



**Title of Project:**

Ecology of English as a Lingua Franca, Plurilingualism, and Social Relationships: A Longitudinal Investigation of an English-medium International Program in Thailand

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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

The past few decades have witnessed the increasingly prevalent use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in international encounters beyond its traditional home of Anglophone countries. Unlike any other language, a notable fact about ELF is that most of its users are those who have traditionally been referred to as nonnative speakers; about a decade ago, Crystal (2008) conservatively estimated that there were as many as two billion of these individuals, and the number continues to rise to this date. While there also exist non-English lingua francas that are pertinent to certain locales and professions (Amelia, 2005; Kubota, 2015), on the whole, the role English plays in contemporary globalization is plainly unprecedented.

Against this backdrop, ELF as a scholarly field was established in Europe some two decades ago. Viewing nonnative uses of English in their own right, the field has striven to consider deviations from native-speaker norms as *difference* (rather than *deficiency*), such that it is not seen as automatically compromising communicative effectiveness of ELF users (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011). Among myriad domains of use, ELF scholarship has devoted considerable attention to the role of ELF in international higher education. To date, research has explored diverse areas, such as language practices in the classroom, language attitudes among stakeholders, and institutional policies (e.g., Baker & Hüttner, 2016; Björkman, 2013; Jenkins, 2014; Mauranen, 2012; Murata, 2016; Smit, 2010). However, in the interest of unravelling ELF users' preexisting competencies, research has rarely considered study abroad (SA) in non-Anglophone countries as a context for *language learning*.

The scarcity of research notwithstanding, an increasing number of students are choosing to improve their English in non-Anglophone countries in view of their aspired futures as global professionals who are able to traverse and communicate across geographical and digital spaces (Dervin, 2013; Kalocsai, 2014; Kimura, 2017). Also, these contexts are emerging as preferred options for many students, as SA in some Anglophone countries is becoming rather prohibitive due to economic and political reasons. Moreover, non-Anglophone countries conceivably hold great promise in providing SA participants with opportunities to cultivate skills and dispositions for dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity in ELF-mediated translocal encounters. To shed empirical light on this emerging phenomenon,

my dissertation longitudinally investigated the experience of Japanese exchange students at a Thai university whose rationale for SA, though not exclusively, involved the learning of *English*. Anchored in up-to-date scholarship on ELF as well as on SA, the dissertation addressed the following three research questions:

1. How do today's English learners decide on their SA destinations in the context of globalization when languages are increasingly deterritorialized?
2. How do issues of identity and investment shape the formation and maintenance of social networks in a nontraditional SA context for learning English?
3. What recurring activities, communication practices, and learning opportunities are observed in such a context? What is the place of ELF situated within local multilingualism and social relationships?

## **Research Methodology**

The site of the study was a public university campus on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand. Being the largest campus of University of Thailand (pseudonym) with over 20,000 matriculated students, the campus houses a broad range of departments and colleges, many of which offer English-medium classes and degree programs. All three of the focal participants were international exchange students enrolled in the English for business communication (EBC) program (pseudonym) at the time of my data collection.

To obtain an emic understanding of my participants' evolving experience, I undertook the following data collection procedures as part of my fieldwork: (1) interviewing the focal participants (over ten semi-structured interviews with each of them); (2) video-recording naturally-occurring interactions among the focal participants and their friends (over 70 hours in total); and (3) gathering publicly available accounts of study abroad experience produced by the focal participants. In addition, I kept a research journal to note down the observations and reflections I made during my interactions with the participants.

After initial coding of the whole collection of interviews and publicly available accounts, I reorganized the data around the prominent social groups with whom each individual regularly interacted. For each prominent group, I associated the participants' attitudes, investment, recurring activities, and communication practices, as well as other issues I identified in the initial coding process (e.g., perceived hardships in everyday affairs and future aspirations). I engaged in the reorganization of data in this manner because of the centrality of individual social networks in understanding the SA experience, established in my review of the SA literature (Coleman, 2013, 2015; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015).

In making sense of the data, I adopted the notion of social networks conceptually and relied primarily on narratives as a means of data presentation. This process helped me make sense of and give coherence to the isolated concepts and themes within each individual case, without reducing them into isolated variables. In doing so, I strove to preserve "individual agency and intention," which is "difficult when cases are pooled to make general statements" about the whole population under investigation (Riessman, 2008, p. 12). To illustrate (and in some cases complicate) the themes issues discerned in the narratives, I examined the recordings of naturally-occurring interactions meticulously using the methods of conversation analysis.

## **Summary of Findings**

By analyzing the data through narrative and conversation analytic methods, the study provided longitudinal accounts of the place of ELF situated within local plurilingualism and social relationships.

Particularly, in recognition of the importance of social networks in giving rise to regular communicative engagement (Coleman, 2013, 2015; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015), special attention was given to the participants' evolving social networks and communication practices as mediated through their available subject positions and varying degrees of investment in different social practices and groups. In doing so, the study offered a contextualized understanding of the contemporary concerns of English learners who choose non-Anglophone countries as their SA destinations for a variety of reasons.

Overall, findings of the study suggest the highly contingent and variable nature of the SA experience, mediated through participants' subject positions, social relationships, socioeconomic backgrounds, histories of language learning and intercultural communication, and future aspirations, as well as varying degrees of investment in different social practices and groups. These differences were decidedly implicated in their social networks and communication practices, giving rise to different opportunities, challenges, and dilemmas. Echoing the existing literature, the study illuminated various themes, including social proactivity (Dewey et al., 2013), affinity through special talents (Mitchell et al., 2017; Churchill, 2009), first language/culture as "tradable cultural capital" (Mitchell et al., 2017, p. 194), sojourners' affective needs (Coleman, 2013), linguistic exclusion through codeswitching to a non-English language (Kalocsai, 2014), and place gendered subject positions in language learning (Takahashi, 2013). Taking social networks as central to the evolving experience and learning, the study shed light on these themes that were pertinent to the participants' (non)participation in different social groups and practices. This holistic approach allowed for fuller depictions of the participants' experiences as *whole people* (Coleman, 2013) than do other approaches that focus on pre-selected contexts or outcomes.

## Implications

Though the study involved only a small number of participants, their experience is not without implications to other sojourners, educators, and contexts. Indeed, as Richards (2003) maintains, "In a field as broad geographically, socially and intellectually as TESOL, [...] the power of the particular case to resonate across cultures should not be underestimated" (p. 21).

Firstly, their experience points to the dilemma of incorporating an ELF perspective in SA, which may logically appear to be a promising avenue for future research and education in light of the role of ELF in globalization. Findings of the study suggested that preference for native-like grammar and pronunciation is still prevailing among some learners (cf. Jenkins, 2007). Thus, for sojourners to fully benefit from English-medium SA in non-Anglophone countries, pre-departure training should be provided to raise their awareness of ELF. It would also be important to conduct close needs analysis, as such contexts may not be suitable for all learners depending on their future aspirations.

Secondly, findings suggested the centrality of individual sojourners' investments in different groups, subject positions, and agency within social constraints. Considering these issues is crucial to better understanding language learning in SA in the context of increased global mobility, wherein language competence and acquisition can no longer be defined straightforwardly in terms of predetermined norms (cf. Canagarajah, 2013). Such individualized attention will likely afford researchers and educators to better grasp the unpredictable and contingent nature of language learning processes taking place in each SA context and ultimately help them to break away from the monolingual bias of travelling to a foreign country to learn one territorialized language and culture.

Last, but not least, more in-depth studies with diverse groups of participants are needed to investigate the promising phenomenon of learning English in non-Anglophone countries. Continued research in this area will potentially assist various stakeholders involved in educating today's English users who are faced with immense linguistic and cultural diversity. It is hoped that programs like the one examined in the current study will receive more importance in years to come in the context of

contemporary globalization when *plurilingualism with ELF* is emerging as an everyday state of affairs for many.



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