting to help ensure informal discussion. Two semesters later, speaker six was interviewed. He represented a separate group of friends. The aim was to have a longer interaction with one individual. This semi-structured interview lasted approximately two hours.

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety. Initial questions were:

- What are some of the topics that you talk about as friends?
- Do you ever correct each other? Do you pay attention to any corrections? Do you take it seriously?
- When you talk to a native speaker friend, are there corrections and feedback? How would you describe your conversations with them?

Based on responses to these, further questions were developed that followed these basic themes. In the following transcript extracts, interviewer is marked as <IR>, while <SS> refers to all of the participants or several of them speaking in unison.

Findings and analysis

"We talk about our personal life": ELF amongst friends

Interview data revealed that the participants simply talk about their lives. These are topics such as their studies, gossip, plans, food, and interests. Markedly, being a diverse group of international students in a foreign land, all of the participants also reported discussions that revolve around country comparisons. They reported talking about their own countries amongst each other, and also comparing cultures and behaviors with Taiwan. The following extracts provide examples.

Extract 1. Group interview 1

<S4> We mostly talk about assignments, outside of the classroom it's homework.
<S5> We talk about our personal life. Gossip, that's really, really normal.
<S4> Yeah, we are all friends, no?
<IR> Personal life? For example?
<S5> Plans, future plans, like trips.
<NS2> Sometimes we also compare stuff in our country, like we ask each other about culture differences and stuff.
<S5> Food, food is a big part.
<NS1> Normal things that friends talk about, like assignments and life and family. But then the biggest difference would be that we

also compare countries, like that would be the main difference that I have with like my American friends and stuff.

<S3> Yeah, sometimes we talk about behaviors.

<NS1> Also politics.

Extract 2. Individual interview.

<IR> So your friends here at the university, where are they from?

<S6> Honduras, Malaysia, Thailand, Palau, America. All over the world.

<IR> Outside of class, what are some of the topics that you talk about?

<S6> We talk about politics, because that's referred to our major. Like I can tell them what happened in France and they will talk about their country. But we also talk a lot about sport.

"It's different, like, you're just talking": Language accommodation and English user identity

In line with previous findings, the participants clearly perceived themselves as English language users. But they also distinguished the features of their ELF from L1 English. In Extract 3, one participant mentions some difficulty when talking to a native speaker. This was also reported by Shaw, Caudery, and Petersen (2010) in their interview data. In contrast, the same participant offers her own description of language accommodation that is used in her social group. Extract 4 provides another example of this.

Extract 3. Group interview 1.

<S5> I have an issue with NS1, and she knows about it. She talk to me sometimes like if I were a native speaker. So sometimes she's like looking the other way, using the phone, talking really soft. And I need higher volume and clarify. Sometimes you need a bit more clear expression, like louder and clearer.

<IR> How about when you are speaking with the others in English, do you have that difficulty?

<S5> Not really. Since we're trying to make ourselves, like be clear, we try to speak in a way that we know that they can get it. It's different, like, you're just talking.

Extract 4. Group interview 1.

<S3> I think it's easier for foreigners, like non-native speaker between non-native, and then when they talk, like bad English, it's not really correct according to native speaker. But we just understand each other because that's how we understand it.

Despite the contrast made between non-native speakers (NNS) and NS, Extracts 5 and 6 describe language accommodation made by an NS friend. This indicates that the NS participants were making efforts to adjust their speech.

Extract 5. Group interview 2.

<S2> But NS1 talk to me, it's different because she's speaking more slowly or because sometimes I cannot understand it if you use the proper English, she use the easy way.

Extract 6. Individual interview.

<S6> Like this American guy, when he talk to us, I think he talk more simpler or slower than if he were with another American. But most of us, I think we just use like the English that we know and understand easier.

In general, the emphasis is on being understood, with less concern for form or accuracy. But perceiving oneself as an English language user entails more than just recognizing speech norms. It may also be expressed in retaining an L1 identity while using ELF. In the following examples, participants report this affinity with their L1 while using ELF.

Extract 7. Group interview 2.

<S5> I don't want to change. I mean, even I know the pronunciation may not be completely correct. I try to change sometimes, but I don't know. Sometimes your tongue just doesn't respond. Sometimes your accent is really difficult to change. And I don't want to always change it. I'm Spanish and this is me.

Here, the Spanish male expressed pride in his L1 identity and a resistance to totally line up with L1 English standards. Interestingly, this was stated during an exchange about error correction, which is elaborated on in the next subsection. While this participant talked about pronunciation, the next example, shown in extract 7, centers on vocabulary.

Extract 8. Group interview 2.

<IR> Last time there was talk of a word in your native language having a different meaning to you than the English translation, and then you decide on a word. Can you talk more about that?

<S4> Yeah, I remember, because we were studying accounting, there was one term. I don't remember, like the third party that holds a

> contract. In English it's only one word, but when translate it into Indonesian, it's like there is five words just to describe this one word. So when I write it, NS1 is like really surprised and she found that when I translate some words into Indonesian it's kinda getting quite long. OK, well, anyway, every time I see this word I know the meaning. I'm going to write it like the way I understand, but in Indonesian. So all of us agree, like, we see this word in English, we're going to use this word. But like when we talk about it, I know this means this in Indonesian. So I write it or maybe say it in Indonesian. Everybody has different perspective, but same meaning.

This participant recounts the group of friends coming to an agreement on code switching. The language accommodation appears to be one of divergence, in which the speaker wants to emphasize or retain linguistic differences between themselves and their interlocutors (Giles et al., 1991). In so doing, the participants are perceiving themselves as language users who use ELF with common features but also accommodate it in very individualized ways.

"Just sometime I say the wrong one and they will try to help me: Learner identity

Consistent with other studies, the participants also perceived themselves as learners. They still saw NS English as a standard to reach. This was reflected in their reported instances of error correction. They practiced it and welcomed the feedback. Pointedly, Extract 9 involves both vocabulary and pronunciation.

Extract 9. Group interview 1.

<IR> Do you ever correct each other?
<SS> Yeah, yes, yes.
<S1> Like I remember S4 wrote in her book 'must beautiful.' It's supposed to be 'most.' Then I start teasing her, 'you are the must beautiful girl in the world.'
<IR> In what other ways do you correct each other?
<NS2> Sometimes when they speak to me, and I'm trying to understand them, I will ask what word they are trying to say. And then only when they explain sometimes what they are trying to say, I tell them, oh, you say it like this, like the pronunciation.
<IR> So when you correct each other, do you take it seriously?
<S4> All of the time.

<SS> Yeah, yeah.

As can be seen, the participants reported error correction on both written vocabulary and pronunciation. Most likely due to the fact that they are friends, at least some of this correction seems to be framed in humor and jest.

Extract 10 illustrates how the individual interviewee, S6, not only reported error correction, but also used NS English education as a standard when evaluating his friends' language proficiency. This is similar to the findings of Park (2020), in which university students emulated time spent in a NS environment and evaluated each other's conformity to NS English pronunciation.

Extract 10. Individual interview.

<IR> So when you're talking with your friends outside of class, do you ever correct each other's English?

<S6> They correct mine, and I don't really correct them because they're obviously better than me.

<IR> All of them?

<S6> Yeah, for example my Thai friend, her English is good because she did her high school in New Zealand. My Honduran friend, he went to an American school in Honduras. So, I mean sometimes the pronunciation, like with the French accent, or like some word, they will make fun of that. Or sometimes they correct my grammar.

<IR> So they do correct you?

<S6> Yeah, but they don't do that always. It would be kind of annoying like every time you say something someone correct you. It's nice for learning but you cannot really talk to someone. But I think it's nice to have some like correction or feedback to know. So my friends, they will correct me sometime but not like every days or—just sometime.

Similar to data from the group interview, S6 reports error correction on both vocabulary and pronunciation. However, he also mentions grammatical form as a source of feedback from his friends.

"So most of the English I know is in Taiwan by speaking with foreigners: Perceived value of ELF interaction

Some of the participants explicitly put high value on their ELF interactions. Overall, they saw it as a real opportunity to improve in some way. For example, in Extract 11, S4 expressed value in using ELF with one of the native speakers.

Extract 11. Group interview 2.

<S4> I know yesterday I was speaking really fast with NS1. So I think it's just like as we grow closer, I get more comfortable and she understands me faster. Like if I make a mistake, she will notice right away what I'm trying to say and don't have to prove myself. So that's why maybe if we pass a long time together, like spend a long time together, then I might by the end of the day be speaking super-fast, and it goes easier.

Here, S4 appears to be reporting that it is possible for her to speak faster with NS1 simply because the latter is a native speaker. Thus, S4 has little fear of being misunderstood. She seems to see speed as more fluent speech. Importantly, she notes the friendship. She states that as they "grow closer," NS1 understands her meaning and there is successful communication. Consequently, she does not have to "prove" herself. In other words, especially because of the friendship, S4 feels as if she can engage NS1 as a language user and not just a learner.

Participant S6, who was interviewed separately, emphasized that he really learned how to communicate in English through his ELF experiences. He expressed that his study abroad was the first opportunity to use English outside of a language learning class.

Extract 12. Individual interview.

<S6> Like in France we learn, but like vocabulary. And we never really practice oral conversation. And for the first time I really practice it when I came to Taiwan when I was sixteen. And then I had to use English because all the exchange students, they were speaking English. All the English I know, I basically learn it in Taiwan.

<IR> So you came here when you were sixteen?

<S6> Yeah, for one year. Then I came back to France for two years and then I came back here for university. So most of the English I know is in Taiwan by speaking to foreigners.

While S6 put value on his ELF interactions with other international students, he made a point of noting that such interaction did not happen much with the local Taiwanese students.

Extract 13. Individual interview.

<S6> But I stay more with foreigner than with Taiwanese. Because Taiwanese in our class, they don't really talk to foreigners. They stay with Taiwanese.
<IR> When you speak English with Taiwanese classmates, do you feel the interaction is any different?
<S6> No. They're English is good.
<IR> So you just don't socialize with them very much?
<S6> I try, but they don't really—don't really seem interested. I don't know.

Conclusion

The students interviewed for this study reported a number of topics that they discuss as friends. These appear to be no different than those discussed by native speakers in their first language. While this result was somewhat expected, it carries important implications. It means that language development may be taking place to a great extent outside of the classroom.

The interview data on language identity is consistent with previous findings. That is, the participants perceived themselves as both English language users and learners. They described their ELF as focused on meaning and intelligibility. They also contrasted their ELF with L1 English in terms of speed and clarity. Simultaneously, the participants adopted a learner identity. They reported engaging in error correction as well as vocabulary questioning. Both the group interviews and the individual interview revealed that the participants welcomed such feedback and exchanges. In particular, NS English pronunciation was mentioned as a standard that the participants aspired to reach. Pointedly, such feedback was recounted as being done with humor and in a sense of jest. It should be noted that this can most likely only occur with friendship. It is unknown what impact this has on retention, but it certainly may help lower affective obstacles.

The language acquisition benefits of the EFL reported here seem to be plentiful. Groups of classmates and friends will rarely be at equal proficiency levels. They may then benefit from each other as they adopt both user and learner identities. Pedagogically, it may be beneficial for teachers

and institutions to implement as much group work and task-based learning as possible when instructing international students (Long, 1989).

On that note, S6 described how he met his friends on campus. In his response, extract 13, he stated that the local Taiwanese students did not interact much with the international students. It has been the personal observation of this researcher and others that this could be a widespread phenomenon (Lau & Lin, 2014). In and out of classrooms, local and international students segregate from one another. Consequently, many local students may use ELF only in classes and rarely outside. Even in classrooms, these students may largely use their first language to communicate with one another.

The result is a kind of self-imposed linguistic segregation. It is likely that this situation exists in many other countries. As a remedy, teachers can try different seating arrangements and groups in which local students are integrated with international ones. This may help foster more cross-border friendships and wider use of the ELF that is described in this study.

Regarding research, this study has its obvious limitations. It is a small, qualitative sample. Future research could explore international students' social use of ELF outside of the classroom, but on a much larger scale. This could be achieved through quantitative methods (questionnaires) supported by qualitative ones (focus group interviews).

The author

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INDONESIAN JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (INDONESIAN JELT) SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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Texts should be between 6,000 and 7,000 words in length. A word-count should be given at the end of the article. The word-count should include abstract, tables and appendices.

Abstracts

All articles should have an abstract comprising 100-250 words in length. A word-count and keywords are required at the end of the abstract.

Criteria for Acceptance

A manuscript will be accepted for publication if it meets the following requirements:

- Its topic and contents reflect the aims and scope of the Indonesian JELT.
- It is likely to arouse readers' interest and is accessible to a broad readership.
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- It has clarity of presentation, is well written and organized, and conforms to the format of this journal.

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