Communicative strategies in BELF negotiations

A qualitative study on misunderstandings and communicative strategies in BELF telephone negotiations

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on exploring the usage of communicative strategies (CSs) by business professionals who use business English as a lingua franca (BELF) in telephone negotiations. The purpose of the study is also to analyze the occurrence of misunderstanding and non-understandings. The data consists of nine naturally-occurring spoken ‘buy-sell’ negotiations between business professionals from seven different countries around Europe and Asia. The negotiations summed up to 1 hour and 30 minutes of recorded material. The transcripts of these negotiations were analyzed in detail by using the qualitative method ‘conversation analysis’ (CA). The results show that business professionals use CSs as pre-empting measures to prevent misunderstanding. In addition, CSs in the present data appear to be used to create cooperativeness and subsequently reach successful communication. The present study also found two scenarios where communicative breakdown occurred but were subsequently repaired through ‘clarity requests’, ‘confirmation checks’ and repetition. Lastly, the present paper recognizes that previous knowledge of the other party is an effective aspect in keeping upbeat negotiations and reaching mutual understanding.

Keywords

BELF; communicative strategies (CSs); misunderstanding; conversation analysis; negotiations.
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1. Introduction

Interaction between people who do not share a common language often result in choosing to communicate in a lingua franca, i.e. a bridge language used to make communication possible (Seidlhofer, 2005). English has for years advanced as the lingua franca that is today used globally, now known as *English as a lingua franca* (hereafter ELF). English is in other words chosen as the communicative tool to reach a mutual understanding by those who do not share neither a common language nor a common culture (Firth, 1996). English is today recognized to be the front of lingua franca communication due to its major feature of being functionally flexible and spread across linguistic, geographical and cultural areas (House, 2002). Lingua franca English is typically used in international domains, e.g. academic discourse communities (Björkman, 2010, 2011; Kaur 2011a and b, 2012; Mauranen 2006), and international business settings and meetings (e.g. Charles, 2007; Cogo, 2009; Cogo, A & Dewey, 2006; Firth 1996; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Rogersson-Revell, 2008).

With globalization, English used in business settings has been gaining prominence, which entails non-native speakers of English interacting frequently to conduct business (Charles, 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; House, 2002; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). This awareness has in turn awakened discussions and research concerning this topic, which subsequently coined the term *Business English as a Lingua Franca* (henceforth BELF) (Louhiala Salminen et al., 2005). English in BELF settings (as well as in academic ELF interactions) is used for goal-oriented interactions where the participants involved in the communication always seek a win-win state among business partners. For this reason, the present paper will use the term BELF when referring to the shared language facility of the domain (Kankaanraanta & Planken, 2010).

In (B)ELF settings, the goal is described as not being as proficient as possible (grammatical accuracy, vocabulary depth and size), but rather being effective when communicating by using, for instance, communicative strategies (CSs) so that the message is conveyed to the other party. This means that ELF and BELF users do not necessarily follow native norms of communication, and that they seem to communicate effectively without conforming to NS norms (Björkman, 2010, Björkman, 2011). This in turn highlights some of the ways business people use a variety of interactive resources and strategies to reach functional goals and to establish a sense of familiarity despite linguistic restraints (Rogerson-Revell, 2008). It is therefore considered that by deploying communicative strategies in the communication process, the participants make an active attempt in avoiding misunderstandings or disturbance in their utterances (e.g. Björkman, 2014; Mauranen, 2006; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

The subject of disturbance and misunderstandings within the field of (B)ELF differs fairly from the closely related field of *intercultural communication*, which entails studies of communication between people having different cultural backgrounds. What separates the two subjects is the fact that ELF and BELF studies reveal that the
occurrence of misunderstanding caused by underlying cultural differences when communicating is not as common as originally thought, while the field of intercultural communication emphasizes the opposite (Kaur, 2011). Studies connected to intercultural communication (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Scollon et al., 2011; Lustig et al., 2006) underline the common assumption that comprehension problems will occur if at least one of the participants is not speaking their mother tongue. Cogo (2009), House (2002), Kaur (2011 a and b), and Maunanen (2006) take a stance on this matter by maintaining that the statement is solely commonsense assumptions. They argue that the participant’s cultural background and linguistic competence would not be recognized as the main cause of the misunderstanding, if it would occur. It is difficult to determine the true cause of the believed misunderstanding, and that paves way for further study. There are as yet few studies examining real-life occurring business negotiations held between NNSs of English, exclusively focusing on telephone conversations and the occurrence of misunderstandings and CSs.

The present paper will therefore explore the use of English as a lingua franca in a business setting, specifically business-related meetings held over the telephone between non-native speakers of English. As the company connects with clients and co-workers across borders on a daily basis, being able to communicate in English is essential for successful negotiation and is seen as a prerequisite by the company. The present study will explore communicative strategies and misunderstandings in BELF conversations, with the central question being whether misunderstandings do occur in BELF telephone negotiations. This paper will subsequently ask if the interlocutors apply communicative strategies to avoid potential misunderstandings, if they use any CSs to repair a misunderstanding if it has occurred, and what type of CSs are displayed if so. These questions will be answered by using conversation analytic CA procedures as previous studies have demonstrated for it to be the best method used when analyzing verbal business interaction (e.g. Cogo, 2009; Firth 1996).

2. Background

The last decade has seen an increase in various studies of BELF, mainly from continental Europe. Generally, the literature on BELF has so far provided us with insights and various descriptions of BELF usage. To this point, we have seen corpus studies discussing the language and cultural challenges BELF speakers encounter, subsequently developing a profile of success factors in BELF interaction (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). With the help of interactive data, they showed that business professionals try to solicit for more understanding in international companies. Other corpus-based approaches in BELF research have advanced within the past decade observing email correspondence, negotiations, multicultural business meetings, and so forth (Bjørge, 2007; Planken, 2005; Poncini, 2004). Research in BELF has also discussed the presence of native speakers of English (NSE) in BELF companies, and the fact that BELF speakers have more trouble reaching mutual understanding with NSE than with other BELF colleagues. Further discussions have focused on raising awareness of the diversity typical to BELF settings and on teaching NSE to
communicate more effectively with BELF speakers (e.g. Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Rogerson-Revell, 2007).

It is beyond dispute that English is the leading lingua franca used to conduct international business (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Characteristic BELF discourse can be recognized as simplified English, and the shared goal for any kind of BELF interaction is to get the job done. In order to reach the mutual goal, speakers of BELF must make sure that the message gets across. To do so, previous research within the field has reported that a wide range of communicative strategies are used in order to prevent misunderstandings potentially causing unsuccessful communication, and instead reach a mutual understanding (Bjørge, 2010; Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010; Firth, 1996; Kankanraanta & Planken, 2010). The following section will explore the research gap outlined in the introduction in more detail and link it to previous research. As BELF has not had extensive research on CSs, the present study will refer to some of the studies outside BELF research that have relevance to this study (e.g. Björkman, 2014; Cogo, 2009; Kaur, 2011a and b; Kaur, 2012; Mauranen, 2006).

The common goal for the researchers studying BELF has been to analyze business participants’ discourse communication whose work involves using primarily non-native language in a business setting, and to study the nature of this type of communication. Recent research demonstrates that speakers generally employ a variety of communicative strategies in BELF interactions. Kankanraanta & Planken’s study (2010) finds that grammatical inaccuracies in oral communication in BELF communication do not lead to negative consequences. Additionally, being able to use communicative strategies in order to reach mutual understanding is thus far proven to be the key for successful communication in BELF (Bjørge, 2010; Kankanraanta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Rogerson-Revell, 2008) and ELF settings (e.g. Björkman, 2011; Björkman 2014). When there is risk for unsuccessful communication eventually leading to a misunderstanding, speakers in BELF settings usually negotiate meaning through accommodation strategies until the misunderstanding has been clarified (Cogo, 2009; Kankanraanta & Planken, 2010). Additionally, strategies may help speakers of BELF overcome the concerns of not being able to make themselves understood. During meetings, participants display various strategies such as signaling the meeting structure and progression clearly, turn-taking strategies and so forth (Rogerson-Revell, 2008). The same study also showed that the participants employed various strategies to make the meeting seem meaningful at a procedural level. In addition, similar work at a linguistic level seemed to be used (Rogerson-Revell, 2008).

The focus of the present study is spoken business interaction, and one of the earliest studies that present similar viewpoints of this study was that of Firth (1996). His research on business telephone conversations between L2 users of English present findings that are highly relevant to the present paper. The results of the study identified frequent discursive practices, one of which was ‘let it pass’, i.e. linguistic anomalies or ambiguities are ignored and the focus is instead on the message rather than form. In addition to Firth’s study on spoken interaction, Bjørge’s research (2010) adds some extended interpretations on the matter from a different point of view. Bjørge’s study
focuses on the area of negotiation and international business communities. Much of the communication going back and forth between professionals is through the production of speech, and analysis of spoken communication is therefore more common. It is therefore acknowledged and emphasized by Bjørge that non-verbal communication is widely under-researched, but just as important (Bjørge, 2010). She argues that professionals should be aware of the fact that they will meet BELF speakers, and that they will also have to develop non-verbal strategies in order to create a successful communicative environment. She emphasizes the important role of having ‘active listening’ skills, which she found to be a decisive skill to have when negotiating in business settings. ‘Active listening’ skills go hand in hand with the phenomenon of backchannelling, which is presented in the same study. It refers to verbal and non-verbal listener feedback in spoken communication. It primarily functions as a turn-continuer as it most often signals understanding from the listener and that the speaker may continue. Backchannelling through supportive laughter has also been identified as an effective pre-empting strategy in ELF interaction (Meierkord, 2000). In a German multinational corporation, it was found that strategies of communicative validation (e.g. clarification requests, brief summaries) were used as an adaptation to a “pragmatic and flexible approach to language use” (Ehrenreich, 2010: 428), which is similar to the work of Louhiala-Salminen et al., (2005). The study also emphasized that successful communication in business interactions is essential for a fruitful cooperation in larger international companies.

Other research has confirmed importance of effective strategies in business environments (Kankanraanta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). Kankanraanta and Louhiala-Salminen show that professionals themselves within the workplace would define politeness as an effective strategy within a BELF context, as it covers areas such as small talk during business talks, which would be referred to as “effective business communication strategies”. They also found that users of BELF preferred clarity to directness, as it delivers an explicit way of communicating. They felt that it was important to find the meaning of the utterance as easily as possible. Speakers seeking clarity was also one of the CSs examined and explained in Björkman’s research (2014) on polyadic ELF speech from an academic setting. It was found that a number of CSs, e.g. clarification requests, were used as a measure to prevent potential misunderstandings. This finding provides further support for earlier ELF research on CSs (Cogo, 2009; Kaur, 2011a and b, and Mauranen, 2006).

The aim of the present study will intertwine with the bulk of research presented above. Whether it is online via e-mail, in an international business meeting or telephone negotiations, adopting communicative strategies when being in a BELF environment is important in order to avoid misunderstandings. There seems to be a need for more research on the topic of CSs from BELF settings. The present study will therefore continue to explore the use of communicative strategies in business telephone negotiations. There is room for more research on where potential problems are averted in BELF research (significantly more in ELF), as opposed to analysis of the occurrence of misunderstandings. The present paper aims to extend knowledge on this matter.
2.1 Misunderstanding and communicative strategies

Business related talk is always in need of mutual understanding from all of the parties involved in the interaction. It is essential for a successful negotiation that the message conveyed is clear and comprehensible. Understandably, this may not always be the case. BELF communication involves participants having to talk in another language different from their mother tongue. Speaking with people from different first language (L1) backgrounds typically involves people having different cultural backgrounds from one another. As communication transpires between two participants who do not share the same L1, mutual understanding is not always achieved. There are three different aspects of communicative breakdown recognized by previous studies (e.g. Kaur, 2011 a and b): partial understanding, non-understanding or misunderstanding. The present study will focus on the latter two.

Misunderstanding and non-understanding are two topics that have been addressed by ELF scholars (e.g. Kaur, 2011 a and b; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). Non-understanding refers to a situation where the listener realizes that s/he cannot make sense of the previous utterance made by the speaker, and therefore fails to comprehend the message entirely. Misunderstanding on the other hand, means that the listener receives the message from the speaker, but interprets it differently from what the speaker meant (Kaur, 2011). In the case of non-understanding, the receiver has the option to either make the speaker conscious of the problem, or to ‘let it pass’ (as mentioned earlier in background). It is important to note that the concept of ‘let it pass’ is not applicable when a misunderstanding transpires, simply because the recipient does not know that s/he misunderstood the speaker's utterance, unless pointed out by the speaker in the next turn. Pitzl (2005) found that the participants often skillfully resolve non-understandings. Research on misunderstandings by Mauranen (2006) found that participants often resolve misunderstandings through cooperative measures, e.g. communicative strategies such as clarification and repair.

Communicative strategies were at first associated with the notion of ‘problematicity’ in the second language acquisition paradigm (Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). Scholars of SLA (e.g. Corder, 1981; Kasper & Kellerman, 1997; Tarone, 1977) described CSs as means to avoid or compensate for breakdowns in communication, or to convey meaning when encountered with linguistic difficulties. Research within pragmatics and speech act theory (e.g. Bialystok, 1983; Canale, 1983) suggested however that problematicity included in the definition of CSs was unjust. CSs are instead seen as a variety of resources that speakers use to express explicitness and effectiveness to convey their message and achieve mutual understanding (Bialystok, 1983). The present paper will also consider the notion of ‘potential breakdown’ and ‘pre-emptive measures’ when performing the analysis as previous findings suggest that CSs are also used in scenarios where interlocutors can predict potential breakdown and solve it beforehand by using CSs (Færch and Kasper, 1984). A number of ELF scholars have followed this line of thought when performing their analyses (e.g. Björkman, 2014; Cogo, 2009; Kaur, 2011)
3. Data, setting and methodology

3.1 Data

The data was collected in the office of the Swedish participant, with whom the researcher first established contact. The office in which the recording was made was medium-sized with a view facing the industry area, and next to the office was a larger conference room and the colleagues of the participant sat in their own respective offices. As the call was made, the researcher placed the recording device next to the telephone and the participant enabled speaker mode so that the recording could register the clients’ voice. The researcher made three visits to the office within two months. A full description of the company and the participants will be given in the section below.

In order to comprehend the complex nature of misunderstandings in BELF communication, it is necessary to use naturally-occurring data. The material of the present study consists of 9 audio-recorded business telephone conversations held by two non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Recordings of a total of 1 hour and 30 minutes have been transcribed using a slightly adapted notation system used in studies by Cogo (2009), Firth (1996), and Kaur (2011b) (see Appendix B). The tools used to perform the transcribing were: Ableton Live and Microsoft Word. Ableton Live is a ‘digital audio workstation’ (DAW), which is a program used mainly for music production and is exceedingly flexible with audio files. This particular program was selected to aid the process of transcribing because of its flexibility and functionality. The program displays the exact time of the recording all the way to a tenth of a second, and it provides the user with an excellent overview of all the recordings in one window. The transcriptions of the telephone recordings contain business related conversations, performed by negotiators from e.g. Spain, France and Turkey (see Table 1 below).

3.2 The Company and Participants

The company in the present study is based in Stockholm, Sweden. It focuses on the development, manufacturing and sales of diagnostic kits and elements based on genetic analytical practices. The office interacts with clients outside of Sweden on a daily basis, as it needs to do so in order to keep the business running in the right direction. The company’s international communication is primarily business related, and is invariably spoken in English, which puts this business in the frame of international English. The workplace, which is located in south of Stockholm, has around twenty employees who all speak English fluently. The majority of the staff is Swedish with some exceptions of people originating from countries outside of Sweden, but they have lived and worked in Sweden for more than ten years. The clients that are contacted by the Swedish company are the local distributors of the products they are selling. As the company has grown larger over the past couple of years, more distributors around Europe and Asia are in day-to-day contact with the company via email or telephone.
Table 1 below displays information about the participants that have taken part in the study, showing code name, their native language and country of birth. For all the participants, English is a second or foreign language. The analysis of the recordings allowed the researcher of the present paper to assess that there was no significant variation in the proficiency levels of the speakers, despite some having different cultural backgrounds than others. Given the fact that the participants display varieties of non-standard English throughout the entire negotiations, all of the participants can be considered fluent speakers of ELF and BELF (Kaur, 2011a; Cogo, 2009). Marco is the participant taking part in all of the recordings as he is the one who is based in Sweden.

Table 1 Participant's code names, mother tongue and nationality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>Country of birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polat</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katerina</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stéphane</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillel</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilshad</td>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marco</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conversations presented in this study are a slightly less prototypical buy-sell negotiation held over the phone with participants coming from different countries in Europe. What separates these conversations from the more commonly structured negotiations is that it is not the first time the participants speak, and this may have affected the nature of the interactions (see Discussion). Clearly visible in the beginning of each transcription (as shown below) is typical small talk, which separates these conversations from the normally more formal openings where first contact is established. The participants regularly collaborate, negotiate, and create a common identity as they interact mainly every other week. This is taken into account when interpreting the results.

The excerpts below display examples of small talk naturally occurring at the beginning of each conversation. These examples can be categorized as work-related as it serves as a medium of ‘making it nice’ (Kankanraanta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010), i.e. maintaining positivity throughout the negotiation process. As they are only in contact due to business-related matters, keeping an upbeat and optimistic environment is essential for a successful negotiation; therefore, applying small talk at the beginning of the negotiation is highly appreciated as it characterizes cooperativeness (Charles 2007; Kankanraanta & Planken, 2010)

As seen in the examples 1 and 2 below, the speakers M & H and M & P begin the conversation on a more informal level by having many laughs, sharing jokes and asking about their family before diving into the business negotiations. This is found to be recurrent in all of the 9 business calls that were recorded. It was found that every
conversation started with small talk, which lasted for at least 20 seconds or more before switching over to business talks.

Example 1

01 H: hello:
02 M: HI
03 H: ahaha (0.5) .hh sorry I was ah: busy on the phone since more than half an hour=
04 M: [=hahaha]
05 H: [hahaha]
06 M: .hh don’t be sorry if you are selling our products you are excused=
07 H: =yes yes yes yes hahahmhah .hh how are you
08 M: I’m good
09 H: eheheh .hh
10 M: okay eh couple of things Helena ehm=
11 H:=yes

Example 2

01 P: hello
02 M: hi it’s me
03 P: he:y Marco
04 M: yes Polat it’s me
05 P: how are you
06 M: I’m good how are you
07 P: I’m fine thank you how was your weekend
08 (1.0)
09 M: my weekend (0.5) ah yeah it was good
10 (1.0)
11 P: [ha ha ha
12 M: [ha ha ha [how about your]s
13 P: [that’s nice .hhh] how is your family?
14 M: my family’s good thank you, have you b[een to England? (1.0)
15 P: [everything’s okay

The remaining recorded conversations are all similar to these two examples as they all have had previous negotiation talks with the Italian participant, and all have included small talk in the beginning of each and every conversation.

3.3 Methods

The study focuses exclusively on the conversations in which two business parties find themselves in a ‘buy-sell negotiation’. Through showing different discourse actions, the participants adapt to the work-related environment of their interactions, which in turn creates ‘business-like’ characteristics of the calls (Firth, 1996). This shows that the purpose of the entire conversation is solely based on business negotiations. The
researcher was always present in the same office where the conversations were held. Although it is very rewarding for the researcher to be close to where the negotiation is being held, it is also very difficult to gather the data of natural speech due to the presence of the researcher, also known as ‘observer’s paradox’. As the researcher attempts to record the participants’ speech, the speakers, conscious that their conversation will be used for academic research, are likely to act and speak unnaturally (Labov, 1972). Although it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the participants’ conversations have been affected by the presence of a third member and the process of recording, none of the participants displayed any discomfort in any way during the negotiations. In addition, there were no overt signals of this in the recordings.

The core methodology conducted in this study is conversation analysis (CA). This qualitative method offers the opportunity to carefully analyze and understand the different discourse activities in the negotiation that takes place over the telephone. The conversation analytic approach was judged as the favorable way to analyze the naturally-occurring real life data (Cogo, 2009). The phone conversations held between the provider (sales representative) of diagnostic kits and their clients were transcribed using conversation analytic tools and an adapted version of the notation scheme (see e.g. Firth, 1996; Cogo, 2009; and Kaur 2011a). The level of detail of the transcription is rather high (see Appendix C) as it is important to keep track of all factors in the conversation that may lead to any kind of disturbance in the talk, as well as “advance prevention of misunderstanding” (Mauranen, 2006: 131). It is important for this study to give an as accurate representation of the conversation as possible. Features such as pauses, simultaneous talk, cut offs, sound stretches and rising intonation have been included in the transcriptions to further improve the representation of the communicative events. It should be noted here that, unlike in the main school of CA, this paper considers the background of the participants, as well as previous relationships when presenting potential findings. In this sense, the present paper diverts from some of the concepts that some CA analysts consider when performing the methodology.

4. Results

This section of the study presents instances taken from the transcriptions, demonstrating firstly an overview on the CSs and pre-emptive measures preventing misunderstanding that were found, secondly situations where misunderstanding had occurred, and lastly a section demonstrating what actions were taken after the misunderstanding had taken place. As previous research in both ELF and BELF environments has shown repeatedly, misunderstandings have a low frequency rate of occurrence (e.g. Björkman, 2011 and 2014; Charles, 2007; Cogo, 2007; Cogo & Dewey, 2006; House, 2002; Kankanraanta & Salminen, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Mauranen, 2006; Meierkord, 2000; Rogersson-Revell, 2008). A similar pattern was observed in the present material. Despite a high frequency of syntactic and lexical anomalies, very few misunderstandings and non-understandings were found. Overall there were 17 instances of CSs in the data, and 2 instances where communicative breakdown occurred.
4.1 Communicative strategies preventing misunderstandings

The extract below comes from the negotiation with Polat from Turkey, and Sweden-based Marco. They are in the middle of the negotiation and Marco is leading the conversation, explaining to Polat that a specific process of production takes a lot of time, and what the future of that process will look like.

(1)
1 M: always a bit tricky (1.0) to make them [work]
2 P: [I understand (0.5) I understand]
3 M: so [only]
4 P: [I understand]
5 M: with the four thousand test that you: are forecasting for the first eighteen
6 months (0.5) we barely covered the d- the development cost
7 (1.0)
8 P: I see I see [I see .hh so]
9 M: [this is the: :reality this is these are the facts
10 (2.0)
11 P: okay .hh so ehm let us discuss internally=
12 M: =yeah

What we see in example (1) is a repeated use of the ‘backchannelling’, demonstrating confirmation of comprehension from P in lines 2, 4 and 8, showing that he has heard and understood M’s utterance and that there is no confusion. By doing so, P has indicated that they are on common ground in the ongoing subject. Additionally, although M could interpret P’s I understand and I see as prefacing a turn, M seems to understand that those utterances signal comprehension. This echoes with previous research, reporting that backchannelling is not used for a speaker shift, but more as a turn-continuer (Meierkord, 2000; Schegloff, 1982). Giving instant feedback facilitates effective communication and is essential for successful negotiations, as misunderstandings may have expensive consequences (Bjørge, 2010). The phenomenon of backchannelling is used extensively in all of the nine negotiations and is determined as a communicative strategy based on the framework of Meierkord, Schegloff and Bjørge (2000; 1982; 2010), who all have included research on the phenomenon. The total amount of backchannels found in the data amounts up to 391, and supportive laughter at 32.

In the next segment presented below (2), Marco tries to explain to Helena that there are some kits missing from their company. These kits are diagnostic products for the detection of DNA mutations in human clinical specimen. This is the first business matter that is brought up in this conversation right after the formal greetings and small talk.

(2)
M: I got a summary from eh eh::: our administration and apparently is:: (0.5)
still you are still short of seven kits for the: hfe to be t- to reach the one
hundred tests (1.0) the one hundred kits
(1.0)

H: for which one?
(0.5)
M: eh: [h- e-hemochromatosis] yes
H: [hemo- hemochromatosis]
(1.0)
H: .hh ehm:

This example (2) demonstrates a segment in which H feels that additional information is needed. She raises an explicit and direct question as she feels that M is leaving some information out (line 5). As the previous utterance before H’s question (line 1) was not clear, H overtly asks M which kit he means. This is referred to as a ‘confirmation check’ (Mauranen, 2006). H realizes what M meant quickly after the attempt to give her the answer (line 7) as she speaks virtually simultaneously as M does, confirming that there is no misunderstanding and there is no need for further explanation. This segment is regarded as a situation where the speaker actively applies a communicative strategy in the form of ‘confirmation checks’ in order to avoid misunderstanding (Björkman, 2014; Mauranen, 2006).

Extract number (3) below displays a pre-empting strategy known as ‘co-creating the message’ (Björkman, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Kirkpatrick defines this communicative strategy as a situation where speakers help fill in the blanks in each other’s utterances in an effort to produce a complete and understandable message. The usage of the strategy is also termed as ‘lexical anticipation’ (Kirkpatrick, 2007). In extract 3, Persian client Dilshad is explaining a situation where a customer was not happy with the kit results, so Marco recommends that they should try a new kit at a 50 percent discount. Dilshad is having some trouble finding the right words already in line 2, where there are hesitation markers and cut-offs in the utterance combined with a pause of a second. It is possible that already in line 2 Dilshad is seeking Marco’s help or some comment at this transition-relevant place (Kaur, 2011b), but is receiving none. A second pause appears in line 3 left by Dilshad, which gives the impression that she is seeking for a word that she cannot think of. Marco sees the opportunity to help fill in the blank (line 4) due to the transition-relevant place left by the client. Quickly after Marco mentions the noun ‘discount’, Dilshad seems to realize what word was missing with the help from Marco and utters it instantly after Marco. As the message was successfully delivered, given that Marco confirms clarity in line 6, confusion and misunderstanding was avoided with the help of both parties.

1 Björkman adopts Kirkpatrick’s term in her study.
(3)

1 D: you know and I told them if you do not have good results so we can you
2 can try w- a- e- another kit (1.0) you can buy another kit with fifty percent
3 (1.0)

4 M: dis[count]
5 D: [discount]
6 M: yes
7 D: yes just to:: compensate the lost after first
8 M: yes

The fourth excerpt below (4) illustrates a scenario where Marco and Dilshad are both looking at a website of a competitor that sells similar kits to those of the Swedish company. The negotiators are looking at their respective computer screens. As Dilshad is having trouble finding the page of the website Marco desires to show, Marco attempts to guide Dilshad to the right page by giving instructions (line 1).

(4)

1 M: yeah and [there] eh below the company overview [if you] scroll down
2 D: [okay] [e:h]
3 D: executives
4 (1.0)
5 M: yeah if you scroll d- eh yeah the- d- d- ceo is also alson ira- (xxx) but if
6 you need to scroll down (0.5) there [is a] table (2.0) [down below]
7 D: [okay] [financial and key?] (2.0)
8 M: huh?
9 D: financial (0.5) and key (2.0) this one?
10 (1.0)
11 M: eh try that one yes
12 (1.5)
13 D: okay (0.5) so here (0.5) they jus- ah okay: I got it
14 (0.5)
15 M: good
16 D: okay
17 M: [good]

What this excerpt seems to show is that key information is repeated numerous times by the turn-holder in line 1, 5 and 6. Given the fact that it is the turn-holder that repeats the utterance, this qualifies as a ‘self-initiated repetition’ (Björkman, 2014; Cogo, 2009). ELF research has reported that repetition is found to be a fundamental pre-empting strategy and significant element in achieving mutual understanding (Kaur, 2011b; Mauranen, 2006). In this case, the use of this communicative strategy signals an attempt to avert breakdown, and common understanding is sought after in order to succeed with the effort to guide the client to the right page. The subsequent utterances (lines 7, 8 and 9) display a second instance of repetition, this time from the other participant, which is also known as ‘other-initiated repetition’ (Björkman, 2014). The first instance of repetition reached its goal of creating comprehension by the recipient (Dilshad), based
on the approving “okay” in line 7. Subsequently, when performed the action of scrolling down, Dilshad asks if it is ‘financial and key’ Marco refers to (lines 6 and 7). Due to the overlapping speech, Marco needs to overtly ask what Dilshad said (line 8). Dilshad sets the two words apart with a half a second pause seemingly indicating a desire to get the message conveyed to the recipient by repeating the previous utterance slower than usual. A pause consisting of a second transpires demonstrating that Marco needs time to process Dilshad’s question. Marco confirms Dilshad’s question and responds positively by saying that s/he is correct (line 11). The succeeding turns (lines 13-17) by both the participants display mutual understanding, confirming that both are on the same page.

### 4.2 Misunderstanding and reaching mutual understanding

The excerpt below contains many technical terms that are specific to the situation. Before the illustrated example, M and H had just finished talking about a specific matter and there was a slight pause before M brings up the next subject with a question (line 1). In this sequence, M asks H about a quotation that she has made to the customer for their products. H asks M if the client he means is the one located in the north of Spain (line 4), where they are offering an instrument to use for their products. M tells her that he was not referring to that customer but to another one (line 7).

(5)

1. M: how is going the quotation for this lab (0.5) with eh with cybergene and everything?
2. H: eh uae: which one you mean the one from the north of Spain?=
3. M: =yes yes
4. H: .hh no no good the one for eh: we buy the sequencer you mean?
5. M: no no no the one we spoke yesterday about [patented yeah]
6. H: [patented yeah] no no no good
7. H: it’s going good we have to:: .hh uh: u- u- speak again with the: customer
8. M: mhm

Before answering the first question, H takes a few seconds to make sure she understood which company M is referring to. H demonstrates that she knows what subject is being brought up, but decides to ask anyway (line 4), requesting clarification. What separates this question from the one displayed in example (2) is that here the speaker asks for further information or clarification as she already knows what subject they are on, but needs additional information in order to give the desired response (Kaur, 2011a and b; Mauranen, 2006). Although the question gets a positive response by M immediately (line 5), H still does not seem to understand, as she feels the need to ask again for clarification if is the same customer they are talking about (line 6). M realizes that there has been a slight misunderstanding (line 7), and that he perhaps left some information out, since he clearly did not understand H’s first request for clarification. As requests for repetition or clarification suggest ‘non-understanding’, rather than misunderstanding (Kaur, 2011), this segment can be categorized as a case in which mutual understanding is needed, and is being worked for by the participants to achieve it, making the conversation flow through with a brief instance of a setback. In this excerpt, based on
the findings of the respective research from Björkman, Kaur and Mauranen (2014; 2011a and b; 2006), the demonstrated ‘clarification requests’ have been used as a communicative strategy in order to repair the misunderstanding.

In the instance below (6), Marco and Israel-based Hillel are discussing whether or not Hillel has sent ‘labels’ for a set of products. Labels in this context are the instruction stickers that are placed on the products.

(6)

1  M: w- wh- what about the labels are you sending us the labels for this products
2  [products as well]
3  H: [yes yes yes yes] it it it will it will sent tomorrow by- by courier so
4  tomorrow is eh:: (1.0) eh friday?
5  M: no eh I’m [talking about the-]
6  H: [no tomorrow is] thursday
7  M: Hillel I’m [talking about] the [accessories]
8  H: [(xxx xxx)] [w-]
9  (0.5)
10 M: Hillel?
11 (2.0)
12 H: yes ah those accessories okay now I’m now I’m sending it to you
13 (0.5)
14 M: o:kay (0.5) alr-
15 […]
16 M: bu- Hillel did you understand my question? I was asking not only for the
17 labels for the trisomy also for [the labels] hh [for the other]
18 H: [yes yes] this is [for the accessories]
19 (0.5)
20 M: [okay okay]

In lines 1 and 2, Marco asks Hillel if they intend to send the labels to them. Hillel immediately confirms that they will send them the next day (line 3). Although the confirmation has been made, Marco still feels that the client has not fully understood what labels for which product he meant. Marco makes an attempt to clarify which products he referred to in line 5 but gets interrupted by the overlapping speech (line 6). Hillel seems to still be talking about what it is the next day and Marco tries harder to get the attention of the client by calling her by her name (line 7). No contact is still made as Hillel keeps muttering (inaudibly), what is perceived to be to herself (line 8), at the same time as Marco repeats his/hers previous utterance. A 0.5 pause occurs before Marco makes a third attempt to get Hillel’s attention (line 10). Hillel ultimately understands what Marco is asking for and expresses comprehension in line 12.

A few turns of the negotiation have been excluded in order to save space (lines 14-26). The subject continues to develop as Hillel explains the shipping details further into the negotiation. Even though confirmation and clarification has been made by both participants earlier, Marco feels the need to request clarification (line 26). Hillel confirms again that she has understood Marco’s message (line 28).
Example 6 is an illustration of a situation where a potential breakdown is developing, but is being determinately averted by one of the negotiators. Due to the recurrent interruptions by Hillel (lines 5-8), Marco is unable to convey the desired message needed to get the information confirmed by the recipient. The necessity for confirmation and for clarification on behalf of the speaker is therefore evident as Marco displays repetition of the previous utterance. What this excerpt also shows is that they do not seem to reach mutual understanding during the first part of the negotiation (lines 1-14). Although Hillel confirms that she is talking about the same set of labels (lines 12), Marco requests further clarification as he senses that the information might be confused with something else (in this case, mixing up an order of labels for just one product and not both).

This sequence (6) displays ‘non-understanding’ (Kaur, 2011; Pitzl, 2005). The non-understanding here refers to the fact that Marco does not understand whether or not Hillel has understood the initial question. Marco is therefore deliberately making sure that they are both in agreement by overtly asking (line 26) the client if she has understood the question posed by Marco. The sequence is identified as non-understanding due to the speaker’s move to repair the breakdown, in this case a request for confirmation. The repairs mark that there is a breakdown (Schegloff, 1987).

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present paper was to observe the nature of spoken BELF negotiation held over the telephone. Specifically, the aim was to study the identified communicative strategies and their function as a pre-empting measure to avoid misunderstanding or non-understanding. The findings displayed some instances of CSs that functioned appropriately as they did their job in evading any kind of communicative breakdown. The analysis of the business negotiations also revealed two instances of possible breakdown which were further identified as cases of non-understanding or misunderstanding. The instances were quickly repaired as it was detected by the participants that information was either not clear or complete, and was in need of further clarification. The previously reported ‘let it pass’ (Firth, 1996) strategy was not observed in these two examples.

Some CSs are judged to be more essential than others in keeping successful negotiations. The first recurring factor that builds towards better cooperativeness in the negotiation was the strategy of backchannelling. These explicit verbal signals have demonstrated throughout the entirety of all recorded negotiations that they are vital in contributing to common understanding. The manifestation of backchannels (presented in section 4.1) delivered an understanding of the importance the phenomenon has. Having its feature of creating mutual understanding through direct feedback, purposely bringing the conversation forwards; backchannelling stands out as one of the key solutions in building towards the cooperative aspect of ELF and BELF interaction, which has been discussed previously by both ELF (e.g. Bjørg, 2010; Björkman 2011;
Mauranen, 2006; Meierkord, 2000) and BELF research, (e.g. Charles, 2007; Cogo, 2009; Firth, 1996; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

The second factor of successful BELF communication was also recurrent in all six instances displayed in the results, namely clarity. Even though backchannels are constantly aiding to the cooperativeness of the interaction, some situations in the negotiation were in need of further clarification (see section 4.2). It has previously been reported that ELF interactions are in need of extra explicitness as there are many different types of asymmetries, which requires speakers to employ a variety of CSs in order to ensure communicative effectiveness (Mauranen, 2006; Björkman, 2014). It is highly relevant to assume a similar scenario when referring to BELF interactions. The present study found several instances in which further clarification was requested in order to comprehend the information conveyed by the speaker. Reaching mutual understanding seems to be the listener’s job as well as the speaker’s, providing support for earlier ELF studies. This finding goes hand in hand with both ELF and BELF studies, showing that clarity is a preferred strategy to employ (Kankanraanta & Planken, 2010; Tsuchiya & Handford, 2014), and that it is both the speaker and listener’s job to actively work towards successful interaction (Bjørge, 2010; Björkman 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Thirdly, the business negotiators found themselves in various situations where they felt it was necessary to repeat the information previously uttered, as reported in previous ELF studies (e.g. Kaur, 2011b, 2012; Mauranen, 2006). Repetitions in the present study were interpreted as strategies used to enhance clarity, or to contribute to an improved level of clarity in an utterance. This finding strengthens the understanding that repetition is a critical pre-empting measure in reaching mutual understanding (Cogo, 2009; Kaur, 2011b, 2012). Instance (6) displayed an example that goes well in hand with the discovery made by Mauranen (2006). What differs from the two is that the present study revealed that the repetition did not signal misunderstanding, but non-understanding.

An important factor that has been taken into account when interpreting the results is that all the participants in the study had previously negotiated with the Sweden-based Marco. This means that the stakes on keeping positive face may not have been as high as initial encounters, as well as the process of building rapport may not have been as critical. It is found in previous BELF studies that knowing the other’s specific context is very important for the business professional in order to have a successful communication. Having previous knowledge about the client is said to create a smoother communication process (Kankanraanta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). Research (e.g. Charles, 2007) has presented evidence of participants stating that small talk is not an easy task to perform in a BELF interaction, but is nonetheless effective in keeping the communication pleasant yet professional. As discussed in section 2, the verbal backchannelling form of laughter has also been proven to be a characteristic of successful conversation (e.g. Meierkord, 2000). The short opening sequences give the participants of the negotiation a place to develop acquaintance; yet, keeping a formal distance increases the opportunity for mutual understanding and successful communication down the road. This finding, along with the use of CSs, is indeed what
the present study has found to be essential in keeping the negotiations successful time after time.

6. Conclusion

The results of the present study displayed excellent cooperativeness from the participants, creating a professional yet friendly and upbeat atmosphere for the negotiation process. The use of CSs, the significance of offering comprehension signals, requesting clarity and repetition to reach a mutual understanding, have been demonstrated to be key in avoiding expensive breakdowns. As previous BELF research has discovered, the present study confirms with the notion that BELF communication is mainly about getting the job done. In addition, the findings of the present study support the conclusion made in previous research when discussing the rarity of misunderstandings in (B)ELF interaction. The results presented in this paper have contributed to a field that is still very much in need of contributions on the very same topic. There is need for more work on CSs from BELF settings. The author hopes that the present study will spark some interest in the topic.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Consent form

Using English as a business lingua franca

Informed consent note

I have been informed by Anton Marra of the overall aims of the research project on using English as a business lingua franca. I understand that the data (recordings of telephone conversations) will be used interpretively in publications, conference presentations and other outlets by the researcher or any other researcher with whom he might collaborate in the future. The data will be anonymized so that no part of it can be traced to any individual in the recording. I have been guaranteed complete confidentiality and anonymity by the researcher, and I have been given the right to see any paper prior to its publication. I have also been given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Signed

……………………………………

Date

……………………………………
Appendix B

The transcription notations are used as follows:

[ ]  Square brackets marks beginning and ending of overlapping speech

=  Equal sign indicates latching

-  Hyphen marks a cut off

(0.5)  Length of pause given in seconds

?  Question mark signals rising intonation

.hh  Double ‘h’ preceded by a dot indicates inhalation

.hh. Dot preceded by double ‘h’ indicates exhalation

(xx) Parentheses containing two or more x’s represents inaudible speech

:  Colon indicates extended utterance
Appendix C

Longer example of a transcription:

01 D: hello Marco
02 M: hi Dilshad
03 D: [how are you]
04 M: [how are you] haha I’m fine you?
05 D: I’m fine I know that I have no news for you for a long time but I’m still working
06 M: yeah I know you’re working don’t worry [hahah]
07 D: [yeah] I’m still working on that
08 M: okay (laughing)
09 D: and th- e-
10 M: I- I- I lost every hope actually .hh [anyway] we have been busy doing
11 D: [yeah]
12 M: something else so it’s not [priority] if: [eh] time comes and it’s possible
13 D: [okay] [okay]
14 M: why not
15 (1.0)
16 D: mmm
17 M: you know we are now establishing the: subsidiary in Italy so it will be
18 much easier to handle the samples .hh in the future if=
19 D: =yes
20 M: is going to to happen=
21 D: =yeah the only problem (0.5) [is] the price (0.5) in Iran they are doing
22 M: [yeah]
23 D: really big low price
24 M: mhm
25 D: the company that I informed you
26 M: mhm
27 D: boats company
28 M: mhm
29 D: and I was in (xxx) and eh:: I:: took a photo from the microgen company
30 M: [mhm]
31 D: [that] I told you they are doing w- really less price with two eur- two us dollars (0.5) I took the picture from their (xxxx) that they are really doing
32 this with this price
33 M: oh my goodness
34 (0.5)
35 D: [yeah they are making (xxx)]
36 M: [tha]nk you
37 D: [th-]
38 (1.0)
D: yeah they really doing in this way
M: okay
(0.5)
D: mm
M: we’ll see what happen [in the] future
D: [yeah]
(0.5)
M: listen [how] is the:: eh: unemployed business down there anything any
D: [okay]
M: news
D: no we we just (1.0) eh:: talking wit the eh:: eh big center
M: [yeah]
D: [(xxx)] Iran (1.0) and they they are using the (product name) products
M: mm
D: first they were using the (product name) products
M: okay
D: and then they switch from (product name) to (product name)
M: okay
D: =because they didn’t have (0.5) they told me they didn’t have good result
(1.0) wit (product name) [kits] (1.0) the: graph was not go:od I couldn’t eh:
M: [mm]
D: analyze the:: result
M: mhm
D: good but wit eh (product name) there is all this (0.5) better
(1.0)
M: okay [but di- di- di-]
D: [yea .hh I- I-] I’m talking wit the manager of the center [and] he
M: [yeah]
D: he’s not (0.5) mm: (0.5) .hh he needs more proof (0.5) and finally I told
him okay I don’t want the products (1.0) in your co- in your co- ehm (0.5)
[center and you will] see (0.5) the result and you can (0.5) eh:: check and
M: [laboratory yeah]
D: [will you] fe- ehm: give you (1.0) one kit free [by] each ten kit that you:
M: [mm] [mhm]
D: buy
M: okay
(1.0)
D: and he told me okay: but we need more discussion and for the next week
(1.0) I’m going to have another call (0.5) to him to discuss more about all
the details
M: mhm
D: but the only ting that (0.5) I’m a little bit afraid (0.5) the center that (xxx)
the products eh the: mm: (company name) kit last time