

English as Business Lingua Franca: A comparative analysis of communication behavior and strategies in Asian and European contexts

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Abstract

Past research has concluded that people from collectivist cultures communicate differently from individualist cultures. This distinction has been based upon the observation of Hall's (1976) theory and has not been subjected to systematic empirical investigation. In this paper, I report a research finding examining communication behaviors of individualist cultures (Sweden and Finland) and collectivist cultures (Hong Kong and Japan). The data sets were the transcripts of intercultural meetings where participants discussed and made decisions about similar topics. Using this meeting data, the communication behaviors on multiple dimensions are examined. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the data are analyzed to answer the three research questions put forward. While the quantitative aspect of the data answers research questions related to turn-taking behaviors, the qualitative data describes the discourse patterns used in relation to topic management strategies.

Keywords: intercultural decision-making meeting, English as Business Lingua Franca, turn-taking behaviors, use of backchannels, floor management.

Resumen

El inglés como lengua franca de los negocios: un análisis comparativo del comportamiento comunicativo y sus estrategias en contextos asiáticos y europeos

Estudios previos han demostrado que las personas procedentes de culturas colectivistas se comunican de manera diferente a como lo hacen otras personas

de culturas individualistas. Esta distinción se ha basado en el estudio de la teoría de Hall (1976), si bien no ha estado sustentada en una investigación empírica sistemática. En este trabajo presentamos los hallazgos observados tras examinar los comportamientos comunicativos de culturas individualistas (Suecia y Finlandia) y de culturas colectivistas (Hong Kong y Japón). Con este fin hemos usado las transcripciones de reuniones interculturales en las que los participantes debatían y tomaban decisiones sobre temas similares. A partir de los datos de estas reuniones se examinaron los compartimientos comunicativos a la luz de varias perspectivas. Se analizaron aspectos tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos, con la finalidad de responder a tres cuestiones. Mientras que el aspecto cuantitativo de los datos obedece a las cuestiones relacionadas con los comportamientos en el cambio de turnos a la hora de hablar, los datos cualitativos describen los modelos discursivos utilizados con relación a estrategias de articulación del tópico.

Palabras clave: reuniones para la toma de decisiones interculturales, inglés como lengua franca de los negocios, comportamientos en turnos de intervención, retrocanalización, distribución de intervenciones.

Introduction

The use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has become the fastest-growing but the least recognized function of English in the world (Seidlhofer, 2001 & 2003; Jenkins, 2007). English as a language of communication between non-native English speakers is assuming an increasingly vital role. In contrast to the native and the established second language varieties, the use of ELF has been heatedly debated but relatively little studied (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009). In their edited book, Mauranen and Ranta (2009) noted that research into ELF has been slower to take off, despite pioneering work by a handful of scholars. Let alone the business English as lingua franca (BELF), the ELF in the international business contexts.

Globalization accelerates need for business English communication skill. English has increasingly become the lingua franca of today's world business language with business practitioners coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds and speaking different national languages. The phenomenon of ELF in international business contexts has drawn great attention as the world of business has become globalized. With the increasing importance of English in international business, undeniably, this global trend has made English a worldwide business language and a business lingua franca.

In the business context, the increasing use of ELF has to do with the globalization of business operations. The emergence of internationalized business operations means that a shared language is essential for communication purposes and that business professionals have to be able to communicate in English professionally and effectively. Firth (1996: 240), a pioneer of ELF research, noted that “*English (...) used as a ‘lingua franca’, [is] a ‘contact language’, between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication*”. Seidlhofer (2001: 146) defines a *lingua franca* as “a [shared] language by means of which the members of different speech communities can communicate with each other”. Taking these two definitions of Firth (1996) and Seidlhofer (2001), Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) coined the term of ELF by adding “B” to describe the use of ELF in international business contexts (see also Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, this volume). Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) defined BELF as English used as a shared communication code when conducting business within the global business discourse community. Charles (2007: 264) argued that BELF differs from ELF in that the domain of BELF is solely business, and “its frame of reference is provided by the globalized business community. The *B* of BELF is thus the socio-pragmatic backdrop against which language ... is to be interpreted”. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010: 204) further state that:

(...) English in today’s global business environment is ‘simply work’ and its use is highly contextual. Thus, knowledge of the specific business context, the particular genres used in the particular business area, and overall business communication strategies are tightly intertwined with proficiency in English.

Consequently, “BELF (...) implies a starting point where the code of communication is investigated in its own right, not as “English” in the traditional sense of the word” (Rogerson-Revell & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010: 276). This description coincides with Hanford’s (2010: 145) argument that “the most important issue in business is not language ability, but the experience and ability to dynamically maneuver within the communities of practice which business people inhabit”.

With globalization, a large and rapidly growing segment of non-native English speakers exchanges information in intercultural business communication settings, yet there is little systematic evaluation that

compares communication behaviors of non-native English speakers in intercultural communication situations. Prior studies examining English as a business lingua franca has been a focus in Europe for the past two decades. Scholars such as Nickerson (2002), Bargiela-Chiappini (2005), and Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) have contributed a great deal in this line of research by examining the effect of English as business or corporate languages in international business contexts. Aside from the research conducted in the European continent, in Asia, others studies have also investigated the communication behaviors of non-native English business professionals in multinational business meetings – see, for example, Rogerson-Revell (1999), Billow (2002), or Du-Babcock (1999, 2003, 2005 & 2006). These studies conducted in various parts of continents have confirmed that English is an intrinsic part of communication in multinational settings and a fact of life for many international business people.

This study examines the similarities and differences of the communication behaviors of Hong Kong Chinese and Swedish/Finnish business professionals. Specifically, the study examines the use of BELF between these two groups of business professionals. Consequently, the purpose of this research aims to (a) investigate communication behaviors of Hong Kong Chinese, Finnish, and Swedish business professionals in intercultural business settings and (b) examine the effects of the English-language proficiency on the communication behaviors of these two researched groups.

Review of literature

To investigate the impact of culture and English-language proficiency on the communication behaviors of the business professionals of the two researched groups, I use the concept of BELF to bridge micro (interlocutor's utterances) and macroscopic (reasons for turn-taking and topic management difference) issues. I first review the BELF framework and related studies conducted in Europe and Asia. Second, I discuss culture and English-language proficiency influences to explain bilingual business professionals' language use in international business communication contexts.

BELF in international business meetings

Lingua franca interactions refer to situations where “there are no native-speakers of English present in the interaction” (Nikerson, 2005: 195) in that English is used as a shared language among individuals who speak English as second or foreign language. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) described BELF in a merger-acquisition environment where the interactions between Swedes and Finns took place in English within the organization. They investigated business communication conducted in ELF in the globalizing business context in two major research projects financed by the Academy of Finland. The first project focused on two international corporations, both formed as a result of a merger between a Swedish and a Finnish company. The study examined the two most frequent communicative events (meetings and email messages) in which English was used as a lingua franca between Finnish and Swedish employees. The findings showed that when English was used as a shared language in the business domain, communication was facilitated, since all its speakers were on an equal footing because nobody’s native language was used.

The second research project explored the notion of communicative competence in general and BELF competence in particular as components of the business competence of internationally operating business professionals. The findings of the second research showed that although BELF communication consisted of a hybrid of discourse features originating from both the speakers’ and hearers’ mother tongues/cultures, a number of qualities of that communication were also shared. A more recent study by Kankaanranta and Lu (2013) further looks into this phenomenon and the perceptions of Finnish and Chinese business professionals of each other’s communication.

Rogerson-Revell (2008) investigated the use of ELF in international business meetings by European business organization. She concluded that while English for International Business (EIB) has an essential function as a lingua franca in multilingual settings, it can also present challenges both linguistically and culturally, particularly as more and more interactions are between speakers whose first language is not English.

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languages in international business contexts. Other researchers from the European continent (for instance, Poncini, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010) have investigated language choice and communication in different European languages. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) examined the discourse in British and Italian business meetings. The study analyzed both structural and pragmatic properties of intra-cultural business meetings (British and Italian) as well as the structural and pragmatic properties in intercultural business meetings that took place in an Anglo-Italian joint venture. Other studies by Poncini (2002, 2003, 2004 or this volume) examined an Italian company's meetings with its international distributors. Poncini's study shows how the meeting participants constructed their business relationships through their choice of linguistic strategies.

Aside from the research conducted in the European continent, in Asia, studies have also investigated the communication behaviors of non-native English business professionals in multinational business meetings. Rogerson-Revell's (1999) study examined management meetings of a Hong Kong international airline corporation, and looked specifically at interactive styles and interactive strategies. In her study, Rogerson-Revell examined interactive strategies in terms of how participants managed their talk and how well the messages were understood. In a similar research, Bilbow (2002) investigated the pragmatic aspect of interaction between native English-speaking expatriates and local Cantonese-speaking Chinese in a large multinational corporation. He concluded that: (i) Chinese are not as verbally active as Westerners in intercultural meetings; (ii) the improper use of directness strategies was a cause for pragmatic linguistic or sociolinguistic failure in the interaction between Western expatriates and local Cantonese-speaking Chinese; and (iii) communication breakdowns in intercultural business meetings result in perception gaps between local Chinese and expatriates.

Two recent studies by Du-Babcock and Tanaka (2010 & 2013) examined the communication behaviors of two researched groups coming from similar collectivist, high-context cultural backgrounds (that is, Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals) in their decision-making meetings in using ELF. The overall findings indicate that in spite of the presumed cultural similarity between the two researched groups, distinctive differences were observed in turn-taking behaviors from the quantitative perspective. Findings of the qualitative comparisons show that the Hong Kong Chinese

and Japanese business professionals exhibited similarities and differences. Both groups reflected their high-context cultural orientations. Disagreements were also expressed differently between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals in intercultural meetings. In contrast, in intra-cultural meetings, while Japanese business professionals carry over similar discourse patterns in disclosing their disagreements, Hong Kong participants tended to be more indirect in intra-cultural meetings if compared with intercultural meetings

Culture, English-language proficiency, and communication context

The cultural context and language affect communication participation and effectiveness. At a score of 25 in Hofstede's scale of individualism-collectivism, Hong Kong is categorized as a collectivist culture where group-orientation cultural norm is dominated, and people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily in the interests of themselves (Hofstede, 1991). In contrast, Finland and Sweden, with scores of 63 and 71 in the scale, are categorized as individualistic societies. It means that a high preference for a loosely-knit social framework is preferred in that Swedes and Finns are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only.

Adopting the cultural construct of individualism and collectivism (I-C), Oetzel (1995 & 1998) developed a model of effective decision-making theory (EDMT) to predict communication behavior in culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous small groups. Specifically, he examined differences in the number of turns, the number of initiated conflicts, and conflict styles in a small group that are likely to be influenced by cultural I-C and group composition. Results of his studies show that individual communication behavior is directly affected by cultural I-C and that individuals exhibited different communication behaviors when participating in homogeneous groups as compared to when participating in heterogeneous groups. Replicating Oetzel's studies, Du-Babcock (2003, 2005) examined the distribution of speaking time and turn-taking behavior in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. Du-Babcock concluded that Chinese bilinguals exhibited different communication behaviors when participating in a homogeneous group as compared to a heterogeneous group decision-making meeting.

Cross-cultural studies on turn-taking (see, for example, Ng et al., 2000) have examined the number of turns taken during business group meetings or in

family conversations and found that turn-taking behavior appears to be influenced by cultures across all groups. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) explained that this pattern of distribution can be linked to cultural differences. That is, members of individualistic cultures distribute turns unevenly, whereas members of collectivistic cultures distribute turns relatively equally because individuals from collectivistic cultures stress group sharing and harmony rather than individual gains.

In addition to culture, second-language proficiency is a determining factor that affects the communication behaviors of bilingual business professionals. Prior studies (for instance, Du-Babcock et al., 1995; Du-Babcock, 1999, 2003, 2005 & 2006; Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2010) have established that second-language proficiency is positively related to communication effectiveness and participation rates in second-language communication environments. Lower proficiency individuals contribute fewer ideas and engage in language simplification and avoidance strategies by adopting a variety of practices that either alter or reduce content and ignore difficult-to-express subjects.

Du-Babcock's (1999 & 2006) earlier studies examined different turn-taking behaviors and strategies and concluded that the language that communicators choose to use can influence and change message content and communication behaviors. Adopting the language proficiency-based explanation, the results suggested that first- and second-language proficiency differentials triggered the various communication behaviors of the Cantonese bilinguals. The results also indicated that individuals with higher second-language proficiency participated at a higher rate in second-language meetings than did individuals with lower second-language proficiency. Her cross-cultural study (Du-Babcock, 2003 & 2005) on the distribution of speaking time and turn-takings between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups concluded that Chinese bilinguals exhibited different communication behaviors when participating in a homogeneous as compared with a heterogeneous group decision-making meeting. Taken together, both studies suggest that second-language proficiency also has a significant effect on Hong Kong bilinguals' communication behavior in such types of meetings. Taken together two of her earlier studies, the results suggest that culture and second-language proficiency are determining factors that affect the communication behaviors of Chinese bilinguals.

Yamada (1990) found that Japanese participants were less active than American participants. Tanaka (2006a) investigated workplace interactions in English in a Japanese chemical company and further confirmed Yamada's (1990) research findings, in terms of turn-taking frequency. Tanaka's (2006a) study also concluded that Japanese participants were less active participants as compared with their United States and French participants. Other studies conducted in Asia confirmed similar results.

Echoing Du-Babcock's studies of the relationship between linguistic proficiency and turn-taking, these findings suggest that Chinese and Japanese as compared to Americans and West Europeans participate at lower rate due to their lower English-language proficiency. The linguistic proficiency difference, then, can create a critical communication breakdown as well as a power divergence between fluent speakers and less fluent speakers. In another study, Tanaka (2006b) took a critical discourse analysis approach to analyzing power relations between Japanese and French in intercultural meetings. The analysis of turn-taking patterns showed that the number of turns taken in the meeting can be affected by the speaker's position or power, both positively and negatively.

Based on the literature reviewed, three research questions are put forth and they are:

RQ1: Do business professionals from Hong Kong and from Sweden/Finland exhibit equivalent or different communication behaviors in English business meetings?

RQ2: Does English language proficiency affect the communication behaviors (for instance, turn-taking and number of words) of Hong Kong and Swedish/Finnish business professionals and managers in their English-language communication?

RQ3: Do business professionals of the two researched groups use similar or different topic management strategies?

Research method

The current study is based on two data sets which consist of Asian BELF data and European BELF data. Both sets of the BELF data were derived from qualitative and quantitative data collection from two different cultural

orientations that are categorized by Hofstede (1991) as individualism (Sweden and Finland) and collectivism (Hong Kong and Japan). The objective of the qualitative meeting dialogues data, derived from text-based analysis, is to examine how individuals from collectivist cultural oriented societies (Hong Kong Chinese business professionals) managed meeting talk similar to or different from individuals from individualist cultural oriented European societies (Swedish and Finnish business professionals). In addition, the quantitative aspect of the data (turn-taking behavior, number of words spoken and English-language proficiency) allows for the turn-taking theoretical framework to be operationalized and generalized. That is, the quantitative analysis of the data consists of performing interaction analysis of the intercultural business meetings.

In this section, I will first describe the collection of these two sets of BELF data and the analysis of the data.

Data collection

The research sites in the current study are business professionals from Hong Kong and Japan (thereafter referred to as “the Asian BELF data”), and those business professionals from two merged Swedish and Finnish corporations (thereafter referred to as “the Helsinki BELF data”) where participants engaged in ELF intercultural business meetings. Trade between the Asia-Pacific region and Europe comprises a significant component of global business. Because of this, research on communication between these two regions has become increasingly important. The communication tasks represented in the current study required all of the business professionals to engage in business discussions around various topics in group meetings. The participants needed to share and present information from their respective viewpoints. The discussions were video and audio taped.

The Asian BELF data

The Asian BELF data set contains transcripts of the dialogues of five intercultural business meetings between Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals. All of the five group decision-making meetings were held and videotaped in videotaping studios equipped with professional video-conferencing facilities. The meetings involved 26 Japanese and 17 Hong Kong Chinese business professionals. The Japanese participants were business professionals who were voluntarily signed up to participate in the

study in response to the invitation announcement posted on a website. As for the Hong Kong business professionals, the participants were invited by one researcher to take part. She screened the participants to make sure that their professional backgrounds were at the level to adequately take part in the research. Each decision-making group was made up of six to eight members consisting of a relatively equal proportion of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese.

The participants of the Asian BELF data assumed the role of board of directors in a simulated decision-making meeting. Their task was to respond to a crisis in that the participants had to decide whether the company should recall its product that had caused 20 to 30 deaths in the past five years – see Guffey & Du-Babcock (2010) for the description of the simulation. The communication task represented in this study required all of the participants to engage in decision-making discussions. The participants needed to share and present information from their respective viewpoints in order to reach optimal decisions. The group members had to interactively integrate inputs and make decisions that not only contributed to the profitability of the entire firm, but also took into consideration the well-being of society as a whole, rather than just make decisions that would improve results in their respective interests. In this connection, the focus of the discussions was on corporate strategy development in five topical areas that the company should adopt in its US domestic and Asian markets. Consequently, the dialogs captured the strategy development of the decision-making process that evolved in the board meetings.

Although random assignment was not possible, all of the participants had comparable and adequate English-language proficiency and interactive listening skills for business related communication. The work experience of these simulation participants was comparable and their work professions included mid-level manager, from various industries, such as private enterprises, educational institutions, pharmaceutical company, and law firms.

The transcripts of five intercultural business meetings form the basis for the Asian (Hong Kong – Japan) BELF data. The total word count for these five intercultural business meetings is about 43,547 words.

The Helsinki BELF Data

The second set of the data for the current empirical study consist of Nordic national and cross-border managerial meetings. This set of the data was

collected by a group of scholars and researchers at the former Helsinki School of Economics (at present Aalto University) in conjunction with a research project on in-house communication in newly merged Finnish/Swedish corporations. The Helsinki data contains a database of video-recorded company-internal meetings held in two multinational (originally Nordic) corporations. Three different languages are used in the data: Finnish, Swedish and ELF.

Two meetings (editorial and head office meetings) were chosen for the current study data set. The data was transcribed according to conversation analytic principles developed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). The extracts of the editorial and head office meetings came from a multinational corporation that operates in the paper industry. One meeting involves a group of managers where they dealt with in-house magazine production. The other is a meeting of the management group gathered in the head office for a regular top management meeting which involved top management from Sweden, Finland and German.

The Helsinki BELF data consists of a series of videotaped company internal meetings that lasted seven hours and 36 minutes. The meeting participants were Finns and Swedes. The meetings were conducted in English, with occasional Swedish or Finnish comments being injected. Likewise the initial, small talk stages of the meeting – before the Chairperson focused on the agenda – were in Finnish or Swedish. Meeting participants were representatives of various business units and various organizational positions. The editorial meeting was informal and the purpose of the meetings was to decide on the contents of the next issue of the globally distributed company-internal magazine. The head office meeting discussed “Big L(ondon) Project”. In total 53,334 words were incorporated for qualitative analysis.

Data analysis

Involved in this study were both quantitative and qualitative data. In the quantitative data analysis, similarities and differences in the communication behaviors were defined by (i) the number of turns taken by individuals; (ii) the length of speaking time during which each group member spoke; and (iii) the number of words spoken.

Turn-taking behavior analysis

To assess turn-taking communication behavior, the turn-taking framework developed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) was adopted together with the specific technique used in Du-Babcock's (1999, 2003, 2005 & 2006) studies. A turn consists of all the speech interactant's utterances up to the point where another individual take over the speaking role. The number of turns taken and the number of words spoken by each participant was codified, counted, and compared. Speaking time was calculated to measure the exact length of each conversational turn. The length of speaking time for each turn and words spoken were coded according to the designated interlocutors and served as a cross check of meeting interaction.

As the current study seeks to examine the differences in number of turns, speaking time distribution, and number of words spoken, possible variations in meeting duration and number of meeting participants may adversely affect the accuracy of the statistical test results on the variables being examined. In order to prevent these intervening factors from confusing or influencing the statistical tests and to obtain more accurate results, we controlled and adjusted the factors (that is, to treat them as covariates and keep them constant) by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests. To investigate how second-language proficiency affects the communication behaviors of bilingual business professionals, Pearson's correlation coefficient was also performed.

In doing so, mean scores and standard deviations for all the variables are calculated and compared. ANCOVA and Pearson's correlation coefficient tests are performed to investigate whether English-language proficiency and culture affects communication behaviors of individuals between Hong Kong Chinese and Finnish/Swedish business professionals and managers when participating in their English business meetings.

Measurement of English-language proficiency

The English proficiency of the business professionals was assessed by a native-English speaker who judged the English proficiency levels of the Hong Kong Chinese, Japanese, Swedish, and Finnish business professionals. The speech acts to be judged was derived from edited meeting videotapes. The judge viewed and listened to five minutes of each participant's speech acts and assigned their proficiency levels with reference to the Common European Framework (CEFR). The proficiency level was further re-

categorized: individuals with A2 and B1 were categorized as 1 indicating low-level of English language; B2 and C1 were categorized as intermediate-level and advanced-level of English proficiency, respectively.

In regard to the qualitative data analysis, I looked for the patterns that could describe the nature of communication process in the meetings. The analysis of the transcripts and videos uncovered three aspects: socializing/small talk, use of backchannels, and floor management.

Results and interpretations

This section first reports the results of the two research questions which were derived from quantitative analysis by examining whether different communication behaviors exhibited by the two researched groups as measured by turn-taking, speaking time, and words spoken in their respective intercultural decision-making meetings. Then findings of the Research Question 3 are described from a qualitative perspective. The qualitative analyses look into how business professionals managed discussion topics from three perspectives; namely, socialization/small talk, backchannels, and turn-taking and floor management.

Quantitative analysis

RQ1 asks whether business professionals exhibit equivalent or different communication behaviors in intercultural business meetings. To answer RQ1, the number of turns, the distribution of the speaking time, and the number of words are calculated and compared between Asian BELF data and Helsinki BELF data.

As the BELF data are derived from business professionals from Hong Kong and Japan for the Asian BELF data, and from Sweden and Finland for the Helsinki data, the comparisons are made to see whether there are within-group differences between Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese and between Swedish and Finnish. If no significance is found, the within-group data will be combined to form the basis for the statistical analysis. Table 1 compares the within-group differences of the two researched groups.

To investigate whether the within-group difference exists, an ANCOVA test was also performed. Table 1 shows that while there are significant differences between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals in all

three aspects of the communication behaviors (i.e., number of turns, amount of speaking time, and number of words spoken) in their intercultural meetings, no significant difference is found between the Swedish and Finnish business professionals.

	Turns (number)	Speaking time (seconds)	Words (number)
Asia BELF Group			
Hong Kong	65	694	1738
Japan	39	404	800
t-value	4.000**	3.786*	20.706*
Helsinki BELF Group			
Sweden	331	2085	5326
Finland	201	1035	2502
t-value	6.218	10.284	18.367

* Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

** Statistical significance at the 0.01 level

Table 1. A within-group comparison of the identified variables between the two researched groups in intercultural meetings.

For the Asian BELF data, the comparison data is made by contrasting the communication behaviors of the Hong Kong business professionals with the Helsinki data. The reason for doing so is to prevent a skewing of the results due to the low English-language proficiency of Japanese business professionals. As no statistical significance is found between Swedes and Finns, the data of the two groups will be combined for statistical analysis. Comparisons of communication behaviors between the Helsinki group and the Hong Kong group will be examined in RQ1.

To answer RQ1, the mean scores of three dependent variables, namely, the number of speaking turns, the length of speaking time and the number of words spoken, are calculated. Besides, to examine the existence of significant differences between Helsinki and Hong Kong business professionals, ANCOVA is performed. Here, the duration of the meetings is treated as covariate to control its effect on the three dependent variables. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Variables	Helsinki	Hong Kong	Mean difference	t-value
Turns (number)	261	54	207	10.962**
Speaking time (second)	1520	729	791	14.815
Words (number)	3806	1749	2057	22.144**

** Statistical significance at the 0.01 level

Table 2. Mean scores of the identified variables between the two researched groups in English business meetings.

The results in Table 2 show that the average number of speaking turns, the average amount of speaking time and the average number of words spoken by Helsinki business professionals are higher than those of the Hong Kong business professionals. This means that the European business professionals take more turns and use more words to express their viewpoints at the meetings. Significant differences at the 0.01 level are found in the mean differences in the average number of turns and in the average number of words spoken. No significant difference is found in the mean difference in the average amount of speaking time (in seconds).

RQ2 examines whether English-language proficiency affects the communication behaviors (for instance, turn-taking and number of words) of the two researched groups in their business meetings. To examine the effect of language proficiency on the communication behaviors, the level of English-language proficiency was divided into three levels; namely, low, intermediate, and advanced levels according to the CEFR language proficiency framework.

The Pearson's correlation coefficient is performed to answer this research question. The results are summarized in Table 3, which shows that English proficiency is positively correlated with the communication behaviors of Helsinki and Hong Kong business professionals in different ways.

English language proficiency	Turns (number)	Speaking time (seconds)	Words (number)
Helsinki Group			
Low (A1+A2)	/	/	/
Intermediate (B1)	0.412*	0.357	0.379*
Advanced (B2+C1)	0.416	0.389*	0.363*
Hong Kong Group			
Low (A1+A2)	0.310*	0.307	0.346*
Intermediate (B1)	0.325*	0.314	0.329
Advanced (B2+C1)	0.417*	0.410*	0.422**

* Statistical significance at the 0.05 level
 ** Statistical significance at the 0.01 level

Table 3. Pearson's correlation coefficients between the English proficiency and the communication behaviors between the two researched groups.

According to the English-language proficiency assessed by an intercultural communication specialist, the whole Helsinki group possesses intermediate (B1) or advanced level (B2 and C1) of English proficiency. The results show that for the intermediate group, correlations with significant differences at the 0.05 level are found between the level of English proficiency and the number of turns and number of words spoken. In contrast, individuals with

advanced English proficiency, correlations with significant level at the 0.05 level are found between the English proficiency and the amount of speaking time (in seconds) and the number of words spoken.

As for Hong Kong group, the results of the Pearson's correlation coefficient reveals positive correlations with significant differences at the 0.05 level in terms of the number of turns for participants with low, intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency. Correlations with significant differences at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels are also found in the number of words for business professionals with intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency.

RQ2 is partially supported. The results indicate that the English-language proficiency best predicts the length of speaking time and the number of word utterances of meeting discussion among participants who possessed advanced English-language proficiency. The mixed correlation results were observed indicating that the English-language proficiency only measures partially the strength of the association with the three identified variables.

When examining the transcripts of the meeting dialogues and turn interactions, it is worthy to note that the use of backchannels may have affected the results of participation rates between the two researched groups. To further examine whether English-language proficiency affects the frequent use of backchannels, frequency of backchannels was counted and calculated against the number of turns taken by individuals to obtain the percentage of backchannels used by individuals with different English-language proficiency levels. The correlation was also performed to examine the effect of English-language proficiency and use of backchannels.

Backchannel responses have been identified as a variable that affects turn-taking behavior (Laskowski, 2010). This widely accepted recognition has not been followed up by systematic research to measure the impact of backchannels. A backchannel is defined as behavior where a participant responds or reacts to the speaker (with "uh-huh", "mhmm", "eh?") without interrupting the speaker's turn – see, for instance, Goodwin and Goodwin (1992), Du-Babcock (2006). As backchannel responses are usually short, some researchers do not consider them to be complete utterances. However, backchannel responses (such as "(m)hm", "yeah", "really?") may constitute a full turn and express agreement, disagreement, and promises. In one instance, a backchannel response can allow the speaker to retain the attention of listeners, and the speaker does not want the speaking role to be taken over by the listener. In another case, the backchannel response can be a prelude

to taking a turn of speaking, so the listener makes sounds to show he or she is planning to speak immediately. In this case, the listener may say “Ahhhh” in a way that implies disagreement or that a contradiction is coming when it is the listener’s turn to speak. Studies (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992, among others) suggest that nonverbal backchannels (such as eye gaze, head nodding, facial movement) are essential in social interaction. However, in the current study, only verbal backchannels were measured. Prototypical backchannels commonly used in this study included such utterances as “yes”, “OK”, “U-hmm”, “yeh”, and “you are right”.

In comparing the use of backchannels, speech acts that include utterances such as “yes”, “OK”, “Yeh”, and “you are right” by each individual are categorized as backchannels. The frequency of backchannels are categorized and counted against with the total number of turns taken by each individual. The results show that backchannels used by Asian participants are that business professionals with low English-language proficiency exhibited more backchannels behaviors than those of intermediate and advanced English-language proficiency individuals (38.8%, 35.7%, and 31.8% respectively).

Figure 1 also shows that whereas the English proficiencies of the Asian business professionals increase the frequency of the use of backchannels decreases. In contrast, the backchannel behavioral patterns of the Helsinki group reveal an opposite direction. The results show that Helsinki business professional with advanced English proficiency (C1 level) exhibit 51.3% of backchannel which is higher than those who with B2 and B1 levels of the English-language proficiency for the use of 41.3% and 47.8% of the use of backchannels.

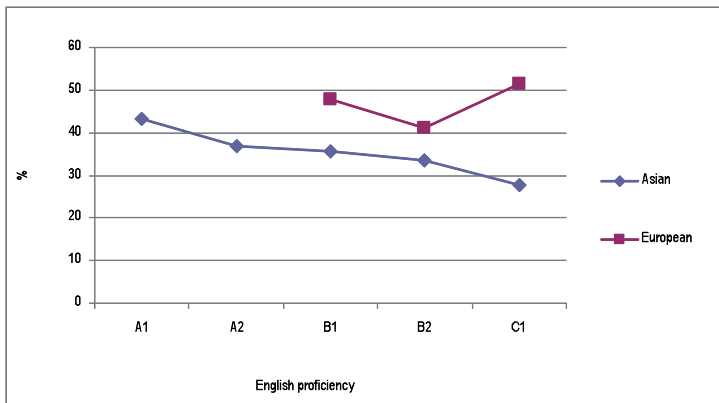


Figure 1. A comparison of the use of backchannels between the two researched groups.

In addition to the comparison between groups, a comparison of the use of backchannels among four nations was also made. Figure 2 shows that in the Asian group individuals with low English-language proficiency tend to use more backchannels than those with higher English-language proficiency. As for the Helsinki group, the results show that: (i) Finns exhibited more backchannels than Swedes when comparing individuals with same English-language proficiency; and that (ii) Swedish business professionals with higher English-language proficiency are likely to exhibit more backchannels.

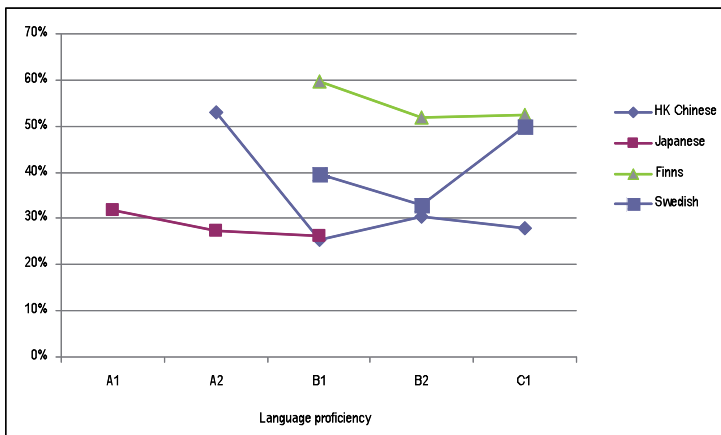


Figure 2. A comparison of the use of backchannels among four nations.

After examining the frequency of backchannels among four nations, further examination of the effect of English-language proficiency on the use of backchannels is made between these two researched groups. The Pearson's correlation coefficient is performed to investigate whether the English-language proficiency affects the frequency of backchannels (see Table 4).

Business Professionals	English-Language Proficiency		
	Low	Medium	High
Helsinki	-	.351*	.403*
Hong Kong	.152	.254	.302*
Japanese	.276*	.172	-

* Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Table 4. Effect of the English-language proficiency on the use of backchannels.

The results show that for Helsinki business professionals, the higher the English-language proficiency, the more frequent use of backchannels. The

same correlation pattern is also observed among Hong Kong business professionals. In other words, correlations with significant differences at the 0.05 level are only found with individuals who possess high-English proficiency among Hong Kong business professionals. As for Japanese business professionals, correlations with significant differences at the 0.05 level are found with individuals who possess low English-language proficiency.

In comparison with Du-Babcock's (2006) study in which Hong Kong bilinguals who possessed lower English-language competence tended to use backchannels to show their engagements, the current study shows a conflicting result in using backchannels in Helsinki group and Hong Kong group. The result of the Japanese group in using backchannels is consistent with Du-Babcock's findings.

The motivation of using backchannels among these three groups is worth noting. Consequently, the use of the backchannels will be further investigated from the qualitative aspect.

Qualitative data analysis

RQ3 asks whether business professionals from the two research groups use similar or different topic management strategies. Using qualitative analysis, I examine three aspects of topic management strategies; namely socializing/small talk, backchannel behaviour and turn-taking and floor management.

Socializing/small talk

Socializing/small talk is like a lubricant, and is treated in this study as an essential component, even though it is often regarded as peripheral and marginal due to its frequent occurrence at the opening, closing and transitional positions of conversation (Holmes, 2000). Socializing/small talk is relational genre (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007) that surrounds and intermixes with task-related communication and which develops positive attitudes that can result in more efficient and effective work-related communication. That is, if interlocutors are comfortable and excited about working with each other, the overall results can be improved work performance.

Socializing/small talk takes on a different degree of importance and has different patterns in Asian and Helsinki contexts. The degree and nature of

small talk also has to do with whether interlocutors are communicating in their first language and, when communicating in a second-language, their level of second-language proficiency. If interlocutors have lower language proficiency, it is probable that there will be less socializing/small talk as those involved need to concentrate on the task at hand. In addition, Asians may avoid small talk in order to prevent from being put in a face-threatening situation due to the possibility of making grammatical errors or embarrassing statements. Cultural factors also may affect the nature, frequency, and timing of socializing/small talk.

In a business meeting setting, the period during which the participants await the start of the meeting constitutes a good opportunity for socializing with each other through small talk. In this period, both the Asian and Helsinki business professionals engaged in socializing/small talk. The nature of the socializing/small talk differs in this case not because of cultural differences but because of the prior relationship of the interlocutors. With the Asians, the interlocutors did not know each other before, and therefore use this period to introduce themselves and to begin to develop their relationships. In contrast, the Helsinki business professionals had already met previously, and the socializing/small talk in the beginning period serves to renew, update, and further build and solidify their relationships.

Excerpt 1 describes the deliberation of socializing/small talk of the Asian business professionals. To do so, I analyze turns 14, 24, and 26 of Excerpt 1, an excerpt from one of the five intercultural meetings. Three Japanese (indicated by A B C) and four Hong Kong Chinese (indicated by D E F G) attended this meeting. In this excerpt (and other excerpts), I use italics to indicate the discourse patterns that are relevant to the topics of discussion. In the first two to five minutes, the participants in the intercultural decision-making meetings seemed to be consciously grounding their harmonious relationship by inserting a little piece knowledge of the partner's language (see Excerpt 1 utterances 14, 24, and 26) while introducing themselves. Such deliberate discourse confirms that Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese, both being members of collectivist cultures, value interpersonal harmony.

Excerpt 1:

14 G: I'm Cecilia, *Douzo Yoroshiku*. [*Pleased to meet you*]

24 B: And er... 我是*Takano* [I am Takano]

26 B: I'm Takano, I know a little bit only Chinese ar... 你們...很漂亮, [*You all are very pretty*]

In most of the intercultural meetings, interaction styles between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals did not differ much in greeting and self-introduction sequences. It should be noted that code switching from English to Japanese by Hong Kong Chinese participants and English to Mandarin by Japanese participants is used for achieving convergence as another study of Chinese and Japanese business interaction (Poppi, 2010) attests. Since the Japanese participants did not speak Cantonese, Mandarin Chinese was the only resource for them to use during strategic code switching.

Although harmony-seeking is said to be one of the attributes of collectivistic culture, caution is needed when asserting that the two groups share collectivist cultural values. Pre-meeting small talk is also often observed in Western individualistic settings as well (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). The convergence could be motivated by the need to understand each other and continue with the proceedings rather than for ideological reasons (harmony seeking) specific to collectivists.

In comparison with the Asian style of socialization, the meeting participants of the Helsinki group were inclined to injecting small talk, humors from time to time, especially the initiation of new topics. Comparatively, the Helsinki business professionals also spent more time for socialization before the beginning of the meeting. For example, in one of the Head Office meetings, the meeting participants spent seven minutes and 48 seconds to have socialization / small talk before the Chairperson called the meeting in order. The language for the socialization was also the combination of the native languages (Finns or Swedes) of the meeting participants and English.

Backchannel behavior

The backchannel behavior exhibited by Helsinki business professionals is very different from Asian business professionals. When examining the use of backchannels between the two researched groups, an interesting pattern is emerged (see Excerpt 2 for the Helsinki meeting). In a Helsinki meeting, meeting participants were discussing a Big L(ondon) project issue, and 104 turns (from turn 31 to turn 134) were devoted to the discussing of this issue. However, when decomposing the speech acts, only 12 turns were related to the issues, including the first turn that was initiated by the Chairperson. A, the person who was in charge of reporting the Big L issue, spoke eight times in providing information. D used two turns to ask issue-related questions (for example, how many people can be accommodated in the new building

and whether the company will provide cultural training to assist family members to adjust to living in London). The analysis shows that 88 percent of the speech acts was backchannel behavior with participants teasing around the points either in a humorous or sarcastic way.

Excerpt 2:

- 31 E: Raising the issue for discussion
 38 A: Explaining background of Big L
 56 A: Providing more information on Big L;
 64 A: More information on Big L and when the building would be available
 66 A: List of transferees
 69 A: HR matters
 71 D: Raising family training issue
 80 A: Details have not been planned yet
 85 A: Further clarify that there are two projects in Big L project: office project and HR project; also providing the name list on these two projects
 87-89 E&A: More information on who is on the list; humor[sarcastic??] beautiful steering group
 112 E: The location of Big L(ondon)
 131 E: From turn 113 to turn 134, meeting participants continued to talk about where the exact location in a teasing tone. Only in turn 131, E(Chairperson) commented that the location is a quite OK area.

In contrast, in a Hong Kong-Japan intercultural meeting, the participants took 52 turns (from turn 51 to turn 103) to discuss the option of the strategies the company should take in the US market. Of 52 turns, 7 turns are either silence or overlapping turns by all of the participants. In this connection, only 45 turns are used for categorization. The distribution of the turns is divided by individual participants and is categorized into two aspects: topic related discussion or backchannels. Table 5 lists the frequencies.

	Japanese Participants				Hong Kong Participants			
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Topic Related	0	3	1	4	5	2	8	7
Backchannels	0	2	1	7	1	0	2	2
Total	0	5	2	11	6	2	10	9

Table 5. Frequency of turns in relation to topical discussion or backchannel.

Of the 45 turns, 30 turns are topic related discussions and 15 are backchannels. When dividing the turns by nationality, Japanese business professionals only contribute 8 turns in the designated topic whereas Hong Kong business professionals contribute 22 turns. However, when looking at the use of backchannels, Japanese business professionals exhibited twice more backchannels than Hong Kong business professionals (10 versus 5 turns). The frequently used backchannel wording by Japanese business professionals are: “good”, “yeh”, “yes”, “um huh”, and “okay”.

Turn-taking and floor management

The examination of turn-taking interaction and the floor management reveals similarities and differences between the Helsinki group and the Asian group. In a Helsinki meeting, the floor management is free flowing among members except one situation when F was late for the meeting for about nine minutes. As soon as F stepped in and said “hi” to meeting attendees, E, the Chairperson, immediately passed the floor to F to discuss the issue. Excerpt 3 reveals that the Chairperson allows the turns to be taken freely except in one case that member F was late for the meeting, and the Chairperson assigned the turns to member F.

Next, I analyze turns 226 to 234 of Excerpt 3, an excerpt from Helsinki meeting that discusses the next issue of the in-house magazine. Five Finns (indicated by A B C G H), two Swedes (indicated by D E) and 1 German (indicated by F) attended this meeting; however, only three of them appear in the excerpt.

Excerpt 3:

- 226 E: Well, Heinz, we are, we are looking at the April results and I just said that magazine came actually above budget, which was strong ... and newsprint came out five below budget, which was the result of the strike in Finland. But er, *would you like to comment on any -anything especially on on on Mag and ...*
- 227 F: Yes
- 228 F: Yes
- 229 F: That's right
- 230 F: Yes, only er em, can say that er em if you talk about er magazine that er, weakest points we have again is er compulsory where we have special problems with er er variable ... costs. ... we are working on ... to present this is er, much more important item, restructuring plan how

- to be responsible for a restructuring project ... important point ... in magazine.
- 231 E: And I have said that the protocol was doing well now...
- 232 F: Yes, but but but not enough
- 233 C: Mm yeah
- 234 F: I wouldn't say that the direction is right, it's it's ok, but er, it's not enough if if you make a bench marking if you see the total in Spring in comparison to others, and we know.... management problem because there you have to be tough and you have to go really in details and have to...

In contrast, the style of floor management for the Asian business professionals reveals differences. Taking Hong Kong business professionals as an example, the floor management reveals differences between intra-cultural meetings where Hong Kong business professionals used either their native language, Cantonese, or BELF language, English. Excerpts 4 and 5 are examples of the deliberations between Hong Kong intra-cultural meetings in their native language, Cantonese and in second-language, English.

With regard to the floor management, the deliberations in Excerpt 4, Hong Kong intra-cultural Cantonese meeting, show when the meeting was conducted in Cantonese, the floor management and turns were mostly assigned by the Chairperson (indicated by B).

Excerpt 4:

- 56 B: ...不如咁啦，由阿Natalie個邊講先，而家有咩口野，你你點睇今次？口下！ [Natalie, how about starting from you first...]
- 60 B: 唔唔唔，... 個drugs 係combination呀，即係其實我口地口的藥係撈埋其他口的藥去食囉... 咁或者Diana你點睇呀？ [Uh Uh Uh...Diana, what's your opinion?]
- 66 B: 停一停先，Ok. 咁...阿Angela你又同唔同意佢口既講法 [Angela, do you agree with the decision on stopping?]
- 68 B: ...會唔會口的醫生接收口左大家錯口既訊息，所以導致口左咁口既誤會囉。... 咁呀...Cecilia, 咁你又點睇呀？ [Cecilia, what do you think?]
- 70 B: 你同唔同意醫生去繼續去配返口的隻藥？你同意既？ (looking at F and soliciting her viewpoints) (to Cecilia) [Do you agree with leaving the decision to the doctor?]
- 77 B: 咁呀，Nicole呢？ [Is that so. So Nicole, what about you?]

In comparison, different floor management is observed when the meeting was conducted in English in that the turns were taken by participants freely after the initial floor assignment by the Chairperson (see Excerpt 5). In general, at the intra-cultural English meeting, the Chairperson (indicated by B) interjected her ideas by clarifying the discussion of the issues or summarizing the discussion. Reasons for such a different floor management can be due to the English-language proficiency of the Chairperson. Unlike the meeting conducted in Cantonese, the Chairperson spent most of her turns clarifying or summarizing the discussions in intra-cultural English meeting.

Excerpt 5:

- 176 B: ... I would like *er let er like er Diana*, to *er* give your opinion *er*, in this issue.
- 177-187 E&B: ... I propose not to continue ..., but I would allow the doctors to continue ... (*Discussions continue between E and B*)
- 188 A: [*A took over the floor*] I totally agree with Celine (the Chairperson) because ... I see your point Diana, ... I agree with you. Yours is moderate approach ...
- 190-192 D, B, A: [*D took over the floor*] *So your choice is option A?*
- 193 E: [*E took over the floor and identify the next person to take over the floor*] ...So, Natalie, I would like to know if *er* you propose to stop *er* production and destroy *er* all the stocks, so you know at presence that still patients taking EasyFix, so what would you do?
- 195 A: Yes, I know so that's why I think we need to ... to see whether any supplement or any *ar* other drugs could be substituted, alright, or in in in replaced that EasyFix.
- 196 B: [*B / the Chairperson agrees with A's viewpoint and re-states the key points and stresses corporate image*] ... how to build up our build up or re-enhance our corporate image. It's it's a global, is our global asset, you know, the corporate image. And I think this approach is the most responsible behavior, to the end user, ... and which is the public ...
- 197-199 A: [*A took over the floor*] Yes it's a long term ((nodding)) ... tell the public again that our drug is reliable... So although we recall, for the um, now, but I think just for short term...
- 200 D: [*D took over the floor*] So you agree to recall all stocks but do you agree to destroy all stocks as well?
- 201-218 A, B, D: [*Turns from 201-218 are shared by A, B, and D to discuss the issues. The floor management is free flow.*] The topics of discussion are: (a) to alleviate public worries, so as to re-

establish the public im- reputation; (b) too soon to recall and destroy the product; and (c) not very trust those independent studies and those experts as well

219-220-234

E, B, A, D:

[*E took over the floor in turn 219 and ended his turn in 234 without invitation from the Chairperson*] Yes, Chairperson I agree [with D's viewpoints]. E thinks that recalling and destroying the product does not solve the real problem. ... I don't think at this moment of time, er we need to take so strong er reaction, right now.

[Note: From turn 220 to turn 234 the discussion was centered around whether the company should recall. E suggested that the company should hold a press conference stressing the successful cases].

In Excerpt 5, the intra-cultural meeting where English was used, the Chairperson initiated the topic in turn 176 and assigned the member to express her opinions. So, the turns between 177 and 187 were a dyad between the Chairperson and member E. The floor then was taken by member A in turn 188, followed by D in turn 190, and E in turn 193, without the invitation of the Chairperson. In turn 196, the Chairperson regains the floor to summarize the viewpoints discussed from turn 177 to turn 195. Then, the floors were taken by members A, D, E again from turn 197 to turn 234.

Conclusion

The current study examines the similarities and differences of the communication behaviors of business professionals who come from different cultural contexts. The study also investigates the effects of the English-language proficiency on the communication behaviors of these two researched groups. Specifically, the study examines the use of BELF between Asian and Helsinki groups.

Two data sets were derived from qualitative and quantitative data collection. The objective of the qualitative data, derived from text-based analysis, is to illustrate and examine how individuals from Asian societies (Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals) managed meeting talk similarly to or different from individuals from European societies (Swedish and Finnish business professionals). In addition, the quantitative aspect of the data (for instance, turn-taking behavior, number of words spoken) allows for the turn-taking theoretical framework to be operationalized and generalized.

Findings of the research questions are as follows:

The Helsinki business professionals took more turns and exhibited a larger amount of spoken words in intercultural business meetings where business English was used as *lingua franca*. Although no significant difference was found in the amount of speaking time, this was longer in the Helsinki case.

The English-language proficiency correlates with the number of turns, the amount of speaking time, and the number of words spoken for both Helsinki and Asian business professionals who possess an advanced level of English proficiency. As for the Asian business professionals, individuals with low English proficiency tended to take fewer turns, spoke less, and used fewer words to elaborate their viewpoints.

Results of the backchannel frequency reveal an inconsistent pattern between the two researched groups. In Asian BELF data, business professionals with low English-language proficiency tend to use more backchannels. The Helsinki BELF data, however, show the opposite backchannel patterns as those business professionals with higher English proficiency exhibit more backchannels.

The qualitative analysis of the data from the two researched groups shows the following:

- Socialization / small talk: While Asian business professionals exhibit small talk or socialization at the beginning of the meeting, Helsinki business professionals are inclined to inject small talk throughout the meetings, particularly at the beginning of the topic initiation.
- Backchannels. Asian business professionals with lower English proficiency tend to use more backchannels to reveal their engagement; however, the Helsinki business professionals with advanced English proficiency use more backchannels.
- Turn-taking and floor management. In the Cantonese meeting, the Chairperson controlled the floor management. In contrast, in the Helsinki meeting the Chairperson did not exhibit control and there was a free flow in message exchange among the participants.

Implications for further research

The current research has a long-term impact by allowing future researchers to draw upon an enlarged knowledge base and for academics and business practitioners to develop and implement programs that facilitate international and intercultural business communication.

For researchers, the present study can guide future research efforts as the findings will build on prior research and expand the foundation on which future research studies can be built. The findings also extend knowledge of the variables affecting English as a business or corporate lingua franca in international business contexts, so that future research studies can evaluate the international and intercultural business communication process more precisely and accurately.

The research also has practical implications for academics in university settings and business practitioners in firms conducting international business. For educational institutions, the findings of the study can be used to develop teaching materials that relate to real world needs of international business communicators. For business practitioners, the results can be used to tailor their training programs to address the communication problems of non-native English communicators in specific tasks and situations.

In sum, the practical significance of the research is to contribute to the theory base on international and intercultural business communication and, concurrently, to provide operational guidelines for business communication researchers and practitioners. It also provides comparisons of turn-taking and strategies in different cultures and among these cultures in international and intercultural business communication.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on two research projects: General Research Fund (GRF 9041451/CityU 141509 and the Strategic Research Grant (SRG 7008167) funded by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and City University of Hong Kong. I gratefully acknowledge the generosity and kind support of the GRF and SRG funding. Appreciation also goes to my co-researchers, Professors Tanaka, Charles, and Louhiala-Salminen, and Dr. Kankaanranta for their contribution of the research data. I also wish to thank Dr. Juan Carlos Palmer-Silveira, Special Issue editor, and the

anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the earlier manuscript.

[Paper received 19 June 2012]
[Revised paper accepted 3 March 2013]

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