

# **Making sure everybody is on the same page: interactional communication strategies in BELF encounters**

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## ABSTRACT

Communication in business often comes with high stakes. To achieve successful communication and positive business outcomes in international and intercultural settings, it is necessary for participants to convey their message effectively and accurately. The success of BELF interactions relies heavily on cooperative behavior, which is essential to meaning negotiation and to the prevention or management of communication problems. Participants in international business interactions highlight the importance of “asking clarifying questions and of checking, double-checking, confirming, and reconfirming” (Louhiala-Salminen – Kankaanranta 2011: 256). This paper aims at exploring how BELF users interact with other participants to ensure intelligibility and comprehension. Specifically, the use of appeals for assistance and responses will be investigated, the use of which has already been attested in ELF. A qualitative approach will be adopted to analyze naturally-occurring BELF data drawn from business conversations and meetings in the Professional Business and Professional Organizational subsections in the VOICE corpus.

Keywords: BELE, English as a Lingua Franca, Communication Strategies, business communication, intercultural communication.

## **1. Introduction**

Professional communication in English has become more and more common in recent years, due to increasing workforce mobility and advancements in technology that foster international business relations. Such business interactions are often carried out by professionals who come from different

cultural and linguistic backgrounds and who adopt English as a shared language of communication. English in its lingua franca role in multilingual business contexts has been defined as BELF (English as a Business Lingua Franca), highlighting the domain of use and the speakers' membership in "the global business community" (Kankaanranta – Louhiala-Salminen 2010) in addition to being ELF speakers.

As business interactions are often task-oriented, with specific and sometimes sensitive goals to be achieved within a time-frame, it is paramount that the finer details of the topics discussed in the conversation are clear to all participating parties (Louhiala-Salminen – Kankaanranta 2011; Palmer-Silveira 2013).

For this reason, the success of BELF interactions relies heavily on cooperative and listener-oriented behavior, in order to negotiate meaning, prevent or manage any communication problem(s) that may arise. In a 2011 study, professionals highlighted the importance of "asking clarifying questions and of checking, double-checking, confirming, and reconfirming" (Louhiala-Salminen – Kankaanranta 2011: 256). In Ehrenreich's 2010 study, interviewees similarly remarked that "comprehension checks, asking for clarification and repetition, attention to facial expression" (2010: 422) are important strategies to ensure effective communication.

This paper aims at expanding current knowledge on the use of Communication Strategies (CSs) in ELF in work encounters, focusing specifically on the types of strategies identified by professionals themselves as paramount to effective communication. The study focuses on face-to-face conversations and meetings within the Professional Business and Professional Organizational sections of the VOICE corpus. The investigation adopts mainly a qualitative approach, with a focus on the function and effectiveness of the CSSs in these BELF encounters.

## 1.1 Communication Strategies

Studies on Communication Strategies started in the late 1970s in relation to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (e.g. Selinker 1972; Tarone 1977; Canale – Swain 1980). Originally, non-native speakers were thought to adopt these strategies to compensate for their lack of proficiency in the target language. This 'deficit' perspective is indeed embedded in multiple definitions of CSs, as in Corder's, which views a CS as "a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty" (1983: 16) and Bialystok's, which emphasizes "[manipulating] a limited linguistic

system in order to promote communication" (1983: 102). Faerch and Kasper similarly mention that CSs are used by learners to "overcome problems" and "create the conditions for intake" (1983: 36). In early studies on CSs, the focus remained firmly on the use of such strategies to solve "gaps", "breakdown" and "problems" in communication (Coupland et al. 1991: 3) and to compensate for failure in communication (Canale – Swain 1980: 30).

However, the use of CSs is not limited to learners trying to compensate for their imperfect knowledge of the language. On the contrary, CSs are found to be pervasive in native speaker use as well, regardless of the presence of non-native speakers in the conversation (Firth – Wagner 1997). These types of strategies exist for both L1 and L2 speakers, and they are considered an essential characteristic of effective communicators (Savignon 1997: 47; Widdowson 2003); in Tarone's words, CSs are "tools used in a joint negotiation of meaning where both interlocutors are attempting to agree as to a communicative goal" (Tarone 1980: 420), whose "main function [...] in the interactional approach is to assist both communicators to agree on and convey the meaning in an interactional situation" (Jamshidnejad 2011: 3758). The effective use of CSs also involves the ability, on the part of participants, to respond to "a variety of changing and often unexpected interpersonal conditions" and to "meet the demands of ongoing communication" through the selection of the most appropriate strategy in any given situation (Savignon 1997: 44), independent of their native or non-native status.

For these reasons, study of CSs is relevant in ELF, as they constitute an important aspect of speakers' communicative competence, which they possess and deploy as they see fit alongside other components to reach mutual understanding. As the ELF approach neither adopts a deficit perspective nor sees the ELF user as a learner striving towards – but never quite reaching – native-like competence, SLA frameworks are not appropriate for the analysis of ELF data (Björkman 2014: 124). CS research in ELF is indeed "achievement rather than problem-oriented" (Kaur 2009: 41).

## 1.2 Communication Strategies in ELF and BELF

CSs are considered in ELF as part of "normal pragmatic practice" (Widdowson 2003), employed as a means of facilitating and co-constructing understanding (Kaur 2009; Björkman 2011, 2014). They appear to be frequently employed by ELF users, as both pre-emptive and retroactive moves, in order to ensure that communication is successfully achieved. Indeed, studies have shown that ELF speakers do not make use exclusively of compensatory strategies to

the purpose of solving instances of non-understanding or misunderstanding. On the contrary,

[e]ven in sequences when there appear not to be overt displays of misunderstanding, the non-native participants are found to employ various interactional practices to check, monitor and clarify understanding. These include clarification and confirmation requests, which are in turn receipted by moves to repeat, rephrase or explain some prior utterance (Kaur 2009: 46).

Indeed, ELF users appear to display a high degree of mutual cooperation, being highly aware of the many variables that may come into play in an ELF interaction and of their own – and their interlocutor’s – varying language competence and different communicative styles. Awareness of these asymmetries, as Björkman calls them (2014: 124) appears to lead ELF speakers to adopt a pro-active attitude (Mauranen 2006b; Kaur 2009). Indeed, the achievement of understanding in ELF communication is a joint enterprise, where participants in ELF interactions work together through the use of various strategies to guarantee the success of the communicative event, assessing and adapting their use of the language at each turn according to the needs of the interaction. ELF speakers appear to make use of explicitation strategies (Mauranen 2006a), both speaker-initiated and other-initiated, that have the purpose of preventing non-understandings and misunderstandings from occurring. As will be seen in our data as well, mutual cooperation is not limited to the use of CSs to ensure successful communication, but also to the maintenance of face. In Kirkpatrick’s words, “the overarching goal in this type of lingua franca conversation is to ensure communication on the one hand, while preserving the face of the participants on the other” (2008: 33), suggesting that it is important in ELF conversation to make sure participants are up-to-date and feel involved in the conversation.

To date, most studies on CSs in ELF have primarily examined the functions and use of certain communication strategies (cf. e.g. Firth 1996; Wagner – Firth 1997; Meierkord 2000; Lichtkoppler 2007; Cogo 2009; Bjørge 2010), with fewer studies having attempted to propose a systematic taxonomy of CSs occurring in natural ELF data (Björkman 2014). Research on the topic spans different geographical contexts, such as Asia (Kirkpatrick 2007, 2008), as well as different domains of use: larger studies were carried out in relation to academic ELF (cf. Kaur 2009; Björkman 2011, 2013, 2014; Mauranen 2006b, 2012). Investigations have also been carried out on leisure

interactions (Vettorel 2019) and BELF (Pitzl 2010). Other studies looking at CSs in BELF have focused primarily on code-switching and plurilingual practices, which have been shown to play a role in meaning negotiation, establishing interpersonal relationships, expressing L1 or LN cultural affiliation, or projecting professional identity (Ehrenreich 2010; Cogo 2012, 2016; Franceschi 2017).

In BELF communication users appear to be “strategically competent”, using both verbal and non-verbal strategies to achieve their communicative goals. Indeed, “applying appropriate communicative techniques” is one of the three main skills BELF users should possess to be successful communicators, alongside “the use of appropriate business related concepts” and “using the corresponding specific terminology in English” (Palmer-Silveira 2013: 9-10). As a prevalently goal-oriented type of communication that may have high stakes, “[t]he dynamism [of BELF] entails that strategic skills, such as ability to ask for clarifications, make questions, repeat utterances, and paraphrase (see Mauranen 2006b), gain in importance for successful communication” (Kankaanranta – Louhiala-Salminen 2013: 28).

## 2. Methodology and data selection

In light of previous studies on BELF, this paper intends to look at how participants in BELF ensure that comprehension is maintained throughout the interaction by actively checking with their interlocutors, either preemptively or by signaling lack of understanding. An additional point of investigation is related to responses to appeals for assistance, as the study also aims at identifying instances of lack of response and the reasons they occur.

In order to investigate the use of interactional communicative strategies in BELF encounters, a choice was made to study naturally-occurring spoken data in professional environments where participants do not share a common language, effectively characterizing them as ELF speakers. The corpus selected for this purpose was the *Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English* (VOICE), which includes about a million words of ELF spoken data in various contexts of communication and different types of interaction. For the scope of this enquiry, it was decided to concentrate on the Professional subset of data in the corpus, specifically on the Professional Business (PB) and Professional Organizational (PO) sections of the corpus. Within these sections, only the conversation and meeting subsections were selected for

analysis, as the nature of these communicative events is highly interactional. The subcorpus contains a total of circa 291,000 words.

Analysis of the data will be carried out from a qualitative perspective building on existing CSs theory. The qualitative approach will contribute to shedding light on the use of each individual strategy and identify which strategies are favored by the participants to the interaction. The qualitative aspect of this investigation will look at selected occurrences from the corpus, in order to show how speakers make effective use of the strategies.

The focus of this study will be mainly on three macrosets of strategies, that is, appeals, comprehension checks and responses, as illustrated by Dörnyei and Scott in their 1997 comprehensive taxonomy of CSs (191-2). These strategies were then adapted and updated according to the linguistic behaviors adopted by participants in the communicative events, where they employed strategies aimed at ensuring that the message has been shared effectively and accurately, either self-initiated or other-initiated.

This taxonomy was adopted for convenience; however, CSs included in the 'appeals' macrocategory were attested by multiple scholars as frequent strategies used in ELF interactions in multiple contexts, although sometimes referred to with different terminology: confirmation checks, clarifications, repetitions (Mauranen 2006b; Kaur 2009); requests for repetition and clarification (Kirkpatrick 2007); repetitions (Lichtkoppler 2007); requests for confirmation and understanding (Kaur 2010, 2011); overt questions, clarification requests (Björkman 2014). Other terminology was borrowed by different scholars for those strategies that were not included in Dörnyei and Scott's list.

1. Appeals
  - a. Direct and indirect appeals
  - b. Request for repetition
  - c. Request for clarification
  - d. Request for confirmation
2. Comprehension checks
3. Responses
  - a. Repetition
  - b. Response to direct appeal with other-repair
  - c. Response (rephrasing, expanding, definition, exemplification, etc.)
  - d. Lexical anticipation in response to hesitation
  - e. Repair after request for confirmation

4. Other
  - a. Other-initiated word replacement
  - b. Statement of incorrectness followed by replacement/paraphrase / extension / definition / exemplification

The CSs were identified through careful analysis of the previous and following turns. As a strategy's surface form and its pragmatic function may not necessarily match, paying close attention to the context is paramount to determine the function of the strategy (Ohta 2005; Foster – Ohta's 2005; Kaur 2009; Jamshidnejad 2011; Björkman 2014).

The classification of certain appeals was not always straightforward, due to their ambiguity. Certain appeals may be either requests for repetition or for clarification, as in the case of open class repair initiators (Drew 1997) such as "sorry?" "huh?", which are used as signals of non-understanding but do not indicate where the problem lies. In such cases, it is up to the next speaker to decide whether to use repetition or attempt clarification through paraphrase or extension. In Kaur's data, it appears that "[t]he ELF speaker is more likely to repeat a prior turn when faced with an open class repair initiator as this involves straightforward recycling of existing material" (Kaur 2009: 142). This appeared to be consistent with the data in this study, as most responses provided in these ambiguous cases were repetitions. The participants that had produced the appeal appeared to be satisfied with the response received in the vast majority of instances, either explicitly signaling comprehension or by continuing the conversation. In these cases, the appeal was marked as a request for repetition. Where repetition was not enough to ensure comprehension, further clarification was prompted in an additional move, as will be seen in the data.

Some instances of CS use were not categorized at all, i.e. where unclear speech was transcribed and it was not possible to reconstruct the context, or function of the CS.

### 3. Results

A summary of the number of instances for each of the strategies selected and investigated may be seen in Table 1 below. It should be noted that, as described above, classification was not always straightforward, and in some cases, identified strategies were not added to the count where unclear speech or gaps in the transcription made it impossible to ascertain their

function. Nevertheless, a breakdown of frequencies will help disclose BELF users' preferences when employing CSs.

Table 1. Frequency of the CSs identified in the VOICE subcorpus

Strategy type	No. of occurrences
APPEALS	
Direct and indirect appeals	11
Indirect appeals	10
Requests for repetition	73
Requests for clarification	35
Requests for confirmation	72
<b>Comprehension checks</b>	38
RESPONSES	
Repetition	67
Response to direct appeal with other-repair	5
Response (rephrasing, expanding, definition, exemplification, confirmation, etc.)	112
Lexical anticipation in response to hesitation	6
Repair after request for confirmation	1
No response to appeal/ request	18
OTHER	
Other-initiated word replacement	21
Statement of incorrectness and replacement / paraphrase / extension	7

As can be seen, requests for repetition and confirmation appear to be the most frequent CSs in the subcorpus. This may be explained by the fact that these strategies are immediate and require a lower cognitive load for the speaker: indeed, requests for repetitions are usually expressed via one-word minimal queries, and requests for confirmation consist in repetition of the trigger with rising intonation. As a consequence, repetition (67) and confirmation (52 out of the 112 responses) are similarly the most common responses to appeals and requests, with more elaborated responses coming into play only when further clarification is needed or expressly requested.

There are, however, multiple factors that play a role in strategy selection, including other-oriented face-saving behaviors, as will be discussed in the following subsections.



### 3.1 Appeals

In the categories of appeals, speakers either signal an existing problem or what they perceive might be a potential problem (Mauranen 2006b; Kaur 2011; Björkman 2014) in their own understanding of previous turns (request for repetition, clarification or confirmation) or in their own use of the language. In the latter case they might ask explicitly for help (direct appeal), or their behavior, verbal or non-verbal (for instance pauses or hesitations) may be an attempt to “elicit help from the interlocutor” (Dörnyei – Scott 1997: 191).

#### 3.1.1 Direct or indirect appeal

These types of appeals are usually responded to via a response to a direct appeal or through lexical anticipation (Kirkpatrick 2007), where another speaker completes the previous utterance by providing what they think is the term the original speaker intended, as in extract 1 below.

- (1) 200 S2: and that they have to er treat their father in special way  
because if they er don't don't catch him er catch his erm  
201 S4: mhm  
202 S4: attention or attraction yeah yeah yeah  
203 S2: attention (PBcon594)

In the passage above, S4 notices S2's difficulty in completing her turn and provides a couple of potential options before S2 can retrieve the word she was looking for. The intended meaning is then accepted and confirmed by S2 through repetition. The strategy used here is one of anticipation (Kirkpatrick 2007). This type of behavior, in addition to ensuring comprehension, may also be oriented at preserving S2's face, with S4 intervening helpfully when she displays difficulty in her turn.

In direct appeals, the speaker asks explicitly for assistance with a word they cannot express, as in example 2 below:

- (2) 101 S1: = and these er are (.) actually part of the fish these are (1)  
er what do you call the (1) eggs of fish (.)  
102 S7: the eggs of fish?  
103 S1: yah  
104 S7: caviar  
105 S1: well if it's a very

- 106 SS: @@ <1> @@ </1>  
 107 S1: <1> e:r EXquisite er </1> egg from a very exquisite fish  
 <2> but wh- wh- wh- (.) wh- wh- </2> er er (1)  
 108 S7: <2> but then it's a fish the: the: eggs of fish (.) i guess </2>  
 109 S7: <3> (i don't know) </3> (POcon534)

S1 makes a direct appeal, asking for the specific word used to define “fish eggs”, that is, roe. S7 asks for confirmation, and, once he receives it from S1, proceeds to respond to the appeal by offering what he thinks may be an appropriate word. However, S1 does not appear entirely satisfied, so he adds further information to highlight the difference between S7's suggestion and his intended meaning. The two participants do not come to a decision as to the most appropriate word for fish egg, but the conversation is not disrupted and mutual intelligibility is achieved, as both participants agree on the meaning of S1's utterance.

Direct and indirect appeals were not common in the data; indirect appeals through hesitation occurred slightly more often; it is, however, unclear whether speakers would have used a direct appeal or attempted a rephrasing if the interlocutor had not provided a solution via lexical anticipation. It is hard to speculate as to why direct appeals appear not to be a commonly-used CS in this dataset: it may be due to the speakers trying to make themselves understood through other strategies such as rephrasing and simplification before disrupting the flow of the conversation with a direct question. In multiple instances in the data, rather than producing a direct appeal, speakers signal their linguistic “insecurity” by pronouncing marked terms in a rising intonation, as if to check the accuracy/correctness of their linguistic choice with the others, and leaving room for other-initiated word replacement or meaning negotiation sequences.

### 3.1.2 Request for repetition

Requests for repetition appeared to be fairly common in the data, alongside requests for confirmation. Most commonly, as will be seen in example 4, requests occur via minimal queries/open class repair initiators such as “sorry?”, “huh?”, “what?”, “pardon?”, “pardon me?”, all identified in the data, rather than more explicit requests for repetition or signals of non-understanding requiring participant intervention.

In example 3, other types of appeal occur throughout the passage, probably due to high levels of background noise that may have impaired message comprehension.

- (3) 378 S4: funding is e:r (1) certainly part of e:r (1)  
 379 S6: (right one)  
 380 S4: the administrative aspect (1)  
 381 S2: sorry? (.)  
 382 S4: the <1> funding </1> and the financial aspects  
 383 S6: <1> funding </1>  
 384 S2: yes mhm mhm that's right (7) {S2 is writing (7)}  
 385 S7: contracts and agreements (.)  
 386 S4: sorry? (.)  
 387 S3: <2> i- </2>  
 388 S2: <2> con</2><3>tracts agreements </3> (.)  
 389 SX-f: <3> contracts (and) agreements </3>  
 390 SX-f: <un> x xx </un>  
 391 S4: agreements ah (.) {S2 starts writing} (POmtg315)

In line 381, non-understanding is signaled through the use of the minimal query "sorry?". S4 and S6 both provide a response through repetition and expansion, which is then followed by S2's signal of understanding. A second signal of non-understanding is carried out just two lines later by S4; response occurs via repetition, which seems to satisfy S4, who in turn confirms comprehension through repetition/echoing. Both appeals in this case were interpreted as requests for repetition, except for S4, who interpreted S2's minimal query as a request for clarification.

### 3.1.3 Request for clarification

In the following passages, more overt requests for clarification are made, where open repair initiators are usually substituted by wh- questions such as "what is/are...?", "What do you mean by/with...?", sometimes followed by the repetition of the problematic item. At times, requests for clarification may not be formulated clearly enough to be perceived as such, making additional moves necessary to reach mutual understanding, as can be seen in the example below:

- (4) 1724 S1: the action (.) o- er DONE is a key account management  
 program we asked er [first name2] (.) to set up e:r some  
 program (.) with imp- (.) the the important er (.) key  
 ACCOUNT (.) to develop some ANNUAL program (.) for  
 ou-  
 1725 S4: what is an annual program? (.)

- 1726 S1: it's a YEARLY (.) based (.) <4><soft> (program) </soft></4>
- 1727 S4: <4><L1ger> ja ja {yes yes} </L1ger></4> (i mean) in regards of <5> assortment </5> in regards of placement or in regards of e:rm activities? (.) (PBmtg3)

In (4), S4 asks for clarification of the expression “annual program”. Assuming S4 does not know the meaning of the word “annual”, he substitutes the trigger with a word similar to “year”, supposing it would be more familiar to S4 and thus easier to understand. However, S4 signals in German, his L1, that he did in fact understand the form of the expression (“*ja ja*”), but what he was interested in was the aspect, or aspects, S1’s company meant to schedule in the program. The conversation, not reported here in its entirety, continues until S4 is satisfied that there is shared understanding on the contents of the annual program. This once again suggests the importance, in professional conversations, of obtaining a precise understanding of what the interlocutor means, especially when different companies/institutions may have slightly different interpretations or practices related to the same expression.

### 3.1.4 Request for confirmation

Another common appeal in the data were requests for confirmation. Often, participants repeated part of the previous speaker’s turn with a rising intonation, in order to check whether their own understanding was correct (Kaur 2009: 112). In some cases, a repetition with a questioning intonation may not be a request of confirmation, but may instead express surprise (Corsaro 1977: 190), or encouragement to continue and/or provide further information (Foster – Ohta 2005: 407). Such occurrences were detected in the current dataset as well.

In the majority of cases of confirmation requests, a confirmation is produced, but in one case, where the participant heard or understood incorrectly, a repair was provided, as shown in the following example:

- (5) 2146 S8: <fast> so how many how many </fast> er lower decks is on the <spel> a </spel> three: three hundred er three three THIRTY for the: (.) for the cargo? six er bellies er for the cargo? o:r less. (.) for the connections. (.) as well. (.) right NOW you’re on the (backside you’re) right? (.)
- 2147 S2: you mea- you mean the: ex <3> europe flights? makes </3>

- 2148 S8: <3> hongkong er hongkong </3> tokyo. (2)  
 2149 S2: oh <4> the the </4> TOKYO how MANY flights? (.)  
 2150 S8: <4> hongko- hongkong </4>  
 2151 S8: mhm  
 2152 S2: <8> e:r </8>  
 2153 S1: <8> no:</8> how many pallets per er er er does fit on  
 a on on a <5> eight three thirties </5>  
 2154 S2: <5> in the three thirties </5> <9> three thirties </9>  
 2155 S8: <5><un> xxx </un></5><9><un> xx </un> didn't  
 </9> know what <6> they've e:r </6>  
 2156 S1: <6> three thirties </6> yeah yeah  
 2157 S8: between hongkong and japan right?  
 2158 S2: yeah?  
 2159 S8: okay. h- how many positions you keep for for cargo?  
 2160 S2: i believe it was THREE <7> three </7>  
 2161 S8: <7> three </7> for for cargo? =  
 2162 S2: = lower lower deck <10> pallets </10> (.)  
 2163 S8: <10> mhm </10>  
 2164 S2: the: the <spel> p m cs </spel>  
 2165 S8: yah yah yah (PBmtg300)

In the passage above, we see S2 asking for confirmation that he has understood S8's question. S8 provides a repair, indicating the route he was referring to. S2 contributes a repetition of part of S8's turn to signal comprehension and asks again for confirmation that he has understood his question. S8 repeats the name of the second city (2150), probably to ensure that S2 is aware both cities are involved, but then the conversation stalls, with S2 hesitating because of S8's lack of uptake of his request for confirmation. S1 then intervenes, signaling S2's lack of comprehension and rephrasing S8's original question (2153). In the following line, S2 provides a repair, correcting the aircraft type. S1 signals comprehension via repetition, and then S8 takes the floor again, reminding S2 that the question refers to the Hong Kong – Tokyo route, to ensure a relevant answer. S2's confirmation, in rising intonation, appears to encourage S8 to continue. When S8 finally receives his answer, he asks for confirmation that he had understood correctly, followed by S2's move, providing additional information until S8 signals comprehension ("yah yah yah").

The passage above also constitutes an example of collaborative negotiation, where three speakers participate in the process of achieving

mutual comprehension. The face of all participants is maintained, with speakers taking the necessary actions to achieve communication without leaving room for awkwardness. An example of this focus could be considered S1's intervention in line 2153, where he compensates for S8's lack of uptake and provides S2 with the means to answer the original question.

### 3.2 Comprehension checks

Comprehension checks are a pro-active move "on the part of the speaker to establish that his or her prior utterance has been sufficiently understood by the recipient" (Kaur 2009: 182). Comprehension checks in the corpus were prevalently expressed through single words or non-verbal sounds produced with a rising intonation, such as "okay?", "you know?", "yes?/yeah?", "huh?". Only occasionally the comprehension check would be more articulated, as in the examples below.

- (6) a) 2146 S1: [...] there's a (.) character called (.) digimon (.) <5> digimon </5> is <8> japa</8>nese er <9> you know </9> di- digimon? (.) (PBmtg3)
- b) 366 S7: yeah okay? (.) i i didn't realize that about the belgians because that's hh that's the FRENCH system <fast> you know what i <1> mean</1></fast> (.) (POcon549)

In the corpus data, comprehension checks are rarely followed by an explicit signal of comprehension. Usually, the conversation continues without an explicit request for clarification or repetition, which is interpreted by the speaker as a sign that comprehension has been achieved. In some cases, comprehension checks are followed by signals of non-understanding, which triggered instances of co-construction, as can be seen clearly in (7) below: non-understanding is here due to an instance of codeswitching to refer to a locally-connoted concept. This type of meaning co-construction has been attested in analysis of leisure communicative events (cf. Vettorel 2019) in the VOICE corpus, where students discussed the local food and festivities of their own home cultures.

- (7) 207 S4: then the: (.) organizer was saying everything was done but not the papers (.) not yet this written fact (.) hh then (.) it was the eight of july (.) the idea it is to do e:rm <smacks lips> er a session during a <L1fre> braderie {sale} </

- L1fre> you know <L1fre> braderie {sale} </L1fre> it is  
sort of sale can you say sale?
- 208 S3: mhm
- 209 S4: e:r in this
- 210 S1: maybe you <7> should explain that a <LNfre> braderie  
{sale} </LNfre></7> a <LNfre> braderie {sale} </  
LNfre> for us is <8> for </8> you it's different than  
it's for [S2] <9> because </9> i i talked to her about this  
and she thought that it's <10> all about </10> selling  
furniture (1)
- 211 S3: <7> but can you explain a bit mo:re </7>
- 212 S3: <8> yeah </8>
- 213 S10: <9> no no </9>
- 214 S10: <10> we don't know </10>
- 215 S3: er
- 216 S10: <1> [S4] [S4] who is </1>
- 217 S4: <1> no no </1> no no no no erm it is you know when  
you have the the sale er in july you have a lot of <2> sale  
</2> in in in er shops (.)
- 218 S1: <2> yeah </2>
- 219 S4: okay?
- 220 S3: mhm
- 221 S4: and you have -s this also in january (.) (POMtg439)

S4 is clearly aware that her interlocutors may not be familiar with the French word *braderie* (line 207). Her comprehension check is combined with a translation, mitigated by the vague expression “sort of”, which marks a certain degree of insecurity about the accuracy of the chosen translation. Indeed, she checks with the others that “sale” is an acceptable option: “can you say sale?” (line 207). Both S1 and S3 ask for additional clarification, with S1 specifying that more information regarding *braderie* is necessary, due to a different understanding of the word on the part of different speakers. S10 also reinforces the request for clarification by claiming he and his colleagues are not familiar with the concept. S4 then responds to the requests by providing additional information about the event, producing another comprehension check at line 219. S3's non-lexical vocalization is interpreted as a sign of encouragement and S4 continues her explanation. The conversation, not reported here for reasons of space, continues with further explanations and exemplifications by S4.

### 3.3 Responses

As seen in the previous sections, appeals and requests are generally attended to by other participants, who provide an appropriate response to the produced request to solve an existing or potential problem. Requests for confirmation are generally followed by confirmations – or, in one case, a repair –, while requests for repetitions are usually responded to with the repetition of the relevant segment of the trigger utterance. Should repetition be insufficient to restore mutual intelligibility, additional information may be elicited, with a request for clarification (cf. example 4) – or offered by the speaker.

When answering requests for clarification, speakers may rephrase the word – or utterance – to extend the context (Dörnyei – Scott 1997), or again, provide an exemplification or a definition of the problematic item.

- (8) 2278 S1: okay (4) er NOW er talking about TARGET . (2) er (.) kids are (no more) (.) GULLIBLE {word is used in the presentation material} than adults. per<5>haps even less so </5> they're
- 2279 S5: <5><un> xxxxx </un></5>
- 2280 S4: excuse me er (.) GULLIBLE i've never heard that word. what does that mean? (.)
- 2281 S5: hm
- 2282 SX-1: <pvc> gullabry <ipa> 'gʌləbri </ipa> </pvc> (more like) <6> that?</6>
- 2283 S4: <6> @ </6>
- 2284 S5: @@ (.)
- 2285 S2: <L1kor> x [first name5] xx?</L1kor>
- 2286 S4: gullible?
- 2287 S1: gullible gullible (1) yeah gullible means (2) not english word (.) (but) like er GREEDY ? (.)
- [...]
- 2319 S1: <2> O:H </2> yeah i think <3> (it) EASY to be influenced </3> [...] (PBmtg3)

When S4 hears a word he is not familiar with (“gullible”), he asks for clarification by explicitly asking for the meaning of the word. SX-1 attempts to solve the problem by producing an alternative – although non-standard – pronunciation of the word. It is hard to provide an interpretation for this



move, but S1 might have thought S4 could have recognized the word if pronounced differently. Alternatively, given S4 and S5's laughter, SX-1's turn might be an inside joke incomprehensible to outside listeners. In line 2286, S4 brings the attention back to the issue with a repetition of the problematic item with a rising intonation. After some hesitation, S1 suggests a possible answer via paraphrasing. However, the answer provided is not correct, creating a situation of erroneous shared knowledge. The conversation on the topic, however, continues with S1 signaling uncertainty about his response and other participants intervening in the conversation, in another example of meaning negotiation. In the end, S1 provides another definition of the word, this time the correct one, ensuring that agreement on the meaning of the word and comprehension of the presentation material are achieved.

While in many cases it is possible to reach shared understanding with an appeal/request and answer sequence, sometimes multiple turns may be necessary to ensure that communication has been effectively achieved for all parties involved. An example may be seen in the extract below: S8 requests confirmation of her understanding of S2's explanation by offering a paraphrase of the element on which she wants confirmation, preceded by a meta-cognitive expression making her request explicit (line 912, "this means...").

- (9) 912 S8: this means that <un> xxx </un> a kind of a set of regulations?  
 913 S2: mhm  
 914 S8: you they have to follow or to apply? =  
 915 S2: = they (.) CAN follow yeah  
 916 S8: if they: wish to have a a: label er [org2] label (.) or not.  
 917 S2: hm:<4> no?</4>  
 918 S1: <4> maybe it's not a </4> set of regulation but <5> rather </5> er (.)  
 919 S2: <5> no?</5>  
 920 S1: a <6> manual </6> of good practice.  
 921 SS: <6><un> xxx </un></6>  
 922 S2: practi- <7> exactly.</7>  
 923 S1: <7> is something </7><8> which is </8> serves well the purpose. =
- [...]
- 936 S7: sort of recommendations rather than <1> regulations </1>

- 937 S8: <1> recommendations </1>  
 938 S1: <2> rather than re</2>gulations  
 939 S8: <2> recommendation huh?</2>  
 940 S2: yah (POmtg314)

In this case the first request for confirmation is immediately followed by a second one in line 914. Reacting to S2's "mhm", which may have been interpreted as a sign of lack of comprehension, S8 attempts to clarify her own move by adding to his first question. This seems to be successful, as S2 answers, using sentence stress to mark that the regulations are not compulsory – "they (.) CAN follow" rather than "have to follow". S8 continues with her own interpretation of S2's explanation and appears not to have caught on to S2's message, who then explicitly says S8's understanding was not accurate, and S1 intervenes, providing an alternative definition to S8's proposal. S2 accepts S1's definition ("exactly"), and S1 continues paraphrasing S2's previous explanation to enhance clarity, the explanation interspersed by other speakers' positive backchannels. S7 takes the floor, providing other-initiated word replacement that is then taken up by other participants via repetition. S8 then appears to ask once again for confirmation of the negotiated word 'recommendation', which S2 confirms in the following turn. In this extract, a misunderstanding emerges via a request for confirmation and is solved through the joint work of multiple participants, mutually co-constructing meaning and reaching understanding on a main aspect of their project.

### 3.4 Other-initiated word replacement and repairs

In addition to checking for other people's comprehension or making requests to ensure that their own understanding is correct, participants in BELF interactions may ensure the success of an interaction by repairing a speaker's turn when the linguistic element employed may be inaccurate or ambiguous, and potentially hindering effective communication and comprehension of important business points, as in the following example:

- (10) 1839 S2: maybe yours is a: little bigger than  
 1840 S1: wider  
 1841 S4: <8> mhm </8>  
 1842 S5: <8> mhm </8>  
 1843 S2: erm <6> yah mhm yah mhm yah </6>

- 1844 S5: <6> yah </6> this <7> was </7> the problem <1>  
(because) </1> it was <2> too </2> wide
- 1845 S2: <7> mhm </7>
- 1846 S2: <1> yeah </1>
- 1847 S2: <2> mhm </2>
- 1848 S2: yeah wide (PBmtg3)

Participants in the passage are discussing the size of a product display item. When S2 suggests the issue is that the product was too big (line 1839), S1 provides an other-initiated word replacement, specifying that the issue was with the width, which is then confirmed by S5 in line 1844. S2 accepts the repair through repetition of the correct form. In this case, while the term employed by S2 was correct in a broad sense, S2 still felt it was necessary to provide a repair as it would be important to know exactly where the problem was to avoid potential further issues with the product. In other cases, a word replacement may not be as important to the interaction as in the instance above. In another event (POmtg315), the use of “work market”, despite being understandable, triggers another-initiated word replacement with a speaker suggesting the more common collocation “labor market”. The use of a more technical collocation may be preferred in very task-oriented meetings such as this one, as it may later appear in a document shared with other groups and institutions.

### 3.5 Unattended appeals for assistance

The analysis of the corpus showed that the vast majority of appeals and requests in the dataset were addressed by other participants. However, it was also true that in a small number of instances, such appeals or requests appeared not to be reacted to by any of the other participants in the communicative event. Looking at the individual occurrences, it could be noted that in most of these cases, the lack of uptake could be justified in several ways; it was only in very few instances that signals of non-understanding were simply left unattended.

In some instances, the appeal for assistance was followed by a signal of comprehension, clarifying that intelligibility had not actually been lost. In other cases, the use of the <soft> tag could mean that the would-be recipient(s) did not hear the request. In the extract below another situation is represented, where stopping the flow of the conversation to attend to an appeal might not have been deemed necessary or appropriate by the recipients.

- (11) 567 S5: er but then you <6> won't </6> see  
 568 S3: <6> huh?</6>  
 569 S3: huh?  
 570 S5: <7><un> xxx </un></7>  
 571 S9: <7> this is fine </7> (.) yah  
 572 S5: that's fine (.) (POmtg315)

In this conversation participants are taking notes on the board. S5 points out that the latest element added is not visible. S3 signals lack of understanding through a non-lexical minimal query ("huh?"). S9 and S5 seem to fix the visibility issue and signal agreement. S3's appeal may have been left unattended because it was only relevant to the writing process and not to the content. In yet other instances, requests for repetition appear to go unattended because the utterances triggering the request do not contain any relevant information. Participants may then decide not to disrupt the flow of the conversation to address the queries, as doing so would not be beneficial or enhance communicative effectiveness.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The need to come to a mutual agreement and ensure that all parties understand the language used in the same way is certainly not exclusive to ELF interactions, but it may be more sensitive in BELF contexts. Participants are indeed aware that their linguistic levels may be different and that the implications of the same word or expression may be influenced by multiple factors, such as a) individual proficiency in English, b) linguistic and cultural background, or c) business culture. As a result, they similarly appear to be mindful of the potential risks of misunderstanding these conditions entail, and react by acting accordingly, employing requests and confirmation checks to prevent these risks (Mauranen 2006b; Kaur 2009; Björkman 2014). One of the major aspects of BELF, and one of the elements that sets it apart from other uses of ELF, is related to the knowledge of the "shared professional area of expertise involving special concepts and terminology, as used by the relevant discourse community" (Kankaanranta – Planken 2010: 391) and its related vocabulary. This is in line with what an interviewee stated in Kankaanranta and Planken's study, where "sharing the jargon and content" (394) was prioritized over grammatical correctness. As illustrated in 3.4,

“work market” might have been perfectly understandable to all participants, but an other-initiated word replacement is used in favor of a more technical term, which may be considered more appropriate to use in minutes or any documents stemming from the meeting.

In these data, requests are generally attended to by participants, who either repeat, clarify or confirm the marked item, ensuring that all parties are on the same page. Participants tend to show a tendency to employ minimal queries (“sorry?”, “huh?”, repetition of the word/expression in a rising intonation) when performing their requests, which may make it difficult, not only from a methodological point of view but for the interlocutors themselves, to discern whether the request requires only a confirmation or repetition as an answer, or a clarification of any type. In most cases, speakers appear to provide either a repetition or a confirmation, waiting for additional requests on the part of the asker before giving additional information and further interrupting the flow of the conversation with an explanation sequence. It is possible that the interlocutor may expect a more elaborate request for clarification (e.g. “what do you mean with servers”) and interpret this type of minimal query as repetition/confirmation by default. In addition, interlocutors may want to preserve the ‘askers’ face by assuming first that the disruption in the conversation is due to a lack of or imperfect hearing rather than a lack of knowledge of the problematic item.

The corpus showed that appeals and requests are rarely left unattended, and even when this occurs, the event can usually be justified: the request might not need to be addressed directly, as the problematic item or turn may not be relevant to the conversation at hand, as shown in example 12. In other examples in the corpus, lack of hearing due to the request being uttered in a soft voice may be behind an unattended request. In a different case, not reported here, a non-verbal gesture like a nod, not transcribed in the turn, may result in an apparent unattended request. On the other hand, comprehension checks appear to go mostly unanswered, with silence being interpreted as confirmation of understanding, or followed by non-lexical vocalizations such as “mhm”, “hm”.

It may, therefore, be said that the participants in the conversations analyzed here show strong cooperative and face-saving behavior in BELF encounters while they engage actively as listeners in those conversations and respond to each appeal and request, with multiple participants employing as many turns as necessary to reach mutual understanding and achieve their common professional goal.

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## APPENDIX 1

**Selected VOICE transcriptions conventions**

SX-f	unidentified speaker, identified gender
<L1ger> </L1ger>	tag signaling that a word is produced in the speaker's L1. The language is specified.
<LNfre> </LNfre>	tag signaling that a word is produced in an LN. The language is specified.
?	rising intonation
e:r	lengthened sound
(.)	brief pause
(1)	longer pause, timed in seconds
<pvc> <pvc>	variation from native norms in terms of phonology, morphology or lexis. May indicate creations that do not exist in ENL.
<ipa> </ipa>	phonetic transcription in case of significant variation in pronunciation
@	laughter
<1> </1>	overlapping speech (because) uncertain transcription
<un>xxx</un>	unintelligible speech
{words}	translation of non-English speech and contextual events
CAPS	emphasis of a syllable or a word
=	continuation/completion of speech by another speaker without pauses
<soft> </soft>	soft voice
<fast> </fast>	fast pronunciation
<spel> </spel>	words spelled out by the speaker
[org23]	anonymization of organization names
[S4] / [first name 2]	anonymization of participants / non-participants
di-	the hyphen indicates that a word is not produced in its entirety.

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