

From Intercultural to Transcultural Communication: ELF in Multilingual Settings

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Abstract The study centres around the idea that English is a global lingua franca for intercultural communication between multilingual speakers. Drawing on relevant literature in the field, the paper will highlight the intercultural and transcultural nature of English used as a multilingua franca (EMF). An online link to a questionnaire was emailed to all participants and was used as a research tool to collect quantitative data. What is suggested is that language teaching practices should incorporate intercultural/transcultural oriented issues to provide learners with a more comprehensive knowledge of the multifaceted global English world and encourage a richer cultural and linguistic experience.

Keywords Intercultural communication. Language and culture. Global Englishes. EMF/ELF. Learners' attitudes.

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1 Introduction

The paper will highlight that using English in multilingual contexts is a social practice which depends on the interplay of different variables, and is subject to adaptation, negotiation, and change (Pennycook 2007; Risager 2006; 2007). Intercultural communication through ELF entails linguistic encounters which are not fixed and static, but rather are dynamically created and recreated through fluid and flexible interactions (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 251). According to some ELF researchers, English as a lingua franca (ELF) can be defined as a ‘multilingua franca’ (EMF) (Jenkins 2015b; Cogo 2018; Ishikawa 2017), a term which highlights the role of multilingual resources and repertoires which emerge when English is used in global communication. In this context, the notion of translanguaging is particularly relevant to describe the role English plays as a EMF, “a dynamic process whereby multilingual language users mediate complex social and cognitive activities through strategic and creative employment of multiple semiotic resources” (Li 2016, 21). What English as a EMF challenges is the well-known belief that languages and cultures are fixed entities, “neatly separated into named categories” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 251). On the contrary, EMF entails a broader perspective where cultural borders, boundaries and categories lose their prominence, become fuzzy, blurred, and are transcended into new meaning-making processes which are simultaneously developed across and through cultures and languages (182). Within this framework, the paper will attempt to raise awareness on the complex and dynamic nature of English, a language which is not owned by its native speakers any longer and that cannot be viewed as one fixed entity with well-defined borders. Therefore, it was decided to explore learners’ beliefs with the purpose to stimulate critical reflection as far as the intercultural/transcultural nature of English is concerned (Baker, Ishikawa 2021) and consequently approach a broader representation of English within second language teaching practices.

Firstly, the paper will highlight relevant theories in the field, in particular the shift from cross-cultural to intercultural communication theories, moving forward to the concept of transcultural communication which is likely to embrace global communication in the multifaceted English-speaking world. Secondly, the paper will focus on learners’ attitudes towards culture and language, culture and intercultural communication as well as the aspects which are believed to facilitate or hinder communication in ELF/EMF contexts. Two different groups of participants were surveyed, Group 1 and Group 2. Group 1 is composed of international students belonging to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, studying at the University of Calabria (South of Italy), where Italian is the main language of academic instruction and possibly one lingua franca along with English.

The second group includes American and Canadian university students living and studying in English speaking contexts where English is likely to be the main lingua franca for intercultural communication. Similarities or differences between the two groups will be examined and pedagogical considerations raised.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 From Cross-cultural to Transcultural Communication Theories

The theoretical framework of the study centres around the idea that “languages and cultures are variable, negotiable, and constructed in interaction. They are not fixed, established and static” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 82). Nonetheless, culture is a complex phenomenon that cannot be easily and clearly defined. One approach views culture as a “system of shared products, symbols, discourses, practices, ideologies among groups of people” (181). These people, products, symbols, discourses, practices and ideologies which constitute culture are not fixed, but rather are in a constant process of change with no clear boundaries between them. Just like culture is considered as a process, intercultural communication can similarly be described as a “social practice in motion” (82). While cross-cultural communication theories (see Hofstede 2001) focused on cultures as separable entities, intercultural communication theories explore cultures as fluid and dynamic entities with blurred boundaries. On the one hand, cross-cultural communication research investigates culture at the level of geographical boundaries and makes generalization about cultural groups in which individual differences within cultures are not seen as relevant. On the other hand, the intercultural communication research which will inform the present study, emphasizes the relevance of cultural and linguistic differences, of cultural identities constructed and negotiated in interaction (Baker 2015; Zhu 2014; 2019).

A recently emerging approach to understand Intercultural communication is Transcultural communication. This approach is based on the concept of transcultural and transnational flows (Risager 2006; Pennycook 2007) which describe the relation between culture and language as a complex system of fluid and dynamic networks which open up new and diverse cultural spaces (Risager 2006; 2012; 2020). The notion of transnational and transcultural flows was already used by post-colonial scholars who introduced the term ‘contact zones’ to define “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clashes and grapple with each other” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 185). Specifically, transcultural communication questions the ‘inter’ suffix of intercultural communication. While intercultural communication emphasizes how participants

interact in between cultures, the ‘trans’ prefix in transcultural communication theories expands the previous concept and brings intercultural communication to a further level. In other words, it focuses on how participants move “through and across” cultures and languages, transforming and transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries in the process (Baker, Sangiamchit 2019). What Transcultural communication scholars argue is that it is not often clear which cultures participants are in between. In transcultural communication, “cultural and linguistic borders become blurred, transgressed, transcended [...] the complexity and fluidity of cultural and linguistic practices becomes the starting point for investigation” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 183).

This perspective draws on the concept of translanguaging, which highlights how participants in interaction “go beyond narrowly defined linguistic cues and transcend culturally defined language boundaries to achieve effective communication” (Li 2018, 24-5). Therefore, transcultural communication goes beyond well-established languages and cultures and makes use of a variety of plurilingual resources that participants bring in and use simultaneously to achieve effective meaning-making. Although there are a number of IC theories which do not consider culture as fluid and dynamic, the theoretical approach that will inform the present study will exclusively focus on the aforementioned line of research. Therefore, drawing on current theories related to global English and intercultural/transcultural communication may help better understand how ELF functions in multilingual scenarios where links between English and other languages are fluid and dynamic.

3 The Study

3.1 Research Design and Objective

It was decided to explore learners’ points of view, with the objective being to identify to what extent they are aware of the intercultural nature of English alongside the relation between culture and language.

To highlight the central place English, as a global lingua franca, holds within multilingual contexts, the term EMF (Jenkins 2015b) will be used to refer to ELF. Taking an EMF perspective into consideration, two groups of participants from two different contexts were selected and examined. In the first group, learners belong to a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The hypothesis is that they are likely to experience English in multilingual communication, “in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (73). In these contexts, multilingual repertoires and resources are emergent, and may combine with non-English resources in a translanguaging process which contributes to create

dynamic, multiple and fluid communicative encounters (63). Learners from Group 1 are likely to experience EMF communication but English is not the main medium of academic instruction in this particular setting, moreover, English is one lingua franca along with Italian. The second group, on the contrary, includes a student population which is composed mainly of native English/American native speakers. Nonetheless, the hypothesis is that they are likely to experience the diversity of English in EMF contexts. American and Canadian universities are known to be multicultural environments (Jenkins 2015a), where students are exposed to a variety of cultural backgrounds, with linguistic repertoires moving across boundaries. In these contexts, English can be considered a multilingua franca for intercultural communication, and therefore, for this target group, English is likely to be the main medium of intercultural communication. The research questions the study will attempt to investigate are the following:

1. What attitudes do learners display towards the relation between culture and language and the factors affecting intercultural communication in ELF/EMF settings?
2. To what extent are learners aware that English has evolved and diversified in multilingual contexts where English is used as a lingua franca?
3. Might higher exposure to English in multilingual settings contribute to learners' positive attitudes towards the issues above?

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Participants and Settings

The study investigates two groups of participants.¹ Group 1 includes 168 students, they are all international students from different first language backgrounds, enrolled for the year 2020-21 at the University of Calabria (Italy) in different degree courses. Among them, 15 stated to be native English speakers, while the majority, 153 students stated to be non-native speakers of English. The second group is composed of 58 respondents. Participants were studying for the year 2021 at Chicago Loyola University (USA), Modern Languages and Literatures department, minoring in Italian American Studies, and at Alberta University (Canada), Social Studies Department. Out of 58 students who responded, 18 stated to be non-native English speakers and 40 native English speakers (British/American).

1 The present paper draws on a previous study (De Bartolo 2021) in terms of the set of data employed and the questionnaire items, which however have been further examined by using a different data analysis.

3.2.2 Data Collection

To examine students' attitudes, a quantitative design was employed. An online questionnaire was designed and administered to the participants via email. The questionnaire was based on a study by Baker (2015) and adapted from his case study in Thailand. It was anonymous, and it clearly stated that students' anonymity was going to be strictly kept.

The questionnaire includes three sections. The first section provides general background information which meant to identify whether respondents were native or non-native English speakers and which variety of English they used (Native variety, e.g. British/American English or Non-native-variety, e.g. Indian, Singapore, Caribbean, African, Malaysian, etc.). If they specified to be non-native speakers of English, they were asked to write down how long they had studied English for.

The second section of the questionnaire consists of nine items aimed at investigating students' attitudes towards the relation between language and culture (items 1-2); whether or not culture and language are viewed within clear-cut geographical/national borders (items 3-5); to what extent English used in multicultural settings (EMF) may facilitate communication and richer cultural encounters (items 6-7); whether or not understanding different cultures may impact on successful intercultural communication (items 8-9).

A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, was used to express participants' beliefs about the 9 statements below.

1. Culture and language are closely linked.
2. Language is culture.
3. A language represents a specific culture with its world views, values and beliefs.
4. The English language is linked to English culture only.
5. Culture and specific languages can be separated (for example, the English language can be separated from British culture).
6. In multicultural settings, negotiation strategies (confirmation checks, clarification requests, paraphrasing, repetitions, code-mixing and so on), contribute to achieving effective communication in English.
7. English used in multicultural settings enables speakers to share their different cultures.
8. In order to communicate effectively, it is important to understand the influence of culture on communication.
9. In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to know the culture of the people you are communicating with.
10. The third and final section of the survey includes 6 items which specifically address some factors related to intercultur-

al communication through English. Learners were required to express their level of agreement/disagreement with the statements 10-15 on a scale from 1 to 5 as above. The purpose was to explore whether or not, based on the participants' beliefs, these factors may facilitate intercultural communication in English. Although English has changed to fit new communicative functions and purposes and it is largely used as a 'multilingua franca', the idea that standard native English contributes to successful communication may still be prevalent for a number of respondents.

11. Knowing about the way other non-native English speakers use English.
12. Knowing about the culture of the non-native English speakers you are communicating with.
13. Knowing about the culture of native English-speaking countries.
14. Having a native-like pronunciation.
15. Using correct native-like grammar.
16. Knowing about the relationship between language and culture.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS version 27. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was used to examine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. In particular, Cronbach's Alpha statistics with item deletion was employed. This analysis has led to exclude Question 5, therefore resulting in a better internal consistency for both sample groups (alpha 0,75 and 0,81). From the statistical measure, alpha resulted above 0,7 and this supports a reasonable internal consistency (Bland, Altman 1997). The analysis has therefore been conducted on the remaining 14 questions.

In the first part of the study descriptive statistics were calculated, however they are not included in the analysis for reasons of word limit (see De Bartolo 2021 for details related to this part of the analysis). Secondly, students' responses were extracted into cross-tables 2×2 and possible associations were searched between each of the 14 variables and the degree of agreement/disagreement with each of the questions. Therefore, it was decided to apply those tests generally employed with categorical data (Chi-square and Q of Yule) (Rajaretman 2016; Bohrnstedt, Knoke 1994). As concerns the 14 questions, scores (1 to 5) were reduced to two categories: 1 = 1-2-3 ('strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree') and 2 = 4-5 ('agree and strongly agree'). It was possible to create 14 cross tabs 2×2 and two tests were performed: Chi-square test (Bohrnstedt, Knoke 1994), with the objective to identify whether students' degree of agreement with questions 1-14 was associated significantly with responses from

both groups, and the Q of Yule Index (Bohrnstedt, Knoke 1994), to identify the strength and the direction of covariation (if any) between responses and groups. The model for contingency tables used for the 14 cross-tabs is:

		Variable X		Total
		1	2	
Variable Y	2	a	b	a+b
	1	c	d	c+d
Total		a+c	b+d	a+b+c+d

Figure 1 Contingency table model

Where 1 and 2 indicate respectively the lower and upper classes of variable Y (in our case, number 1 indicates students' opinions on the disagreement scale and number 2 opinions on the agreement scale). The numbers 1 and 2 of variable X indicate respectively Group 1 and Group 2. The Q of Yule Index is based on the difference between crossed products in the 2x2 tabs, in other words, $Q = (bc-ad)/(bc+ad)$ and was applied to identify a possible association strength. The Q value vary between -1 and $+1$. A positive value indicates a direct relationship, which means that the lower classes and the upper classes are associated with their corresponding ones, a $Q=0$ indicates that there is no relationship between the dichotomies, a negative value of Q indicates an inverse relationship, this means that the upper class of a variable is associated with the lower class of the other variable.²

3.2.4 Results and Discussion

The analysis has attempted to gain insights as far as students' attitudes are concerned, with the purpose to identify which group manifests higher level of agreement towards the issues identified in the research questions. The Chi-square test, firstly, and the Q of Yule Index secondly, were applied to the data to find associations with re-

² The degree of association is measured on the basis of the following table (see Bohrnedt, Knoke 1994).

sponses from both Group 1 and Group 2.

The results section will discuss only those cases where some kind of association, either with the Chi-square test or with the Q of Yule Index, were observed [tab. 1].

Table 1 Chi-square and Q of Yule tests for relevant cross-tabs in the study

Cross Tabs	Chi-Square	Significance level	Q of Yule	Degree of Association
Q1	5,174	p less than 0,05 Reject H ₀	0,473	Weak direct Association
Q3	3,893	p less than 0,05 Reject H ₀	- 0,295	Weak inverse Association
Q4	4,227	p less than 0,05 Reject H ₀	- 0,617	Moderate inverse Association
Q7	10,659	p less than 0,01 Reject H ₀	- 0,488	Weak inverse Association
Q9	3,626	p less than 0,10 Accept H ₀	0,304	Weak direct Association
Q10	14,034	p less than 0,001 Reject H ₀	0,570	Moderate direct Association
Q11	5,495	p less than 0,02 Reject H ₀	0,394	Weak direct Association
Q14	4,171	p less than 0,05 Reject H ₀	- 0,302	Weak direct Association
Absolute Value of Q	0,00-0,24	0,25-0,49	0,50-0,74	0,75-1,00
Degree of Association	No Association	Weak Association	Moderate Association	Strong Association

From the Chi-square analysis, it was possible to identify a statistically significant level ($p < 0,05$) in 7 cases (Q1, 3, 4, 7, 10, 11, 14). Therefore, in these cases the differences between the two groups are statistically significant and we reject the null hypothesis. In all other cases, the null hypothesis is accepted and this means that there is no statistically significant relation between how students responded and the questions investigated. Moreover, when conducting further analysis with Q of Yule Index, it is revealed that when we have a direct association Group 2 agrees more with the statements, on the contrary, an inverse association reveals that Group 1 agrees more. Question 1, 'Culture and language are closely linked', presents a weak direct association with $Q = 0,473$ and this means that students from Group 2 agree more with the statement compared to Group 1 students who have given lower scores. On the contrary, as far as Question 3 is concerned, 'A language represents a specific culture with its world views, values and beliefs', the analysis shows an inverse weak association with $Q = -0,295$, meaning that in this case, the first group man-

ifests more positive attitudes towards the statement by giving higher scores. Similarly, in Question 4, 'The English language is linked to English culture only', we identify an inverse association with a moderate strength, $Q = -0,617$ and this seems to confirm that students from Group 1 are likely to agree more with the statement compared to Group 2 students who give lower scores. Question 7, 'English used in multicultural settings enables speakers to share their different cultures' also shows an inverse association, though weak, $Q = -0,488$, which suggests that the group who agrees more with the statement is Group 1. Question 9, 'In order to communicate effectively, it is necessary to know the culture of the people you are communicating with', on the contrary, presents a direct weak association, $Q = 0,304$, which suggests that Group 2 students are likely to agree more with the statement compared to Group 1 students.

Though the analysis doesn't aim to draw any definitive conclusions being still partial at the present stage, it can suggest overall that Group 2 students show more positive attitudes towards the relationship between language and culture and seem to be more aware of the need to know the culture of the people you are communicating with to achieve effective communication. The analysis seems to reveal that students from Group 2 may have more direct contact with multilingual speakers from different L1s and therefore may experiment more the use of EMF. Conversely, Group 1 students appear to be more aware that English used in multicultural settings enables speakers to share their different cultures. However, for Group 1 students, languages and cultures are likely to be seen as fixed entities, bounded objects with precise and clear boundaries which are limited to national languages and cultures, as Question 3 specifically highlights. They may not be fully aware that English has transcended boundaries and moved across and through different cultures and languages. As far as this aspect, Group 2 may be more willing to accept the fluidity and diversity of EMF in which people's repertoires are mixed, modified and re-created during interactions. Group 2 students do not seem to agree with the idea that languages reflect well-defined cultures with specific cultural identities and beliefs, rather, they may be more inclined to acknowledge the complexity and richness of different cultures which are not necessarily associated to national cultures and languages.

These points are reinforced when we consider those statements which specifically address the factors facilitating intercultural communication. We can observe that Question 10, 'Knowing about the way other non-native English speakers use English', and Question 11, 'Knowing about the culture of the non-native English speakers you are communicating', both present a direct association, with moderate strength for Q10 ($Q = 0,570$), and weak strength for Q11 ($Q = 0,394$). These results reveal that Group 2 students manifest more positive

attitudes towards these statements in terms of agreement compared to Group 1 students. Finally, Question 14, *Using correct native-like grammar*, presents a weak inverse association with $Q=-0,302$ and this shows that students from Group 1 seem to agree more with the statement as they give higher scores. This analysis seems to confirm the hypothesis that Group 2 students, being immersed in American/Canadian environments where English is the main medium of intercultural communication, are likely to have more direct experience of English used among multilingual speakers who share a variety of repertoires in interaction. Therefore, they may be more willing to acknowledge that English used in multicultural/multilingual contexts can facilitate intercultural/transcultural communication. On the contrary, Group 1 students seem to be more attached to a notion of languages and cultures which is restricted to clear-cut categories such as native/non-native, standard/non-standard as well as national languages and cultures. They seem to prioritize native speaker pronunciation and correct native-like grammar to achieve effective communication. As it is raised in the research questions, those learners who may be more exposed to English in multilingual contexts are the ones more likely to manifest higher awareness of the diversity of English, of the fluidity of intercultural communication among multilingual speakers.

On the contrary, Group 1 students, though belonging to different linguistic backgrounds, do not seem to fully experience English in its diversity, possibly because Italian is a prominent lingua franca in that context.

The study, by comparing groups across two different settings has meant to spur reflections on the factors which facilitate intercultural communication, and the role culture may play on successful understanding and communication in ELF multilingual contexts. Specifically, it has suggested that regardless of students' linguistic background and native language, their knowledge and attitude towards culture and intercultural communication may be affected by the surrounding cultural and linguistic context they are exposed to. In terms of pedagogical considerations, the study aims to encourage learners to move beyond fixed categorizations and focus on the intercultural and transcultural nature of global English communication with its diversity, complexity and richness. As Baker and Ishikawa (2021) highlight, English is only one of a number of global languages in a multilingual world, yet it is the most widely used lingua franca across different domains and people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, learners need to come to terms with this multifaceted global English world and be adequately prepared to engage with it through appropriate learning materials and classroom practices.

3.2.5 Limitations of the Study

The study has many limitations. Firstly, the analysis has relied on statistical procedures exclusively and for a number of reasons, one being the pandemic, it wasn't possible to integrate the quantitative approach with a qualitative design, such as face to face interviews, as originally planned. Therefore, the analysis and findings are partial and tentative in some respects and do not aim to be comprehensive. A follow-up of the study will aim to expand the questionnaire with a larger number of items aimed at addressing, specifically, the extent to which learners are familiar with English in multilingual settings and engage with ELF/EMF communication. Secondly, the study will involve and compare a higher number of groups across a wider range of cultural and linguistic settings in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues investigated.

4 Pedagogical Considerations

In the light of the previous discussion, the study suggests incorporating an intercultural/transcultural communication approach into classroom materials.

The intercultural dimension in actual teaching practices and materials is often neglected or marginalised. Studies have revealed a superficial and stereotyped representation of culture and intercultural communication in teaching materials with a central focus on linguistic features of communication and on the representation of a world which is typically “white, middle-class, male and monolingual” (Jin, Cortazzi 1998; Vettorel 2010; 2018; Baker 2015; Rose, Galloway 2019). It is therefore essential that intercultural-oriented pedagogies become a core part of educational practices to prepare learners for the use of English for intercultural and transcultural communication. Byram (1997, 2008) suggests an Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) approach, which may help students develop an understanding of the complex relationship between culture and language. Learners need to be aware that cultural practices are not necessarily associated to specific cultures with well-defined values and beliefs, as the paper has attempted to emphasize. Moreover, it is necessary to expand learners' perspective towards an understanding of Intercultural communication as a process which moves through and across named languages and cultures, where language boundaries are “transgressed” and “transcended” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021), and intercultural communication in English is co-constructed through a number of linguistic repertoires. Besides knowledge of intercultural communication, students need to develop those skills and strategies employed in intercultural interaction, such as accommodation

strategies: repetition, confirmation checks, clarification requests, re-statements, understanding checks, self-repair, turn-taking, simultaneous speech, utterance completions, code-switching, creative use of shared resources, such as idioms, translanguaging, pre-realizations, post-trouble source strategies (Cogo, Dewey 2006; 2012). If learners acquire awareness of the process of intercultural and transcultural communication, they may better negotiate the different linguistic and cultural practices they experience in communicative encounters. As Canagarajah (2013, 174) emphasizes, “Competence isn’t constituted of the *what*, but of the *how* of communication.” Moreover, embracing an intercultural-oriented teaching approach is likely to encourage learners to develop “positive attitudes to difference, motivation to engage with others, and the ability to de-centre and relativize one’s own beliefs and practices” (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 295).

Ultimately, the goal of intercultural teaching should be to develop a critical approach to language, culture and intercultural interaction in which learners and teachers are engaged in critical reflection and examine the complexity of the relation between culture and language. “Learners are expected to actively engage in intercultural communication and transform themselves in the process”» (297). Therefore, their acquired awareness may be finally translated into knowledge, action, and active engagement (Liddicoat, Scarino 2013, 28-9).

In other words, a revised teaching approach which incorporates a perspective on language, culture and intercultural/transcultural communication should:

include Intercultural communicative competence and awareness, pragmatic competence, and positive attitudes to difference and ‘others’; remove the native speaker as a model and goal and replace it with the intercultural speaker; focus on processes of communication, not on linguistic products; develop a critical approach to language, culture and identity that challenges dominant established discourse; highlight the importance of local contexts and cultures; recognise the global role of English as a *multilingua franca* and develop EMF awareness. (Baker, Ishikawa 2021, 298)

The study has attempted to raise awareness of the evolving nature and complexity of English in multilingual settings, in order to explore the dynamic processes which take place when learners from different backgrounds interact in contexts where English is the language for intercultural communication. Further studies and in-depth examination into learners’ needs and perceptions are therefore necessary, along with a fuller integration of intercultural/transcultural communication issues and activities within teaching materials.

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