

“We don’t always have to talk to understand each other”:
Intercultural couples’ views on ELF communication and problem-
solving methods

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Nykypäivän globalisoituneessa maailmassa monikulttuuristen pariien määrä kasvaa jatkuvasti. Monikulttuuriset parit ovat pariskuntia, joilla voi olla eroavaisuuksia muun muassa kielessä ja kulttuurissa. Monikulttuuriset parit, joilla ei ole yhteistä äidinkieltä, valitsevat usein englannin kommunikaatiokielekseen, sillä se koetaan usein kieleksi, joka on molemmille osapuolille tasavertainen kommunikaatiokieli, ja pareilla on yleensä entuudestaan osaamista englannin kielestä. Uuden tiedon hankkiminen heidän kommunikaatiostaan on tärkeää, sillä tämänhetkistä tietoa pariien omista kokemuksista kommunikaatiosta on vielä vähän. Tämä kandidaatintutkielma keskittyi monikulttuuristen pariien englannin kielen käyttöön heidän yhteisenä lingua franca-kielenään. Tutkimus pyrki selvittämään, minkälaisia kommunikaatio-ongelmia monikulttuuriset parit kohtaavat, kun he käyttävät yhteisenä kielenään englantia, joka ei ole heidän äidinkieltänsä, ja kuinka he toimivat näissä tilanteissa ratkoakseen kyseiset ongelmatilanteet. Haastateltuja pareja oli tutkimuksessa yhteensä kolme. Tutkimus keskittyi pääasiassa tutkimushenkilöiden omiin kokemuksiin ja näkemyksiin kommunikaatiosta. Aiempi tutkimus on yleisesti keskittynyt pareihin, joilla on pidempi historia yhdessä. Tämän tutkimuksen parit ovat olleet yhdessä alle kaksi vuotta, mikä antaa tietoa monikulttuuristen pariien suhteen alkuvaiheen kommunikaatiosta.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat, että monikulttuuriset parit kohtaavat kommunikaatio-ongelmia pääasiassa kielierojen takia, johon vaikuttavat puhujan oma äidinkieli ja kulttuuri, erilaiset tavat ilmaista asioita kuten erot ääntämisessä sekä aksentti, eroavaisuudet englannin kielen taidossa, joka voi vaikuttaa parin samantarvoisuuteen keskustelutilanteissa sekä hankaluus ilmaista asioita englanniksi, jotka voivat kääntäessä muuttaa merkityksensä, kuten vitsit. Esille tuli myös se, että monikulttuurisen parin osapuolet eivät ole vain tietyn kulttuurin tai kielen tuotoksia, vaan omia persooniaan, ja tästä syystä he eivät aina ymmärrä toisiaan. Esille ongelmanratkaisukeinoiksi nousi muun muassa käsillä osoittaminen tai kuvan näyttäminen, monikielisuuden hyödyntäminen, selittäminen ja toistaminen, kunnes molemmat ovat ymmärtäneet asian, auttaminen, huumori ja erilaiset kääntäjät, kuten Google Kääntäjä. Lisäksi parit kokivat tärkeäksi sen, että he ymmärtävät omat ja toistensa rajoitukset englannin kielen käytössä ja ovat näin ollen ymmärtäväisiä toisiaan kohtaan.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The intercultural couple is defined as a couple where the partners come from different cultures and might have differences in race, ethnicity, religion and language (Campbell, Silva and Wright 2012). The number of intercultural couples is growing constantly. In today's world, it is easier than ever before to travel and meet people from different countries. In addition, the internet and countless websites allow people to meet each other online around the clock. Intercultural couples are not a new phenomenon, but there is still not enough research of intercultural couples and the current research is insufficient (Dervin 2013, Tien 2013). Studying intercultural couples and their language use is a challenging area of study because of countless different mixes of intercultural couples (Dervin 2013). Tien (2013) notes that "Not much existing literature has investigated and provided understanding of the communication process and relationship adjustment of intercultural couples, especially the role of language differences."

It has been stated previously that the challenges that intercultural couples experience in their relationship are unique (Tien 2013) due to their language differences that are infused by their different cultural traditions and views. However, previous research states that the information about intercultural couples' communication could be beneficial for other intercultural or multilingual couples and health professionals (Tien 2013), and for anybody who wants to communicate with someone who has a different native language or comes from a different culture. The results might help people to understand why people from different backgrounds communicate in different ways. The results might be especially beneficial for other intercultural couples who might get new ideas how they could understand each other better and evolve their communication.

The present study aims to explore what kind of communication issues intercultural couples who have chosen English as their shared lingua franca face and how they solve these possible communication issues. The aim of the study is to present the interviewees own views and attitudes towards their own and each other's use of ELF and thus interview was deemed as the most appropriate method of data collection, instead of conversation analysis, which has been the typical way to analyse ELF talk. The study consists of the interviews of three couples, so in total six people were interviewed. The present study focuses on the choice of English, which

intercultural couples often choose as their shared language, because it is usually the language they have the most knowledge of in addition to their mother tongue and is an equal ground for both members of the relationship (Beraud 2016).

Furthermore, the research has often focused on couples who share longer history together, usually over than 2 years, are married and/or live together. Here the aim is to find more information about communication in the first stages of the relationship, since previously couples' efficient communication has been explained by their long histories together (Pietikäinen 2017, Tien 2013). Pietikäinen (2016) has stated, that in fact the long history together affects the communication so that the couples do not face a lot of misunderstanding because of the partners' knowledge of each other. Likewise, Tien (2013) has stated that it might be because of the long histories together that cultural elements cannot necessarily be found in couples' speech.

The study will next move to the background theory, where the relevant background research and concepts related to intercultural couples and ELF communication are discussed. After that, the methods of the present study and data will be introduced, including the research questions. Next, the findings section introduces the results of the study, where intercultural couples' communication problems and problem-solving methods will be discussed based on the interview findings. Finally, the conclusion chapter will discuss the main findings and limitations of the study, and the suggestions for the future research.

2 INTERCULTURAL COUPLES AND COUPLE COMMUNICATION

This chapter introduces relevant background information and terms related to intercultural couples and their communication, and ELF communication, which works as a framework for this study, since the focus of the study is on intercultural couples who use English as their shared language. ELF communication will be defined through the couple communication viewpoint, and the reasons why ELF is the preferred choice of language for intercultural couples will be considered. Finally, it will be discussed, how language identities and language differences contribute to the communication of intercultural couples.

2.1 Defining intercultural couples

Nowadays meeting people from around the world is easier than ever before, due to the easy access to internet and easier and cheaper ways to travel which thus blurs national boundaries (Campbell, Silva and Wright 2012). According to Dervin (2013), this mobility and growing amount of migration makes it easier for people from different nationalities to meet each other and build relationships together. Campbell, Silva and Wright (2012) define intercultural couple as a relationship where partners come from different nationalities and may have differences in race, ethnicity, religion and language.

As Dervin (2013) has found out, there exists little knowledge on intercultural couples, since there are countless different mixes of intercultural couples, which also makes studying them challenging. Each couple forms their own traditions by negotiating and taking both of their cultures into account. Also Tien (2013) notes that knowledge on intercultural couples' communication and particularly their language differences is deficient. According to her, intercultural couples encounter unique issues in their relationship since they might have completely different traditions and views that are infused by their native languages and cultural traditions. She also mentions that knowledge on intercultural couples is important and might be beneficial for experts such as therapists and psychologists who could use this information to better help intercultural couples.

Interestingly, Klötzl (2015) calls intercultural couples who use ELF as their shared language as ELF couples. Doing this she distinguishes the intercultural couples who use English from other

intercultural couples, aiming to make notions specifically of the couples who use English. By her definition, ELF couple is an intercultural couple, who use English together and neither of the partners have English as their native language. She found out that the couples in her study did not see ELF as a disadvantage but instead were happy with the language because it made their relationships possible. She explains that the couples construct their use of ELF through shared intimate lingua franca, which is “created with, through and in ELF” (Klötzl 2015: 2). Thus, the couples use ELF to construct their shared couple tongue, which will be discussed later on. The next chapter moves on to the definition of ELF and what ELF communication of intercultural couples is like.

2.2 ELF communication

Seidlhofer (2011, cited in Baker 2015) defines ELF, English as a lingua franca, communication as any use of English language by non-native English speakers who use English as their shared communication language by choice or even as the only option. Baker (2015) then continues that ELF is thus often seen as the lingua franca of intercultural communication, which refers to communication between different cultures or social groups or how the communication is infused because of culture. ELF is most often the language that intercultural couples choose if they do not know each other’s languages. Pietikäinen (2017) states that they usually choose English as their shared language because it is generally the language they have the most knowledge of in addition to their native languages. In addition, Beraud (2016), who has interviewed Norwegian-Ukrainian intercultural couples, explains that couples usually see English as the most logical choice when they do not know each other’s languages, one interviewee noting that English is the world language. He also mentions that intercultural couples usually found English as the most fair and neutral choice since using other one’s native language would give that person more power in communication situations (Beraud 2016).

Even though there have been plenty of studies of ELF, Gundacker (2010) states that research on ELF as private lingua franca has been neglected and studying ELF has mostly focused on the academic use of ELF. She continues that it can be assumed that one of the major challenges of ELF couples is indeed communication, since it might make the conversation restricted or limited and make expressing emotions hard. Thus, she finds it crucial to gain more knowledge on private ELF use. However, she states that ELF couple talk is similar to mother tongue couple talk “in terms of the associated feelings and emotions that come as a part of any relationship”

(Gundacker 2010: 113) and that the things the couples want to express are the same as in mother tongue couple talk, but just more challenging because of the inability to express oneself perfectly in language that is not native to them. The following extract shows the intercultural couples' attitudes towards the use of ELF from her study.

The couples have chosen English as a lingua franca and do, therefore, not expect to communicate in a form of English which is necessarily close to native English. For them, it is not important *how* they speak English; but that they speak a form of English. (Gundacker 2010: 9)

Nowicka (2018), on the other hand, has studied the communicative problems in ELF talk generally, and how ELF communication is organized. She suggests that communicative competence affects the ELF talk, which refers to speakers' different levels of language knowledge. She claims that different language levels may cause misunderstandings and conflicts when one person is not capable of understanding the same amount of the used language as the other one.

The problem-solving methods for intercultural couples are often similar to general ELF problem-solving. Let it pass strategy, which Pietikäinen (2017) and Nowicka (2008) have introduced in their studies, is one of the problem-solving methods for intercultural couples, which is mentioned as a common way to avoid misunderstandings in ELF talk. Nowicka (2008) explains that people in lingua franca communication tend to use let it pass strategy during the conflicts where the members of the conversation prefer to avoid the conflict situation by waiting for the situation to clear up on its own. She notes, however, that this strategy cannot be used in every situation, for instance during situations that need immediate clarification such as pronunciation of the name.

Another strategy to avoid difficult situations is silence in conflict, which refers to situations where one prefers to stay silent during the conflict situation. Pietikäinen (2017) notes, however, that silences during the complicated situation might not be a feature of intercultural couples but rather a way in which couples generally cope with such situations since silences do not have, or might not have, cultural relevance. The following extract shows the findings from her study of intercultural couples' ELF use.

Cultural differences were not generally made relevant in these interactions, which can imply two things: that silences have less intercultural relevance than commonly expected,

and/or that ELF couples should be considered “intimate partners interacting” first, and “intercultural” second. (Pietikäinen 2017: 154)

Several factors could be identified that play a main role in affecting communication of intercultural couples. For instance, Pietikäinen (2017) has found four different aspects that might affect the communication of intercultural couples when using English as their shared lingua franca. These four aspects she identified are multilingualism, (mis)understanding, language identity, which includes speaker’s views and thoughts and “silence in conflict”, which was already discussed above. She mentions that multilingualism is present in couples’ daily lives, since often intercultural couples use their own or each other’s native language and mix it with English. She notes that misunderstandings might be caused, for instance, by couples’ expectations to understand each other due to their closeness, which as Pietikäinen (2017) mentions, both might help the couples to understand each other better but also might cause confusions. The language identities of intercultural couples will be discussed in the following chapter. Tien (2013) explained that depending on how they are emotionally related to English language might affect the way these people communicate and answer to each other. Intercultural couples usually tend to be more emotionally related to their native language because it is the language that entails their cultures and with their mother tongue they are able to better express their emotions and feelings and explain their cultural beliefs (Tien 2013). Beraud (2016) states that intercultural couples often see English as their couple tongue, the language of their relationship, which also has unique features such as multilingual properties.

2.3 Language differences and identity

Language identity refers to a person’s relationship with their second or additional language (Kriukow 2017). Several studies (Pietikäinen 2017, Beraud 2016), have revealed that intercultural couples see English often as their own language, the language that they identify themselves with. One interviewee in Beraud’s (2016) study even mentions that she feels like English is her native language. Intercultural couples thus might identify themselves as native or native-like English speakers since the use of that language is such an important part of their daily life. In addition, Klötzl (2015) found out that ELF couples tend to get more comfortable with ELF the longer their relationship lasts. When the relationship evolves, the partners create their own ways of communication through their native languages and English.

Tien (2013) has studied how language differences affect intercultural couples. She has identified different aspects that affect the intercultural relationship such as gender roles, religion and food. Tien also stated that sometimes these couples just have to accept that they might never fully understand each other's cultures and each other. She discusses some ways for intercultural couples to better understand each other such as inventing new language, also called a couple tongue, and nicknames. Pietikäinen (2017) mentions that intercultural couples tend to invent couple tongue to better understand each other, since couple tongue is formed by time as these couples get to know each other and form and negotiate their values and traditions. Sometimes people outside of the relationship will not be able to understand couple tongue for this very reason that it is invented by two individuals from different backgrounds, who want to share their life together. Couple tongue generally includes new words and expressions and is many times a mixture of speakers' own native languages and English. Thus, multilingualism plays also a part in shaping intercultural couples' language use and identities.

Intercultural couples have been studied more from a cultural point of view, but according to Dervin (2013), they should be seen through their identities and their language use. In his study, 23 couples living in Hong Kong and Finland were interviewed. The results showed that intercultural couples must accept their own and each other's limitations because neither of them has perfect English language skills. He also notes that the use of English might alter the way these couples see themselves as representatives of their own cultures or countries, as their language identity when using English may differ from the one that they have when communicating in their native language.

To conclude the findings from previous research, it is clear that intercultural couples' ELF talk is adorned with unique features and traditions. The couples do not only use English but also other languages, such as their native languages, to enhance their communication to better understand each other (Beraud 2016). Language differences, however, affect the communication, because couples' native languages might include properties that are not common to English language. However, intercultural couples have several ways to avoid or delay misunderstandings. The present study aims to fill the gap that previous research has not addressed enough: the couples' own views and thoughts on their ELF communication. The previous research has explained to a great extent what intercultural couple's communication is like through conversational analysis (CA) and other language properties but the focus on couples own views and thoughts is limited. The knowledge of their feelings, both positive and

negative, is beneficial for understanding the unique issues that intercultural couples face. Furthermore, previous studies have mainly focused on the couples who already share a longer history together. Thus, by concentrating on couples that have not been together very long, the present study hopes to gain information about the communication in the first stages of the intercultural relationship.

3 PRESENT STUDY

3.1 The aim and the research questions

The aim of this study is to find new information about English as lingua franca communication of intercultural couples. The previous research on ELF communication has strongly focused on conversational analysis, which analyses the interviews strictly and instead of bringing out interviewees' own opinions, focuses on how the language use is structured and what kind of features the language includes. Thus, the present study will aim to fill this gap and analyse the communication of intercultural couples through their own views, thoughts and identities as lingua franca users in their daily communication. The results could help other intercultural couples to better understand their communication and help them to develop their communication.

The following two research questions aim to reveal the communication issues of these couples, but also try to provide answers, how these problems could be solved. Close attention will be paid to whether there is a certain pattern that intercultural couples tend to use to tackle their communication issues. The questions are:

1. What kind of communication problems do intercultural couples encounter when using English as a lingua franca?
2. How do intercultural couples deal with these communication issues?

3.2 Participants and data collection

The participants of the study had to be intercultural couples who use ELF as the shared language in their relationship, and they were not allowed to have English as the native language. There were no other restrictions for the chosen participants. The interviewees of the present study are couples who do not yet share long histories together, since all the couples have been together for less than two years. It might be that the newer couples show more cultural aspects in their communication compared to the older couples since as Tien (2013) has explained, the long history together might affect the communication so that many cultural aspects cannot be found

in the couples' conversation. The newer couples might not have formed couple tongue yet, which couples usually form when they get to know each other well and causes the cultural aspects of the conversation to vanish (Pietikäinen 2017).

All the interviewees seemed excited and interested to take part in the study and hear the results after the study is complete. All the couples had been together for less than two years, which distinguishes the present study from previous ones. The setting of the present study will provide new information about new couples' communication and whether it is different compared to couples who have a longer history together.

All couples are heterosexual couples. All the interviewed Finnish people are female while interviewees from the Netherlands, France and Nepal are male. The ages of the participants and the time they have been in a relationship was calculated in the moment when the interviews took place, in February 2020.

1. The Finnish-Dutch couple (F1 & D):

The members of the couple come from Finland and the Netherlands. Their native languages are Finnish and Dutch, and their ages are 23 and 21. They have been in a relationship for 1 year and 9 months. The couple currently lives in different countries.

2. The Finnish-French couple (F2 & R):

The members of the couple come from Finland and France. Their native languages are Finnish and French, and their ages are 22 and 24. They have been in relationship for 1 year and 9 months. The couple currently lives in different countries.

3. The Finnish-Nepali couple (F3 & N):

The members of the couple come from Finland and Nepal. Their native languages are Finnish and Nepali, and their ages are 22 and 32. They have been in a relationship for 8 months. N has lived in Finland for 12 years and the couple is currently living together.

The couples in the present study had previous experience of interculturality and having friendships from other countries. In addition to that, the Finnish-Nepali couple had both been in intercultural relationship before. The Finnish-Dutch couple mentioned that they met through online gaming, where they also share a friend-group of other gamers that they use English with. Additionally, F1 told that she studies English as her major in the university, and that she has also studied intercultural communication as her minor subject. The Finnish-French couple met through a website “Students of the World” whose homepage suggests it to be “the biggest student network to make friends all over the world”. The third, the Finnish-Nepali couple met through their common friends, and they told during the interview that they have friends from several different countries. It seemed that the couples’ own interest in languages and interculturality were the main reasons they had ended up in intercultural relationships.

The data was gathered using a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interview is an effective method to find out interviewees’ own opinions and thoughts, since it is a flexible form of interview, and gives interviewees opportunity to express themselves freely. There were three couple interviews, so both members of the couple were present at the same time. The interviewees were asked a set of questions that are connected to their use of English language in their relationships, their communication issues and possible solutions to their communication issues. The interviews lasted from half an hour to one hour. Before the interviews started, the interviewees were given brief information about the study and their rights as interviewees of the study. The interviewees signed consent forms before the interviews took place.

The interviews were carried out during February 2020. There were three couple interviews and six interviewees in total. The Finnish-Dutch and Finnish-Nepali couples were interviewed as face-to-face interviews, since at the moment of interview, D was visiting Finland. The Finnish-Nepali couple were the only couple who both live in Finland. During the interview, R was in France, so the interview of the Finnish-French was organized through Skype video call. This changed the interview dynamics, since the other couples had a more natural and relaxing environment during the interview. In addition to that, there were slight internet connection issues, which did not, however, affect the results.

3.3 Method of analysis

The data collected by interviews was transcribed and then analysed using qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis helps to analyse the data through interviewees own opinions, instead of numerical data, and is thus suitable for the present study. Haregu (2012) states that qualitative data analysis is a range of processes that guides the researcher to move from the data that has been collected to some kind of explanation to understand the people or situations that have been studied. The qualitative data analysis begins with more general questions, and as the study evolves, the data will be narrowed down to construct clear and narrowed explanation of the phenomenon. In qualitative data analysis, the process of analysis starts already when the research questions are constructed, since those will guide the whole data gathering and analysing process. Thus, for the present study, it was decided that the study will be a qualitative one in order to find out interviewees' own opinions and views.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter introduces the results of the study and discusses the findings from the interviews. The chapter is divided into two chapters where the first one, 4.1, discusses the communication problems and 4.2 discussed the problem-solving methods for intercultural couples. Finally, chapter 4.2 will end with brief summary of the findings of both sub-chapters.

4.1 Communication problems

Schuler and Dias (2014) state that usually in intercultural couples, at least one of the two is not completely fluent in their shared language, which affects the couples' communication. Lack of knowledge of the language affects how the couples deal with their emotions and it might make a relationship challenging because expressing deep emotions and humour are difficult to communicate in a foreign language. It became clear in the present study that even though the couples felt that they are more capable of deeper communication in English than if they used each other's native languages, they had issues related to joke telling and problems in explaining something in English that has cultural value in their native language. All the male partners mentioned that it is challenging for them to explain a joke in English. R mentioned that sometimes the jokes translated into English are not funny anymore. The interviewees felt that because of the limitations that they have in English language, they were not able to convey everything they wanted to say, especially regarding topics that had cultural relevance. D mentioned that "sometimes I just wish she could understand cause like I don't know, there is some things that like get lost in translation". This corresponds well with the findings of Tien (2013) who discovered that sometimes the intercultural couples might feel that something is "lost in translation", which refers to the usually inseparable bond of the culture and language. When one is not aware of the culture behind the language, understanding of the concept might be challenging. To understand what the partner is trying to express, one should learn not only the target language but also the culture, which might feel frustrating for the couples.

When a couple knows each other well, they might face misunderstandings because they think they understand each other so well that there cannot be misunderstandings (Pietikäinen 2017). N mentions that they tend to solve misunderstandings right away. However, his partner F3 continued that sometimes they might not notice the misunderstanding right away and are both happy with the result, even though they had been discussing completely different things. The

couple noted that this might cause problems later on when they realize that they have misunderstood each other previously. Otherwise intercultural couples seem to have similar misunderstandings to other couples, not just because they use English, which is not their native language, but because they are different people with different kind of characters, as R states. F3 mentions that she might face misunderstandings with her Finnish friends, too, because they think differently and have different kind of personalities.

Communicative competence seems to have a huge importance in ELF communication (Nowicka 2008). The couples who noted that they have differences in their English language knowledge expressed more problems in means of understanding each other. The Finnish-Dutch couple was the only one to express that their English language abilities are equal and that their communication is thus quite natural. On contrary, F2 was able to point out many difficulties they face in their communication due to R's more restricted English abilities. They mentioned that in France English teaching is not always good enough, which could be seen as one of the reasons why they faced communication problems. F3 mentioned that N knows more vocabulary in specific areas of interest, such as history, and she mentioned that in such cases she struggles to understand him because she has no knowledge of the specific area or the specific words that she might not have ever heard.

The Finnish-French couple noted that their communication issues were caused mostly by the French language influence in English language, which the example below shows.

I also think that sometimes he sounds a little bit childish because maybe French language just is like that because for example, he says "sun goes to sleep" which means "The sun goes down". But first I just thought that he says it because he wants to be fun, but actually it's just because of French. (F2)

This is one example of how language differences affect the communication and even the image of the person. As the example shows, different languages have different ways of expressing certain things, and when those things get directly translated into another language, in this case English, the content might sound totally different. F2's notion of French language making R sound more childish affects the image of the person as well. Thus, the language differences affect how the couples viewed each other and themselves. Likewise, Tien (2013) has noted that intercultural couples have these kinds of different views and traditions that are infused by their native languages. The Finnish-Nepali couple had encountered similar situations, and, in their

case, it seemed that it made their communication more unclear. F3 said that sometimes she struggles to understand her boyfriend because he explains things in a Nepali way, which again refers to language and culture differences that people who do not share the native language have. On the contrary, it seemed that Finnish language did not have a huge impact on language differences, since none of the couples made such notions about Finnish language.

The couples mentioned that different kind of understanding of the pronunciation or accent might cause them understanding issues. F1 mentioned that if there is something they do not understand, it is more likely caused by the pronunciation instead of not understanding the meaning. R stated that French accent does cause him problems when he is trying to be understood and that the French accent combined with English might be confusing. Also, F3 mentioned that they occasionally struggle with pronunciation differences. She also noted that N sometimes has an accent in his speech, which affects her understanding. She also stated that even though her own pronunciation is not always correct, she finds that her speech is clearer than speech that is infused with an accent. F2 mentioned that she cannot stand grammatical mistakes, so she tends to point out the mistakes that R makes in his speech.

The Finnish-French and Finnish-Nepali couples expressed frustrations in some situations where they had to invest in communication more than the other one. F2 noted that sometimes it is frustrating to explain something over and over again, but states that usually at the end they mostly always understand each other after enough repetition and using more simple words and structures. F3 explains that sometimes she has to take care of official calls, for instance, that have to be done in Finnish. In such situations she hoped that her partner would speak more Finnish. This situation is unique compared to the other couples, since they live together in Finland and thus have to take care of several official matters in Finnish. Thus, the importance of Finnish in their relationship seemed more important than with other couples who were mostly satisfied with only English. D and R both said that they are interested to move to Finland and thus willing to learn Finnish language. Even though learning each other's language did not seem really important to couples in means of understanding each other, it seemed to have more relevance when planning a life together in one another's country, or when communicating with each other's family and especially their parents.

The most unexpected finding was, how big of an importance interviewees' parents play in means of understanding each other's languages. All couples agreed that they can communicate

with each other in English without problems and often times English was seen as a preferred choice; as an equal communication medium. However, they all hoped that their partner would speak or at least understand each other's language so that the communication with their parents would be easier.

One thing is like with mom. I feel like it's not so much for me for him to understand Finnish but like with mom because like... Or I would understand Dutch for your parents.
(F1)

Especially the Finnish-Nepali couple expressed that in Nepal the role of parents and the family is the biggest priority, and thus N mentioned that it would be really important for F3 to learn Nepali language. He also mentioned that he wants to speak Nepali language to their upcoming child. Thus, even though the couples were satisfied with English as their shared language, they still had hopes of their partner learning their native language. The couples reported varying English levels of their parents. Some of the parents were able to understand and speak little English while some of the parents did not know English at all. Consequently, it seemed important for the couples to learn each other's language at least a bit. Similar findings were made in Tien's (2008) study, who found out that communication with the extended family plays a big role in intercultural couples' communication. In her study the couples expressed that they wanted to change their communication style so that they could communicate with the extended family with the help of their partners.

4.2 Problem solving

As seen in the previous chapter, intercultural couples struggle with several communication problems that may be caused by the use of ELF, but also due to several other factors such as language differences and communicative competence. This chapter will introduce the problem-solving methods for the problems introduced in chapter 4.1 that the couples mentioned during the interviews.

Multilingualism seemed to be a part of all the couples' communication at some level. The Finnish-Nepali couple used Finnish the most but due to the other couples' incompetence in each other's languages, multilingualism did not seem to have a huge relevance in their communication. The couples felt that English allows them to express themselves more deeply,

even though it is not their native language, noting that if they were to use each other's languages, the communication would be restricted and probably not even possible with their current knowledge. English was their main language and the language that they preferred to use. Previous research states that intercultural couples tend to use English as their lingua franca, since it is a fair and neutral choice and language that people commonly have previous knowledge of in addition to their native language (Pietikäinen 2017, Nowicka 2008). The present study shows that in addition to English language, the couples who knew each other's languages seemed to use code-switching because it offers them more ways to try to understand each other better. All the couples showed interest in learning each other's languages, mentioning that English would probably still remain as their lingua franca, even if they learned each other's native languages. F3 told how code-switching helps them to solve the things that they aren't able to express in English.

If he don't [sic] understand me, then I say it in Finnish and he might get that word in Finnish. (F3)

The couple mentioned that N knows Finnish pretty well, since he has been living in Finland for 12 years and because of that the couple showed more signs of the use of code-switching than the other couples. F3 mentioned, however, that if they used only Finnish as their communication language, their conversations would be more limited and not so deep. Thus, Finnish language was a tool for the couple to understand each other better and avoid situations where they might not have understood each other otherwise. Based on these findings, it could be said that learning each other's native languages would help the couples to understand each other better, and also allow them to invent new communication habits, and possibly avoid misunderstandings that could be otherwise caused by communicative competence in ELF, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Dervin (2013) found out that intercultural couples do not always expect to ever understand each other completely because they do not share the same native language and have differences in culture. Interviewee F3 made a same kind of notion stating that when one goes into an intercultural relationship, they must know what to expect. She said that one must be aware that there will be misunderstandings and communication problems because it is a part of the/an intercultural relationship. It seemed that the couples were aware of the possible communication problems but that did not affect their decision to start a relationship. The Finnish-Dutch couple

mentioned that they always tend to make sure that they understand each other even with the smallest things. They think that it is a good idea in problematic situations to take a few steps back and clarify the situation. F2 mentioned that in the case of misunderstanding or in situations where R did not understand her, she explains things in a simpler way as many times as needed, until they have understood each other. Thus, the couples understood each other's limitations and were willing to help each other. It also seemed that the couples were happy with English, because they thought that otherwise their communication would be impossible. Findings of Klötzl (2015) support this claim, since she found that intercultural couples are generally happy with English because it makes their communication and thus the whole relationship possible. To summarise, the lack of language knowledge does not determine intercultural couples' communication abilities since the couples seemed to structure the communication so that they were able to understand each other and be understandable.

The Finnish-Dutch couple expressed traits of let it pass strategy, which as previously mentioned, is a common way to avoid misunderstandings in ELF talk. It refers to avoiding situations that might cause misunderstanding or conflicts, where the person decides to let the situation pass (Nowicka 2018, Pietikäinen 2017). F1 noted that sometimes when she is not able to explain something or is, for example, too tired to do so, she might give up and let the situation pass. She noted, however that such situations usually happen only when she is for instance tired. However just as Nowicka (2008) has pointed out, the couples used this strategy only when the matter was something not so important. The Finnish-Dutch couple emphasized that if the topic was something really important, they always make sure that at the end they understand each other. Nowicka (2008) notes that the let it pass strategy works in all lingua franca communication situations since it is a way for people to avoid unpleasant situations where they need to ask one another to explain again.

One way for couples to deal with challenging situations was to use humour and jokes to understand each other. Even though, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, it seemed that couples struggle with directly translating jokes into English, they still had their own ways to be funny with each other. The following extract shows an example of the Finnish-Nepali couple's communication differences.

F3: We make fun of each other. Especially he makes fun of me if I don't understand or I make fun of his talking when he say [sic] like some things a funny way and I don't

understand. Like I didn't understand when he said gassy station, gassy station. Do you understand? That's a gas station. It's gassy station.

N: How hard it is, it is just like gas station.

F3: Aagh, no, you say gassy station. Like these we, like this way we like... It's like arguing like kinda like who is right.

As the example shows, the couple understood each other but they had differences in means of their English language use. These kind of small instances in communication help the couples to negotiate and understand each other's language use and possibly evolve their English language abilities. Furthermore, all the couples agreed that if the other one did not understand them, they started to explain the matter in a more simple way, using simpler words and structures and also repetition, until they understood each other.

One way how the couples tackled communication issues was to help each other if they do not know something, such as a word, or help them to improve their English. R mentioned that F2 corrects him a lot, but it takes a long time for him to learn the right ways to say those things.

I want to hear him speak in good English because I cannot stand grammatic mistakes and such. (F2)

This extract shows that F2 wanted to not only understand what R means but also help him to correct his grammar. This kind of language repair could help the couples to overcome the issues that their language differences seemed to cause, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Also, during the interview, F3 was trying to remember the word spontaneous, and N immediately helped her by telling her the right word and mentioned that sometimes he has to help her with such words and situations. Even though the couples' communicative competence, as discussed in previous chapter, vary, the people with more language knowledge were eager to help each other. In fact, Pietikäinen (2017) found that the intercultural couples show remarkable ways of repairing their own and each other's speech. She states that the couples have learned how to cope in difficult communication situations and emphasizes that how well couples know each other should be seen as one of the main factors when studying language contacts and comprehension. Moreover, Tien (2013) explains that being patient and understanding helps the couples to overcome their communication problems. The following extracts shows one interviewee's thought on the importance of being understanding towards each other.

My opinion for any international relationship is that you are ready to understand that the other people have the different culture and sometimes the other person doesn't mean anything bad so you have to have the patience and understanding to the other so that you

don't get mad every time when the other person say something wrong or don't know something or like you have misunderstanding so like to be very like understanding. (F3)

These results show that even though the couples were able to identify several communication issues when using English, it did not seem to be a big issue for them. Pietikäinen (2016) found out that in fact intercultural couples do not struggle with many misunderstandings. The misunderstandings are mainly derived from vagueness in speech, which she explained with the couple's expectation to understand each other even when they are being vague. The couples in the present study mentioned same kind of ways of dealing with misunderstandings as Pietikäinen (2016, 2017), such as pointing at things, clarifying the situation, explaining and code-switching.

When it comes to the non-verbal communication, the couples noted that pointing at things or moving hands helps them to express themselves better, when they were at the same place. However, two of these three couples do not live together since they live in their own home countries at the moment. The couples who do not yet live together were asked how their communication works when they are away from each other. They mentioned that it is more complicated because during a call or in a text message it is not possible to point out things or show expressions.

Through like being in a call without like video chat because you don't see the other person so it's like especially because we're both really sarcastic, so it sometimes goes over the heads like where you're joking or where you're like being serious. (F1)

R mentioned that sometimes he sends a picture if there is something that F2 does not understand or something that he struggles to explain. The long-distance couples mentioned that long distance communication might be more restricted because, for instance, during a phone call, using hands to point out something is not possible. Both the Finnish-Dutch and Finnish-French couple mentioned that sometimes they use Google Translate when they do not know or remember a certain word. Such techniques as using a translator, moving hands or sending a picture are a good way for intercultural couples to communicate with each other because in such situations understanding is not entirely tied to the knowledge of the language. D mentioned that

Having the distance like kinda changes the whole dynamic of how your relationship works. (D)

It seemed still that the couples had found new and creative ways to understand each other even though they were not physically in the same place. Similarly, Tien (2013) states that all the couples interviewed in her study had their own ways of effective communication. The couples used varying tools such as dictionaries, showing movies or telling stories and explaining different, more complicated, concepts in a detailed way to each other. The present study shows similar findings, proving that every couple has their own unique ways of communication.

Schuler and Dias (2014) state that intercultural families are nowadays considered as the families of the future, since based on the statistical information, it seems that intercultural families constitute a large part of the population. Thus, the knowledge of their communication is beneficial for not only the couple itself but their offspring too, as the number of intercultural couples and thus the amount of intercultural families grows. Carvalho, Hoffmeister, and Schmidt (2009, as cited by Schuler and Dias 2014) state that often the differences that the members of the intercultural couple have, might be at first as seen as attractive and sometimes even the only thing bringing the couple together. In these kinds of situations, the couple seems to think that because of their love, all the problems will be solved, but as the couple moves in together, they start to experience the real problems that culture and language differences cause. This did not, however, seem to be relevant in the present study. All the couples seemed to be aware of the complexity of intercultural relationships. The couples were familiar with how to make a long-distance relationship work and showed traits of good time management and planning. The couples who did not live together had to make time for travelling and meeting each other while living their daily life with their duties such as studying or work. The Finnish-Dutch couple mentioned that they call each other every morning to make their relationship seem more normal, which shows that the couple was ready to invest time on each other, even when they were busy.

To conclude the findings, it seems that the couples have many similarities in their communication and thus similar communication issues and problem-solving methods can be identified. Even though the couples seemed to have communication problems caused by the use of ELF, it was clear that the communication issues were mainly caused because of differences of characteristics, which are infused or might be infused by their own cultures. Even though the couples were relatively new couples, they seemed to have arranged their communication in creative ways so that they did not express huge problems with ELF use. For these couples,

English is an important tool that allowed them to meet and to communicate with each other. Thus, even though the couples experienced multiple communication issues, English was seen more as an advantage than disadvantage. Finally, the feedback that the Finnish-Nepali couple gave in the end of the interview emphasizes the importance of this kind of research and shows that the couples are interested to gain more understanding of intercultural couple communication.

N: I think it's a good topic and it might help like for the foreigners-

F3: To understand-

N: To understand how the language barriers can affect the - like in a relation and with the parents and like [unintelligible] the common future.

F3: Yeah, it's a - I'm interested to talk - read the research. What you like figure out because there's also like other couples. Like is there like similar cases.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to find out possible communication issues that intercultural couples face when they use English as their shared lingua franca and how they solve these issues. The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and in total three intercultural couples were interviewed. The couples had all been together for less than two years.

The first research question intended to explore what kind of communication problems intercultural couples who use ELF as their shared language encounter. The main communication problems that the interviewed couples had were the pronunciation differences, having a different understanding of something, limited English abilities, influence of their native language on English, in other words language difference, and not being able to communicate with partner's parents and problems when something got lost in translation. Two out of three couples, the Finnish-French couple and the Finnish-Nepali couple expressed differences in their English abilities and thus experienced that their English language abilities are not equal. Communicative competence thus affected the couples' communication and made their communication more prone to misunderstandings. The same two couples noted issues relating to language differences, which were noticed when one member of the couple tried to translate something from their language directly into English, or when the speech had characteristics from their native language. The Finnish-Dutch couple did not express these issues since they thought that their English language levels are equal.

The similarities were that all the couples hoped that their partner would speak the other one's native language so that they could communicate with their extended family, and especially parents who did not seem to have competence in English. Also, all the couples expressed that using English together might cause them misunderstandings and issues in pronunciation and having a different understanding of something, such as a definition of a word. All the couples also experienced problems in means of trying to explain something such as a joke that did not sound the same when translated into English. Nowicka (2008) calls the phenomenon "lost in translation" which refers to something that changes meaning or becomes senseless in the process of translation.

The second research question aimed to explore what kind of problem-solving methods intercultural couples use. Things that the couples did to understand each other were explaining,

repetition, using more simple words and structures, making sure they both understood, being understanding, being flexible, using multiple languages, pointing out things, Google Translate, sending a picture during the phone call, letting the situation to calm down and going back to the same topic later. The Finnish-Dutch and the Finnish-French couples were in long-distance relationship, so they also mentioned that when they are away from each other they might send a picture because they are not able to point out things when they were on a call. The couples stated that they always make sure that they understand each other at the end. It became clear that the couples encounter issues when using ELF, but it did not seem to be something that they actively pay attention to. The couples themselves did not view the use of English as something that would negatively affect their communication.

The results support previous knowledge of intercultural couples and support the fact that every single intercultural couple is different and unique in means of their communication habits. Even though there were many similarities, there cannot be generalizations of intercultural couples that would cover every couple because there are countless unique mixes of intercultural couples. The interviewees of the present study showed a lot of similarities in means of communication, but there were also differences that were mainly caused by their own personal differences and mostly also their varying knowledge of English, or differences in their communicative competence.

The notion of couple tongue that both Pietikäinen (2017) and Tien (2013) have discussed, did not come out during the present study. The couples did not show signs of the invention of their own new language, couple tongue, but instead tried to understand each other with English, a little help of their own languages and non-verbal communication. It is impossible, however, to say whether these couples actually had their own couple tongue and perhaps CA, conversational analysis, would be the best way to find out these kind of features in communication, because the couples might not express such things during the interviews, which is not completely natural conversation setting. Another such feature was silence in conflict, which was not mentioned by any of the couples, but might also be a feature that could be found with CA. The suggestion for the future research would be to combine both CA, which also has been used in previous ELF research, and the couples' own thoughts and feelings to be able to draw a bigger picture of the couple's communication. It could be, however, that the couples had not invented shared couple tongue yet due to their shorter history together and thus it was not mentioned during the interviews.

The biggest limitation of the study is the number of interviewees. For future research it would be beneficial to interview more couples. Even though all-inclusive generalizations cannot be made, it would be beneficial to gain more information of how intercultural couples communicate, since it could help the couples to evolve their communication and be more understanding towards each other. Especially further focusing on the couples' own views could be fruitful. Furthermore, the present study focused on newer couples so it would be interesting to interview the same couples again after some time to see whether their communication has changed to see if some patterns of the intercultural couple communication at different levels of the relationship could be drawn. The results of this study and the future research would not be only beneficial for the other couples, but also to health experts such as psychologists (Tien 2013) and all the people who wish to gain more knowledge and understanding of the communication with people who come from different nationalities and cultures.

The study showed that the research field of intercultural couples' communication is a complex and evolving area. As the number of intercultural couples and multicultural families grow, it will be interesting to see how this study area evolves, and how intercultural couples will be seen in the future, since as previously mentioned, multicultural families are nowadays seen as the families of the future. When intercultural couples and families become more and more the norm, the boundaries between intercultural and intracultural slowly disappear. Thus, for future research, it will be fascinating to see how all communication slowly moves towards interculturality.

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