



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR  
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

# WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU USE ENGLISH AT WORK? A STUDY OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA IN MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS IN CHINA

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Uppsats/Examensarbete:	15 hp
Program och/eller kurs:	SIK240
Nivå:	Avancerad nivå
Termin/år:	Vt/2022
Handledare:	Asha Tickoo
Examinator:	Gunnar Bergh
Rapport nr:	xx (ifylles ej av studenten/studenterna)

# Abstract

**Title:** *What Changes When You Use English at Work? A Study of English as a Lingua Franca in Multinational Corporations in China*

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**Abstract:** This study investigated when Chinese business professionals use English as a lingua franca to communicate in the workplace, what changes, and why and how the changes happen. 14 respondents who had Chinese as L1 and English as at least one of their working languages participated in the open-ended questions survey. Qualitative approach was employed to analyse the data. The results showed that compared to use L1 to communicate at work, using English brought changes in terms of language proficiency (including vocabulary level, syntax level and other), language politeness, interculturality and linguistic relativity.

**Keywords:** English as a lingua franca, ELF, intercultural communication, workplace, multinational corporations, MNCs, China

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# 1. Introduction

As a result of globalization, more and more multinational corporations (MNCs) have branches around the globe. With China's expanding collaboration with the rest of the world, multinational companies have been arriving in droves during the past 20 years (Guo & Gallo 2017: 5). After introducing its economic open-door policy, China emerged as an attractive location for multinational companies, and in 2014 became the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Chen et al. 2021: 1).

English is the official working language in almost every MNC branch office, regardless of the first language of the employees. Likewise, in China English has been used as a lingua franca in almost all workplace communications in multinational firms. Even among Chinese colleagues, the formal working language is English too. Linguistically, Chinese and English differ greatly. For example, in terms of language family, English is one of the Indo-European languages while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family; in terms of writing system, English is alphabetic writing system, and Chinese is logographic writing system. Those features of the two languages have already been extensively studied by linguists.

Over time, cross-disciplinary studies of languages begin to emerge. It has been argued that studies of the social life of language are often too "language-centered". Any investigation of language that considers only language will be deficient, and inappropriate limitations and restrictions can cripple insights (Edwards 2009: 1). There has been growth interest in studying languages' differences from an intercultural point of view and the main discussions focus on the fields like foreign language acquisition and teaching, immigrations, multiculturalism, etc. However, a limited number of studies explored how Chinese professionals feel about using English as a lingua franca at work from an intercultural perspective.

Considering the growth of international business in China and the fact that English has become a lingua franca in MNCs, the cross-disciplinary study of workplace communication in English is worth exploring. The aim of this paper is to understand in multinational corporations in China, how do Chinese professionals feel about using English as a lingua franca to communicate, and how that differs from using Chinese. The data was collected via open-questions survey and 14 respondents participated. All the respondents are native

Chinese speakers and are currently working or have worked in multinational companies. Qualitative approach is employed in this study.

This article is structured as following sections: 1) introduction; 2) theoretical frameworks and the previous studies, where the following concepts will be discussed: workplace communication, interculturality (i.e., intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural identity, high vs. low context, language politeness, etc.), and linguistic relativity; 3) aim and method of current study; 4) findings and discussion of the data; and 5) conclusion.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

There has been a growing interest in English as a lingua franca in the workplace as a consequence of economic globalization. English is employed as the official working language in almost every multinational company. No matter how different background the employees have (i.e., first languages, cultures, education levels, social identities, etc.), they all use English to communicate at work. As a result, intercultural communication becomes increasingly popular among scholars from different disciplines.

Conventionally, intercultural communication studies refer to studies of both interactions between people of different cultures and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures (which used to be referred to as cross-cultural communication) (Zhu 2019: 1). The study of intercultural communication extends beyond linguistics and encompasses a wide range of perspectives. A number of research examine this phenomenon via a cross-disciplinary approach. For example, besides of the language proficiency, scholars have also analyzed individuals' performance in intercultural communication in terms of intercultural awareness, intercultural adaptation, and intercultural competence in various contexts.

#### 2.1.1 Workplace and workplace communication

From multinational corporations to family-owned shops, from language classrooms to outdoor markets, the workplace is fundamental to socialization (Ladegaard & Jenks 2015: 2). As Martin and Nakayama (2015: 14-15) argued:

Business experts and scholars agree that the twenty-first century workplace, regardless of location, is somewhat different from the work contexts of even 25 years ago as a result of (1) economic globalization (Akram, Fahim, Bin Dost, & Abdullah, 2011), (2) shifting demographic patterns (Karoly & Panis, 2004), and (3) the rapid pace of technological change. Economic globalization affects industries worldwide and segments of the workforce insulated from trade-related competition in the past.

The reason why the workplace is chosen as the study site here is that, compared to day-to-day communication, workplace communication is more demanding. In daily life communication, for example, most communications are informal and casual. It is not necessary for individuals to possess or master too advanced professional communication skills. Also, there are less variables affecting the communication results. The workplace,

however, requires more consideration when it comes to communication. For example, individuals might need to manage difficult workplace conversations involving topics that are “sensitive” or hard to talk about which often because they involve the transmission or receipt of “bad news” (Bradley & Campbell 2016: 443); well-managed workplace communication may promote well-mental health status among workers (Orui & Yasumura 2019: 471). It is not easy to improve one’s business communication skills. However, widely circulated studies and reports regularly confirm that communication skills are a priority for employers (Coffelt et al. 2019: 418).

Secondly, it is difficult to communicate at work in a foreign language. Someone may be very good at business communication with counterparts who share the same L1 and cultural background with him / her. The person may, however, fail once he / she tries to use a L2 to communicate interculturally.

### **2.1.2 Intra-cultural communication and inter-cultural communication**

First of all, we need to define what is “culture”. According to Bates and Plog (1980: 6), culture is a system of shared beliefs, norms, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another.

Theoretically, human verbal communication can be considered a process with two extreme ends: intracultural end and intercultural end (Kecskes 2015: 171). According to Kecskes (2015: 175), intracultural communication occurs in interactions between members of a relatively definable L1 speech community following conventions of language and conventions of usage with individual choices and preferences. Intercultural communication refers to interactions between speakers who have different first languages, communicate in a common language, and, usually, represent different cultures. According to Sitaram and Cogdell (1976: 28), intracultural communication is the type of communication that takes place between members of the same dominant culture, but with slightly different values. Intercultural communication, on the other hand, is the communication between two or more distinct cultures.

However, some scholars hold different perspectives on intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication. For example, as Kecskes (2015: 172) mentioned, there is no single language, culture, or communicative style. What we have is language, culture, and communicative style

instantiated in several group and individual varieties. Interlocutors have a repertoire of varieties of styles and a combination of styles which are deployed according to communicative needs in changing contexts.

### **2.1.3 Interculturality**

#### **2.1.3.1 Intercultural Competence (IC), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), and Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)**

Scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (sociolinguistics, language education, communication, business, etc.) have investigated and promoted the notion of competence in intercultural interaction for many years (Martin & Nakayama 2015: 13). To move into a detailed discussion, it is necessary to distinguish two conceptions: intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

According to Zhu (2019: 161), IC is the ability to interact in one's own language with people from another culture and does not necessarily require knowledge of the target language. Byram (1997: 48-53) proposed intercultural competence (IC) which consists of the following sub-components:

- Attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.
- Knowledge (*savoirs*): knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*): ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own culture.
- Skills of discovering and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*): ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- Critical cultural awareness/political education (*savoir s'engager*): ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria the perspectives, practices and products of one's own and other cultures and countries.

As for intercultural communicative competence (ICC), it is the ability to interact with people from another culture in a foreign language (Zhu 2019: 162). Byram (1997) considered ICC as the ability to understand and gain an inside view of other people's culture while at the same time help other people understand one's own culture from an insider's point of view.



ICC requires certain attitudes, knowledge and skills in addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences.

In order to have a better understanding of the relationship between IC and ICC, the ICC model (Figure 1) from Byram (1997: 73) is employed. It clearly illustrates the relationship between intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence: IC is one of the elements under ICC.

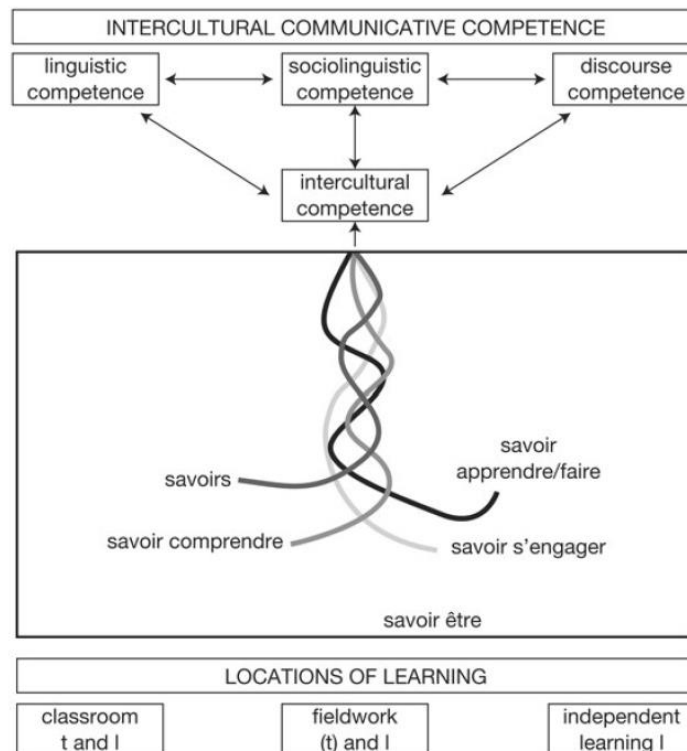


Figure 1: Byram's ICC model (Byram 1997: 73)

Lastly, intercultural sensitivity (IS) is a key to development of ICC (Alaei & Nosrati 2018: 75). Because greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence (Hammer et al. 2003: 422).

As intercultural sensitivity is mentioned, it would be impossible to avoid the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennett (1986, 1993). DMIS is a framework to explain the six stages of people's reaction to cultural difference. Bennett observed intercultural adaptation and identified six orientations that people seem to move through in their acquisition of intercultural competence (Hammer et al. 2003: 423).

The first three stages are under ethnocentrism. That means these stages are more ethnocentric. One's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way in those stages. And the last three stages are defined as more ethnorelative, meaning one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures (Hammer et al. 2003: 424).

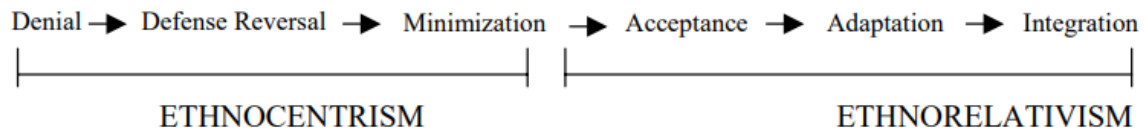


Figure 2: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Hammer et al. 2003: 424)

Each stage was explained by Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003: 424) as follows:

1) Denial: one's own culture is experienced as the only real one. Cultural difference is either not experienced at all, or as “foreigner” or “immigrant.” People with a Denial worldview generally are disinterested in cultural difference, although they may act aggressively to eliminate a difference.

2) Defense: one's own culture is experienced as the only viable one. Cultural differences are more “real” than the first state. But the Defense worldview here can only make cultural differences experienced stereotypical. The world is organized into “us” and “them,” with one's own culture superior and others’ inferior.

3) Minimization: elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal. People at Minimization expect similarities, and they may become insistent about correcting others’ behavior to match their expectations.

4) Acceptance: one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. People with this worldview are able to experience others as different from themselves, but equally human and can construct culture-general categories.

5) Adaptation: the experience of another culture yields perception and behavior appropriate to that culture. One's worldview is expanded to include relevant constructs from other cultural worldviews. People at Adaptation can engage in empathy—the ability to take perspective or shift frame of reference vis-à-vis other cultures.

6) Integration: one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. Integration is not necessarily better than Adaptation in situations demanding intercultural competence.

### **2.1.3.2 Identity and Intercultural Identity**

Identity can be explored via analyzing language, i.e., discourse and narratives. For example, De Fina (2000: 132) investigated identity through discourse analysis, specially looking at linguistic strategies used by undocumented immigrants to identify characters in storytelling. The perception of self-identity is always related to the perception of the identity of others (Horowitz 1975: 13). As Kroskrity (2000: 111) claimed:

Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories. Though other, non-linguistic criteria may also be significant, language and communication often provide important and sometimes crucial criteria by which members both define their group and are defined by others. Identities may be linguistically constructed both through the use of particular languages and linguistic forms (e.g., Standard English, Arizona Tewa) associated with specific national, ethnic, or other identities and through the use of communicative practices (e.g., greeting formulae, maintenance of mutual gaze, regulation of participation) that are indexed, through members' normative use, to their group. Language and communication are critical aspects of the production of a wide variety of identities expressed at many levels of social organization.

As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible to give a simple answer to the question “Who am I?”, because everyone has multiple identities co-existing in the society. Like Tracy (2002: 18-20) proposed, there are four types of identity: master, interactional, relational and personal identities which are stable, situated, social and personal respectively. As Zhu (2019: 213) summarized:

- Master identities refer to those aspects of personhood (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, nationality) which are relatively stable and do not change from situation to situation.
- Interactional identities refer to specific and situational roles people enact in a communicative context. A person can be a college student, a volunteer for Oxfam, a passenger and a mother.
- Relational identities refer to interpersonal relationships such as power difference or social distance between people involved in a given situation. They are negotiable and context specific. For example, in an appraisal meeting, there is power difference between a manager and an employee whose work-related performance is assessed. If they meet in a lift, however, the power difference is less of an issue.
- Personal identities refer to personality, attitudes and character, which are relatively stable and unique.

There are other classifications of identity proposed by other scholars, i.e., discourse, situated and transportable identities (Zimmerman 1998); imposed, assumed and negotiable

identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2003); identity as a project of the self, as a product of the social and as constituted in discourse (Benwell & Stokoe 2006), etc. In this study, the identity classifications from Tracy (2002) are employed.

In terms of intercultural identity, according to Hu and Dai (2021: 90), since the second half of the 20th century the presence of cultural diversity has been an increasing trend in the world. Scholars, such as Adler (1975), apply the concepts of “identity” and “identification” to intercultural fields. After that, scholars redefined and synthesized the concepts of intercultural identity. For example, as summarized by Hu and Dai (2021: 91), some key perspectives on intercultural identity include: multicultural man (Adler, 1985), man of in-betweenness (Yoshikawa, 1987) and individualization and universalization (Kim, 2001).

Like argued by Fernández-Agüero and Garrote (2019: 162), when communication occurs outside the individuals’ cultural group, cultural identity may lose its rigidity and significance and “lead to greater tolerance, acceptance and willingness to accommodate out-groups” (Hebrok 2011: 55). In that case, intercultural identity goes beyond the boundaries of any cultural identity and becomes “an intellectual template for a constructive and creative way of seeing and relating to oneself and others” (Kim 2015: 10). Regarding to the emergence process of intercultural identity, Kim (1998, 2001a) claimed that intercultural identity unfolds through a continuum from unconsciousness to creativity on the basis of a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Fernández-Agüero and Garrote 2019: 163).

### **2.1.3.3 High vs. Low Context**

The term “high vs. low context” was suggested by Hall (1976: 91):

A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite, i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

Zhu (2019: 104) gave examples of cultures that prefer high vs. low context communication as shown in Figure 3:

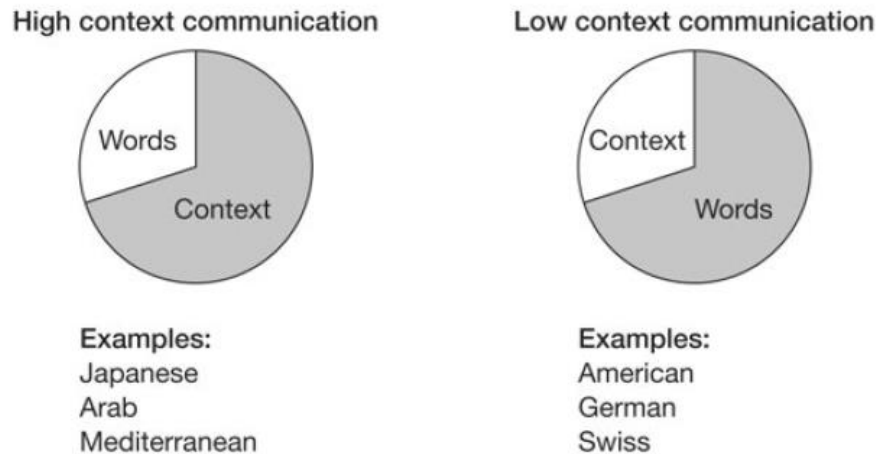


Figure 3: sources of meaning in high context and low context communication styles

In low context countries, people tend to communicate when they have something specific to say, and then they say it specifically. In high context cultures, on the other hand, there is more reliance on personal relationships than a particular event or exchange (Larsen et al. 2002: 7).

In high context cultures the drive to become closer to and get to know others is strong because more is expected of the receiver in a communication than in low context systems. High context individuals will talk around a point, and it is up to the receiver to put the pieces of context and words together. Thus, for communication to take place effectively, the receiver must have a great deal of knowledge about the sender and the sender's role and situation. Additionally, in high context cultures, there is more emphasis on building on-going, lasting relationships. Both parties in a relationship need to know and understand the other party in the relationship, requiring an on-going exchange of information among individuals. This requires frequent back-and-forth contact among participants in high context cultures, as they must be continually updated on events in others' lives (Larsen et al. 2002: 7).

#### **2.1.3.4 Language Politeness and Face**

In 1975, Searle (1975: 59-82) found that speech acts can be roughly divided into either direct or indirect ones (Zhu 2019: 108). Lakoff (1973) proposed the conception called "rules of politeness" which consists of three rules: do not impose; give options; make addressee feel good – be friendly. According to Lakoff, rules of politeness supersede "rule of being clear"

when there is a conflict between the two (Zhu 2019: 109). That is to say, if a speaker wants to maintain the politeness, he or she needs to speak in an indirect way and bear clarity loss.

Lakoff's rules of politeness was the first attempt to explain language use in terms of linguistic politeness (Zhu 2019: 109). After that, Brown and Levinson (1978) developed a politeness theory with a notion of face. They claimed that every person is assumed to possess a self-image, which is "face". Face has two dimensions: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be approved by others, and negative face means the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (Zhu 2019: 109). When a speaker feels there is a face-threatening act (FTA), he or she will select certain politeness strategies to avoid any possibility to threaten the other party's face. Below are Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness strategies (Zhu 2019: 109):

- Without redressive action, baldly (the most direct, unambiguous and concise way of putting one's intention across)
- Positive politeness (A set of strategies aimed to reduce the threat to positive face of the hearer. These include claiming common ground)
- Negative politeness (A set of strategies aimed at reducing the threat to negative face of the hearer. These include being direct; do not presume/assume; do not coerce)
- Off record (Using hints to deliberately make her intention ambiguous)
- Don't do the FTA (The speaker gives up her communicative intention when the face threat is too great)

#### **2.1.4 Linguistic relativity**

"To have a second language is to have a second soul", said Charlemagne. That probably is the earliest version of linguistic relativity (or language relativity). In the academic world, Casasanto (2016: 158) argued that the theory of linguistic relativity means that language shapes the way people think; as a result, speakers of different languages may think differently, in predictable ways. This proposal, often associated with the writings of Whorf (1956; see also von Humboldt (1988); Sapir (1929)), has generated decades of controversy among linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and anthropologists.

There are strong version and weak version of this hypothesis: linguistic determinism (language determines thought) and linguistic relativity (language influences thought).

According to Sapir, the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (Sapir 1929: 209). Whorf (1956: 272) claimed that “the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.” Also, Slobin argued that the same situation can be described in different ways, and it is evident across languages, because each language provides a limited set of options for the grammatical encoding of characterizes of objects and events (Slobin 1987: 435). Numerous empirical experiments have been conducted to prove this hypothesis, including Hopi concept of time, Eskimo dozens of words for snow, Tarahumara speakers’ failure of distinguishing blue and green, the Amazonian Pirahã people’ disability of counting, different time metaphors in English and Mandarin, etc. They all tried to prove that language shapes the way we think.

The linguistic relative theory is so controversial that all its opponents try to show that perception and cognition are not connected to language / culture. For example, Lupyan and Clark (2015: 282) claimed that “although different languages provide their speakers with different ways of talking about things (Malt et al. 2015), these differences have nothing to do with how we think about or perceive things (Gletiman & Papafragou 2005).” And Pinker thought that the linguistic relativity theory is “wrong, all wrong”, and there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers’ way of thinking (Pinker 2007: 57). However, Goddard and Wierzbicka (1995: 39) debated that, anyone with an intimate knowledge of two (or more) different languages and cultures will find it hard to take Pinker’s hyperbole seriously. It is self-evident to any bilingual that language and patterns of thought are interlinked. On the other hand, it is true that investigations of the relationship between language, culture and cognition have been greatly hindered by conceptual and methodological difficulties, not least of which is the tendency for upholders of linguistic relativity to reply on impressionist “evidence” and to resort to vague and slippery generalizations.

Though Pinker held such a strong opposite position to linguistic relativity theory, in his book he indicated that sometimes when we are uttering or writing, we realize that it was not exactly what we meant to say. Sometimes it is not easy to find any words that properly convey a thought. That is because when we hear or read, we usually remember the gist, not the exact words, so there has to be such a thing as a gist that is not the same as a bunch of words (Pinker 2007: 57). A situation like this can occur even when speaking the first

language. Using a foreign language to communicate at work increases the likelihood of this happening.

## 2.2 Previous studies

There have diverse studies about English as a lingua franca and interculturality (i.e., intercultural competence and intercultural identity) within the contexts of international education, immigrations, or multicultural / third cultural individuals. However, very few studies examined using ELF at work among Chinese business professionals and had a holistic discussion about the practices. In this section, related previous studies will be reviewed.

English as a Lingua Franca has established itself as a vibrant research field in its own right, and interchange with neighboring fields is growing (Mauranen 2018: 107). For example, as Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014: 356) claimed, English as a lingua franca has gained many responsibilities, one of which is acting as a common language for interaction among study abroad students. The historical roots of study abroad research date back to the 1960s and 1970s during which Carroll's (1967) and Schumann and Schumann's (1977) work emerged as the pioneering examinations of the role of study abroad on language development. In the context of ELF in study abroad, Baker's (2009: 567) study showed that ELF needs to move beyond the traditionally conceived target language - target culture relationship to incorporate an awareness of dynamic hybrid cultures and the skills to successfully negotiate them.

Within the context of ELF in study abroad, some scholars explored the relationship between identity and ELF. For example, Virkkula and Nikula (2010: 251) investigated identity construction among Finnish users of English as revealed in interviews conducted both before and after a period spent in Germany. The study concluded that the relatively short stay remarkably impacted on the way they discursively construct themselves in relation to English; also, rather than being a single entity, identity was in constant flux, which showed in the participants simultaneously positioning themselves in different discourses (Virkkula & Nikula 2010: 269). In another study, Tian and Lowe did a case study about eight American students' intercultural experiences and the impacts of such experiences on individual identity during their study in a Chinese university (Tian & Lowe 2014: 281). That study revealed the journey of participants from cultural naivety to an emergent intercultural awareness and cultural



critical capacity, and its findings supported Kim's (2008) depiction of the processes by which intercultural identity emerges, notably the stress-adaptation-growth cycle and the concurrent processes of acculturation and deculturation (Tian & Lowe 2014: 281).

There are also research studying ELF in terms of communicative strategies. Björkman (2014: 122) presented an analysis of the communicative strategies used by speakers in spoken lingua franca English (ELF) in an academic setting by studying fifteen group sessions of naturally occurring student group-work talk in content courses at a technical university. The results showed that the speakers in these ELF interactions employed other-initiated strategies as frequently as self-initiated communicative strategies.

Regarding to using English as a lingua franca at workplace and intercultural competence, Yao and Du-Babcock (2020: 1) argued that intercultural business communicative competence (IBCC) consists of four obligatory components: three in relation to cultural ability (metacognitive intelligence, motivational intelligence, and behavioral intelligence) and one in relation to language ability (strategic competence). 227 Chinese business professionals answered the online questionnaires and 11 of them participated in semi-structured interviews. A critical finding was that, unlike what Byram (1997: 73) claimed (intercultural communicative competence includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence), Yao and Du-Babcock (2020: 12-14) argued that for intercultural business communicative competence (IBCC), the professionals did not need to be equipped with very advanced cognitive cultural intelligence (i.e., the knowledges of norms, practices, and conventions in different cultures), discourse competence (i.e., English proficiency, rich linguistic resources, etc.) or pragmatic competence (i.e., the knowledge of speech acts, routines, implicature etc.). That is because in the workplace context, even linguistic errors happened, both sides were still able to understand each other and communicate because they understood the highly specialized technical terms and shared standardized concepts.

Some studies have shown that even people with similar cultural backgrounds or origins may struggle with intercultural communication. Hong-Xoan and Earl (2020: 832) interviewed Vietnamese workers who worked in South Korean companies. Though both Vietnam and Korea are Asian countries and share Asian cultures background, conflicts due to cultural differences still happened. According to workers, the main causes of conflict in workplace

interactions with Korean managers are “differences in working culture” (especially about workplace time use) and “attitude differences”. The study showed that intercultural communication is an ongoing and dynamic interpersonal process which is influenced by social, contextual and individual factors.

One of the most popular target groups for research on intercultural identity is international education and foreign language teaching/learning communities, for example, prospective foreign language teachers (Fernández-Agüero & Garrote, 2019), Iranian learners (Aliakbari & Amiri, 2018), etc. As Fernández-Agüero and Garrote claimed, the prospective teachers displayed an incipient intercultural identity characterized by a tendency to avoid agency and a certain shortage of intercultural knowledge, yet they were notably concerned about their professional image and their responsibility in work environments (Fernández-Agüero & Garrote 2019: 159). After analyzing 930 learners from 25 schools, Aliakbari and Amiri found evidence on links between aspects of identity and academic achievement in foreign language learning at schools (Aliakbari & Amiri 2018: 88).

Another popular target group to study intercultural identity is multicultural and / or third culture individuals who lived outside their passport country during their developmental years (Moore & Barker 2012: 553). As Moore and Barker (2012: 559) discussed, third culture individuals are more apt to possess multiple cultural identities or a multicultural identity. And they never lose their native cultural identities but adopt new ones and are able to successfully alternate between the two.

In terms of intercultural sensitivity and Bennett’s DMIS tool (developmental model of intercultural sensitivity), Hernandez and Kose (2012) investigated the cultural competence of the principals’ who worked in diverse schools by employing DMIS tool. The DMIS offered a powerful theory for understanding how principals may experience and interpret issues of difference and diversity in schools (Hernandez & Kose 2012: 512). In the paper from Tarchi et al. (2019), 32 US students and 28 Erasmus Mundus students were recruited. The results indicated that Erasmus Mundus students expressed more ethnorelative orientations than the US study abroad students. For example, Erasmus Mundus students emphasized the setting and the ending of their experiences more than the US students did. Also, Erasmus Mundus students presented lower identification scores with their conational than US study abroad students did (Tarchi et al. 2019: 875).

### 3. Aim and Method

#### 3.1 Aim

As discussed before, workplace communication in a sense is more difficult compared to other types of communication. It is even harder to use L2 to communicate at work. In communicating with people from foreign cultures, there are more variables that influence and/or determine the outcome of the communication. Thus, using English as a lingua franca in the workplace is chosen as the main field of study in this article.

The aim of this study is to investigate in China's multinational corporations, how do people feel about using English as a lingua franca to communicate and how that differs from using Chinese.

To be specific, the research questions of present paper are:

- What becomes different when Chinese business professionals use English as a lingua franca to communicate in multinational corporations?
- Why and how do the changes happen?

#### 3.2 Method

In order to obtain data with the least amount of intervention, a survey consisting of seven open-ended questions was developed. Compared to closed-ended questions, open-ended questions have below advantages (Connor Desai & Reimers 2018: 1427): 1) the responses to open-ended questions are constructed rather than suggested by response options, and so avoid bias introduced by suggesting responses to participants; 2) open-ended questions also allow participants to give detailed responses about complex stimuli and permit a wide range of possible responses.

All participants were recruited by snowball sampling method and personal networking. Snowball sampling methodology (SSM) is a technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the researcher the name of another, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt 2005: 300). The sample group grows like a rolling snowball. According to Cohen and Arieli (2011: 426), SSM is commonly used to locate, access, and involve people from specific populations in cases where the researcher anticipates difficulties in creating a

representative sample of the research population. SSM is probably the most effective method to access hidden and / or hard to reach populations (Valdez & Kaplan 1999). Nonetheless, the method of sample collecting has its limitation, i.e., representativity. In SSM, the research subjects are not collected randomly, as expected by “pure” sampling principles (Cohen & Arieli 2011: 426). However, Cohen and Arieli claimed that despite this limitation, it is possible to increase the representativity of SSM by sufficient planning of the sampling process and goals, initiating parallel snowball networks and using quota sampling (Cohen & Arieli 2011: 428). Thus, the author of current study recruited participants from diverse education background, age, and working industries with the aim of increasing the representativity of the sampling.

In terms of participants selection, since the theme of this study is Chinese employees and interculturality in the workplace, the selected respondents are people who: 1) have Chinese as the first language; 2) have English as at least one of their working languages; and 3) are currently working or have worked in multinational companies in China. Those qualified as participants received the survey via online communication applications or via email. All the participants answered the survey without knowing the purpose of the survey, the background of this study, or the desired kinds of answers. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the answers and relate them to the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

### **3.2.1 Participants**

Out of 19 on-line survey invitations, there were 14 valid feedbacks from respondents and included in data analysis. The rest of them either did not feedback or were not qualified as respondents to this study. Among the 14 final respondents, the age range was from 28 years old to 43 years old. 8 (57%) were female and 6 (43%) were male. Everyone has Chinese as the first language and English as at least one of the working languages. Regarding to the education level, 9 participants (64%) received bachelor’s degrees while 5 (36%) held master’s degrees. In terms of majors in university, majority of them were linguistics students studying foreign language: 6 studied English and 1 studied Japanese. The others were 2 majoring in data science, 1 in logistics, 1 in marketing, 1 in international relations, 1 in pharmaceutical analysis, and 1 in marine engineering. The last critical variable is the job rank. Although every participant engages or have engaged in intercultural communication with English at work, their working industries vary: 8 (57%) worked in supply chain; 1 in retailer, 1 in

education, 2 in software engineering, 1 in trading company, and 1 in real estate. The detailed respondents' profiles are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: respondents' profiles

No.	Age	Gender	Education level	Major in university	Job rank
A	28	F	Bachelor	Logistics & supply chain	Supply chain planner
B	29	F	Bachelor	Japanese	Supply chain planner
C	28	F	Master	Marketing	Sourcing in retail
D	35	M	Master	International relations	Education consultant
E	36	F	Bachelor	English	Supply chain manager
F	30	F	Master	Data science	Software engineer
G	34	F	Bachelor	English	Supply chain planner
H	28	F	Bachelor	English	Supply chain Project management
I	29	M	Bachelor	Marine engineering	Supply chain manager
J	35	F	Master	Pharmaceutical analysis	Supply chain manager
K	32	M	Bachelor	English	Supply chain planner
L	36	M	Bachelor	English	Trading company manager
M	43	M	Bachelor	English	Real estate manager
N	37	M	Master	Data science	IT consultant

### 3.2.2 Data collection and analysis

During the survey, seven open-ended questions were used to obtain data with the least amount of intervention. They were not the questions which could only be answered from a restricted viewpoint. Instead, they allowed respondents to reflect on their own experiences and feelings spontaneously and proactively. The seven open-ended questions are:

- 1) Do you think the way you talk and/or act becomes different when you use English (or any other foreign language you use during working) to communicate at workplace?
- 2) If yes, what changes?
- 3) Please give an example.
- 4) Why did you decide to make the change(s)? Do you think the changes are good or bad?
- 5) In this example, if you could communicate in your mother tongue, would you act / talk differently? How?

- 6) For the changes you described in question 4, would they still happen if you use this foreign language in an informal situation (not at workplace)? Why? What makes you decide to change or not?
- 7) Based on your own working experience, do you think there are less or more conflicts happening with counterparts while using English at workplace? Why?

Some respondents used narrative discourse (storytelling) when describing an instance in their lives while answering the survey. This contributed to unexpected findings and enriched the study's results. Narrative discourse organizes life-social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future. The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events. This meaning of discourse applies to all forms of human communication and symbolization – verbal and nonverbal alike (Daiute & Lightfoot 2004: xi). And statement about emotion, motivation, goals, thoughts, and beliefs would indicate inclusion of the landscape of consciousness (Daiute & Lightfoot 2004: 93).

Besides of narrative analysis, discourse analysis approaches were also employed in data analysis process. As Jones (2012: 15) cites from Halliday (1994): whenever we use language, we are always doing three things at once: representing the world (ideational function of language), creating / ratifying / negotiating our relationships with the people with whom we are communicating (interpersonal function of language), and joining sentences and ideas together to form cohesive and coherent texts (textual function of language. As Jones (2012: 2) said, discourse analysis is not just the study of language, it is a way of looking at language that focuses on how people use it in real life to do and to show that they are certain kinds of people or belong to certain groups. “Whenever people speak or write, they are somehow demonstrating who they are and what their relationship is to other people through their discourses. They are enacting their identities. The important thing about such identities is that they are multiple and fluid rather than singular and fixed” (Jones 2012: 4).

In terms of the raw data, the full version of each survey can be found in Appendix.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the findings from the survey data will be reported and discussed in order to answer the research questions.

Almost every respondent (13 out of 14) felt that the way they communicate in English at workplace differed from using Chinese. After analyzing, all the changes can be classified into four subcategories: 1) language proficiency level, 2) language politeness level, 3) interculturality level, 4) linguistic relativity level.

### 4.1 Language Proficiency

Within 14 respondents, 5 employees expressed their concerns at language proficiency level. Due to a lack of proficiency in English, the biggest difference for them was that they were not able to express themselves 100% accurately when using English at work.

#### 4.1.1 Vocabulary

There are two participants showed that they had a problem with expressing themselves due to a lack of English vocabulary. Firstly, respondent E wrote “I will need more effort to come up with the right words in my expression”, for example, when “having a meal with foreigner, if I want to talk about how to cook some kinds of foods or to describe the flavor of the foods or speak out the name of the foods”, the vocabulary barrier stood in her way.

Secondly, as a software engineer, respondent F emphasized how she changed the way of expressing herself when she used English to communicate at work: “I try to make my sentence shorter with simple words”. That was because “I am not a native speaker with expert language skills and a big vocabulary, so I just want my comments clear and easy to be understood by others”. Also, she would act the same no matter using English in the workplace or informal situations, because “smooth communication always goes first to me with respect to the language”.

#### 4.1.2 Syntax / Grammar

Besides of vocabulary concern, respondent F also expressed her concern at syntax / grammar level. “I split the sentences, so they don’t contain too many ‘which’ and ‘that’”.

However, unlike respondent F who preferred shorter sentences while speaking English as a lingua franca in the workplace, respondent H, on the other hand, had an opposite opinion. “When speaking English, I always say long sentence with liaison, which does not happen in speaking Mandarin”.

Why their answers were so different, even opposite? What are the possible variables here affecting their answers? The respondents’ profiles table showed that respondents F and H shared something in common: they were in similar age (30 vs. 28) and same gender (female). It was the education level, the major in university, and the job rank that differed. Respondent F, the one who preferred shorter English sentences, held master’s degree in data science and worked as a software engineer. Respondent H, who used longer sentences while speaking English, had bachelor’s degree in English and worked in supply chain project management. There was no denying that their education background and profession industry were important factors to their decisions. It is very possible that due to the nature of the industry, professionals in software engineering or IT departments prefer to communicate in a simpler, more direct and efficient way. While in the field of linguistics, it is the language itself which attracts more attention. In spite of the fact that respondent H did not work in the linguistics field, her education background was potentially relevant. As a result of her own experiences and thoughts formed during her education, she might make certain choices unconsciously when using English at work. This can be analyzed from sociolinguistics lens as well. Sociolinguistics studies how language varieties differ between groups of people in relation to specific social variables, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, profession, gender, level of education, age, etc. (Trotta 2016: 42).

Respondent G had concern of syntax / grammar as well. When using English at work, she intended to make her expression much clearer and easier to be read when composing emails in English.

#### **4.1.3 Other**

In the answer of respondent C, she mentioned “English rhythm is different vs. Chinese. I don’t know why but I talk louder when I speak Chinese and my hometown dialect. My voice is much softer when I use English in my work.” She is not the only one who felt this way, respondent H had the same feeling: “Tone is different. It is soft in English, while louder in



Mandarin”. Furthermore, respondent H described a real case happened in the workplace. She wrote:

There is risk for one of my projects. Before meeting other foreign co-workers, I use Mandarin to explain with my Leader. It comes with details first then is the result. I need speak louder and clearly word by word, so he can understand fully. When it comes to meeting with foreign co-workers, my voice becomes soft, and I share what the risk is, what is the reason and action plan later on. It is more direct way.

Both C and H realized that there was a difference in voice volume between speaking Chinese and English. And both of them acted the same, louder in native language but softer in English. Although respondent C clearly claimed that “I don’t know why”, in the next answer she still gave a possible reason of talking softer in English: “I use Zoom to communicate with international business partners and colleagues. Maybe that’s the reason why I talk more softly in English. Because everyone talks and hears clearly, no need to raise my voice up.”

It is difficult to connect it to any existing theories, so the author categorized it under language proficiency concerns. That is because, when a person uses a foreign language, he or she is fully aware that as a non-native speaker, there exist language proficiency gap. Lacking proficiency easily disimproves one’s communicative performance. For example, there would emerge disfluency, slower response, softer voice, less-proactive position, etc. Another possible reason is that, they tried to being friendly and polite by softening voice in order to maintain rapport with foreign colleagues in the working environment.

## 4.2 Language Politeness

Among the 14 participants, 5 indicated that it was in the language politeness that English differed from Chinese in the workplace, i.e., directness / indirectness, politeness / impoliteness, and face-threatening act.

“I will be more direct when speak English”, “the way to communicate (in Chinese) will be not so direct”, said respondent H. And she also explained the reason by stating “Chinese people communication is in an implicit way, while westerners are in a direct way”.

Similarly, respondent J touched the topic about being polite or not. “We can easily express the emotions when using mother languages to communicate. But it feels impolite to do so when speaking English.” Here is the real case example she described in her survey:

In a gives-and-gets meeting with remote country counterpart, the fact was that they made a mistake which caused business loss. When I put all the facts on the table, people were silent over the phone. The purpose of the meeting was to know what happened, and how we can do better. I then realized and broke the silence by saying something like “maybe this is just one time issue”, “we can do XXXX”, etc. I did that because I realized if I keep communicating like this, other people will feel uncomfortable and less engaged in that conversation.

She then indicated that if she used the mother tongue Chinese to communicate, things will be different because “most of time you have informal touch with the person, can directly ask that person to share her/his perspectives”. To better understand what she meant, the author, also a Chinese native speaker, would like to provide some Chinese cultural background. Firstly, the expression “most of time you have informal touch with the person” can be understood from the lens of high-context culture and low-context culture. According to Hall and Hall (1990: 6), people in high-context cultures typically maintain close relationships with family, friends, colleagues and clients; but individuals in low-context cultures tend to compartmentalize their personal relationships, work and many other aspects of their lives. As a Chinese who has a high-context culture, respondent J felt to maintain rapport with colleagues in the workplace or even day-to-day life was very natural, common and even “mandatory”. That explained why she mentioned something like “most of time you have informal touch with the person”. Since there existed closer relationship between her and the counterpart, she then felt “can directly ask that person to share her/his perspectives” without being considered as a person who was too direct, impolite, aggressive, or rude.

Regarding to high- and low-context, respondent B gave another example. She was the only participant who uses two foreign languages (English and Japanese) as working languages. When being asked what changes when using a foreign language to communicate at work, she gave an example of using Japanese to communicate at work:

Sensitive level - When speaking in Japanese, I need to care about the culture manner & the feeling of the listener, and I will think about what is the true meaning that the speaker wants to deliver – are they insinuating something opposite?

It is true that the Chinese and Japanese cultures share a lot in common, however, due to Japan’s relatively “higher” context culture, there still exists some cultural differences in formal workplace. The politeness strategies which aiming to avoid face-threatening acts then might vary in these two Asian countries.

Next finding is about respondent K. His answer showed that he agreed with the notion of low-context culture and the communicate style in that kind of culture by stating “communication for western people is explicit and straightforward”. Moreover, he gave an example which was related to politeness and the theory of face:

When you are pushing somebody to complete a task before the deadline, you need to try to be as polite and professional as possible. For example: ‘could you pls help close the task before Aug-13? Thanks in advance’. or ‘your prompt reply would be highly appreciated!’

As Brown and Levinson (1978) claimed, there are two faces: positive face and negative face. Positive face means that people have the desire to be appreciated by others with positive images, and the negative face means that people always want to be unimpeded in one’s actions. Negative politeness strategies aimed at reducing the threat to negative face of the hearer. These include being direct; do not presume / assume; do not coerce; communicate speakers’ wish to not impinge on hearers; and redress hearers’ other wants (Zhu 2019: 109). Thus, when respondent K was using English to push someone, he selected negative face politeness strategy by using sentences like “could you pls help ...thanks in advance”, “your prompt reply would be highly appreciated!”, etc.

The last participant contributing here is respondent N. When being asked “what are changed when you use English to communicate in the workplace”, respondent N answered: “not use direct language” and “sometimes I talk more indirectly to my foreign colleagues”. This looks totally opposite to what respondent H and K have answered. Both respondent H and K thought that Chinese communicate in an implicit way while westerner in an explicit way. Thus, both of them would talk indirectly in Chinese but directly in English. However, after reading further on respondent N’s answer, it became clear that the direct / indirect here did not refer to the “direct / explicit culture” or “indirect / implicit culture”. When answering to the question “why changed the way of communicating when using English”, he wrote “since if you don’t know the person well, or what kind of culture background he experienced, being too direct or blunt may be considered rude”. His original words “not use direct language” then could be understood as “talk more politely” or “in a good manner”.

## 4.3 Interculturality

Interculturality-related answers were the most common ones. Many participants described how they changed their way of communicating and those changes were related to interculturality, either intercultural communicative competence or intercultural sensitivity. 5 respondents will be discussed and analyzed in upcoming section.

### 4.3.1 Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)

Below is a real example provided by respondent A:

In our daily operation, urgent calls often needed to discuss sudden product supply gap and solution to close OOS (out of stock, annotated by the author) and minimize the hurt on NOS (profit). The action needs to be immediate and the atmosphere within supply team is very intense. However, when I am in those calls with English native speaker, I normally will not go straight to the RCA (root cause analysis, annotated by the author) discussion but rather will start with greeting each other in the call and share some updates or stories in life, then a few mins later we will talk about the issue and solution.

And the reason why she made this change was:

I observed this habit during working with them, they feel more comfortable when discussion starts with light-hearted subject. I do feel the change is necessary cause it will make the whole conversation easier and smoother cause the chitchat before serious topic will ease the tension and provide better coordination within the team.

Apparently, respondent A was aware of the cultural difference by observing her counterparts' communication habits, and she made adjustments accordingly as well, i.e., bringing the "chitchat" forward. "In Chinese context and culture, we normally prefer discuss issue and solution first, once we firm the action plan, we then talk about other topic such as weather or family". Her intercultural awareness and adaptation can be discussed from the approach of intercultural sensitivity (IS).

Per Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), one's intercultural competence develops through six stages: Denial → Defense Reversal → Minimization → Acceptance → Adaptation → Integration. The first three stages are under ethnocentrism while the last three are under ethnorelativism.

Respondent A apparently was in one of the last three more ethnorelative stages, where "one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures" (Hammer et al. 2003: 5). According to Hernandez and Kose (2012: 516), in the adaption stage, individuals can shift from one worldview to another and change their behavior to effectively interact with people

from another culture. Examples of statements from someone who is adapting to difference may be “To solve this dispute, I’m going to have to change my approach,” and “I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways” (Bennett 1993: 3). Therefore, in terms of DMIS, respondent A was in the 5<sup>th</sup> stage: Adaptation.

Respondent A was not the only one who was aware of the cultural differences and made adaptations, respondent H also did the same: “when using English, I explain the result/summary first, then share about the details. But in Chinese, always details first.” In addition, respondent D and L both showed that they “tend to use the way foreigners use, like more body language and positive expression” when speaking English.

Among all the participants, respondent M might be the best example of ICC and IS. As a real estate manager, he had customers from all over the world. He claimed: “I change my way of talking according to my customers’ culture background”. The example he provided was:

For example, my customers are from different countries. The way I talk to my Indian customers is definitely different vs. the way I talk to American customers, or customers from Hongkong. I have to focus on different aspects. For instance, people from Hongkong have trust issue with real estate agency in mainland China. They don’t easily trust you. Thus, there are more problems to solve for me in communication. Most of my American customers have relatively simpler style. Less discriminations. I can discuss problems with them simply and directly without taking too much into consideration. The way to talk to Indian customers depends on where they come from in India. Some of them represent two extremes and I adjust my way of communication accordingly... I made the changes because I know their cultures well. And I know it will make our cooperations much more efficiently and smoothly. I think the changes are good.

To analyze his behavior by employing DMIS, respondent M was definitely in one of the ethnorelative stages: Acceptance, Adaptation, or Integration, or more specifically, either Adaptation or Integration. The final stage “integration” is more characterized by accepting an identity that is not based in any one culture, and individuals here are considered to be bicultural or multicultural and use their skills of understanding other cultures to become fully competent in new cultures (Hernandez & Kose 2012: 517) or construe their identities at the margins of two or more cultures and central to none (Hammer et al. 2003: 425). Integration is descriptive of a growing number of people, including many members of non-dominant cultures, long-term expatriates, and “global nomads.” Those features from “integration” does not fit his profile. Thus, the author would like to define respondent M under Adaptation stage as well, same as respondent A.

### 4.3.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Respondent M can also be analyzed from intercultural communicative competence (ICC) point of view. ICC includes four components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. Firstly, greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence (Hammer et al. 2003: 422), therefore it is reasonable to infer that respondent M had strong intercultural competence (IC); secondly, according to van Ek (1986), sociolinguistic competence means the awareness of the impact of context such as setting, relationship between communication partners, intentions, etc. on the choice of language forms (Zhu 2019: 160). How respondent M adjusted his communicative strategies according to customers from different cultures demonstrated he had strong sociolinguistic competence as well. Therefore, respondent M had not only strong sensitivity to intercultural occasions (IS), but also strong intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

### 4.4 Linguistic Relativity

When being asked “what changes when using English to communicate in the workplace”, respondent B made this statement: “character – be more outgoing. Like the MBTI that I did for English version, my result showing that I am Extrovert, while in Chinese version, my result is introvert. And when talking in English, I will be more straight forward to explain what I think & what I want.”

The first half of the statement is eye-catching. MBTI (Myers–Briggs Type Indicator) is a questionnaire to classify human personality into 16 different types on the basis of four dichotomies: extraversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving (Song et al. 2021: 2). Why did two different languages result in two different MBTI test results? Did that mean while using English, she was an extrovert person, but when using Chinese, she became an introvert?

As mentioned in theoretical framework section, linguistic relativity theory argued that language either determines thought (strong version) or influences thought (light version). No matter which version, it seems fit with what respondent B had manifested. Her personality changed when she started speaking a foreign language. It is possible that misunderstandings of the questions and misexpressions of the answers occurred during testing due to a lack of

proficiency in foreign languages, and thus got those two different test results. But let us see first if there were any other respondents had similar feeling.

Respondent K wrote, “the way when talking in English could be different as I need to use a different way of thinking. Words and phrases need to be organized in a different way vs. using Chinese... Nevertheless, although the way you express yourselves is totally different due to vocabulary and grammar differences, but you are still the same you, your idea, your value, your habit, etc., remain all the same”. He first delivered the similar feeling that he had to “change the way of thinking” when changing to speaking English. That was in line with what respondent B said, in a sense. However, in his later words, he clearly clarified that he did not change as a person at all, “you are still the same you”. This opinion was opposite to respondent B.

There was also another participant, respondent I, who contributed to this topic. Respondent I was the only one who thought nothing changed when he used English to communicate in the workplace. “No, I think I still use Chinese way of thinking while speaking English, but anyways people understand.”

They might be all correct: you changed, but not all of you changed. Like mentioned in previous theoretical framework section, Tracy (2002: 18-20) proposed four types of identity: master identity (stable, i.e., gender, ethnicity, age), interactional identity (situated, i.e., a person can be a student, a volunteer, a passenger and a mother), relational identity (social, i.e., a manager and an employer in an appraisal meeting vs. meet in a lift) and personal identity (personal, i.e., personalities, attitudes and characters). What respondent K meant by saying “you are still the same you” means that one’s “master identity” never change. And what respondent B described about different MBTI results means that her “personal identity” changed by the influence from a foreign language.

Now let us move back to the latter half of respondent B’s statement, “...and when talking in English, I will be more straight forward to explain what I think & what I want”. It sounds like by speaking English, there was something emerged or created. Thus, she felt she was in a reasonable position to express “what I think & what I want”. Her answers might not be that obviously, but the answers from other two participants demonstrated better.

Respondent C wrote: “sometimes in negotiation, I feel shy if I use Chinese. But using English is kind of ‘nothing about me personally’... it’s like Chinese people are shy to express our feelings, for example to apologize or express love among family members. But in English I feel more comfortable”. Again, there must be something newly created for her to stand alongside; something "reasonable enough" to make her behavior acceptable by others. Similarly, respondent D gave a real example from his working experience:

I was an intern psychological counsellor before, and my clients speak English. However, English is my second language. For example, I will ask about the client and their partners' relationship during the intake and counselling session. This talk sometimes will come to sex activities and health. However, if I talk about it in Chinese with a client speaking Chinese, I can imagine how hard for the clients and me to talk about it openly. However, when I talk about it in English with my client, I feel more comfortable using the second language, especially some words and expressions that will make the clients and me feel uncomfortable if we discuss it in Chinese.

Once again, another participant implied that speaking English enabled him to freely speak differently. But the question is, what is that “something”? Is that a new identity?

In theoretical framework section the term “intercultural identity” was introduced. When communication occurs outside the individuals’ cultural group, cultural identity may lose its rigidity and significance and “lead to greater tolerance, acceptance and willingness to accommodate out-groups” (Hebrok 2011: 55). In that case, intercultural identity goes beyond the boundaries of any cultural identity and becomes “an intellectual template for a constructive and creative way of seeing and relating to oneself and others” (Kim 2015: 10).

Communication is always two-way. When someone becomes more tolerant to accommodate out-groups, he or she also expects being treated with more tolerance, acceptance and willingness by out-groups. Under the umbrella of this new intercultural identity, people feel more comfortable to talk in new styles or discuss some topics which are “taboo” in his / her culture of origin. The tolerance was just as what respondent D described: “the listeners or readers are more tolerant of foreigners who speak English as a second language”.

#### 4.5 ELF in the workplace in practice

Did people like ELF communication at work? Did they think it was effective or not? As part of the survey, respondents were asked about their opinions on English usage as well as



conflict occurrences. As shown in Table 2, there are 4 participants thought “less conflicts” happened while using English at work, 6 considered “more conflicts”, and 4 thought language and conflicts occurrence were irrelative.

Table 2: respondents' attitudes towards conflicts when using English at work

Respondent No.	Less conflicts	More conflicts	Irrelative
A		√	
B		√	
C	√		
D	√		
E		√	
F			√
G			√
H		√	
I			√
J	√		
K			√
L		√	
M		√	
N	√		
Total	4	6	4

Participants thought less conflicts occurring while using English mainly because they always tried to be friendly and polite in English communication. They intentionally “use lots of ‘please’, ‘thank you’, ‘could you’, ‘may I’, etc.” and “think twice” in order to maintain politeness, face, rapport and solidarity with foreign colleagues. Also, they thought their counterparties did the same too. Just like what respondent C said, “it’s not only me who tries to fit in their cultures, sometimes they also copy my way to speak... It’s a two-way thing”; “the listeners or readers are more tolerant of foreigners who speak English as a second language”, said respondent D.

On the other hand, some respondents thought more conflicts happening because they were worried about their English proficiency. They felt sometimes they were unable to express

themselves accurately in English, and that brought back-and-forth communications, misunderstandings, and conflicts.

For the rest of the participants, they thought conflicts and language were irrelative: “it more depends on one’s attitude while communicating with others. Troublemaker will be troublemaker anyway, no matter which language he / she uses”, “it all depends on your own characteristic or the work atmosphere”.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated what becomes different when Chinese business professionals use English as a lingua franca to communicate in multinational corporations, and also explored why and how the changes happen. Open-ended questions surveys were employed to collect data. Totally 14 Chinese respondents participated in this study.

The analysis and results revealed that 93% respondents agreed that their way of communication changed when using English as a lingua franca to communicate at work. The changes can be analysed from four different levels: language proficiency, language politeness, interculturality, and linguistic relativity.

### -Language proficiency

There were five respondents claimed that due to a lack of proficiency in English, the biggest difference for them was that they were not able to express themselves accurately when using English at work all the time. Two participants encountered vocabulary barriers, three participants had changed in the syntax level, and two respondents changed their tone while speaking English.

### -Language politeness

Five participants indicated that it was in the language politeness that English differed from Chinese in the workplace. Sometimes the way they communicated in Chinese was culture-specific only and could not be applied to English communication. In order to maintain politeness, face, rapport and solidarity, the participants selected politeness strategies accordingly to avoid face-threatening acts.

### -Interculturality

Most participants realized they changed their way of communication in English due to interculturality-related reasons. They were aware of cultural differences and make intercultural adaptation accordingly. By employing the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) tool, the analysis showed that the respondents who made adaptation were in the ethnonrelative stage called Adaptation. They had strong intercultural sensitivity (IS) and better intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

### -Linguistic relativity

Participants here showed the changes they made were related to linguistic relativity level. After analysis and employment of theoretical frameworks, it was concluded that using different language might cause identities change: “personal identity” changed but “master identity” remained. Also, by speaking English, a “new” identity was created which allowed speakers talk more open than he / she was supposed to and at the same time acceptable by others. This “new” identity was intercultural identity.

### -ELF in the workplace in practice

Lastly, respondents showed their attitudes towards the relation of using English and conflicts occurrence: four respondents thought less conflicts happening as they always tried to be polite in English communications, and the counterparties did the same too; six respondents thought more conflicts due to a lack of English proficiency; the other four participants thought conflicts and language were irrelative.

This study explored ELF communication in the workplace and discussed how Chinese business professionals talk / act differently when using English from a holistic point of view. However, there exist some limitations: firstly, there were only 14 participants, and their data were collected via snowball sampling methodology. The relatively narrow and non-random data limited the reliability of current study; secondly, the majority of respondents were from same industry: supply chain. That might narrow the data and results as some communication skills are industry-specific; thirdly, all the answers to the open-ended questions were provided by respondents themselves. There might be cognitive bias when evaluating their own behavior and competence. Further studies could be done here by employing a more objective tool, i.e., intercultural developmental inventory (IDI), which is a 50- to 60- questions questionnaire to tests individuals’ intercultural competence within 20 minutes. However, the researcher needs to be qualified before authorized to proceed any tests on any respondents, and both the tool and the qualification require fundings.

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# Appendix

**Q1: Do you think the way you talk and/or act becomes different when you use English (or any other foreign language you use during working) to communicate at workplace?**

A: Yes.

B: Yes, I think so.

C: Yes.

D: Yes,

E: Yes, I think so.

F: Yes, sometimes.

G: Yes.

H: Yes, it is different when I use English to communicate with others

I: No, I think I still use Chinese way of thinking while speaking English, but anyways people understand.

J: Yes.

K: Yes.

L: Sometimes.

M: Yes.

N: Yes.

**Q2: If yes, what changes?**

A: Method changed while I am speaking to English native speaker.

B: Character & Sensitive level

C: 1) English rhythm is different vs. Chinese. I don't know why but I talk louder when I speak Chinese and my hometown dialect. My voice is much softer when I use English in my work. 2) sometimes in negotiation, I feel shy if I use Chinese. But using English is kind of "nothing about me personally". 3) sometimes when I talk to native English speakers, I adapt their way of expression because it's a chance to study English to me.

D: Firstly, I tend to use the way foreigners use, like more body language and positive expression when talking to American people. Secondly, I will be more open to talking about some topics or using some words that I feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to say in my mother tongue.

E: I will need more effort to come up with the right words in my expression.

F: I try to make my sentence shorter with simple words.

G: The expression is intended to be much clearer, simpler, easier to be read when composing an email.

H: - Thinking logic is different. When using English, I explain the result/summary first, then share about the details. But in Chinese, always details first. - Tone is different. It is soft in English, while louder in Mandarin. - When speaking English, I always say long sentence with liaison, which does not happen in speaking Mandarin. - I will be more direct when speak English.

I: N/A

J: •We can easily express the emotions when using mother languages to communicate. But it feels impolite to do so when speaking English. • In order to soften the communications, some words like “maybe” is often being used, which makes people feel that you’re not that firm or confident.

K: The way when talking in English could be different as I need to use a different way of thinking. Words and phrases need to be organized in a different way vs. using Chinese. This does take some time and used to be out of my comfort zone, but you tend to learn from the way that native English speakers and you get to know how they express themselves. Hence the speaking becomes easier and easier. Nevertheless, although the way you express yourselves is totally different due to vocabulary and grammar differences, but you are still the same you, your idea, your value, your habit, etc., remain all the same.

L: I guess it’s the way you try to express your ideas and how fluent it would be. And also, perhaps the tune of your voice, and your gestures / body languages.

M: I change my way of talking according to my customers’ culture background.

N: Not use direct language.

### **Q3: Please give an example.**

A: In our daily operation, urgent calls often needed to discuss sudden product supply gap and solution to close OOS and minimize the hurt on NOS (profit). The action needs to be immediate and the atmosphere within supply team is very intense. However, when I am in those calls with English native speaker, I normally will not go straight to the RCA discussion but rather will start with greeting each other in the call and share some updates or stories in life, then a few mins later we will talk about the issue and solution.

B: 1) Character – be more outgoing. Like the MBTI that I did for English version, my result showing that I am Extrovert, while in Chinese version, my result is introvert. And when talking in English, I will be more straight forward to explain what I think & what I want. 2) Sensitive level - When speaking in Japanese, I need to care about the culture manner & the feeling of the listener, and I will think about what is the true meaning that the speaker wants to deliver – are they insinuating something opposite?

C: 1) I use Zoom to communicate with international business partners and colleagues. Maybe that’s the reason why I talk more softly in English. Because everyone talks and hears clearly, no need to raise my voice up. 2) It’s like Chinese people are shy to express our feelings, for example to apologize or express love among family members. But in English I feel more comfortable.

D: I was an intern psychological counsellor before, and my clients speak English. However, English is my second language. For example, I will ask about the client and their partners' relationship during the intake and counselling session. This talk sometimes will come to sex activities and health. However, if I talk about it in Chinese with a client speaking Chinese, I can imagine how hard for the clients and me to talk about it openly. However, when I talk about it in English with my client, I feel more

comfortable using the second language, especially some words and expressions that will make the clients and me feel uncomfortable if we discuss it in Chinese.

E: When having a meal with foreigner, if I want to talk about how to cook some kinds of foods or to describe the flavor of the foods or speak out the name of the foods.

F: For example, I can describe everything as 'good' if I think they are. I split the sentences, so they don't contain too many 'which' and 'that'.

G: When we summarize issue and ask for help from others, we prefer to make the issue statement and action plans easily understood and executed. For example, presently we spend around two hours on meeting with manufacturing counterpart, to know completion rate of production yesterday, staffing details and so on. During the conversation, not just getting messages in back-and-forth Q&A session, but also, we set emotional tones in every expression. That is why it takes longer time as it mixed with thousands of messages, no matter it is key to the theme or not. On the contrary, the meeting minutes we are going to write is not like a novel to simply capture everything we speak, but it is as a key take away one page after digesting. Usually, we start with clear issue statement in the method like "5W2H", then the objective conclusion, and any actionable plans or help in need to target audience.

H: There is risk for one of my projects. Before meeting other foreign co-workers, I use Mandarin to explain with my Leader. It comes with details first then is the result. I need speak louder and clearly word by word, so he can understand fully. When it comes to meeting with foreign co-workers, my voice becomes soft, and I share what the risk is, what is the reason and action plan later on. It is more direct way.

I: In my daily life I use English together with Chinese with my wife. So I can hardly notice if my communication is different. And sometimes I speak English word to replace a Chinese sentence when I don't know the best way to explain.

J: In a gives-and-gets meeting with remote country counterpart, the fact was that they made a mistake which caused business loss. When I put all the facts on the table, people were silent over the phone. The purpose of the meeting was to know what happened, and how we can do better. I then realized and broke the silence by saying something like "maybe this is just one time issue", "we can do XXXX", etc. I did that because I realized if I keep communicating like this, other people will feel uncomfortable less engaged in that conversation.

K: When you are pushing somebody to complete a task before the deadline, you need to try to be as polite and professional as possible. For example: 'could you pls help close the task before Aug-13? Thanks in advance.' or 'your prompt reply would be highly appreciated!' While in Chinese you use very short but still polite. For example: 请于 8 月 13 日前完成为谢!

L: For instance, when you do a presentation in front of your boss/colleagues/customers etc., you could be very talkative with your mother tongue, but when it turns to the English language, sometimes you would tend to tune your speech by adding some "little actions" and body languages.

M: For example, my customers are from different countries. The way I talk to my Indian customers is definitely different vs. the way I talk to American customers, or customers from Hongkong. I have to focus on different aspects. For instance, people from Hongkong have trust issue with real estate agency in mainland China. They don't easily trust you. Thus, there are more problems to solve for me in communication. Most of my American customers have relatively simpler style. Less discriminations. I can discuss problems with them simply and directly without taking too much into consideration. The way to talk to Indian customers depends on where they come from in India. Some of them represent two extremes and I adjust my way of communication accordingly.

N: At workplace, sometimes I talk more indirectly to my foreign colleagues. But most of the time I focus on the work tasks themselves and don't change too much the way I communicate.

**Q4: Why did you decide to make the change(s)? Do you think the changes are good or bad?**

A: Reason for the change is I observed this habit during working with them, they feel more comfortable when discussion starts with light-hearted subject. I do feel the change is necessary cause it will make the whole conversation easier and smoother cause the chitchat before serious topic will ease the tension and provide better coordination within the team.

B: This is not intentional change that I make, just unconsciously. I don't think the changes can be judged good or bad simply, cos language is part of the culture outcome & it is a "tool" for communication which to enable trade business/social activities. When I learn the language, I was impacted by culture, so when I speak English/Japanese, just act as the culture itself.

C: It's just like you talk to your friends often and the way you talk will sound similar. Impact each other. But it's not only me who tries to fit in their cultures, sometimes they also copy my way to speak. For example, when we are joking, they use some popular Chinglish expressions because they know we all use. It's a two-way thing. I think the changes are good. They make us closer and build special connections. But to be honest, I am who I am. Most of the time I prefer to talk the way I'm supposed to base on my personality, regardless which language I'm using.

D: I believe it is a good change. First, I know that it is ok to talk about it during the counselling scenario for most Americans. Second, I won't feel uncomfortable when I talk about some words or topics in English that most Chinese think should not speak with others. Because when I say it in English, not my first language, I won't connect the words with the awkward and uncomfortable feeling.

E: Because I want to make myself to be understood. I think this is a good change.

F: I am not a native speaker with expert language skills and a big vocabulary, so I just want my comments clear and easy to be understood by others.

G: It improves efficient on communication. I think it is good to change.

H: I think this change is good, because Westerners have a different way of thinking from Chinese. It is better to uses Westerners thinking way when speak English, it can avoid some mis understanding.

I: If you are asking whether I like the way I mix English words during my Chinese conversations. I do not like it. Cause not all people understand it but somehow it has become my own habit.

J: Nature reaction. Not good.

K: It's good as it gives you an opportunity to communicate from people all around the world, exchange the ideas under the context that different people might come from a totally different culture. To make the change actually ensure that you can embrace the diversity and create value within a bigger group of people.

L: Thought these could help me better express my ideas and let the listeners better understand my points, so I think the changes are good.

M: I made the changes because I know their cultures well. And I know it will make our cooperations much more efficiently and smoothly. I think the changes are good.

N: The changes are good, since if you don't know the person well, or what kind of culture background he experienced, being too direct or blunt may be considered rude.

**Q5: In this example, if you could communicate in your mother tongue, would you act / talk differently? How?**

A: Yes, in Chinese context and culture, we normally prefer discuss issue and solution first, once we firmed the action plan, we then talk about other topic such as weather or family.

B: If communicate in my mother tongue, I would act/talk differently. Cos I will be more comfortable/confident on the message that I want to deliver, I know the word/message that I deliver will not offend others. But I will become introvert & sensitive to the message that I received & heard about.

C: I speak direct when using English. But if I keep that direct style when I speak Chinese, I will sound too direct or even rude. Because it's not a traditional Chinese way.

D: In this example, if I talk with the clients in Chinese, I will probably act and speak in another way. I won't ask the clients about their sexual activities and health directly. Instead, I will ask it indirectly and use more euphemistic ways to make sure that the clients want to talk about it openly.

E: If I talk in my mother tongue, I can talk it freely without much effort.

F: I can freely arrange the words' sequence or even use some shortened forms.

G: Chinese expression in business context would be much more formal, preciseness on writing format, and so it turns out to be complicated to read, not that clear and direct.

H: Yes, it will be different. Firstly, my voice will be stronger. Secondly, the way to communicate will be not so direct. Third, I will explain the details first then come to the summary. Last, no liaison, I will speak every work clearly.

I: I think I would. Cause Chinese is a beautiful language that with deeper meaning. But English words are just easy to represent what you want to say.

J: If use mother language, most of time you have informal touch with the person, can directly ask that person to share her/his perspectives.

K: Easy, straightforward. Example is shown above.

L: Perhaps. Or maybe even more talkative – after all mother tongue is what you've been using since childhood.

M: Yes. If we both speak Chinese, we understand each other easily and efficiently.

N: Yes, because you know the culture, and you get the feeling that the way you are talking is correct. At least no harm for other people.

**Q6: For the changes you described in question 4, would they still happen if you use this foreign language in an informal situation (not at workplace)? Why? What makes you decide to change or not?**

A: Still, I notice it's their culture and habit on this way of communication, be it work of daily conversation. However, I do talk differently if I know this person well, it will depend on personal relationship with the person I am having conversation with.

B: I think would happen if I use this foreign language in an informal situation. I don't think the change will be changed based on informal situation or not. It might be impacted the wording that I choose, but my language character will not change.

C: Maybe. I might do some adjustments to different situations, but it's based on who I am first. My personality is direct, so sometimes if I think my way is acceptable then even at work I don't change. But I don't think there's a big gap because English culture has been impacting me a lot, the way I'm using is very close to their culture already.

D: I will still make the change in an informal situation, but it may not go so far compared with a formal or professional situation. I think there are two factors that affect the change. The first is if it is necessary to talk about a private topic. The second is the willingness of other people to talk about it.

E: I think it will still happen, because of the limited numbers of vocabulary I have. If I am familiar with the vocabulary I need to use in that topic, then I don't need to make extra efforts.

F: Yes, I will still keep these changes. The reason is the same as in question 4. Smooth communication always goes first to me with respect to the language

G: Who are the readers and what is result/effect to drive are the main factors to determine changes in behavior.

H: Most of them will be happened. The main reason if the culture difference and a different way of thinking. Chinese people communication is in an implicit way, while Westerners are in a direct way. No matter it is in a formal or informal, when I face to a Westerner and need to speak English, I will change the thinking way, tone to adapt to the English communication environment.

I: I would rather not mix Chinese and English in a non- working environment. And same reason as above. Not all people understand them, and it make me feel I have been losing my sense on how to speak proper Chinese.

J: No, I'm usually not talkative in informal situation.

K: Will still make the change. English is relatively more popular and well known in the world then all the other languages. Because of this, the way that people communicate using English is always very similar. In brief, communication for western people is explicit and straightforward, at the sample, English also has its own beauty because the expression is always very graceful. Therefore, the uniqueness of the English language is the key factor that make me change the way I talk.

L: I think it has something to do with your personality. Sometimes it just happens unconsciously. So yes, they would probably still happen in an informal situation – just maybe in a more casual way.

M: In informal situation I would be more open and talkative because no need to worry about work thus we can interact better.

N: Yes, you are not sure about your judgment of cultural difference.

**Q7: Based on your own working experience, do you think there are less or more conflicts happening with counterparts while using English at workplace? Why?**



A: More. Because that's not my first language. Sometimes my wording and talking style might sound weird or even unfriendly to native English speakers. Especially in emergency circumstances, if I can use Chinese to communicate, my expression will be efficient and accurate. But if in English I might fail.

B: More conflicts. Because it's not my mother tongue. I can't find accurate words to express myself sometimes and that will cause misunderstanding. But I think no matter English or Chinese, if your counterparts can't get your point correctly, there might come the conflict.

C: Less. Because normally in English, I use in a very polite way, like I use lots of "please", "thank you", "could you", "may I", etc. and are very polite. In Chinese, as a Chinese native speaker, I'm too familiar with this language that I won't care about my manner and politeness. I will be more emotional, direct and even rude. When driven by the emotion, the brain won't think too much when it is your native language. But you need to think twice if it is in another language.

D: I think there are more conflicts when I speak Chinese, my mother tongue. First of all, I tend to be more careful in choosing which words and expressions to use when speaking and writing English. Secondly, the listeners or readers are more tolerant of foreigners who speak English as a second language.

E: More conflicts. There would be misunderstanding due to vocabulary and wording.

F: I think both. I've witnessed someone couldn't express himself very well and caused his colleague misunderstood. That had conflicts because of that. The conflicts happened in speaking Chinese might not due to poor language skills, might be about the real conflict itself.

G: I don't think conflicts have anything to do with language. It more depends on one's attitude while communicating with others. Troublemaker will be troublemaker anyway, no matter which language he/she uses.

H: I think communicating in English brings more conflicts. The reasons are: 1) English is not my mother tongue. I have difficulties to express correctly sometimes. For example, sometimes my incorrect pronunciation caused misunderstanding, or what I asked was not what I meant to ask, then the answers from others were not what I wanted. I have to communicate back and forth, and conflicts happened sometimes. 2) Different cultural background. For example, once I had a conflict with a foreign colleague because I couldn't agree with his habit. That habit might be normal to westerners, but I felt not that acceptable to me.

I: No. It purely depends on people. As a matter of fact, I think using English is less likely to create conflict because that is not my mother language. So it is not as easy for me to detect any offensive message when speak or hear English vs Chinese.

J: Less. Using Chinese brings more conflicts. Because Chinese is my mother tongue, I can express exactly what I mean. It is very natural for me to add tones. Sometimes my tone is too strong and easily causes conflicts with my colleagues. But in English this happens less.

K: Whether there's a conflict or not, it does not depend on which language you are using. So I would say none of these two language will cause conflict in workplace. It all depends on your own characteristic or the work atmosphere. If you are easy to be irritated, then there's always conflict in your work no matter which language you use, English or Chinese. If people around you are very friendly and intelligent, the likelihood of having conflict is low also disregarding which language will be used among this organization.

L: It depends on the speaker's personality and how good he/she can speak English - good enough to express himself/herself precisely with no involvement into any potential 'conflict' and, capable to

explain himself/herself to eliminate the conflicts if there's already any. So in this sense, I'd say that using English could be more likely to get into conflicts.

M: More. Because I know less about western culture than Chinese culture.

N: Less. Because it's much freer to express in mother tongue. But to use English to communicate at work, I need to plan how to say it in advance.