



## Korean Business Professionals' Language Attitudes Towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the language attitudes and perceptions of Korean business professionals with extensive experience in intercultural communication, focusing on their views of English as a lingua franca (ELF) from the perspective of sociocultural theory. Using thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with nine Korean business professionals, the findings reveal three key themes: 1) perceptions of nativeness, 2) prioritisation of accommodation, and 3) conflicting views on ELF. While participants emphasised the importance of fluency in ELF, they did not equate fluency with native-like proficiency. Instead, they prioritised the ability to convey ideas in a more explicit and intelligible way over achieving a native-like accent or pronunciation. Participants also acknowledged linguistic diversity in ELF communication and skillfully employed both productive and receptive accommodation strategies. From a sociocultural theory perspective, ongoing social interactions and activities allow speakers to refine their actions and mediate relationships with others. The findings indicate that ELF speakers' increasing intercultural experiences foster more flexible and accommodative linguistic behaviours, enhancing their awareness of language diversity and complexity in ELF contexts.

### KEYWORDS

ELF, language attitudes, sociocultural theory, nativeness, accommodation, intercultural sensitivity

## 1. Introduction

As the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been growing and expanding in international contexts, ELF research has also received attention in English language teaching (ELT) and applied linguistics. Along with pragmatic studies to identify common features of communicative strategies in ELF, the study of language attitudes is the research area that has flourished in ELF academia (e.g., Baird and Baird 2018, Cogo and Siqueira 2017, Ishikawa 2017, Ishikawa and Panero, 2016, Jenkins 2007, Otsu 2019, Sung 2018). Language attitudes play a crucial role in the interactive process of language use as well as in acquiring and learning a language. As Garrett (2010) puts it, “language attitudes would be expected not only to influence our reactions to other language users around us but also to help us anticipate others’ responses to our language use and so influence the language choices that we make as we communicate” (p. 21). Seidlhofer (2011) also suggests that speakers’ perceptions of the language they use and their performance of it will affect “the way interactions proceed, and the linguistic forms they exhibit” (p. 49). Consequently, language attitudes are involved in all the processes of using certain forms and strategies and constructing meanings and therefore are crucial to understanding language users’ communicative behaviours and pragmatic patterns in ELF interactions.

ELF research into language attitude challenges standard language ideology and native speakerism ingrained into all contexts of English use and teaching (Dewey 2014, Dewey and Pineda 2020, Jenkins 2009). The global spread of English and the subsequent variation of the language make it difficult to identify and define the notions of standard English and native speakers of English (NSEs) in a monolithic way. British English or American English, which are commonly considered standards to evaluate correctness and legitimacy, is also merely one variety of the language among others. Within the framework of standard language ideology and native speakerism, which stress the validity of prioritising native speakers, which marginalises other language users by classifying them as foreign, non-native speakers (NNS) of English are permanent language learners rather than language users despite their fluency, intentional creativity, and diverse communicative needs (Seidlhofer 2011). Jenkins (2007) argues that “NS (native speaker) norms continue to colonise the minds’ of non-native English speakers, leading to assumptions of NS linguistic superiority and often, with them, feelings of linguistic insecurity,” which eventually generate their negative attitudes toward ELF (p. 32). However, because of the role of English as a lingua franca, many people use it as a convenient tool for communication every day. They often see themselves as users rather than learners, and they are naturally exposed to a wide variety of language usage without feeling the need to master these forms ‘properly’ themselves (Seidlhofer 2011).

Along with globalisation, Korea has encountered more intercultural contacts and transnational experiences than ever before. Many Korean people have travelled abroad for diverse purposes, and a growing number of foreign visitors and sojourners have also begun to visit Korea and continue to flow to the country. Consequently, Korean people continue to be more involved in multicultural communities of practice, and Korea has shifted to a more multilingual and transcultural society (Bae and Park 2020, Paik 2018, Park and Lo 2012, Ra 2019, Um and Cho 2022). This sociolinguistic change allows Korean speakers to have more opportunities for intercultural communication through ELF. Given that today English is used as the most common means of communication in an intercultural context in Korea, ELF interaction has dynamically taken place among multilingual speakers in the country. Despite the growing use of ELF, however, ELT practices and applied linguistics research in Korea are heavily approached from the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL), and a standard language ideology and native-speakerism are still prevalent in ELT in Korea. In addition, many language attitude studies tend to address Korean teachers’ and students’ perceptions towards native and non-native varieties of English and reveal their strong preference for English as a native language (ENL) teaching models (Choe and Lee 2024, Choi

2021, Lee and Kim 2019, Lim and Hwang 2019).

However, many studies have criticised the dominance of ENL perspectives, arguing that they fail to capture the shifting linguacultural dynamics present in various sociolinguistic contexts across the globe (Jenkins 2015, Kohn 2018, Seidlhofer 2017). Korean learners and users of English must grasp the evolving sociolinguistic phenomenon of multilingualism and broaden their perspectives on English to be well-prepared for diverse ELF interactions. Greater exposure to intercultural communication and a deeper understanding of language diversity can influence language attitudes and foster a shift away from native-speakerism in various ELF communication contexts (Lee 2019, Lee and Lee 2019, Lee and Lee 2023). This study aims to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Korean business professionals toward ELF from a sociocultural theory perspective by exploring their intercultural communication experiences through ELF, as well as the insights and accomplishments gained from these interactions. The research questions are as follows:

1. What did Korean business professionals experience in ELF communication?
2. What attitudes and perceptions do Korean business professionals have towards ELF use from these experiences?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory, initially developed by Vygotsky (1978, 1997), emphasises learning and cognitive development as arising from interactions between individuals and their environments. The theory posits that learning is a socially constructed and temporally situated cognitive process, shaped by semiotic tools and artifacts created by communities over time (Duff 2007). Essentially, sociocultural theory highlights the interplay between an individual's psychological development and the socially and culturally produced contexts and artifacts that shape and transform cognitive and mental processes (Scott 2015). Through the use of cultural artifacts, such as language, within their environment, individuals create new tools that enable them to regulate their biological and behavioural activities (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). In the BELF context, speakers utilise English as a sociocultural artifact within business settings, refining and adapting their communication strategies through ongoing social interactions.

Sociocultural theory examines not only how external factors contribute to individual learning but also how cultural beliefs and attitudes shape speakers' actions and language use. In the realm of communication and language use, learning is redefined to encompass knowledge construction, meaning-making, and socialisation (Duff 2007). Social interactions and activities enable individuals to refine their actions and behaviours by using symbolic tools that mediate and regulate their relationships with others and themselves, transforming the nature of these interactions (Poehner and Lantolf 2024). Through participation in collaborative activities, language users internalise the outcomes of shared efforts, gaining new sociocultural strategies and knowledge.

In international business settings, BELF speakers also acquire and develop diverse communicative strategies, intercultural knowledge, and behaviours. This interplay between individual and social processes significantly influences language use and development. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, human interactions are mediated by instruments and semiotic tools, with ELF serving as a key semiotic tool in intercultural communication within modern business environments. This tool not only facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and negotiation of meanings but also helps to prevent and resolve potential issues.

## 2.2 Business Professionals' Language Attitudes in ELF

In many multinational corporations, English has been adopted either as an official corporate language based on a company's language policy or as a default language based on a tacit agreement among members of business communities of practice (Ehrenreich 2010, Kankaanranta et al. 2018, Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005, Nielsen 2020). Although the use of other languages can accomplish diverse business tasks in multilingual business environments, and multilingual resources and translingual practices play an effective role in the achievement of mutual understanding among speakers (Cogo and Yanaprasart 2018, Franceschi 2017), English is often the only common language that speakers share in international business contexts. As English has been used as a *de facto* lingua franca in global business, business professionals perceive English communication skills as a top priority in job performance and often connect English competence to their professionalism. Nielsen (2019) illustrates that business professionals state they need to know domain-specific terminology and professional expressions in English and develop the ability to use and understand them in order to accomplish demanding tasks more professionally. From their business experiences, therefore, speakers of English as a business lingua franca (BELF) regard English fluency as a key means of performing their professionalism more successfully.

One common perception of BELF speakers is that clarity and adept negotiation of meaning are more important than native-speaker (NS) correctness or accuracy. Kankaanranta and Planken (2010), for instance, conducted questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with professionals in five Euro-based multinational corporations and found that BELF speakers prioritised communicative effectiveness over the native-like pronunciation and perceived English in BELF contexts had no association with any specific NS norm or cultural value. Given that business communication is featured as a goal-oriented and task-based genre, the main purpose of BELF is to convey professional knowledge and exchange business-specific information. Consequently, shared professional expertise and mutual understanding of business-related issues are more crucial in BELF discourse than linguistic accuracy and correctness. To foster clarity and mutual understanding in BELF interactions, speakers employ a variety of pragmatic strategies. Franceschi (2019) illustrates that BELF users actively adopt communicative strategies such as repetition, highlighting key points, simplification, using approximations, paraphrasing, and creating word-coinage to improve clarity and ensure comprehension. These speakers enhance explicitness by employing multiple approaches, such as emphasising crucial elements, simplifying and clarifying information to prevent communication breakdowns, and compensating for gaps in their linguistic repertoire by creating alternative expressions that effectively convey their intended meaning while maintaining conversational flow. Consequently, BELF speakers prioritise conveying the key message over strict adherence to pronunciation or grammatical accuracy, emphasising clarity in their interactions (Agustina et al. 2024, Tan 2024). This perspective among business professionals underscores that BELF competence is more closely linked to effective communication skills and the ability to accomplish tasks in professional business settings.

Business professionals also highlighted the importance of accommodation practices, where ELF speakers adjust their speech style and patterns to align with their interlocutors (Jenkins 2022). This includes modifying speech rate or employing simplified vocabulary and sentence structures to facilitate mutual understanding. ELF speakers observed that they consciously avoided idiomatic expressions, ambiguous language, and complex sentence structures (Kaur 2017, Seidlhofer 2011). Instead, they relied on various pragmatic strategies, including paraphrasing and confirmation checks, to ensure effective communication (Kankaanranta et al. 2018, Nielsen 2020). Kaur and Birlik (2021) particularly highlight the crucial role of 'explaining' as an adaptive pragmatic strategy in BELF interactions. Their research shows that business professionals in formal international meetings use the strategy of explaining to enhance communicative effectiveness. This strategy involves providing additional

information or contextual details to foster communicative alignment and expand shared understanding. The study underscores that pragmatic competence in accommodation is essential for achieving communicative goals in business contexts.

Also, plurilingual resources are regarded as an effective accommodation strategy in ELF interactions. Franceschi (2017) demonstrates that BELF speakers employ diverse plurilingual practices as communicative strategies, including the use of discourse markers, inclusion and exclusion techniques, interpersonal relationship management, identity construction and projection, and localisation devices. These practices reflect a listener-oriented and collaborative approach. Convergent strategies are employed to align with interlocutors, foster a relaxed atmosphere, and reduce tension. This flexible use of language adapts to individual speakers' needs and goals, facilitating the co-construction of meaning and contributing to successful BELF communication. Business professionals' orientation towards accommodation in ELF is also highlighted in Cogo's (2016) research, which explored the ELF attitudes of professionals in a multinational banking corporation. Professionals in the study foregrounded intercultural accommodation and displayed tolerant attitudes towards multilingual resources. These perceptions and attitudes towards BELF affected their communicative practice because BELF speakers revealed that they attempted to use accommodation skills and diverse pre-empting strategies to achieve mutual construal and avoid potential misunderstandings. The findings also show that in the BELF community of practice, the co-construction of shared repertoire and the strategic use of multilingual resources are shed light on for effective communication to deal with business in practice.

Despite the raised awareness of diversity and the pursuit of clarity, meaning, and content-focused communicative practice, however, BELF speakers are found not to be completely emancipated from the NS ideology. Otsu (2019) demonstrates that Japanese professionals show ambivalent attitudes to English use and prefer to produce more native-like language use in BELF communication with speakers in higher positions and authority. While the professionals prioritised communicative effectiveness and functional aspects of BELF over linguistic accuracy and criticised form-focused language teaching, they believed that conformity to NS norms can project their professional competence and have more advantages for job success. Lee's (2025) study highlights the ambivalent attitudes of BELF speakers toward nativeness. While recognising the reduced importance of NS norms in ELF contexts, Korean professionals still expressed a preference for specific ENL varieties, such as British English. Similarly, Chung (2017) found that despite acknowledging the value of context-specific English skills, Korean business people aspire to achieve native-like fluency and pronunciation. They also emphasise the importance of learning the culture of ENL countries, underlining the significance of sociocultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency. Otsu (2019) identified two primary reasons for ELF speakers' preference for NS norms. The first is their past experience learning EFL, where inner-circle English varieties were presented as the standard teaching model, leaving them with limited exposure to other English varieties. As a result, they are more likely to perceive inner-circle English as correct, proper, and authentic. The second reason is their belief that using NS English can enhance their personal and corporate image, reinforcing their adherence to nativeness.

While English is widely adopted as a common means of communication in international business contexts, the perceptions and attitudes of Korean business professionals towards ELF have not received significant attention. A significant amount of research on attitudes towards ELF has focused on academic settings, examining the language attitudes of teachers and students. In contrast, studies on ELF in business contexts, particularly within the Korean business environment, remain scarce. Given that English has played a crucial role in the Korean business context due to increasing intercultural contact and international business transaction, it is valuable to explore the perceptions and attitudes of experienced Korean business professional towards ELF use to gain insights into the evolving dynamics of ELF in Korea and to envisage its future role and position within multilingualism. Therefore,

this study aims to address the underexplored area of Korean business professionals' attitudes and perceptions toward ELF from a perspective of sociocultural theory, shedding light on a group that has been largely overlooked in existing research and comparing these findings from those of other BELF contexts. By focusing on this demographic, the study contributes unique insights to the discourse on ELF in Korea, particularly in professional and intercultural communication contexts.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 The research Context and Participants

South Korea's global economic involvement has led to an increase in interactions where English serves as the primary means of communication (Bae and Park 2020). This environment provides a rich context for examining how Korean professionals perceive and navigate ELF, revealing insights into both linguistic challenges and intercultural perceptions for effective and successful communication in a high-stakes setting. In selecting participants for this study, a purposeful sampling was employed to align with the study's focus on language attitudes towards ELF among Korean business professionals. The participants of the study were nine Korean business professionals who were chosen based on their active involvement in international business interactions that necessitate the use of ELF as a communicative tool. Business professionals who use ELF regularly can provide rich insights due to their frequent engagement in intercultural communication and real-world application of English in international business settings. To recruit participants, the researcher posted the notice on the online board of a social community for postgraduates at a university, explaining the overall content and aim of the research. Ten people replied and expressed their interest in the research, and nine out of them participated in the actual interviews. All the participants are highly experienced ELF speakers and possess advanced levels of communicative competency. Regarding the English proficiency of the participants, all of them had either a TOEIC score above 900 or an IBT TOEFL score exceeding 100. Table 1 presents demographic details of the participants. In terms of gender, five were male, while three were female. Their ages ranged from 30 to 51, with five in their 30s, three in their 40s, and one in their 50s. The participants held diverse occupations, including trader, shipping agent, merchandiser, lawyer, stewardess, civil servant, travel agent, and stock broker. Additionally, Table 1 includes information on their language proficiency, experience of living abroad, and years of overseas work experience.

**Table 1. Participants' Profile**

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Languages	Experience of staying abroad	Years of working abroad experience
1	M	37	Trader	Korean, English, Chinese	China/Slovakia	5 years in China 2 years in Slovakia
2	M	39	Shipping agent	Korean, English, Chinese	US/ UK	
3	M	38	Merchandiser	Korean, English, Japanese	US/ Japan	
4	F	38	Lawyer	Korean, English, Spanish	US/Vietnam/ Laos	3 years in Vietnam 2 years in Laos
5	F	30	Stewardess	Korean, English, Malay, Chinese	Malaysia	
6	M	51	Civil servant	Korean, English, Arabic	Iraq	6 years in Iraq
7	M	42	Travel Agent	Korean, English, Chinese	US/ China	
8	M	45	Trader	Korean, English, Japanese	US	
9	F	43	Stock broker	Korean, English, Chinese	US, Singapore	

### 3.2 Data Collection

For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face. Before the interviews, each participant was asked to sign an ethical approval and consent form to confirm that he/she had been fully informed of the research purpose and process and agreed to voluntarily participate in the research. A semi-structured interview can not only elaborate on the issues from predetermined questions but also track a line of enquiry generated by the interview (Hashemnezhad 2015). With open-ended questions, participants can be involved in a more flexible and free process of responses than in structured interviews. By eliciting in-depth responses from participants to open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews can also capture spontaneous emotional and cognitive responses (Cargile 2002, Garrett 2010). As semi-structured interviews “allow participants to introduce, draw upon, redefine or even reject linguistic notions, ideas and experiences in their ways during the formulation of situated evaluation,” they make it possible to draw inductive reasoning from the data and expand the predetermined frameworks and conceptualisation of a topic (Ishikawa and Panero 2016, p. 91).

The interview questions for the study include participants' experiences of English use and ELF, perceptions of their own English, ENL, and ELF, and attitudes towards language variation and culture in ELF. The full interview questions are provided on Appendix 1. The interviews were conducted in the researcher's office and lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. All the data was audio-recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. The interviews flowed freely based on the participants' responses although the interviews covered several pre-determined questions. Therefore, the key themes of the findings were labelled and categorised inductively according to major arguments emerging from the data. In addition, all the interviews were conducted in Korean to help participants respond more elaborately and convey their perceptions and ideas in greater detail. Although all participants were fluent enough to articulate high-level topics in English, English is rarely used in intra-cultural communications among Korean native speakers. Therefore, Korean was adopted for the interviews to create a more natural and comfortable atmosphere between the researcher and participants, and all the data was fully translated to English for analysis.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis was conducted. This approach is utilised to uncover and interpret themes within the data, offering a thorough thematic overview of the entire dataset (Lawless and Chen 2019). As a widely used qualitative research method, it has been instrumental in exploring language users' experiences in intercultural communication (Cutting 2020, Nfor 2023). Themes and categories relevant to intercultural communication in the business ELF context were identified, extracted, and organised through the thematic approach. During the initial phase of the analysis, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the data, carefully examining the text to pinpoint key statements reflecting the participants' perceptions and attitudes toward ELF. In the subsequent phase, meanings were derived and constructed from these significant statements. Finally, the core themes were identified and organised based on the formulated meanings. For coding, the researcher initially focused on answering the foreshadowing questions, which guide the research and affect the collected data (White and Marsh 2006) and inductively developed the themes and categories emerging from the data. In other words, while reading through the data, the researcher identified key phrases and text segments corresponding to the research questions and classified key themes and patterns through the process of thematic analysis. Then, the data was re-read to formulate new categories and constructs that were not predicted at the beginning of the analysis. To enhance trustworthiness and reliability in the interview analysis, peer debriefing was employed. This process involves discussing reflections

and interpretations with an unbiased peer to gain clearer insights (Henry 2015). The analysis results were reviewed and assessed by two experienced qualitative researchers in the field. Additionally, the three participants were invited to verify and compare the findings to ensure they aligned with their intentions and experiences. The coding through thematic analysis provided the three main themes: (1) perceptions of nativeness; (2) prioritisation of accommodation; and (3) conflicting views on ELF. Each theme is analysed and presented in the following section.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Perceptions of Nativeness

One notable feature of language attitude in the data is the participants' views on nativeness in ELF interactions. Korean ELF speakers in this study underscored the significance of fluency in intercultural communication through ELF, but their understanding of fluency did not always align with the nativeness of English. Fluency is perceived as the ability to automatically plan and process a language to “the degree to which listeners consider them to be instances of smooth language performance” (Hüttner 2020, p. 30) or “the ability to produce comprehensible output in real-time” and “individuals' relative communicative functionality” (Worden 2016, p. 28). The notion of fluency is commonly measured and evaluated in terms of the linguistic abilities of non-native speakers compared to native speakers of the target language, but the dichotomy of native and non-native speakers has been criticised in that native speaker ideology ignores the current sociolinguistic reality in many parts of the globe, which are characterised by multilingual and multicultural environments (Baird et al. 2014, Jenkins 2017, Jenkins and Leung 2019, Murray 2018).

The participants foregrounded the ability to express their ideas in a clear and intelligible way rather than native-like accent or pronunciation and had positive attitudes toward Korean-accented English if it was fluent enough. Although the participants evaluated speakers with higher speech rates and native-like accents as fluent, their conceptualisation of fluency tends to more focus on the pragmatic aspect of fluency and the communicative appropriateness in a range of contexts. They also viewed nativeness in terms of cultural dimensions and perceived intercultural sensitivity as a vital element to characterise fluency in ELF. The findings propose a new conceptualisation of fluency in ELF contexts, which shifts from viewing fluency as a native-like language competence to appropriateness and intercultural sensitivity to perform more effective communication in ELF contexts.

#### Excerpt 1: P4, 38, Lawyer

I think the question like **which variety of English you prefer such as US, UK, Australia, or Canada is unreasonable** since it is the same question as which one you prefer, Southern Korean or Northern Korean. It depends on individuals, contexts, and educational history. Correctness is important because I'm a lawyer, so I need to produce more precise expressions, but intercultural sensitivity and cultural awareness are also very important. In many cases, I communicate in written English like an email, and if the interlocutor's English is very poor, I don't evaluate that English positively although I can understand the rough meaning. Apart from the incorrect use of English which can hinder the overall flow of understanding, I think that intercultural sensitivity is more important. **I don't care about nonnative speakers' accent.**



The respondent in the data points out the problem of conceptualisation of English in which the preference for a certain variety of English ultimately equates to the dichotomy between nativeness and non-nativeness of English. Although she accepts the pluralism of English across the globe, she is reluctant to make the distinction between nativeness and non-nativeness of English and describes it as unreasonable and irrational. She further argues that when we talk about the Korean language, we do not ask about the preference of local varieties of the language, believing that the diversity of English is a highly common and inevitable phenomenon since any language has different accents, lexical features, and pragmatic diversities of use according to speakers, speech communities, and contexts of use. Even though the interviewee takes correctness and intelligibility into account for a shared understanding, she foregrounds intercultural sensitivity in ELF communication over nativeness. Another issue raised in the data is that nativeness is to a large extent concerned with culture, and the following extract suggests that the concept of nativeness is more related to cultural elements rather than a language itself.

#### Excerpt 2: P8, 45, Trader

When I was sick or in any emergent situation, what is important in interaction is not the native-like pronunciation of words like stomach but the appropriate expressions to describe my conditions. I think it is much more important, but I don't think that native-like speaking is not an important element to acquire a language. Instead, **what 'native-like' means is to know the culture.** When I moved to the US at a young age, I had to know the culture even though I did not mean to. US people love baseball, so many idiomatic expressions are connected to baseball games. It's completely cultural, and no matter how fluent one is, he or she has no idea what the expressions mean if he or she does not know the rules of baseball or US culture. If it's Spanish or French, they will have different cultural elements in the language.

The respondent demonstrates that the notion of nativeness is more involved in cultural dimensions than communicative functions in language use. The participant's remark supports that specific-culture-based idiomatic expressions "serve the function of signaling membership of a certain native-speaker community and underscore the distinction between 'them' and 'us'" (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 52). By comparing the examples of the idiomatic use of expressions in American English to Spanish and French, nativeness in language use is conceptualised within the framework of English as a foreign language (EFL), which primarily targets communicating with speakers in ENL communities. This leads to the possibility that unilateral idiomaticity is more likely to interfere with shared understanding among speakers from the outside of the culture (Seidlhofer 2004, 2009). This functional redundancy of NS 'shibboleth' can cause communication breakdown in ELF contexts and "marginalise other users of the language as foreign" (Seidlhofer 2011, p. 53).

#### 4.2 Prioritisation of Accommodation

Another significant issue related to language attitudes in the data is ELF speakers' accommodative actions in communication. Participants were observed to recognise the linguistic discrepancy and variability of their interlocutors in ELF communication and adeptly use diverse accommodation skills. The ELF speakers showed that they tried to adjust their speech rate, styles, and patterns to their interlocutors' levels of English proficiency, pragmatic styles, and the contexts in which the language was used. In ELF interactions, a key challenge is managing diversity and complexity while overcoming unpredictability and uncertainty to ensure successful communication. Therefore, accommodation, which is a communicative process where speakers adapt their utterances to their interlocutors and modify their speech style and patterns (Giles et al. 1991), is essential for more

effective and collaborative interaction (Jenkins 2022). The participants accept the linguistic and cultural differences as a natural phenomenon and attempt to adapt to their interlocutors' linguistic proficiency.

### Excerpt 3. P2, 39, Shipping agent

As I work in the shipping industry, I meet clients from diverse linguacultural backgrounds including India, Chinese, the Middle East, and Greek. Some of them have a strong accent, and sometimes their pronunciations are difficult to understand. But **I think it's natural and inevitable**, and maybe I also have a unique Korean accent. I try to overcome such unexpected communicative situations, and I have better understood them with more experiences of intercultural communication. I sometimes encounter cultural differences with people from different cultures. However, I think individual differences also have a great influence on cultural adaptation and intercultural experiences.

### Excerpt 4. P1, 37, Trader

In intercultural communication, the interlocutors' mother tongue and their accents vary, and particularly, their levels of English fluency are also diverse. However, it hardly matters because **I try to 'level down' for the interlocutors with lower fluency** while **I tend to 'level up' for the interlocutors with higher fluency**. Maybe the interlocutors with higher fluency than me will try to adapt to my English fluency and comprehension level. In intercultural interaction, it does not matter whether the English of the interlocutors and me is native-like or not, but **the common goal for both of us is to convey meanings and achieve successful communication**.

Both interview data above attest that the ELF speakers accept diversity and complexity as a normal and inevitable phenomenon in ELF situations. Although they mention that the interlocutors' phonological diversity can sometimes cause intelligibility troubles, it can be overcome by more exposure to diverse L1 interlocutors and their accents. The ELF speakers not only exhibit a higher level of tolerance towards the interlocutors' accent, pronunciation, and levels of English proficiency but also attempt to adjust and adapt to the interlocutors' linguistic repertoires. In addition, they recognise that the other speakers are also likely to accommodate them for a shared understanding and highlight that the main goal for ELF communication is not native-like language production but conveying meanings. This comment supports the findings in previous ELF research, according to which ELF tends to be meaning-focused rather than form-focused (Cogo and Dewey 2012, Önen 2016, Mauranen 2012,). The following data shows that proficient ELF speakers can adeptly make accommodations and variations in their speech according to their interlocutors' linguistic capacity, lingua-cultural backgrounds, and communicative situations.

### Excerpt 5. P7, 42, Travel agent

There are huge gaps between speakers' English levels, so from a variety of experiences of intercultural communication, **I try to accommodate their language levels such as vocabulary and sentence structures**. I believe I have a greater ability to accommodate compared to other speakers. I use different expressions and vocabulary with British, American, and other second language speakers, respectively. When I talked to my native speaker boss, I used to use a very formal language with high-level vocabulary. **In intercultural talk through English, I try to use easier expressions and simpler sentence structures**.

The interview extract corroborates that more experiences in intercultural communication and ELF can lead to

better accommodation skills, and proficient ELF speakers are willing to shift their speech patterns and styles to adapt to the interlocutor's perceived interpretive competence. Speakers shift their speech levels downwards or upwards "to take the recipient's requirements into account which, in turn, leads to increased intelligibility" and facilitates understanding and interpretability (Jenkins 2000, p. 170). However, as seen in the data, proficient ELF speakers' attuning action is not limited to shifting linguistic usages such as vocabulary levels or sentence structures, but pragmatic patterns such as speech style or formality are also adjusted according to interlocutors' lingua-cultural backgrounds and contexts of use. As pragmatic and socio-cultural norms in intercultural communication do not always align with the speaker's L1 or ENL norms and values, ELF speakers tend to modify and alter their pragmatic speech styles and patterns according to the recipient's pragmatic norms and purposes of communication. The following extract shows that ELF speakers strategically converge and diverge their pragmatic styles according to different-L1 interlocutors to achieve more effective and successful communication.

#### Excerpt 6. P3, 38, Merchandiser

When I communicate with speakers from different cultures, **I try to adapt to the interlocutors' socio-cultural and pragmatic styles.** For example, I know Germans do not prefer small talk for icebreaking before a business meeting. I was very shocked in the first business meeting with my German client when he straightforwardly began the business meeting with authentic (?) business topics. On the other hand, **Italian clients are completely different from Germans.** As they tend to have too much small talk before a business meeting, I should interrupt their small talk so as not to miss the crucial issues in the meeting. I realised that in some cases **it is useless to follow the tips 'use small talk for ice-breaking in English conversations'**, which I learned in the English classroom. In intercultural communication, participants need to research general information on the socio-cultural speech styles of the interlocutors, particularly before formal business meetings.

The participant highlights the importance of accommodation to the interlocutors' socio-cultural and pragmatic speech styles in business ELF conversation settings. He describes his devastating experience with a German client in the first business meeting, where there was no icebreaking time with small talk. Although he learned in English classrooms that it was desirable to have icebreaking time with small talk in conversation, he realised that this tip could not be applied to all English communication situations such as ELF, where speakers with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and their own pragmatic norms contact one another. He further describes that in contrast, he had to mediate having too much small talk in business meetings with Italian clients. The data shows that the ELF speakers attempt to reduce the differences between themselves and their interlocutors by converging towards the interlocutors' L1-specific pragmatic styles while they diverge from the interlocutors' pragmatic patterns when necessary to keep their ultimate purpose of the conversation.

The ELF speakers are shown to pay more attention to appropriateness, which refers to "the extent to which particular communicative functions, attitudes, and ideas are judged to be proper in a given situation" (Canale 1983, p. 7), and appropriateness in ELF cannot be always determined by ENL norms. ELF speakers are found to shift and modify their pragmatic behaviour to be communicatively competent and appropriate, and accommodation dynamically and proactively occurs at interpersonal and intergroup levels. As seen in the data, pragmatic and strategic competence need to be more flexible according to speakers' lingua-cultural experiences and repertoires, and it can be developed "based on the extent to which ELF speakers have acquired and used in ELF experiences" (Murray 2012, p. 325).

#### 4.3 Conflicting Views on ELF

Although participants separated fluency from nativeness and stressed the importance of accommodation in intercultural communication from their ELF experiences, some also showed ambivalent attitudes towards NS varieties of the language and culture. One participant who works in a German-based automobile corporation in Korea displayed his positive attitude towards other ELF speakers' communicative performance and highlighted the salience of business knowledge and domain-specific expertise as a professional as below.

**Excerpt 7. P3, 38, Merchandiser**

I have worked with many non-native speakers from diverse nationalities and visited over 20 countries for business trips. From my experience, **most non-native English speakers are highly accommodative and adaptive to interlocutors from other cultures**, and they noticeably attempt to accommodate me when I show respect and an adaptive attitude to them. In business, it is very important to show interest in and rapport with the other's culture.

**Excerpt 8. P3, 38, Merchandiser**

When I worked at the electric wire company, I had to explain highly technical content, and it was crucial to achieving a shared understanding of technical expertise. At the automobile company, I have to demonstrate engineering terminology in a highly professional way. **When I don't understand technological concepts, the other speakers attempt to produce their speech in different or easier ways, making meanings more detailed and clearer**. The key aim in business communication through English is to get things done.

Despite his positive perceptions and experiences of ELF communication with other non-native speakers of English, he expressed his personal preference for a specific variety of English, which is British English.

**Excerpt 9. P3, 38, Merchandiser**

When one Korean colleague talked on the phone for business communication, **she spoke English with a very strong British accent, and it sounded very posh and cool**.

This comment shows the tendency to admire and idealise the British speakers of English despite the recognition that communication in practice does not need to be NS-oriented. Another participant, who showed a highly open and flexible attitude towards diversity and accommodation in ELF, also exhibited her preference for British English among others.

**Excerpt 10. P9, 43, Stock trader**

**In terms of preference for a specific variety of English, for me, it's British English**. When speakers, particularly young children, speak English with a British accent, **it sounds so attractive**. This is merely my personal preference. Speaking in a poor British accent, simply mimicking, is not attractive, though. It might be a stereotype that Koreans who speak native-like English with a British accent look smart and intelligent. Personally, Australian or New Zealand English does not sound so attractive.

This participant is highly fluent both in English and Korean and identified herself as a balanced bilingual in both languages as she went to the US at the age of 13 and studied and worked in the country for over 12 years. Despite her native-like fluency in American English, she had a preference for British English, but she seems to recognise a contradictory aspect of her attitude, inferring from her utterance '*this is merely my personal preference*.' An

interesting point, however, is that both participants' preferred attitudes towards British English are not associated with intelligibility or communicative functions but based on aesthetic reasons, as seen in the use of the words 'cool' and 'attractive.' It is more concerned with the superficial aspect of whether the language sounds nice or beautiful, but it is not about whether the language is useful or people understand each other, or whether the accent is intelligible. The participants' comment '*Koreans who speak native-like English with a British accent look smart and intelligent*' not only demonstrates that the use of a specific variety of English can act as an indicator of positive speaker images such as smartness or intelligence but also supports that language attitude can be affected by symbolic functions of language rather than practical functions. The participants' ambivalent and contradictory attitudes towards nativeness are also found in relation to the issue of cultural identity.

#### Excerpt 11. P4, 38, Lawyer

When I go travelling abroad, particularly in Europe, people ask me whether I'm an American, not asking Asian or Korean. When I answer '*no, I'm Korean*', they ask me again '*why do you have a perfect American accent?*' But I don't feel so good because they might think I'm as fluent as native speakers, but many Europeans do not judge Americans positively. Although I'm ethnically Korean, I am often identified as an American due to my English fluency and American accent. **I think that identity is distinguished between linguistic and cultural ones.** While I'm culturally Korean, and I'm happy to have a cultural identity as a Korean, I don't want to be identified as a Korean-like English speaker. I don't want my English sounds like a Korean speaker's English. On the other hand, I don't want to be seen as an American, either.

This extract shows the complexity of the speaker's linguistic and cultural identity in multilingual environments. As the participant studied in the US for a long time and achieved native-like fluency, she is often identified as a native American speaker. Although she has self-confidence in her native-like fluency in English, she notes that she does not want to be identified as a native American culturally but wants to keep her cultural identity as a Korean. She emphasises that linguistic identity and cultural identity need to be distinguished from each other, and it presents that both identities are not necessarily coincided, and favourable language attitudes towards a specific variety of languages do not always guarantee positive perceptions of that culture. In multilingual situations such as ELF, speakers have multiple identities in terms of nationality, culture, ethnicity, profession, and language, and these identities can be constantly combined, separated, or fluid from each other. This finding shows the complex relationships between language, culture, and identity in multilingualism and supports that a priority of linguistic nativeness does not necessarily lead to a preference for cultural nativeness.

Table 2. The Main Themes of Analysis

Perceptions of nativeness	Prioritisation of accommodation	Conflicting views on ELF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● fluency rather than native-like accent or pronunciation</li> <li>● appropriateness and intercultural sensitivity to perform more effective communication in ELF</li> <li>● more related to cultural elements rather than a language itself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● accepting the linguistic and cultural diversity as a natural phenomenon</li> <li>● adapting to interlocutors' linguistic proficiency and repertoire</li> <li>● shifting speech patterns and styles to adapt to the interlocutor's perceived interpretive competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● highlighting the salience of business knowledge and domain-specific expertise as a professional</li> <li>● expressing personal preference for a specific variety of English</li> <li>● language attitude affected by symbolic functions rather than practical functions</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study sought to investigate Korean business professionals' experiences with ELF and the perceptions and attitudes towards ELF from a sociocultural theory perspective. A key finding of the study highlights that participants emphasised fluency as a critical factor for successful communication. However, their understanding of fluency did not necessarily align with native-like speech. Instead, participants defined fluency as the ability to articulate and convey ideas clearly and intelligibly, tailored to their communicative needs, goals, interlocutors, and specific contexts of use. Some participants challenged the native speaker ideology, embracing diversity and fluidity as natural and common features of ELF. From the perspective of sociocultural theory, BELF speakers' understanding of fluency, which is more emancipated from nativeness, highlights the influence of external factors, such as frequent intercultural interactions and accumulating ELF experience. These factors shape the attitudes and perceptions of ELF users, moving away from conventional notions of fluency. Traditionally, fluency has been assessed based on the linguistic abilities of non-native speakers in comparison to native speakers of the target language. However, this native/non-native dichotomy has faced criticism for overlooking the current sociolinguistic reality of many multilingual and multicultural contexts worldwide (Baird et al. 2014, Jenkins 2007, 2017, Jenkins and Leung 2019, Murray 2018). While some participants expressed ambivalent attitudes, showing a preference for native speakers and ENL varieties of English despite recognising variability in its use, they prioritised intelligibility, intercultural sensitivity, and fluency over achieving a native-like accent or pronunciation.

The native speaker ideology places heavy emphasis on linguistic inheritance, perpetuating a deficit-based view of non-native speakers. As Seidlhofer (2011) argues, the primary issue with native speakerism in the context of ELF lies in its hegemonic control over international communication, privileging native speakers of English while disempowering other users. Non-native speakers are often judged negatively for their non-native-like or less native-like language use, regardless of their intentions or creative expressions. However, adherence to ENL norms, which are rooted in a single variety of English, fails to prepare ELF users for real-world communication demands. In fact, native-like speech rates, lexical preferences, and idiomatic expressions may lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns in ELF interactions (Hüttner 2020). The study's findings underscore the need to conceptualise fluency in ELF beyond native speakerism, placing greater emphasis on its pragmatic dimensions. Effective ELF communication requires new skills and competencies that prioritise functionality and adaptability over conformity to native norms. As Brumfit (2000) notes, fluency can be defined as "the maximally effective operation of the language system" (p. 69), emphasising effectiveness and functionality as central to fluent communication in ELF contexts. Furthermore, since fluency is context-dependent and judged based on interlocutors, conversational goals, and situational factors, the ability to adjust and adapt to one's interlocutors is crucial for achieving more effective and fluent communication in ELF settings. In this vein, the concept of accommodation holds significant importance in ELF communication.

Another prominent finding of the study is that the participants produced both conscious and subconscious adaptation of their speech styles and patterns to align with their interlocutors. The findings revealed that the participants adjusted their lexical choices and sentence structures based on their interlocutors' proficiency levels, while also modifying pragmatic styles and degrees of formality according to the interlocutors' linguacultural backgrounds and the specific communicative contexts, which align with previous ELF studies (e.g. Cogo and Yanaprasart 2018, Franceschi 2017, Kaur and Birlik 2021, Nielsen 2020). From the sociocultural theory perspective, ongoing social interactions and activities enable speakers to refine their actions and behaviours by mediating and regulating their relationships with others. Therefore, in intercultural business contexts, participants attempted to develop various communicative strategies through continuous social interactions and negotiation of

meaning, fostering the co-construction of knowledge. These findings highlight ELF speakers' awareness of linguistic and paralinguistic variation in ELF interactions and their efforts to navigate superdiversity and complexity through skilled linguistic, pragmatic, and strategic accommodation (Cogo 2012, Jenkins 2015). Notably, the motivation for accommodation in this study was primarily driven by a focus on communicative efficiency rather than affective purposes, aligning with Jenkins' (2022) findings in empirical ELF research. ELF speakers were observed employing strategies such as leveling down or leveling up their lexical, phonological, and pragmatic patterns to enhance clarity and comprehensibility for their interlocutors. These adaptive behaviours fostered improved mutual understanding and minimised potential communication breakdowns. Furthermore, ELF speakers consistently adjusted their utterances to align with their interlocutors' linguistic capacities and sociocultural expectations, aiming to be better understood while reducing misunderstandings in diverse communicative contexts.

Language attitudes can be understood as a dynamic process shaped by various factors, including practical experiences, language contact, social interactions, and contextual usage. In other words, attitudes towards language are not fixed or static; rather, "they affect, and are affected by numerous elements in a virtually endless, recursive fashion" (Cargile et al. 1994, p. 214). To fully understand language attitudes, it is important to consider speakers' perceived pragmatic motivations, their experiences with language education and use, their socio-linguistic environments, and their understanding of diverse lingua-cultural issues. Although this research is based on a small-scale interview dataset, the findings suggest that ELF speakers' cumulative experiences with intercultural contact through ELF can lead to more flexible and accommodating linguistic behaviours, as well as a heightened awareness of language diversity and complexity in ELF communication. Future research should explore the language attitudes of ELF speakers from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, examining how these attitudes relate to factors such as intercultural encounters, motivations, learning experiences, and contexts of use. This would provide a deeper understanding of ELF users' perspectives and the evolving landscape of English usage.

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### Appendix: Interview questions

1. Are you aware of the global spread of English and the use of English as a lingua franca?
2. What do you think of the current situation of English use in the global context?
3. What do you think of native English speakers and their English?
4. What do you think of your own English?
5. Is English important to you? Why?
6. Do you have any preference for a certain variety of English?
7. Do you want to be as fluent as native-like? Or do you want to keep your linguistic identity as a Korean speaker with fluency in English?
8. What do you think is most important when communicating in English with speakers from different cultures?
9. What do you think of the English you are most exposed to?
10. Please comment on any ideas or opinions about English or English use.

Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary