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Achieving mutual understanding in the global workplace: a questionnaire-based survey of BELF users' perceptions and practices¹

Abstract

Maintaining mutual understanding is one of the pillars of ELF communication, and even more so in the business context, where high-stakes interactions often take place. In order to achieve their communicative goals in and outside the professional context, ELF users engage in proactive, cooperative behavior to ensure that comprehension is achieved, employing a range of strategies to prevent or solve instances of miscommunication. This study aims at contributing to the investigation of workplace interactions by exploring BELF users' perceptions and practices through a questionnaire-based survey including close-ended and Likert-scale questions. The survey, aimed at non-native speakers who use English as a Lingua Franca for professional purposes, focuses on both oral and digital interaction, analyzing these contexts separately due to their inherently different nature. Respondents, recruited through network sampling, were asked to identify what they perceive to be the essential aspects of successful communication and those that on the contrary may lead to mis- or non-understanding. The survey also aims at shedding light on which Communication Strategies users employ when faced with potential challenges, and at comparing preferences of use in different oral and digital media of communication.

1. Introduction

In the current globalized society, companies and business organizations work increasingly within international networks that are constantly expanding and shifting; in order to communicate effectively and successfully in potentially high-stakes interactions, professionals need to possess intercultural and strategic abilities to adapt to the needs and purposes of the individual communicative events they participate in. Such interactions nowadays occur overwhelmingly in English, which has become the *de facto* global language in

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many domains, including business. The concept of English as a Lingua Franca refers to “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice” (Seidlhofer 2011, 7), highlighting the fluidity and hybridity of language use in international communicative events that have different participants, needs and purposes. ELF is “highly context-bound, negotiable *in situ*” (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen 2015, 218). The acronym BELF (English as Business Lingua Franca) has been adopted for use in business communication; the ‘B’, which stands for business, is used to emphasize the domain of use (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013, 17), which involves a “goal-oriented nature, shared business fundamentals, and strategic management” (Kankaanranta et al. 2015, 129). Indeed, in their extensive study of the topic, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta have identified three aspects that can foster successful communication in international workplace settings, summarized in the Global Communicative Competence (GCC) model: multicultural competence, competence in BELF and business know-how (2011, 257). These three aspects are intertwined and concur to success of professional interactions. Multicultural competence includes active listening, accommodation skills, and tolerance towards different accents and varieties (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011, 259). Business know-how involves professional competence in the participants’ field of work and relates to knowledge of both general principles of business and the specific aspects of the participants’ line of work. According to the authors’ interpretation of a survey they carried out, business know-how is perceived as a prerequisite for successful communication by professionals using English for international communication at work (Ibid, 257).

The third aspect is the focus of this study: BELF competence, which is defined as the ability “to adapt to the forms and norms of the language required in each business situation” (Ibid., 259). Effective BELF use involves possessing strategic competence, including the ability to ensure that messages are conveyed and understood accurately by performing relevant strategies such as asking for clarification, checking and confirming, paraphrasing; “[i]n business, the role of strategic skills is understandably of utmost importance since “letting it pass” (Firth 1996) is not a feasible option: misunderstandings can cause extra work and incur additional costs” (Kankaanranta et al. 2015, 131). Lack of mutual understanding can have serious consequences for business; indeed, Business English users in international environments often

employ pragmatic and Communication Strategies (henceforth CSs) deliberately and advantageously to both prevent and solve potential communication breakdown. While CSs were originally conceived of in compensative terms, as in strategies used by non-native speakers to fill the gaps in their linguistic knowledge, they are now seen as a central aspect of communication in L1 communication as well (e.g. Tarone 1980; Firth and Wagner 1997; Savignon 1997). Amongst the empirical studies that have been carried out in ELF over the years, pragmatic and communication strategies have been included, suggesting that such skills are displayed by ELF users as part of the effort they put into maintaining mutual intelligibility. Pragmatic strategies have been studied comprehensively in the academic context (Mauranen 2006; Kaur 2009; 2011; Björkman 2011; 2013; 2014); however, fewer studies so far have been carried out in BELF, preeminently in face-to-face communication (Pitzl 2010; Franceschi 2019, submitted), with limited attention being paid to digital channels such as e-mailing (Caleffi 2020; Ren 2018) and social media platforms (Brunner and Diemer 2019) despite the frequency of technology-mediated interactions in the workplace. The results of these studies have highlighted the importance of both self-initiated and other-initiated CSs in international environments, including multilingual strategies such as codeswitching (Poncini 2003; Cogo 2016; Franceschi 2017) especially in interactions where clarity and accuracy of comprehension are paramount for the success of the professional encounter. Strategies such as asking for repetition and clarification, rephrasing, asking for confirmation of understanding appear to be considered especially important by professionals themselves, as suggested from survey responses (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011, 256), as well as strategies enhancing explicitness. These strategies are paramount in business interactions (e.g. Franceschi 2019, submitted) to ensure that mutual intelligibility is maintained and that communication breakdown is either prevented or solved as quickly as possible.

However, despite the importance of strategic competence in workplace interaction, it appears that such skills are not fostered in traditional Business English coursebooks. There is a need to build student abilities and train them to strategically “deploy the adaptive strategies used in BELF communication” (Pullin 2015, 45). Reed’s (2011) review of Business English course material suggests that Business English teaching material are conceived within a traditional EFL perspective (2011, 326) in both face-to-face and digital environments. Indeed, Caleffi and Poppi’s recent study on handbooks and

coursebooks focusing on email writing highlighted that the “linguistic input provided is still oriented towards nativeness and prescriptivism” (2019, 93). Studies carried out specifically on CSs in recent Business English coursebooks (Franceschi 2018; Vettorel 2019) showed that little attention is paid to CSs, both in terms of fostering awareness and building strategic skills in both face-to-face and digital contexts, within the specificities and peculiarities of these channels. Indeed, Vettorel states that “business ELT materials do not deal consistently with pragmatic strategies and even when examples are provided, they are rarely accompanied by reflection tasks” (2019, 79). Scholars therefore advocate the use of authentic data and simulations (e.g. Pullin 2015), “informed by research and be guided by the future profession of the graduates” (Kankaanranta et al. 2015, 142).

This study builds on previous studies on CS use in ELF and aims at investigating how people in workplace environments actually employ their strategic skills in face-to-face and digital interactions, with specific attention to the peculiar characteristics of these two ways of communicating and the way they may influence comprehension and the use of pragmatic strategies. This was done by means of an anonymous survey oriented to non-native speakers of English who communicate in English as part of their work.

2. Methodology

The survey included 3 sections, one on background information, one on oral interactions, and one on digital interactions for a total of 35 closed questions². The questions included were either multiple choice, multi-response (where the user may tick more than one possible answer) and 5-point and 6-point Likert-type questions. The latter type of question was used to measure agreement with statements related to perceptions and behavior in English use in the workplace (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree), with investigated aspects drawn from previous research on ELF and BELF communication. Similar Likert-scale questions investigated frequency of use of CS (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) in different situations during oral and digital interactions where potential non-understanding and misunderstanding may occur. Similarly,

² The questions were originally 36; however, one of the questions, “In which sector do you work?” was eventually scrapped as the answers ‘primary’, ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ were not immediately comprehensible to non-Italian speakers.

these questions were formulated on the basis of previous ELF and BELF research on pragmatic strategy use in oral and digital interactions. In order to compare levels of agreement/frequency in Likert-type items, each response was given a numerical value³ so that central tendency and dispersion can be calculated for each item. As Likert-type data are widely considered ordinal data (cf. e.g. Joshi et al. 2015), median and interquartile range (iqr) were used as measures of central tendency and dispersion rather than mean and standard deviation.

Respondents were recruited through network sampling, which “uses social links between networked individuals to locate and add additional units to the sample” (Callegaro et al. 2015, 50); data was collected online from April to June 2019. However, it has to be taken into account that one setback of anonymous online surveys is that data may not be reliable as people who do not fulfill the criteria for participation may still fill in the questionnaire or might answer inaccurately.

A total of 96 responses were collected, of which 2 were rejected, as they did not fulfill the criteria established. To be eligible, respondents needed to be non-native speakers of English and working in a non-English speaking country. While current definitions of ELF do not exclude native speakers, as they would be required to display strategic skills when interacting in international contexts, a choice was made not to include them in the investigation as well as non-native speakers living and working in native-speaking countries. Not all questions were marked as compulsory, as it was assumed that not all respondents would be engaging in every type of interaction investigated; as a result, not all questions were answered by the entire sample. Due to the choice of network sampling, starting from the researcher’s own contacts, the final result could be considered a convenience or availability sample and therefore a non-probability sample. As a result, a normal distribution should not be expected: hence, “without further assumptions – which are usually risky and impossible to verify – in principle this prevents any standard statistical inference calculations” (Callegaro et al. 2015, 54). Respondents in the sample tend to be young – as will be seen in the following section, the majority is within the 25-40 age bracket – and well-educated – most of them possess postgraduate degrees, with the 11% possessing a PhD. It is therefore possible to surmise that with a younger,

³ From never = 1 to very often = 5 and from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 6.

more educated sample, results might show more internationally-oriented attitudes and behaviors than a more heterogeneous sample.

3. Findings

3.1. Respondent background

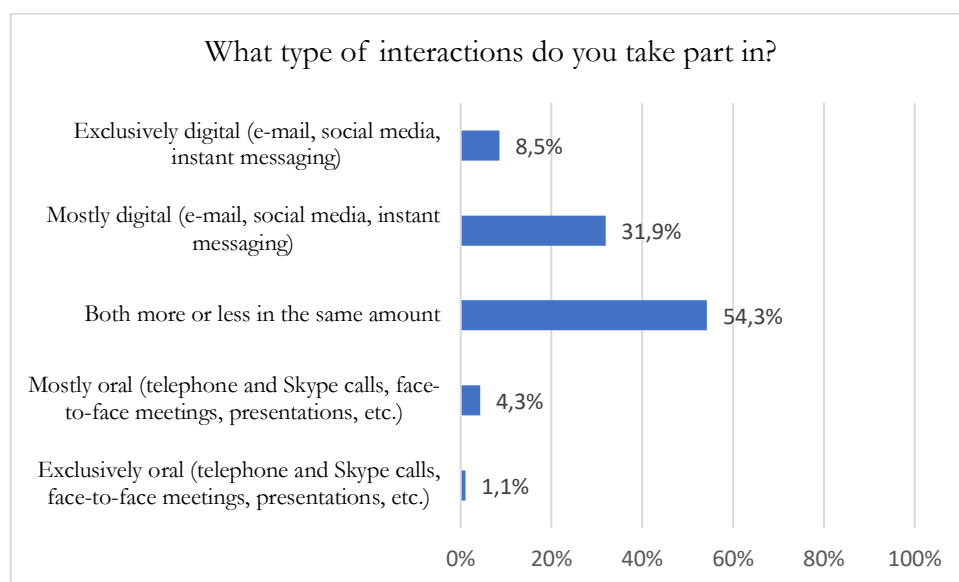
Out of the 94 respondents, just under half have Italian as their mother tongue; one third of the speakers speak Russian as an LI, whereas the remaining speakers include a range of languages (e.g. Spanish, Finnish, Ukrainian). Similarly, around half of the respondents live in Italy, whereas the rest of the respondents live across a number of European and extra-European countries. About one third (33%) work in a medium-small company, while 31% for a multinational company, 16% for a big company, 8% own their own business and 5% are freelance workers. The remaining 7% selected 'other', which means their workplace does not fit into any of the presented categories. The vast majority have completed tertiary education, with over half respondents having a Master's Degree (54%), 19% an undergraduate degree, and 11% have a doctorate. As anticipated, due to the non-probability, convenience sampling, such percentages do not represent the wider population. As to age, 73% of respondents are in the 25-40 range, with 17% being in between 40-55 and 8% between 18 and 24. The young age and degree of formal education received entail that the respondents have often received extensive education and training in English. With the exception of the 1% (1 respondent) who claimed they have never received formal education in English and 4% who studied English for less than 5 years, the vast majority of respondents received at least from 5 to 8 years of education (20%), from 8 to 10 (23%) and 52% more than 10. However, despite their experience with general English, over half (55%) of them have received no specific training in English for business purposes. Out of the remaining respondents, 20% covered business English in their school curriculum; 16% received training within their companies, and 19% received training by either a language school or a private teacher. The sum of these figures is over 100% as some respondents have received training in Business English in multiple contexts during their lives and careers. This means that while many respondents may have long-term, possibly extensive experience with English

in classroom contexts, they were not specifically exposed to Business English training.

3.2. English use

A number of questions aimed at gathering information regarding how often respondents use English at work, the type of interaction they engage in most frequently, and the type of speaker they communicate with. Results show English use appears to be frequent for the majority of respondents - around 88% use English multiple times per week; more specifically, 74% stated they used English every day or most days. The graph below shows that the majority of people use English equally in oral and digital contexts. For the remaining half, most engage mostly or exclusively in digital communication, whereas it is a much smaller number that is involved mostly or exclusively in oral interactions. While more people than expected interact both orally and digitally, it is still true that digital communication appears to be more frequent than face-to-face.

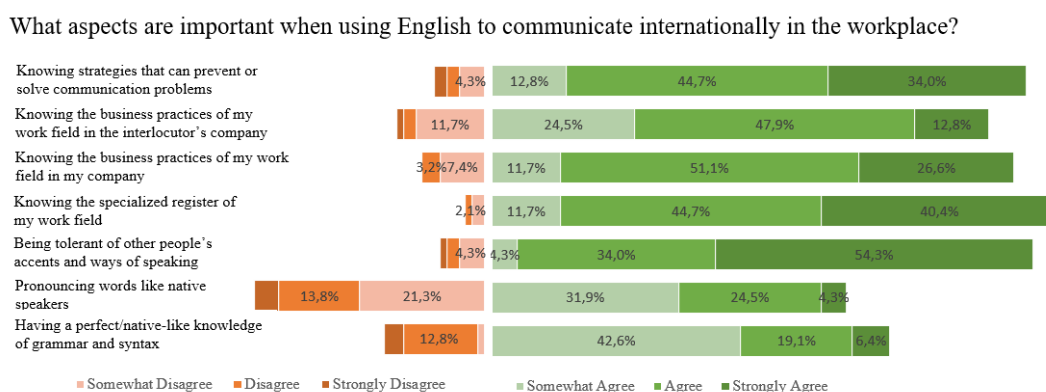
Figure 1 Types of interaction.



If we break down the different types of communication, e-mailing appears to be the most common way of interacting, followed by face-to-face and instant

messaging. Videoconference conversations and social media use for work purposes appeared to be the least common types of interaction, with 66% using videoconferences and 60% working with social media platforms. The vast majority of the respondents (95%) stated they communicate with other non-native speakers, whereas 62% interact with native speakers. Only 38% interact with speakers from post-colonial countries, or what Kachru (1985) called the Outer Circle of English, which includes territories where English was imported through colonization.

Figure 2 Important aspects for international communication at work.



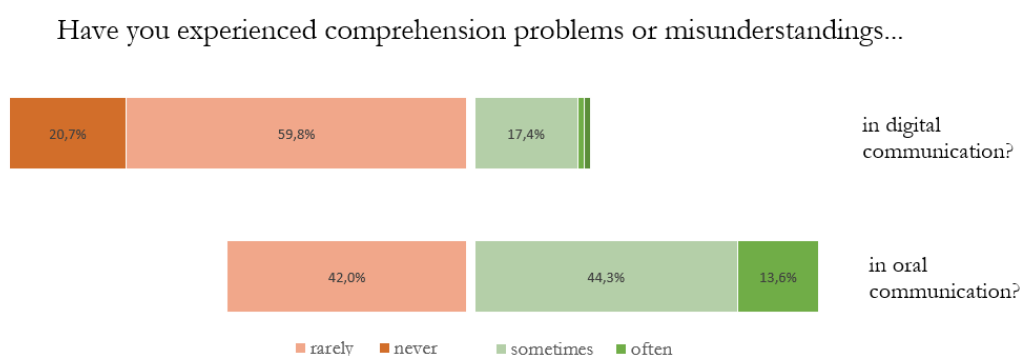
When asked to determine their agreement with the aspects above, the majority of respondents appear to indicate that tolerance is paramount in communicative success (median=6, iqr=1). Flexibility and acceptance, alongside a co-operative behavior, have been underlined as a positive aspect of ELF communication generally as well as in BELF (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013). Native-like pronunciation and grammar on the other hand obtained the lowest agreement scores (median=4, iqr=2 for both) in the set, in line with the basic principles of ELF stating that a focus on native-like competence is unneeded in international interactions.

The other elements find similar degrees of agreement (median=5, iqr=1). As it can be seen, the importance of knowing the register of the work field is agreed upon, as well as knowledge of communication strategies. Business know-how, one of three main aspects of BELF according to Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) is also seen as very important in such communication: employees should be familiar with the business practices of their own companies as well as those of the interlocutor's company – such

knowledge provides a shared common ground that can prevent misunderstandings and ensure that all parties are working with the same background information. Indeed, the following question “Do you think that having a shared knowledge of the business know-how involved in the interaction can help mutual understanding?” showed definite agreement, with only 3 respondents selecting disagreement (median=5, iqr=1).

The following questions looked at the different categories of face-to-face and digital communication.

Figure 3 Comprehension problems or misunderstandings in different channels of communication.⁴



The diverging stacked bar chart shows that while miscommunication does inevitably occur in both channels of communication, it appears to be more common in oral communication (median=3, iqr=1; N=88⁵) than in digital communication (median=2, iqr=0; N=92⁶). These results, not unexpected, may be explained with the nature of (written) digital communication itself, which allows for additional processing time and does not include the additional risk of mispronunciation or hearing problems.

When it comes to the type of speaker the respondents were more likely to encounter problems with, it should first be noted that in both oral and digital communication, over 20% of the respondents reported never interacting with speakers of post-colonial varieties, whereas they appear to communicate mostly with non-native speakers, as only 4,3% (oral) and 1,1% (digital) report

⁴ This element was investigated in two separate questions: 12. *Have you experienced comprehension problems or misunderstandings in oral communication?* And 14. *Have you experienced comprehension problems or misunderstandings in digital communication?*

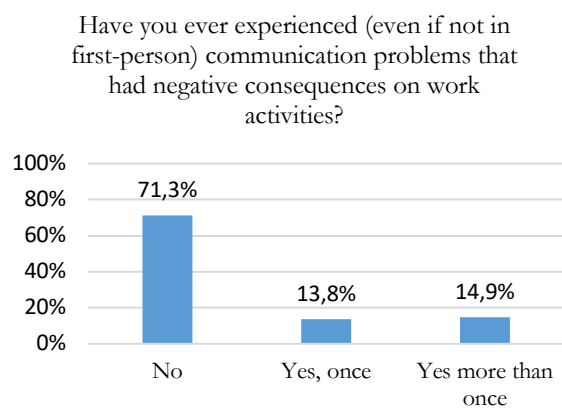
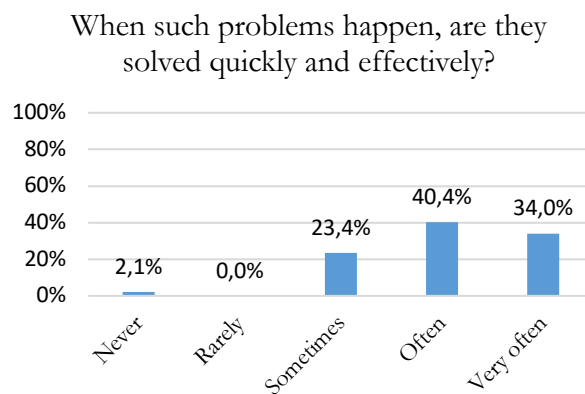
⁵ 6 respondents reported never taking part in oral communication in English.

⁶ 2 respondents reported never taking part in digital communication in English.

not interacting with this type of speaker. These percentages increase to 9,8% (oral) and 5,3% (digital) for native speakers, suggesting that non-native speaker/non-native speaker communication is the most common for the respondents. Interactions with native speakers appear to be perceived as the least problematic in both channels of communication (oral: median=2, iqr=2, N=85; digital: median=2, iqr=0, N=91), whereas non-native speakers and outer circle speakers appear to be seen as the source of more frequent communication issues. This appears to contradict ELF-related studies that highlight communication issues between non-native and native speakers of English, where native speakers are deemed poor international communicators (Carey 2013) and would benefit from training in accommodation (Tatsuki 2017).

When communication problems happen, however, they remain very rarely unsolved: as respondents state, such instances are resolved quickly and efficiently in the majority of cases.

Figure 4 Communication problems resolution and consequences.



The perception reported is that whenever misunderstandings or non-understandings occur, an effort is carried out to solve them as quickly as possible, due to the importance of being on the same page.

Indeed, the majority of respondents reported that they have never had any experience, first-hand or otherwise, of communication breakdown being at the root of negative consequences at work, such as loss of clients or orders, rewriting of agreements and the like. These results seem to corroborate the idea that the ‘let-it-pass’ strategy (Firth 1996) is avoided in BELF communication: due to the potentially high stakes of business interactions, all parties collaborate actively to ensure that essential information is shared and understood by all relevant parties. However, at times misunderstandings or non-understandings may not be solved, therefore affecting one or multiple parties negatively in terms of time and revenue loss.

The following questions investigated the different channels of communication, oral and digital, in order to ascertain different perceptions and behaviors.

3.3. Oral interactions

The first aspect to be examined in this section is the degree of agreement with a number of potential problematic elements that could disrupt communication and/or create misunderstandings in face-to-face/videoconference and telephone interactions.

Figure 5 Problematic aspects of face-to-face/videoconference interactions.

The following aspects can create communication problems in face-to-face / videoconference communication:

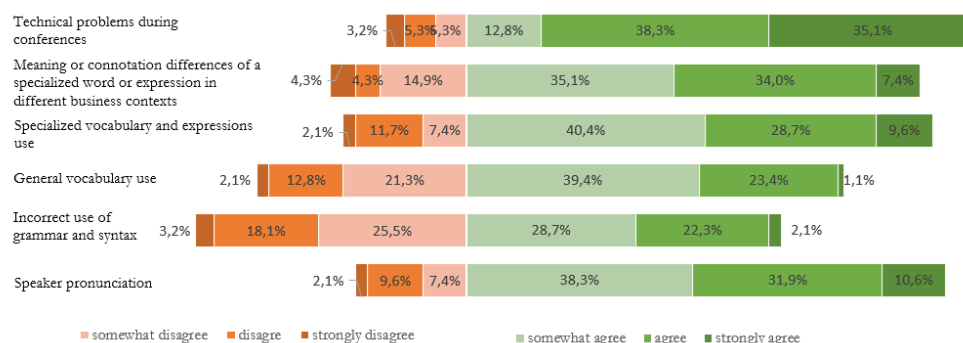
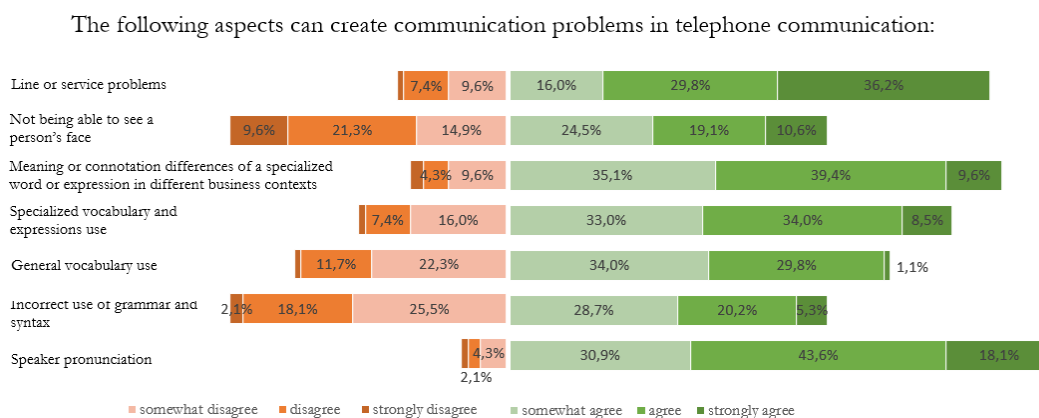


Figure 6 Problematic aspects of telephone interactions.



Percentages remained similar for face-to-face / videoconference interactions, with technical problems being reported as a particularly problematic area alongside speaker pronunciation. Despite responses suggesting that native-like pronunciation is not paramount to communicative success, it appears however that the distinctiveness and variability of international accents may lead to problems in oral interactions. Agreement levels on this item are slightly higher for telephone conversations (median=5, iqr=1) than for face-to-face/videoconference (median=4, iqr=1); nonetheless, being unable to see the interlocutor does not appear to create additional problems for a considerable number of respondents. This may be seen as somehow contradictory, as without any type of visual information – lip reading, facial expressions and gestures, presence of additional material – it is paramount that pronunciation is very clear over the phone to ensure understanding. In line with ELF tenets and previous studies, incorrect use of grammar and syntax did not receive a high degree of agreement in either type of interaction, although this emerges more clearly in the diagram above than in median and interquartile range values (median=4, iqr=2 for telephone; median=4, iqr=1 for face to face/videoconference) suggesting that accuracy was not considered as important as other aspects of telephone communication. In both questions, specialized vocabulary and meaning and connotation differences were thought as being potentially more problematic than general vocabulary use. This may be ascribed to the fact that a misunderstanding due to meaning or connotation differences may not be solved if both parties are unaware of the different assumptions under which they are operating. As for specialized vocabulary and expressions, a person unfamiliar with those may not be

entirely aware of all the implications of the terminology used in practical terms.

Respondents were then asked what they would do if they did not understand something the other party would say; this question was asked twice, in relation to telephone conversations and in to face-to-face / videoconference interactions. The elements the respondents were asked to evaluate were the following, by stating how often they engaged in the following behavior, in a 5-point scale from 'never' to 'very often':

- I tell the other person explicitly that something is not clear (I'm sorry, I didn't understand)
- I signal with my facial expression / gestures that something is not clear (only face-to-face / conferences)
- I ask the other person to repeat the sentence that is not clear (I'm sorry, could you repeat?)
- I ask the other person to clarify the meaning of a word or expression (what do you mean with....?)
- I ask for confirmation that I understood correctly (Did you mean....?)
- I don't interrupt the conversation and see if I can understand as the conversation continues
- If there are other colleagues from my firm, I ask them to summarize / explain what was said (only face-to-face / conferences)

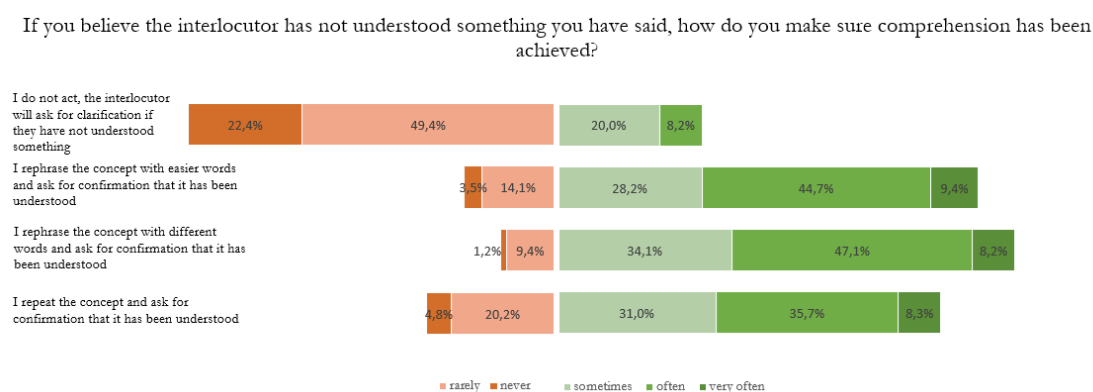
Table 1 Strategies used when comprehension is not clear.

		I say something is not clear	facial expression / gestures	repeat what is not clear	ask for clarification	ask confirmation	I don't interrupt	I ask a colleague
face-to-face/ videoconference	mean	4	3	4	3	4	3	2
	iqr	1	2	1	1	1	1	2
	N	85	84	84	82	82	83	82
telephone	mean	4	/	4	3,5	4	3	/
	iqr	1	/	1	1	1	1	/
	N	83	/	84	82	82	81	/

Responses did not vary significantly for those strategies that were common to the two questions; the strategies employed more often appear to be asking for repetition, stating that something is not clear, and asking for confirmation. The lower scores for clarification of a word or expression may be related to a lower incidence of non-understanding due to a specific element in the conversation in the respondents' experience. On the contrary, ignoring the problem to see if it is solved by itself later on is not a popular strategy to adopt (median=3, iqr=1, N=83 for face-to-face/videoconference; median=3, iqr=1, N=81 for telephone) reinforcing the perceived need to address and solve communication issues as soon as they arise. In face-to-face and videoconference interactions, the use of non-verbal cues is not a popular strategy (median=3, iqr=2, N=84), with even lower frequencies (median=2, iqr=2, N=82) reported for asking for a colleague's help.

The following question, "If the topic of the interaction, or a given word or expression imply additional knowledge of your local context (local or national laws, company policies, etc.) of which the interlocutor(s) may not be aware, what do you do?" showed that the majority of people would either provide the information during the interaction (54%) or before the interaction (35%). Respondents were also asked to state how often they would employ a series of strategies if they thought their interlocutor had not understood something they said:

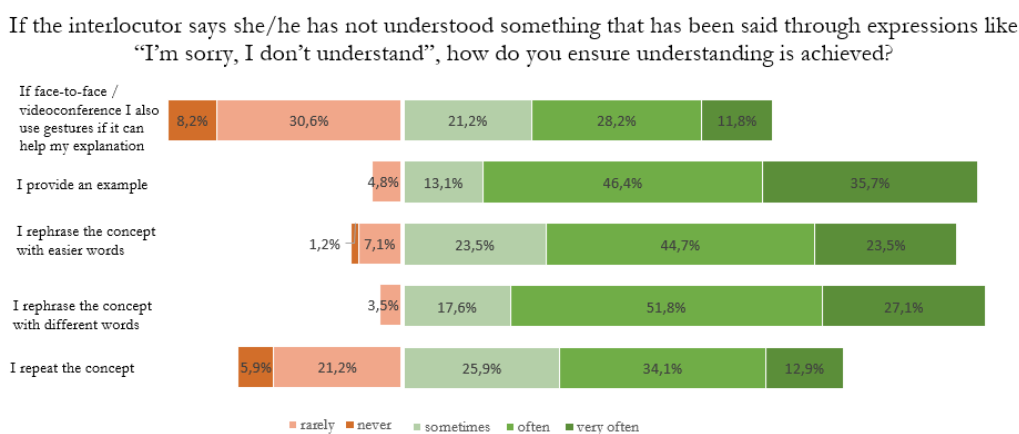
Figure 7 Strategies used when suspecting communication problems.



As can be noticed from the chart, inaction is again avoided (median=2, iqr=1; N=85), showing again a distinct preference for taking action and making sure the hearer has understood the message clearly; indeed, while respondents did use repetition as a strategy (median=3, iqr=1,5; N=84), rephrasing with

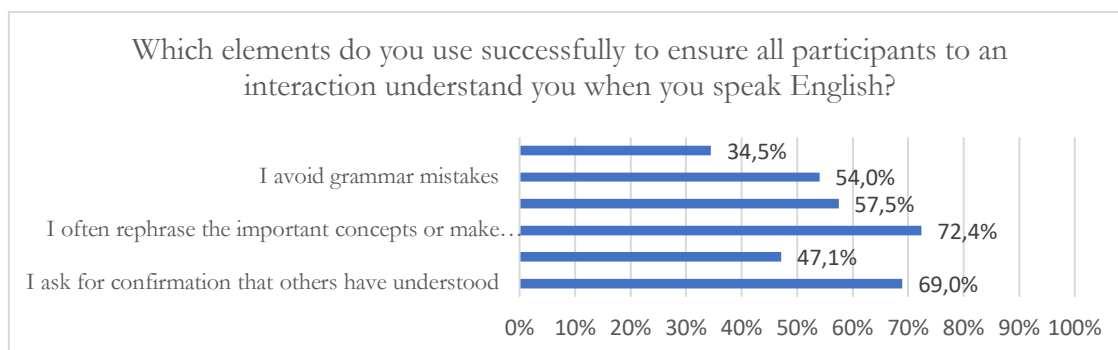
different or easier words appears to be the preeminent strategy employed, with a slight preference, in percentage terms, for rephrasing with different words. While repetition may be useful in the case of mishearing, it is not helpful in the case non-understanding is caused by a comprehension issue. Using rephrasing as a strategy right away may help solve the problem sooner and save the interlocutor’s face at the same time, anticipating a further request for clarification in case simple repetition did not solve the issue. Results are predictably very similar in cases where the interlocutor has specifically stated there is a comprehension issue, as may be seen in fig 9 below.

Figure 8 Strategies to solve communication problems.



Rephrasing with different or with easier words still remain frequently-used strategies, with “providing an example” as another popular linguistic behavior. The use of repetition, as in the previous question, and gestures appears not to be a preferred choice (median=3, iqr=2, N=85). Again, non-verbal language does not seem to be exploited consistently by respondents as a supporting element in solving communication problems. In the last question related to oral interactions, “Which elements do you use successfully to ensure all participants to an interaction understand you when you speak English?” respondents could select multiple options, as shown in figure 3:

Figure 9 Elements that contribute to successful communication.



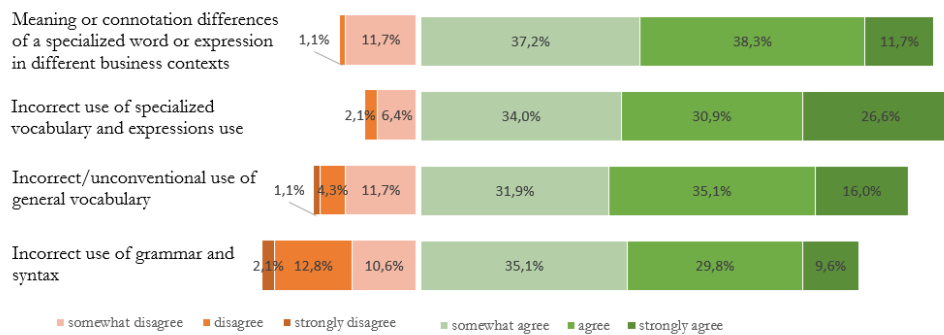
Rephrasing and use of examples appear to be the most frequent strategies, followed closely by asking for confirmation. Avoiding grammar mistakes is also cited as a strategy by around half of the respondents: while native-like accuracy in grammar and syntax is not considered essential, non-normative uses are still perceived as an undesirable trait, possibly due to the wording of the element itself. Native-like pronunciation, on the other hand, is consistently not seen as paramount to the success of interactions.

3.4. Digital interactions

When asked to indicate which aspects of digital communication could be problematic for comprehension, results showed higher degrees of agreement for all the elements that were also investigated in oral interactions, as can be seen in fig 10 below:

Figure 10 Problematic aspects of digital interactions.

The following aspects can create communication problems in digital (e-mail / social media / instant messaging) communication



Incorrect use of grammar and syntax was considered the least problematic element in the list, similarly to oral interactions (median=4, iqr=2). The other three elements have higher degrees of agreement when compared to oral interactions, as summarized in table 2.

Table 2 Problematic aspects of interactions investigated across types of interaction.

		general vocabulary	specialized vocabulary	meaning or connotation differences
telephone	median	4	4	4
	iqr	2	1	1
face-to-face	median	4	4	4
	iqr	1	1	1
digital	median	5	5	4,5
	iqr	1	2	1

This difference may be due to the presence, in the questions on oral interactions, of specific elements that do not apply to digital communication (pronunciation, technical issues) that received very high degrees of agreement and in turn might have influenced agreement scores on the remaining elements.

Respondents were then asked how often they would use specific strategies when not understanding a written message, reporting their behavior through the same 5-point scale employed in the oral interaction section:

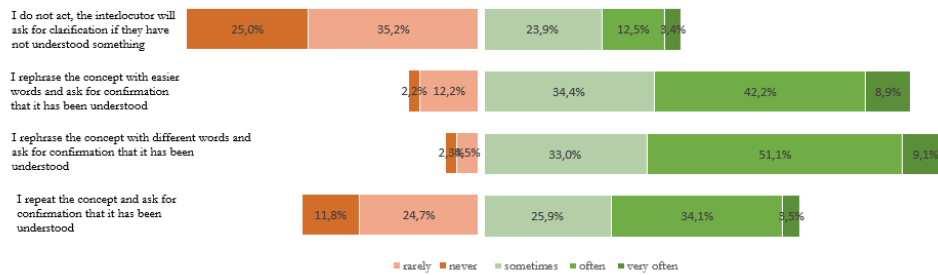
- I ask the other person to rephrase the sentence that is not clear (I'm sorry, could you explain this again?)
- I ask the other person to clarify the meaning of a word or expression (what do you mean with....?)
- I ask the other person to give me an example (Could you please give me an example?)
- I ask for confirmation that I understood correctly (Did you mean....?)
- I ask a colleague for help
- I look for unknown words in a dictionary

As in previous questions, asking for a colleague's help was not a popular strategy (median=3, iqr=1, N=87), although the reported frequency was higher than for face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, respondents appear to favor the use of dictionaries more frequently (median=4, iqr=2, N=87). Looking up words in a dictionary may suggest that respondents, taking advantage of the asynchronous nature of many digital modes, may try and solve the problem by themselves before involving the interlocutor, possibly for face-saving reasons. This may however prove to be a double-edged sword, as words might have different meanings or connotations within specific business practices or industries than those commonly found in dictionaries. Asking for confirmation (median=4, iqr=1, N=87) has a similar score to both types of oral interaction, whereas asking for clarification (median=4, iqr=1, N=88) appears to be used more frequently than in oral interactions.

In case a topic is discussed or a word is used that implies specific knowledge of the local context, respondents would act the same as in oral interactions, that is, providing the relevant information - this time via link or attachment - (83%) rather than waiting for the interlocutor to ask for specific information: this is again tied to a need to be proactive to prevent misunderstandings before they occur.

Figure 11 Strategies used when suspecting communication problems.

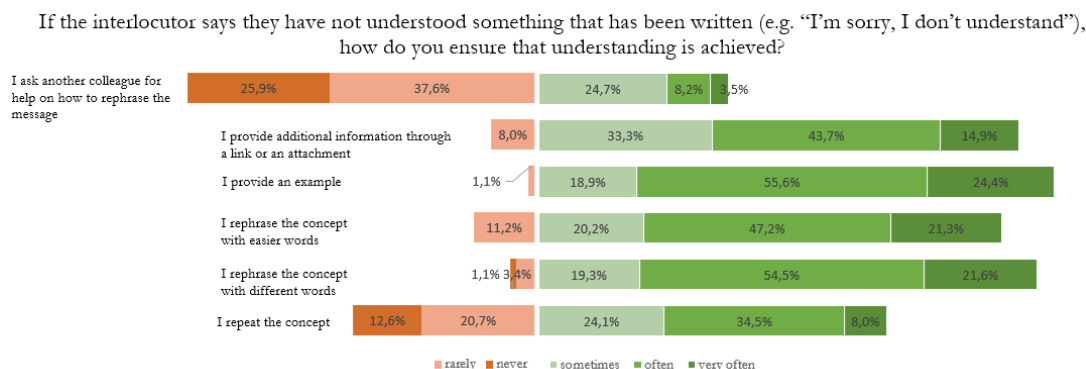
If you believe the interlocutor has not understood something you have written, how do you make sure comprehension has been achieved?



Solving the alleged problem through repetition (median=3, iqr=2, N=86) is not attempted as often as rephrasing (median=4, iqr=1, N=88 for rephrasing with different words, N=90 for rephrasing with easier words). Again, these findings are consistent with responses for oral interactions, even though repetition frequencies were expected to be lower in digital interactions. Using exactly the same exact words again in writing would indeed not be very helpful in case of a suspected communication breakdown, unless repetition was used as a strategy to highlight important or salient points. Similarly, when respondents were asked how they would act if they thought their interlocutor had misunderstood or not understood something, waiting for the interlocutor to make his/her lack of understanding explicit is not a preferred option, much like in oral interactions (median=2, iqr=1,5, N=88).

In the case where the interlocutor has made a comprehension problem explicit, asking for help is again the least frequently used strategy among those investigated (median=2, iqr=2, N=85). Repetition saw a lower degree of agreement (median=3, iqr=2, N=86) compared to the other options provided, as can be seen from the bar chart below (fig. 12).

Figure 12 Strategies to solve communication problems.



These results appear to suggest that different channels of communication do not influence users' preference for which CS to use, at least for those strategies that were investigated in both sections of the survey.

The last two questions in the survey involved the influence of the lack of non-verbal cues on comprehension in digital communication. The question "Do you think that lack of gestures, facial expressions and other elements (intonation, pauses, etc.) in digital communication influence comprehension?" saw 73% of respondents agreeing that the lack of such elements may create ambiguous situations or influence comprehension negatively. This appears to contradict responses for oral communication (cf. Fig. 6), where being unable to see the interlocutor's face was not considered a major problem in telephone interactions.

The last question investigated the primarily asynchronous quality of digital interactions. "Do you think that the 'gap' in time between a message in digital conversation and a response facilitates communication in English?" saw 65% of respondents agreeing that the delayed response gave them time to understand the message and prepare a response, with the possibility of looking things up in the dictionary. Only the 11% stated that they did not see any difference between the different types of communication, whereas the remaining 24% stated they preferred communicating orally, on the account that it is "faster and you can address individual points as they emerge in the conversation".

4. Discussion of findings and conclusion

In Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's 2011 study, survey responses showed that clarity "was without question the most important feature to

guarantee communicative success” (2011, 255) according to the participants in the studies, with grammar knowledge taking a backseat to the knowledge of the specialized register of the users’ field of work (2011, 253). The results of the present study appear to support these claims, as having a native-like competence in pronunciation in grammar and syntax had a much lower degree of agreement than the other elements investigated. This suggests that linguistic accuracy is not as important in effective BELF communication as other aspects of communication, which may be related to the three layers of the Global Communicative Competence Model (see also Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013): knowledge of business practices, linguistic competence in the relevant register, strategic competence in language use to ensure mutual comprehension, and acceptance of different ways of using the language.

The tendency to proactiveness in pre-empting and solving communication problems that has been attested in both previous ELF (e.g. Mauranen 2006; 2012; Björkman 2011) and BELF (e.g. Franceschi submitted) studies is shown in participant responses as well: very few users would wait until they received an explicit request for information or a sign of non-understanding, they would act proactively to avoid misunderstanding through the use of CSs or by providing additional information relevant to the conversation before or during the interaction. While most studies so far have looked exclusively at face-to-face communication, this study attempted at investigating differences in attitudes and linguistic behaviors in digital interactions as well, in addition to looking at specific behaviors in CS use. Digital communication is extremely common in the workplace these days, with 32% respondents in this survey stating they engage mostly in digital interactions. The lack of non-verbal and paralinguistic cues is recognized as having a potentially negative influence on comprehension; however, respondents do not report exploiting non-verbal language as part of their strategies and appear to rely more on verbal strategies when dealing with communication issues. As this survey measured subjective perceptions of respondent behavior, it may be so that participants are not fully aware of the extent of their use of para-linguistic and extra-linguistics features in communication and may have underestimated its role. The potential issues raised by a lack of visual cues are also recognized in oral telephone conversations, where speaker pronunciation is widely seen as a potentially problematic aspect – while native-like pronunciation is not necessary for successful interaction and might even be detrimental in case of regional

native accents, the way a person speaks may still influence comprehensibility negatively (cf. e.g. Jenkins 2000).

Where items remained the same, responses did not vary significantly across types of interaction. In both types of interaction, rephrasing is preferred to repetition when non-understanding on the interlocutor's part is suspected. Unless a specific request for repetition or clarification is made, speakers may recur more often to rephrasing as it may solve either a hearing or a comprehension issue, acting as a preventive measure and as a face-saving device to the interlocutor. However, interaction data suggests that upon ambiguous requests speakers in oral interactions tend to favor repetition over clarification (Kaur 2009; Franceschi submitted), trusting the interlocutor to make a further request should they need one. This discrepancy may be explained if we assume respondents might have overestimated their use of rephrasing, perceived as the most effective option, whereas during actual interactions they may fall back on repetition as it allows speakers recycling of existing material, reducing cognitive load unless necessary (Kaur 2009, 142).

To conclude, results relating to aspects of BELF communication already explored by previous research appear to be in line with such studies involving both surveys and interviews (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011; Ehrenreich 2010; Rogerson-Revell 2010) and linguistic analysis (Franceschi 2019, submitted), underlining the role of all three layers of the GCC and of the need for skillful use of certain communication strategies to maintain successful communication. The attempt to investigate preferences in CS use across different channels of communication has not highlighted any significant differences between oral and digital interactions for those strategies that were relevant to both. As this study explored self-assessed behaviors in a small sample of BELF users, further studies would be needed to examine CS use in workplace digital interactions, namely analysis of naturally-occurring data.

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Valeria Franceschi received her PhD in 2014 from the University of Verona, where she is currently a junior researcher in English Language and Translation at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. She teaches courses at undergraduate and graduate level. She has published mainly in the field of English as a Lingua Franca, including *Exploring Plurilingualism in Fan Fiction: ELF Users as Creative Writers* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017). Lately, her research in ELF has focused on plurilingual practices and on the business context (BELF). In addition to ELF, her research areas of interest include digital communication and corpus linguistics.