

“Jos englanti ei suju, ni se on vaan harmi, tulee
paljon väärinymmärryksii”:

An Interview Study on English Use at an
International Workplace in Finland

Bachelor's thesis
Ella Lohilahti

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Language and Communication Studies
English
May 2019

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Ella Maria Aurora Lohilahti	
Työn nimi – Title ”Jos englantia ei suju, ni se on vaan harmi, tulee paljon väärinymmärryksiä”: An interview Study on English Use at an International Workplace in Finland	
Oppiaine – Subject Englanti	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatin tutkielma
Aika – Month and year Toukokuu 2019	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 26+1 liite
<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Englantia käytetään yhä useammin maailmanlaajuisesti lingua francana eli kommunikoinnin yleiskielenä, kun yhteistä äidinkieltä ei ole. Monissa työpaikoissa, esimerkiksi Suomessa, englannin kielen taitoa pidetään yhtenä tärkeimpänä taitona. Useissa suomalaisissa työpaikoissa englannin kielen rooli saattaa olla jopa tärkeämmässä asemassa kuin suomen kieli. Englannin kieltä on tutkittu jossain määrin työ- ja monikulttuurisissa sekä monikielisissä konteksteissa. Asiakaskommunikaatiossa käytetty englannin kieli kansainvälisellä työpaikalla on kuitenkin aihe, jota ei ole tutkittu juuri ollenkaan Suomen kontekstissa.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, kuinka englannin kieltä käytetään kansainvälisellä työpaikalla Suomessa. Selvitän, onko työntekijöillä tiettyjä kaavoja tai skriptejä, joiden mukaan heidän täytyy puhua, kun he kommunikoivat englanniksi asiakkaiden kanssa. Lisäksi tarkastelen tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat siihen, miten työntekijät puhuvat englantia ulkomaalaisten asiakkaiden kanssa. Tarkoituksena on myös tutkia väärinymmärryksiä sekä ei-ymmärryksiä (non-understanding), kun yhteistä äidinkieltä ei ole ja kommunikaatio tapahtuu englanniksi. Tämän lisäksi selvitän, miten työntekijät ratkaisevat tilanteet, joissa väärinymmärryksiä tapahtuu. Aineisto kerättiin kahdella haastattelulla, joissa molemmissa oli kaksi työntekijää vastaamassa kysymyksiin. Haastattelut äänitettiin ja äänitteet litteroitiin.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että työntekijöillä ei ole käytössä kaavoja tai skriptejä puhuessaan englantia asiakkaiden kanssa. Vain kuulutukset ovat etukäteen kirjoitettuja, mutta niitäkin työntekijät saavat muokata haluamallaan tavalla. Työntekijöiden englannin kielen puhumiseen vaikuttavat monet tekijät: onko asiakas esimerkiksi kokematon tai kokenut matkustaja, asiakkaan kansallisuus sekä englannin kielen taitotasoa. Väärinymmärryksiä tapahtuu työpaikalla jatkuvasti, kun yhteisenä kielenä on englanti. Väärinymmärrykset ovat yleensä pieniä eivätkä aiheuta suuria konflikteja. Väärinymmärryksiä esiintyy esimerkiksi lentotermin, aksenttien tai kulttuurien takia. Näitä työntekijät ratkovat yksinkertaistamalla termejä, toistamalla sekä selittämällä omin sanoin. Työntekijät käyttävät toisinaan myös muita kollegoitaan apuna, jos asiakas ei osaa englantia. Google Kääntäjää saatetaan myös silloin tällöin käyttää. Tästä aiheesta pystyttäisiin tekemään useampia muitakin tutkimuksia, esimerkiksi koodinvaihdosta (code-switching). Olisi myös mielenkiintoista, jos työntekijöiden ja asiakkaiden kommunikaatiota pääsisi analysoimaan keskusteluanalyysin avulla.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords ELF, international workplace, customer-employee interaction, pragmatics, interview study	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION	4
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	5
2.1 English as a lingua franca	5
2.2 Workplace interaction and customer-employee interaction	7
2.3 Pragmatics and problems in understanding	7
2.4 Earlier studies on ELF and understanding at international workplaces	8
3 PRESENT STUDY	9
3.1 Research aim and research questions	9
3.2 Research method and data collection	11
3.3 Method of analysis	11
4 FINDINGS	12
4.1 The use of English at the workplace	12
4.2 Using scripts or ‘natural own text’?	13
4.3 The factors which influence how employees speak English with customers	14
4.4 Problems in understanding at work	16
4.4.1 Misunderstandings relating to vocabulary	16
4.4.2 Misunderstandings relating to accents	17
4.4.3 Misunderstandings relating to cultures	18
4.5 Solving problems in understanding	19
CONCLUSION	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	24
APPENDIX	27

1 INTRODUCTION

English is a globally used language and has gained the status of a lingua franca in many countries. In Finland, according to Leppänen and Nikula (2008), English has spread into Finns' everyday life through social media, education and working life. Nowadays oral and written English skills are highly valued at workplaces, especially at international workplaces. In addition to language skills, customer service skills are also valued when it comes to workplaces where employees interact with customers daily. Communication with customers from different linguacultural backgrounds and cultures is, indeed, different and this needs to be taken into consideration. Employees cannot use the same linguistic strategies with a foreign customer as they would with a Finnish customer because of cultural differences.

The interaction between employees and customers has not been studied much, while, on the other hand, the internal interaction at work has been studied to a large extent (e.g. Räisänen 2013, 2018; Kankaanranta & Planken 2010; Gerritsen & Nickerson 2009). Yet, Kaur (2009) studies English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication and the misunderstandings and how to pre-empt them. Nieminen (2014) has also good points in her manual guide called "Monikulttuurinen asiakastyö": e.g., how customers from different cultures need to be treated and what culture-specific difficulties there can be in service situations and how to avert or solve these difficulties. I will compare my findings mainly on Kaur's and Nieminen's findings.

This study attempts to fill the research gap within the area of ELF research. It examines the use of English language in customer-employee interaction at an international workplace in southern Finland. I have three research questions in this study which will be introduced thoroughly in the present study chapter. First, I will concentrate on the use of scripts when speaking English at work. Second, I will discuss the factors which influence the way employees speak English to customers. Third, I will concentrate on misunderstandings and non-understandings when using ELF and how they are solved. The data were collected by interviewing employees of said workplace. As for the method of analysis, I used the following two: content analysis method and thematic analysis method.

This study consists of four sections: theoretical background, present study, findings and conclusion, respectively. The following chapter will present the theoretical framework and previous studies on

ELF. I will discuss the relevant terms, for example, English as a lingua franca and cross-cultural communication. I will also introduce relevant studies, e.g., Kaur's (2009), Nieminen's (2014) and Firth's (2009) studies. In the present study section, I will present my research aim and research questions but also the method of data collection and the method of analysis. In the findings, I will explain the discoveries of the study. I will conclude my thesis with the conclusion where I summarize the assumptions and findings.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter I will introduce my theoretical framework. First, I will present and elaborate the key concepts of my study, i.e. English as a lingua franca, cross-cultural communication, workplace interaction and pragmatics (misunderstandings and non-understandings). I will also bring into consideration the relationship between English as a Lingua franca and customer-employee interaction. Secondly, I will introduce the relevant previous studies done in these areas.

2.1 English as a lingua franca

English continues to be the most widely spoken language in the world (Crystal, 2003). Its role, for example, in Finnish society has increased over the years, and a great deal of communication, where the speakers speak different first languages, happens in English. There is a specific term for this phenomenon, and it is called "English as a lingua franca" (henceforth ELF). ELF is a concept that people have been using for years and Cogo and Dewey (2012: 1) also agree that ELF is nothing new but, on the other hand, ELF *research* is a "relatively recent empirical enterprise". English is also used substantially in international workplaces and, in general, in international business, the term used is BELF, i.e. business English as a lingua franca. BELF has been studied, for example, by Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009), Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) and Kankaanranta and Salminen (2013). Skapinker (2007) claims that English is "[t]he language of international business and therefore the key to prosperity". Therefore, English is used as a Lingua Franca globally. Furthermore, according to Motschenbacher (2013: 20), English is currently the language which is used mainly as a lingua franca in Europe.

The knowledge of English language in Europe is also high as argued by Hartmann (1996: 2) in his study: “English has not only become the first language to be used all over Europe, but is now the dominant lingua franca in such fields as the mass media, technology, youth culture and travel.” In Finland, English has been the language used by Finnish people when communicating with foreigners in multiple situations (Leppänen & Nikula, 2008). Leppänen and Nikula (ibid.) also point out how in Finland, English is more than just a foreign language, as it is used, e.g. in Finnish media, education and working life. It is no wonder that workplaces, especially in northern Europe, highlight that the competence of the English language is truly important. For instance, the workplace that I will be researching has a great deal of native Finnish people who use English daily at work with foreign customers who do not necessarily speak English as their mother tongue.

Cross-cultural or intercultural (used interchangeably here) communication strongly relates to ELF communication because a vast amount of cross-cultural communication is often ELF communication. Martin and Nakayama (2015: 14) claim that global workplace is one of the most significant contexts for intercultural interaction in the present day. In these contexts, employees meet people from all around the world and, thus, they need to know how to communicate with them mostly with only English.

The term “cross-cultural” can sometimes be contested but in this study, I am using Thomas’s (1983) definition. Thomas (1983: 91) states that the term should not be used only for native – non-native interactions but, in addition, it should be used when the interactants have different first languages or do not share the same cultural background. Archibald et al. (2011: 38) also state that “ELF communication is no longer tied to the cultures of the ‘inner circle’ English speaking countries” and “[i]nstead the language and culture relationship is created in each instance of communication depending on the speakers, setting and subject.” Crystal (2003: 60) explains how inner circle English speaking countries refers to the countries where English is spoken as a mother tongue, e.g. Britain, Australia and the United States. To conclude, cross-cultural communication is in many situations ELF communication and, thus, English is in the key role, e.g., at international workplaces.

2.2 Workplace interaction and customer-employee interaction

Workplace interaction is a topic that has not been studied to a large extent (Vine, 2004: 1). Nevertheless, there are still some studies, but these focus mainly on the communication of the employees (e.g. Willing 1992) or the communication between different workplaces (e.g. Hemchua & Rajprasit 2015). Communication with customers is, indeed, studied less.

Nieminen (2014: 13, emphasis added) emphasizes that regular customer service work is all about the communication; yet, cross-cultural customer service work is all about the *cross-cultural* communication. Thus, employees at an international workplace need to know how to interact appropriately among customers from different cultures and languages. In addition, they should be trained to do so. Guirdham (2011: 34) points out that organizations cannot afford to ignore cultural differences because of the expanding “diversity of domestic workforces, markets and populations, together with globalization”. Guirdham (ibid.) also argues that cross-cultural communication is difficult; nevertheless, it can be achievable through awareness of cultures and skill development.

Nieminen (2014) has written a manual guide for multicultural customer service workers. In this guide, Nieminen discusses how customer service employees need to take into consideration cultures when interacting with customers from various cultural backgrounds. In addition, Nieminen has several guidelines on, e.g. how to behave around Chinese or American customers.

2.3 Pragmatics and problems in understanding

According to Huang (2007: 1), pragmatics as a field of linguistics is rapidly growing. Pragmatics studies a vast amount of different aspects of language in use, e.g. politeness, complaining and interrupting. In this study, I discuss one aspect of pragmatics, i.e. the misunderstandings and non-understandings in communication.

Archibald, Cogo and Jenkins (2011: 2) speculate that when people from different linguacultural backgrounds meet, their communication in English is rather difficult and many misunderstandings can occur. However, against this traditional view on cultural interaction, several studies have shown that communication in ELF is less troubled and problematic than one could expect (Kaur

2009; Mauranen 2006; Pitzl 2005, as quoted by Archibald et al., 2011: 2). The communication at an international workplace, where employees interact with customers, can be either very successful or full of conflicts if the speakers do not understand each other's varieties of English. When analysing misunderstandings in ELF interaction we also need to take into consideration the non-understandings which are also a rather large part of ELF communication. Bohus and Rudnicky (2008: 124) give a concise explanation of the two terms – misunderstanding and non-understanding: “In a *misunderstanding*, the system obtains an incorrect interpretation of the user's turn” whereas “in a *nonunderstanding*, the system fails to obtain any interpretation of the input.” In other words, if you misunderstand something, you still have some kind of an idea of the matter, whereas, if you do not understand anything someone has told you, this is then called a non-understanding. Deterding (2013: 13) reminds that even though this distinction between a misunderstanding and a non-understanding seems to be somewhat clear in theory, it is still often difficult to apply in practise.

Firth (2009: 134) introduces a strategy for misunderstandings which he has discovered in his previous studies (1996) on telephone conversations in an international context between ELF speakers. The strategy is called “let it pass”. It means that when a misunderstanding (or a non-understanding) occurs it is often let pass. As Nowicka (2008: 224) states, interaction participants tend to “let troubles pass and wait for a misunderstanding to clear up further in interaction”. Firth (2009: 134) explains how “‘let it pass’ and ‘make it normal’ are deployed to over-come or circumvent apparent linguistic hurdles in order to render their tele-ponic encounters communicatively effective and organizationally expedient”. Thus, this phenomenon, i.e. “let it pass”, is a relevant part of ELF interactions in situations where participants are oriented to the goal of communication.

2.4 Earlier studies on ELF and understanding at international workplaces

Multiple studies have been conducted on ELF at international workplaces on internal interaction but not much research has been done on the (ELF) communication between employees and customers. Hemchua and Rajprasit (2017) examined Thai computer engineers' proficiency in English at an international workplace. They also examined the nature of communicative situations

where these engineers use English. The results of the study (2017: 109) suggest that the proficiency of English language played a key role in the workplace. At the same time, Hemchua and Rajpravit (ibid.) explain that the main point was not to use perfect English, yet more important was to be understood by others, i.e. the intelligibility when using English. In my study I argue that this also applies to other international workplaces.

Kaur's (2009) study on problems in ELF interaction among mainly postgraduate students in international settings discussed how to pre-empt or avert problems of understanding in ELF communication. It also discussed how to gain a mutual understanding among ELF speakers. Kaur (ibid.) discovered that the ELF speakers often used repetition and rephrasing in order to be understood and to gain a mutual understanding. Kaur's (2009: 120) study also revealed "[t]hat it is likely that the participants' anticipation of difficulty in understanding, arising from the lingua franca context, gives rise to increased efforts at maintaining shared understanding." Thus, maintaining a shared understanding becomes an important matter, especially, in ELF communication.

3 PRESENT STUDY

In this chapter I will describe the present study. First, I will present the aim of the study and my three research questions. Then, I will discuss briefly research method, data and the method of analysis. I will also hypothesize what I am hoping to discover from the data and what I will, undoubtedly, find out from it.

3.1 Research aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to analyse how English is used in customer-employee interaction at an international workplace in Finland. First, I concentrate on the scripts used at the workplace, i.e. do the employees use specific scripts when communicating with customers or is everything they produce their own speech. Secondly, I examine the factors that influence the way employees speak English to customers. Thirdly, I analyse the pragmatic aspects of the interaction at the workplace,

i.e. the misunderstandings, but also non-understandings. Misunderstandings and non-understandings in ELF, or in any kind of, communication can make customers' and/or employees' life more challenging. Thus, working with people from different backgrounds and languages can be difficult in some situations.

The research problem in this study is how employees at an international workplace in Finland use English with customers. My research questions relating to my research problem are:

(1) Do employees have any “scripts” when using English with customers at work?

The initial assumption is that at this specific workplace, there would be scripts when using English. For instance, a specific greeting and specific final remarks. I am also interested to find out whether employees have been trained to use scripts at work. Do employees already have such good skills in English or are they taught how to speak and what to say in English to customers who can only communicate in English (i.e. a non-native English speaker or a native English speaker).

(2) Which factors influence the way employees speak English to foreign customers?

If there are not any specific scripts in ELF communication, what are the factors which then influence the way employees speak English to customers? The initial assumption is that the customer's own level of English will influence and affect the way employees use English language.

(3) Are there any misunderstandings when using ELF; if yes, how do employees solve them?

ELF communication can sometimes be challenging because the speakers are usually non-native English speakers. The initial assumption is that there are many misunderstandings in ELF communication among customers and employees as customers might speak poor English. It is highly likely that these situations are solved with a translator.

Hemchua and Rajprasit (2017: 110) also mention that there are great difficulties in English language proficiency and communication at an international workplace among engineers who are non-native English speakers. According to Bandura (2008, as quoted by Hemchua & Rajprasit 2017: 111) communication at work can be learned in social situations but also taught, and in addition, communication can be developed and enhanced through training programs. These training programs are usually provided for the employees. Thus, I assume that the workplace will provide training programs in English for employees.

3.2 Research method and data collection

My research is a qualitative research as I gathered the data with a semi-structured interview (see Appendix). A semi-structured interview is a conversational interview which allows the participants to answer the questions in their own words (Longhurst, 2003: 145). The interview was conducted in the workplace, in a neutral environment for me and in an easy environment for the employees as they were working at the same time as I interviewed them. My data collection method were two separate interviews which lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. Both interviews included two employees answering and discussing my questions. These interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

The interview concentrates on ELF use at work. First, I had questions concerning their backgrounds. The interview includes themes such as the contexts in which English is used, the factors affecting or influencing the way employees use English with customers, the scripts used and the potential misunderstandings/non-understandings and how these are solved.

3.3 Method of analysis

After transcribing the data, I analysed it with a content analysis method as it is very often used as a method for analysing different kinds of textual data, which does include transcripts (Julien, 2012: 2). I also used thematic analysis, as my interview was a thematic interview. Boyatzis (1998: 4) notes that thematic analysis is used for qualitative data; to encode it. Thus, after transcribing my data, I organized it thematically. Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) also describe how thematic analysis is a method for analysing and identifying certain themes within data.

I based my findings on previous studies conducted on ELF communication but also on ELF communication at work. I tried to find any similarities between my findings and earlier research on ELF even though the context varies slightly in some of the previous studies.

4 FINDINGS

In this chapter I will present the findings of the study. First, I will introduce how much English is used at the specific workplace and in what situations. Secondly, I will discuss whether the interviewees use scripts when talking in English or whether everything they produce is their own natural speech. Thirdly, I will indicate the factors which influence the way in which the four interviewees speak English with customers. Lastly, I will concentrate on the pragmatic aspect of (customer-employee) ELF interaction, i.e. misunderstandings and non-understandings.

4.1 The use of English at the workplace

English is used daily at the workplace, as all the interviewees agreed that English is the main language they use when interacting with customers. One interviewee pointed out that they speak more English than they do Finnish at work, even though Finnish is their mother tongue. Another interviewee emphasized that English is the language they use as a service language, it is the initial language they use with customers even if they are Finnish. This point is illustrated in Example 1:

Example 1

“...jos sä oot vaik jossain Barcelonan portilla, tai jossain, ni kyl se niin ku automaattisesti palvelukieli on niin ku englanti, ett tota nii kyl siit yrittää bongaa suomalaisen, mut lähtökohtasesti niitäkin palvelee englanniksi, kunnes sit sä huomaatkin, ett se onki suomalainen”

“...if you are at Barcelona’s gate or somewhere, English is, automatically, the language you use to serve customers, so you can try to spot a Finn, but, primarily, they are also served in English until you notice that he or she is a Finn”

The most interesting point about this was that the employee also continued that the conversation starts as such: ‘hello, hi, oikein hyvää matkaa’. Hence, employees use some sort of code-switching, but the switch here seems to be made unintentionally. This phenomenon lacks information and research and could be studied in the future.

Besides using English daily in customer interaction, the interviewees stated using it in other contexts, too. These include, for instance, speaking English with colleagues who do not speak Finnish and with computer engineer employees from India if they need any technical help. One

interviewee also added that she trains Asia guides and all their training materials are in English, and therefore the language which she uses while training the new guides is always English. But overall, the main situations where employees use English at work are customer service situations.

4.2 Using scripts or ‘natural own text’?

My first research question was, if employees had any specific scripts when they speak English with customers. The interviewees all implied that they do not have any scripts when discussing with customers. However, one interviewee indicated that there are certain service principles, generally, in any language used, which one needs to follow, for example, formally addressing the customer. One script they all identified was a public announcement, i.e. when they need to announce to customers, e.g. when the flight leaves, how to proceed to plane etc. These public announcements are written beforehand, and they are announced in English, Finnish, and in some occasions in Swedish. However, these scripts are also freely to be changed if one wishes to do so. Employees do not have to read the text as it is. Hence, almost everything employees produce in English is ‘natural own text’. There are not any ready-made specific phrases or scripts which employees use when a customer approaches them and asks something. This is illustrated in Example 2:

Example 2

“mut ett, siin meillä on semmonen selkee käsikirjoitus, ett, että miten se kuulutus menee eli just noi lähtökuulutukset ja ennen, vähän ennen lähtöä kuulutetaan, ett kuinka monta minuuttia siihen on ja millä tavalla me alotetaan se koneeseen nousu, ja tällaset, ni semmoset on niinku kirjattu ylös, mutta, mut ei meil oikeen muuten sellasta suoraan niinku ohjetta tai kaavaa oo siihen, niinku, ett, ett kyl se on luontevaa omaa tekstiä, jota koko ajan tehään.”

“but that, there we have a clear script, that, that how the announcement goes, so, specifically those departure announcements and before, little before departure there is an announcement that how many minutes there is to that and how we are going to proceed to plane, and these kinds of, so, these have been documented, but, but we don’t have any straight guideline or script when, so, so that it is natural own text which we produce all the time”

An interesting fact was that this specific workplace does not offer any language courses or any language training to its employees. If one wants to improve one’s English language skills (or any language skills, for that matter), one can always voluntarily join language courses in their leisure

time. Because the workplace does not offer any language training, the English language skills – both oral and written – must be on a very high level when entering the workplace. Employees learn and maintain English language skills every day in the job: they, for instance, become aware of the aerial terminology. Employees do not necessarily study these aerial terms at home, but they become familiar with the terminology by hearing them used around them. The four employees I interviewed, do not attend any language courses on their free time nor do they study English in any way. However, they learn and use the language in other ways: they travel quite often, read books in English, watch tv-series in English, listen to English music. Thus, there is no need for extra studying. This is illustrated in Example 3:

Example 3

“En mie usko, ett meillä monikaan käy (kielikursseilla), ett ehkä se jo, ett ku se (englannin) perustaso pitää olla semmonen, ett pärjää niinku jo hyvin, ja sit meillä on oikeesti henkilökunta sellasta, ett todella paljon matkustellaan niinku sit ympäri maapalloo, ni luulen, ett jokainen kyllä sit taas ihan omassa siviilielämässä käyttää paljon englantia, ei pelkästään työpaikalla”

”I don’t think that many in our workplace attend to (language courses), perhaps because the basic level of English should already be on a level in which you manage well, and then our staff really is the kind of people who travel a lot around the globe, so, I guess that everyone uses a lot of English in their civilian life and not just at work”

4.3 The factors which influence how employees speak English with customers

The nationality of a customer together with their level of English strongly influences the way in which employees interact with the customer. Interviewees all agreed that this is the main feature that affects how they speak to customers. Relating to the nationality of the customer, one factor that also influences the way employees speak is whether the customer is a native or a non-native English speaker. This is shown in Example 4:

Example 4

“öö ainakin se henkilö, ett onks hän niinku natiivi niinku puhuja, ett puhuuko se äidinkielenään niinku englantia vai onks hän esim öö, sanotaan vaikka, vaikka, venäläinen puhuu englantii, ni se on ihan erilaista, jos mä puhun hänen kanssaan, natiivin kanssa sä voit puhua semmosta ihan normaalia englantia, ja jos (asiakas) on semmonen, joka ei oo natiivi äidinkieleltään, niin sit pitää käyttää tosi semmosia helppoja sanoja, ett hän

varmasti ymmärtää sen, ett välttämättä se ei oo mitään hyvää, puhdasta englantia, vaan semmosta enemmän basic sanoja, mitä käytetään siinä ihan perusmuodossa”

”uhm, for one, the person if he or she is like a native speaker, so that are they speaking English as a mother tongue or are they, uhm, let’s say, for example, a Russian who speaks English, then it is totally different if I’m speaking with them, with a native speaker you can speak this normal English and if (the customer) is not a native as their mother tongue, then you need to use very easy words, so that they definitely understand it, so, it is not necessarily good, pure English, but more like basic words which are used in the basic form”

In addition to nationality, one interviewee said that the language skills of the customer influence how she uses English, e.g., if the customer is a Chinese person who does not speak English well, then the employee talks slowly, calmly and uses simpler words. What happens here is that the employees simplify their language skills to match the customers’ level of English. Such a situation is illustrated in Example 5:

Example 5

“Usein pärjää ihan sillä, ett sanoo ”where is bag?” -tyylillä, ett niiku toiki saattaa joskus jo riittää...”

“Often, you can cope with just saying ”where is bag?” kind of a way, so that that can sometimes already be enough...”

Her co-worker continued adding that even with single words such as “bag?” you can cope in a situation where the customer speaks poor English. If the speaker is, e.g., a native British speaker, the English language used by employees is notably faster and they use words which they would normally use in such a situation.

In addition, one fact which can influence the way employees interact with customers is whether the customer is an experienced passenger or not. If the customer has little experience in travelling, the terminology and the mechanisms are not familiar to them. Employees use different language and vocabulary in these situations, too. An example of word choices is illustrated in Example 6:

Example 6

“ja, ett ylipäättään, tosi helppona, esimerkiksi, sanoksä matkustajalle ”may I see your boarding pass” vai ”may I see your ticket”, ett, niiku kokeneemmalle voi sanoa sen ”boarding pass”, koska hän ymmärtää heti, ett mitä me tarkotetaan...”

”and, in general, very easy, for example, do you say to the passenger “may I see your boarding pass” or “may I see your ticket”, so that, to an experienced (passenger) you can say “boarding pass” because he or she understands immediately what we mean...”

One interviewee also said that if a customer does not speak English, employees might use signs or gestures and demonstrate with their hands. Yoshida and Brislin (1994: 275) explain how this type of nonverbal communication becomes an important part of any communication. Yoshida and Brislin (ibid.) also argue that cultural differences make nonverbal communication crucial even though sometimes difficult. Yoshida and Brislin (1994: 279) point out two main reasons how cultures influence nonverbal communication: first, expressing emotions differs in different cultures (these are called the display rules) and, second, there are culture-specific uses of nonverbal communication. Both may cause “misunderstandings when people from different cultures communicate” (Yoshida & Brislin, 1994: 279-280).

4.4 Problems in understanding at work

The interviewees revealed that there can be many misunderstandings, but also non-understandings, in ELF communication at the workplace in customer-employee interaction. These problems in understandings are not serious and can be rather easily solved. In this section, I will explain the most common misunderstandings which occur at this workplace: misunderstandings relating to vocabulary, accents and cultures, respectively.

4.4.1 Misunderstandings relating to vocabulary

One interviewee explained that there are some misunderstandings because of their own work-related vocabulary. For example, a passenger who is traveling for the first time cannot be familiar with these terms. One place where misunderstandings are common is the Arrival Service desk. One interviewee mentioned an example of a situation where misunderstandings happen quite often:

Example 7

“... jos on jääny laukku jälkeen ja se on tulossa myöhemmin, ni se, ett ku pyytää matkustajan pysyvää kotiosotetta, eli siis englanniksi ’permanent address’, niin yleensä ensimmäisenä tulee se, ett ’ei se missä mä vierailen täällä?’, niin ku, ett he haluaa ymmärtää sen niin, ett mihin me tarvittas heidän oikeeta kotiosotetta, jos he ei oo menossa sinne...”

”... if baggage has not arrived on the same flight and it is coming later, then when you ask for the passenger’s permanent address, in English ‘permanent address’, the first thing that comes is that ‘not the place where I am visiting here?’, they want to understand it that way because why would we need their real home address when they are not going there...”

In addition to this example, another interviewee explained how some customers mix the gate number with their seat number, so the customer goes to the wrong gate. In these kinds of situations, employees usually walk the customer to the right gate because the customer does not understand or know where he or she needs to go or be. Yet another interviewee said that there are, also, customers who use different, incorrect, terms, for example, when talking about baggage or luggage, some customers use words such as “cargo” or even something else which has nothing to do with luggage. This can sometimes confuse the employees a bit. As Hülmbauer (2009: 333) explains that ELF speakers have a tendency to use language more freely, and instead of concentrating on the forms, ELF speakers are more focused on the intended meaning.

The interviewee also added that the situations where misunderstandings (or non-understandings) happen are the ones where the customer is already in an agitated state. So, the situations, in which customer is already tense, are somehow irregular situations (passenger has lost baggage, passenger has not arrived in plane on time etc.). The same point has been raised by Nieminen (2014: 201) who has noted that when arriving to a service point, the customer might already be upset about other reasons, and because of that, even the smallest of setback can mean losing a temper. Nieminen (ibid.) also states that any details relating to, e.g., technical matters can feel difficult and the customer is not able to understand the matters in such a short time.

4.4.2 Misunderstandings relating to accents

Occasionally, there are situations where a customer has such a strong accent that the employees cannot thoroughly understand the customer’s spoken English. For example, interviewees agreed that Indian and Chinese people often have a strong accent which is sometimes difficult to understand. Nieminen (2014: 94-95) confirms that ‘Finnish people often have difficulties in understanding Chinese and Indian accents when the shared language is English.’ If there is a case such as this and they cannot find shared understanding, employees might simply use pen and paper

because, usually, these customers are better at writing in English than speaking. Examples 8 and 9 illustrate this:

Example 8

“Haasteellista on esimerkiksi intialaisten matkustajien kans, heillä on tosi vahva aksentti, ja ja, tota, välillä ihan, tota, yksinkertasia asioita tuntuu, (...) ett ei niiku millään saa selvää”

”Challenging is, for example, with Indian passengers, they have such a strong accent, and and, well, occasionally, even the simplest matters feel, (...) like you cannot understand anything”

Example 9

“joo, ja tosi paljon on semmosia, esimerkiksi just aasialaisia, jotka siis puhuu ihan uskomattoman hyvää englantia, just silleen, ett kaikki sanasto ja vastaava on ihan täydellistä niinku ’yliopistoenglantia’ ja näin, mut sitte se ääntäminen, ni siinä on niin paksu aksentti, ett vaiks se ois kuinka hyvä se englannin kielen taito, niin me ei välttämättä aina ymmärretä, mitä hän yrittää sanoo, koska se on niin paksu se aksentti”

”yeah, and many, for example, specifically, Asians who speak incredibly good English, so that vocabulary and similar matters are perfect ‘university English’ and so on, but then the pronunciation, there is such a thick accent, so even though if their English language skills were good, we are not necessarily always able to understand what he or she is trying to say because of the thick accent”

4.4.3 Misunderstandings relating to cultures

Misunderstandings can also occur because of cultural differences. Nieminen (2014: 32) points out that typical cultural differences are, e.g., communication styles, listening styles, and different views or opinions about power and hierarchy. In addition to these, there are different views of the meaning of individuals and groups. Moran, Harris and Moran (2007: 29) argue that due to cultural differences, communication symbols and meanings can change, and, because of this, misunderstandings can occur in communication. In the present study, one interviewee also noted that cultural differences can sometimes make understanding somewhat challenging. Example 10 shows this:

Example 10

“...heidän (intialaisten) korottamiset eri luokkiin ja tällaset on niinko sitte ehkä vähä vaikeempaa, mut se taas on niinko kulttuuriero, että niinku meillähän täällä törmätään päivittäin tosi paljon eri kulttuureihin ja me ollaan, meiat on periaatteess koulutettu myös toimimaan eri kulttuureiden kanssa, ett ollaan ihan perehdytetty siihen...”

”...their (Indians) way of raising people to different classes and these kinds of matters are a bit harder, but this, on the other hand, is a cultural difference, so that we meet people from many different cultures here and we are, we have been, basically, taught also to work with different cultures, so that we have been acquainted to it...”

These misunderstandings relating to cultural differences are often not serious. As Moran et al. (2007: 50) also affirm:

“When communicating with individuals of our own culture, we can more readily assess the communication cues so that we know when our conversation, our ideas and words, are being understood and internalized. However, when communicating across cultures, communication misunderstandings can occur. They are usually not serious and can be rectified.”

4.5 Solving problems in understanding

As problems of understanding occur quite frequently at the specific workplace when the language spoken is English, there must be ways how employees solve the misunderstandings and non-understandings. Three discrete ways were found in this study: problems of understanding are usually solved with using repetition, rephrasing and paraphrasing but also sometimes with the help of other employees. Employees can also often detect if the customer is not understanding merely from the facial expressions of the customer.

In the situations where misunderstandings or non-understandings happen, employees explain the matter repeatedly and even try to paraphrase it until the customer understands. Kaur (2009: 118) states that an effective way of getting the message through to the recipient is repetition and paraphrasing. Nieminen (2014: 109) also suggests that in problem situations, a wise customer servant tries to ensure that the message is understood by the customer. Nieminen (ibid.) adds that an easy way to be understood is by modifying the vocabulary. Nieminen (ibid.) also argues how repetition is not offensive in multiple cultures as it is, e.g., in Finland. Paraphrasing and repetition are illustrated in Examples 11 and 12:

Example 11

“no yleensä auttaa se, ett sit vaan selitetään sama asia monta kertaa...”

”well usually it helps that we explain the same matter multiple times...”

Example 12

“...niin sitten otetaan taas vähän astetta yksinkertasemmin ja hitaammin, ni yleensä silloin menee (viesti perille)...”

”...then we take again a bit simpler and slower, so then (the message) usually goes (through)...”

In these situations where problems of understanding might occur, employees can always try to look for signs of confusion from customer's face. One interviewee said that you can look at the customer's facial expressions and notice if the customer does not understand what the employee is trying to tell them. Another interviewee also came up with an example of a situation which is shown in Example 13:

Example 13

“...exit-paikallahan (koneessa) ei saa istuu sellanen ihminen, joka ei puhu englantia, ja sitte ku se (kiinalainen) tulee sun luokse ja sä katot, ett 'puhuttko englantia?', heti siin vaihees, jos sä huomaat, että se ei osaa yhtään, se vaan *nyökkäilee* 'mm-hmm' ni siinä vaiheessa koitappa selittää: 'nyt sun paikka muuttuu, välttämättä et enää istu sun kaverin vieressä', mut koska me turvallisuuden takia (...) vaaditaan nää asiat, ett sä puhut englantia...”

”...on an exit row seat (on a plane), a person who does not speak English, cannot sit there, and then when he or she (a Chinese) approaches you and you check if they speak English, immediately, if you notice that he or she doesn't know any English, he or she is just *nodding* 'mm-hmm', then you need to try to explain that 'now your seat changes, you are not necessarily sitting with your friend any more', but because of safety, we need to insist that you speak English...”

Kaur (2009: 116) explains how participants, who share incompetence in the English language, are rather cautious when it comes to “accepting a minimal response as evidence of understanding”. Nieminen (2014: 89-90) has also found out that ‘Asian customer might answer to almost every question with a positive response...’, as it is not acceptable in the Asian culture to directly say no. Thus, employees can notice if misunderstandings occur from customers' reactions and facial expressions.

Translators are not used at the specific workplace. Because the employees already have good English skills (written and oral) and, in some occasions, they speak an additional language, e.g., as their second mother tongue, there is no need for translators. There is still one exception: Asian guides are, in their own way, translators. This matter is illustrated in Example 14:

Example 14

“no me kaikki työntekijät ollaan tavallaan tulkkeja, kaikki puhuu jotain yleensä ylimäärästä kieltä esim meil (...) meidän työnjohdossa tiedetään, ketkä osaa esim puhuu jotakin kieltä esim, jos mulla on kiinalainen matkustaja mun edessä, ja kukaan ei puhu kiinaa täs mun lähistöll, ni mä voin soittaa, jos mä tiedän, ett mun kaveri on töis, ni mä joko soitan sille suoraan tai mä soitan allokaattorille eli meidän työnjohtoon, ja kysyn, ett onks ketään kiinan puhujaa, ja me saadaan sitä kautta tulkki, että ei tavallaan mitään ulkopuolista tulkki oo muut’ ku meidän iso työyhteisö...”

”well, all of us are, in a sense, translators, everyone usually speaks some extra language, for example, in our management, they know who speaks, for example, some language, for example, if I have a Chinese passenger in front of me and no one around me speaks Chinese, then I can call, if I know that my friend is at work, I can call her or I can call to an allocator, so, to our management, and ask, if there are any Chinese speakers (at work) and that way we get a translator, but we don’t have a hired translator because our work community can take that role...”

In addition to this, one interviewee also pointed out that they sometimes use Google Translate. This is an easy and a quick way to communicate with a customer who does not speak any English.

Firth’s (2009) phenomenon ‘let it pass’ in these contexts is not usually a working solution. Customers need to understand how and when everything happens, and therefore employees must ensure that customers thoroughly understand what is being said. Thus, misunderstandings and non-understandings need to be solved in order to avoid any unfortunate events which would occur if problems of understanding were let pass.

CONCLUSION

The first research question concentrated on the scripts used at work. In this study the initial assumption was that almost everything the employees produce would somehow be written beforehand. My second assumption was that employees would not be producing a large amount of English on their own because they have been trained to speak in a specific way to customers who speak ELF.

The findings revealed that this is not the case. Employees do not have any ready-made scripts on how to speak in English. Thus, everything they produce is their own spontaneous speech. However, employees must take into consideration the specific service principles. In addition to this, there is

no language training or language courses which employees need to attend. Therefore, employees are not taught how to speak in English. Instead, they are expected to have quite excellent skills in oral and written English language when entering the workplace and to maintain their skills in their free time.

The second research question dealt with the factors which influence the way employees use English with customers. The initial assumption was that, at least, the level of English skills affect how employees speak. The findings indicated that there are multiple factors which might influence the way English is spoken: nationality, whether the customer is a non-native or a native speaker of English, the customer's level of English skills, and whether the customer is an experienced passenger or not. The employees agreed that the main factor was the nationality of the customer.

The third research question concentrated on the misunderstandings and the non-understandings in ELF communication, if there are any, and if yes, how do employees solve them. The initial assumption was that there are many misunderstandings and non-understandings because, in many instances, English is not the employees' nor the customers' mother tongue. Cross-cultural communication (i.e., in this context, ELF communication) can often be challenging (Guirdham, 2011: 34). I also assumed that these situations where misunderstandings occur are solved with translators.

The findings showed that there are quite a lot of misunderstandings at work with customers. For example, the customer does not understand the vocabulary used by employees or there are cultural differences which might bring challenges to the communication. These situations are usually not solved with translators because the workplace does not have hired translators. They simply use the multilingual work community or sometimes even Google Translate.

There were some weaknesses in this study because of the number of the interviewees. If there had been more participants, the findings could have altered somewhat. Therefore, there cannot be made any generalizations of the findings.

This research is important to this field of study because ELF communication between employees and customers is not studied enough. There are a few studies on ELF at work, but the focus is always on the internal communication, i.e. between employees. Even the communication between companies have been studied but not the customer-employee communication which, in my opinion,

is an important aspect, too. This topic (and study) would be benefitting for people, especially for students, who would like to know more about ELF communication between employees and customers. This could also be a great topic to be taught in universities because this certain area is important when discussing working life. To conclude, this topic should be studied more because there are still many gaps in this specific field.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Archibald, A. N., Cogo, A. & Jenkins, J. (2011). *Latest Trends in ELF Research*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Bohus, D. & Rudnicky A. I. (2008). Sorry, I Didn't Catch That! In: Dybkjær L., Minker W. (eds) *Recent Trends in Discourse and Dialogue. Text, Speech and Language Technology*, Vol 39. Springer, Dordrecht. 123-154. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6821-8_6
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Vol 3, Is 2. Routledge. 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Cogo, A. & Dewey, M. (2012). *Analysing English as a Lingua Franca: A Corpus-Driven Investigation*. London; New York: Continuum International Publ. Group.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Deterding, D. (2013). *Misunderstandings in English as a Lingua Franca: An Analysis of ELF Interactions in South-East Asia*. Vol 1. Boston; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Firth, A. (1996). The Discursive Accomplishment of Normality: on "Lingua Franca" English and Conversation Analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics* Vol 26. 237-259.
- Firth, A. (2009). Doing not Being a Foreign Language Learner: English as a Lingua Franca in the Workplace and (Some) Implications for SLA. *IRAL – International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*. Vol 47, Is 1. 127-156. DOI: 10.1515/iral.2009.006
- Gerritsen, M. & Nickerson, C. (2009). Business English as a Lingua Franca. In Francesca Bargiela-Chappini (ed.), *The Handbook of Business Discourse*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 180-194.
- Guirdham, M. (2011). *Communicating Across Cultures at Work* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hartmann, R. (1996). *The English Language in Europe*. (Ed.) Vol 2, No 3. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Hemchua, S. & Rajprasit, K. (2017). The English Language & Communication in the International Workplace: An Examination of Thai Computer Engineering Professionals. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. Vol 21, Is 3. 109-124.
- Huang, Y. (2007). *Pragmatics*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

- Hülmbauer, C. (2009). "We don't take the right way. We just take the way that we think you will understand" – The Shifting Relationship between Correctness and Effectiveness in ELF. In A. Mauranen and E. Ranta (eds.), *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Findings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 323-347.
- Julien, H. (2012). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods: Content Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Kankaanranta, A. & Planken, B. (2010). BELF Competence as Business Knowledge of Internationally Operating Business Professionals. *Journal of Business Communication*. Vol 47, Is 4, 380-407.
- Kankaanranta, A. & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2013). "What Language Does Global Business Speak?" – The Concept and Development of BELF. *Iberica*. No 26, 17-34.
- Kaur, J. (2009). Pre-Empting Problems of Understanding in English as a Lingua Franca. In A. Mauranen and E. Ranta (eds.), *English as a Lingua Franca. Studies and Findings*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 107-123.
- Leppänen, S., Nikula, T. & Kääntä, L. (2008). *Kolmas Kotimainen: Lähikuvia Englannin Käytöstä Suomessa*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura.
- Longhurst, R. (2003). *Key Methods in Geography: Semi-structured Interviews and Focus Groups*. (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc. 143-156.
- Martin, J. & Nakayama, T. K. (2015). Reconsidering Intercultural (Communication) Competence in the Workplace: A Dialectical Approach. *Language and Intercultural Communication*. Vol 15, Is 1. London: Routledge. 13-28. DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2014.985303.
- Motschenbacher, H. (2013). *New perspectives on English as a European lingua franca*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Moran, R. T., Harris, P. R. & Moran, S. (2007). *Managing Cultural Differences: Global Leadership Strategies for the 21st Century (7th Ed.)*. Amsterdam; Boston: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Nieminen, M. (2014). *Monikulttuurinen asiakastyö*. Helsinki: Tietosanoma.
- Nowicka, A. (2008). Dealing with Communicative Problems in English as a Lingua Franca. *Kalbotyra – Linguistics. German and Romance Studies*. Vol 59, Is 3. 222-230. DOI: 10.15388/Klbt.2008.7610
- Räisänen, T. (2013). *Professional Communicative Repertoires and Trajectories of Socialization into Global Working Life*. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 216, Jyväskylä. [PhD dissertation]

- Räsänen, T. (2018). Translingual Practices in Global Business – A Longitudinal Study of a Professional Communicative Repertoire. In Mazzaferro, G. (ed.) *Translanguaging as Everyday Practice*. Springer, 149-174. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-94851-5.
- Skapinker, M. (2007). Whose language? *The Financial Times Limited* 2018. [online]
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied Linguistics*. Vol 4, Is 2. 91-112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>
- Vine, B. (2004). *Getting Things Done at Work: The Discourse of Power in Workplace Interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Willing, K. (1992). *Talking It Through. Clarification and Problem-solving in Professional Work*. Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University.
- Yoshida, T. & Brislin, R. W. (1994). *Improving Intercultural Interactions: Modules for Cross-Cultural Training Programs*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

APPENDIX

HAASTATTELU

TAUSTATIETOJA

1. Keitä olette?
2. Minkä ikäisiä?
3. Koulutustausta? Mitä kieliä olette opiskelleet? Englanti?
4. Missä työtehtävissä olette? Kuinka kauan olette olleet näissä tietyissä työtehtävissä?

ENGLANTI TYÖPAIKALLA

5. Kuinka paljon englantia käytätte työpaikalla? Missä tilanteissa?
6. Mitkä asiat vaikuttavat siihen, miten puhutte englantia? Riippuuko esimerkiksi asiakkaasta?
7. Onko koulutettu automaattisesti puhumaan/tuottamaan englantia tietyllä ”kaavalla”? Meneekö puhuminen rutiininomaisesti?
8. Kuinka paljon saa tai pitää tuottaa itse englantia?
9. Tuleeko paljonkin väärinymmärryksiä joko teille, tai asiakkaille jostain mitä te sanoitte heille? Mitä teette näissä tilanteissa? Esimerkkejä?
10. Onko monestikin tilanteita, joissa ette saa selvää asiakkaan puhumasta englannista? (Esimerkiksi, jos asiakas lausuu sanoja ”väärin” tai on muuten vain hyvin alkeiden tasolla englannissa) Miten toimitte näissä tilanteissa? Tarvitaanko tulkkia vai käytetäänkö tällöin joitain muita keinoja tilanteen ratkaisemiseksi?
11. Järjestääkö työpaikka kielikoulutusta? Jos kyllä, tunnetteko, että koulutuksesta on hyötyä? Jos ei, käyttekö itse kielikursseilla tai opetteletteko itsenäisesti vapaa-ajalla?