

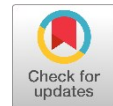
# Negotiating meaning in English as a lingua franca: IISMA awardees across Asian and European contexts

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## ABSTRACT

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In line with the global trend of the internationalization of higher education, students are increasingly seeking educational experiences abroad. In this context, English as a lingua franca (ELF) plays a key role in navigating multilingual and multicultural environments. This study examines the experiences of six Indonesian students participating in the International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) program, focusing on their use of ELF in Asian and European contexts. Using a qualitative case study design, with data collected through individual interviews and focus group discussion, the study highlights that familiarity with the host country's language and cultural knowledge contribute to participants' ability to communicate effectively. Participants' experiences indicate the development of intercultural competence as they navigated linguistic and cultural differences. Two main themes emerged: (1) meaning-making through multilingual resources, and (2) negotiating understanding and misunderstanding in ELF contexts. The study offers implications for international education programs, particularly in strengthening language support and intercultural preparation to better equip students for global academic and social engagement.



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## 1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has increasingly encouraged students around the world, including those from Indonesia, to pursue academic experiences in different cultural and linguistic contexts. As students participate in global mobility programs, English often becomes the common language for communication. The ability to communicate effectively in English has become a crucial skill for individuals seeking to participate in international education and global opportunities.

In Indonesia, the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is a government-funded scholarship program initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and is part of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) initiative, which aims to give students greater academic flexibility and cross-cultural exposure. Since its launch in 2021, the IISMA program has allowed Indonesian students to study for one semester at top universities across

the world, including institutions in non-English-speaking countries in Europe and Asia. Unlike many mobility schemes that are largely anchored in Anglophone destinations, IISMA places students across linguistically and culturally diverse settings, where English is not always the main institutional language, but is still widely used in interaction. As such, participating students are expected to possess high levels of English proficiency to navigate academic and social life in diverse multilingual environments.

Although English is not always the native language of the host countries, it is widely used as a *lingua franca*—a common means of communication among speakers of different native languages. Scholars such as Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011) have used the concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) to describe this phenomenon. Jenkins (2006) and Seidlhofer (2011) define ELF as any context in which speakers with different mother tongues use English as their preferred or sole medium of communication. ELF emphasizes mutual intelligibility over adherence to native-speaker norms, highlighting the adaptability and pragmatic use of English in intercultural settings. In higher education, ELF enables global communication and plays a key role in academic collaboration, everyday interactions, and identity construction across cultural boundaries (Baker, 2015; Ferguson, 2009; Jenkins, 2013; Pietikäinen, 2018).

Within ELF settings, users frequently draw upon multilingual resources, such as code-switching, to facilitate communication and convey meaning effectively. Scholars such as Cogo (2009, 2018) describe code-switching not as a response to communication breakdown but as an intentional effort to accommodate others and draw upon the full range of a speaker's linguistic repertoire. These adaptive practices underscore the dynamic and complex nature of ELF, as emphasized by Mauranen (2018), who notes that ELF operates on multiple levels—macro, meso, and micro—across social and cultural contexts. At the macro level, ELF is shaped by broader structures such as global mobility, institutional arrangements, and the internationalization of higher education, which frame English as a shared resource across diverse settings. At the meso level, it is negotiated within particular communities and institutions, where local norms, expectations, and language practices influence how communication unfolds. At the micro level, meaning is co-constructed moment by moment in interaction, as speakers adjust their linguistic and non-linguistic resources in response to one another.

Despite the growing body of research on ELF in higher education (e.g., Jenkins, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2014), existing studies tend to centre on particular aspects of experience—interaction, identity, culture, or adjustment—most often situated within a single institutional or national context. Research by Xu and Van de Poel (2011) explored university students' interactions, motivations, and perceptions of ownership and identity in ELF contexts, while Situmorang, Nugraha and Sihombing (2021) investigated how international students constructed language learning identities in ELF environments. Other works have considered the cultural dimensions of ELF, with studies like Zhang and Lütge (2023) and Kuroshima, Dimoski, Okada, Yujobo, and Chaikul (2022) emphasizing the influence of home culture, shared cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness.

Closer to the IISMA context, Sanawiyah (2023) examined communication barriers among Indonesian students in South Korea; Zidani and Sudarwati (2023) focused on emotional experiences in international environments, and Faza, Lukmantoro and Manalu (2024) explored student adjustment in Hungary. Across these studies, however, the focus tends to remain tied to particular host settings, with attention directed toward specific aspects of experience rather than how they are negotiated across differing contexts. In this sense, less is known about how students engage with ELF in mobility programs that are not anchored in a single environment but take place across diverse linguistic, cultural and social settings. This is particularly relevant in the case of IISMA, where students are situated in a range of such settings. This study, therefore, examines how ELF is experienced and negotiated by IISMA participants, where English is not simply a medium of communication, but something students engage with as they navigate differing levels of familiarity and expectation, offering a perspective on how language, identity, and intercultural communication come into play in multilingual settings. The research is guided by the following question: How do IISMA participants perceive and experience English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) in academic and social contexts during their study abroad?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, which allows for an in-depth and contextually grounded exploration of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Gillham, 2000). The case in this study is a group of IISMA awardee students from a public university in West Java. The analysis focuses on the students' experiences and perceptions of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in their academic and social interactions during the program. This qualitative case study design is deemed appropriate for examining how ELF is encountered and negotiated in context, as it enables a close attention to participants' accounts of their experiences. Rather than focusing on ELF as interactional features alone, the study attends to how it is experienced and made sense of by students navigating unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments. As such, the case study design provides a situated understanding of the language dynamics surrounding ELF within the IISMA program.

### 2.2. Site and Participants

The participants of this research were six final-year students from different majors at a prominent public university in Bandung who were granted the IISMA program in the second and third batch. The participants were selected purposefully, with the following criteria: (1) they had completed the IISMA program, (2) they had studied in non-Anglophone settings where English functioned as a lingua franca, and (3) they were willing to reflect on their academic and social experiences using English during the program. Participants were recruited through personal networks and referrals, and those who met the criteria were invited to participate voluntarily in the study. They represent a diverse range of contexts in terms of their host universities. Three participants studied in Europe, namely Turkey, Lithuania, and Spain, while the other three studied in Asia, specifically Taiwan, Korea, and Malaysia.

This variation was intended to capture experiences across different linguistic and cultural settings, allowing for a comparative perspective on how ELF is encountered and navigated. The relatively small number of participants ( $n = 6$ ) is consistent with qualitative case study research, which prioritizes depth over breadth. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences while enabling careful comparison across participants' accounts. By examining the experiences of IISMA students who studied in both European and Asian contexts, this research aims to capture how ELF is engaged with across varied settings, including differences in language use, academic environments, and social interaction. Table 1 shows the profiles of the participants, all of whom were given pseudonyms, along with their prior exposure to English and the language of the host country.

**Table 1.** Participants' backgrounds and prior exposures to English and the host language

Participants	Study Major	Host Country	Prior Exposures to English and Host Language
Elana	English Education	Lithuania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learnt English through formal education.</li> <li>• No prior knowledge about Lithuanian.</li> </ul>
Yasmin	Accounting	Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learnt English through formal education.</li> <li>• Majored in English Education at the home university.</li> <li>• No prior knowledge about Turkish.</li> </ul>
Bobby	Visual Design Communication	Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learnt English through his parents and formal education.</li> <li>• Exposed to MotoGP interviews that used English with Spanish and Italian accents.</li> </ul>
Shasha	English Education	Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learnt English through formal education.</li> <li>• Majored in English Education at the home university.</li> </ul>

Participants	Study Major	Host Country	Prior Exposures to English and Host Language
Rafa	History Education	Taiwan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiar with Malaysian language only as a general knowledge through the media and assumption that it is similar with Indonesian.</li> <li>Learnt English through formal education.</li> <li>Learnt and also taught Japanese online courses (familiar with Kanji/Hanja through Japanese)</li> </ul>
Lala	Korean Education	South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learnt English through formal education.</li> <li>Majored in Korean Education at University.</li> </ul>

### 2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This research involved two main data collection techniques: one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews and a virtual focus group discussion. The individual interviews for the six participants were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia*, and the questions revolved around the participants' backgrounds, their motivations for joining the IISMA program, their first encounter with English, their familiarity with English as a lingua franca (ELF), and their experiences as well as challenges in using ELF during their stay abroad, especially in intercultural communication settings. Additionally, the participants participated in a virtual focus group discussion which enhanced the depth of exploration, allowing participants to share, compare, and discuss their experiences and challenges in the context of cultural diversity and the multifaceted nature of ELF during the IISMA program.

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Following data collection, all interviews and the focus group discussion were transcribed and read repeatedly to allow for familiarization with the data. Initial coding was then conducted by identifying recurring patterns and salient points related to participants' experiences of ELF. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories through an iterative process of comparison across participants' accounts. From this process, two main themes were developed, capturing shared patterns in how participants navigated ELF use: (1) meaning-making through multilingual resources, and (2) negotiating understanding and misunderstanding in ELF contexts. The excerpts are translated from *Bahasa Indonesia*, with selected cultural terms retained to preserve nuance.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, excerpts were reviewed by the second author, allowing for further reflection on the interpretation of the data. In addition, the use of both interviews and focus group discussion provided a form of data triangulation, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The findings highlight how participants navigated intercultural communication in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context during their study abroad experiences. Focusing on IISMA awardees, the analysis foregrounds how they engaged with linguistic and cultural diversity across different international settings, offering insights into how meaning is negotiated in multilingual interaction.

It is also worth noting that some participants had prior familiarity with the host country's language and culture, which shaped how they engaged with ELF. For instance, Rafa, who studied in Taiwan, had prior knowledge of Hanzi and a strong interest in language learning. Similarly, Bobby's exposure to Spanish through media and cultural interests supported his engagement in Spain, while Lala, a Korean Education major, had prior familiarity with Korean during her study in South Korea.

### 3.1. Meaning-Making through Multilingual Resources

Participants entered the IISMA program with varying degrees of familiarity with English and other languages, which shaped how they engaged with multilingual environments. Prior exposure to linguistic and cultural contexts appeared to influence not only their expectations, but also their ease in navigating different varieties of English.

Bobby, for instance, described how his long-standing exposure to English through media shaped his ability to engage with locally accented English in Spain: "...sometimes, when people speak English with Spanish accents, I just unconsciously mirror theirs..." (Individual interview 3)

Bobby's tendency to mirror local accents can be understood as an accommodation strategy (cf. Giles, 2008), where speakers adjust their speech in response to their interlocutors to facilitate communication. In ELF contexts, such adaptation is oriented less toward imitating native norms and more toward achieving mutual intelligibility (Jenkins, 2015).

Bobby also recounted one interaction with local professors in the classroom that motivated him to know more about local linguistic varieties, particularly to grasp the nuances of in-group humor and cultural references. He mentioned an instance where a lecturer was making a joke in English and suddenly switched to Catalan—the language spoken in eastern and northeastern Spain—in the middle of his sentence. Teasing those unfamiliar with the language and cultural references, he then said: 'Come on, do you know what I was saying? Do any of you understand what I just said?' in English and continued the class in a fun way." Bobby's account suggests that familiarity with diverse English varieties help support a more flexible engagement with ELF, allowing speakers to align with others in interaction.

Unlike Bobby, Yasmin acknowledged that she had not fully prepared for potential language barriers, as she focused on her academic coursework and relied on alumni accounts that the campus environment in Turkey was already "internationalized." However, her experiences did not fully align with these expectations. She recounted one interaction with a local lecturer:

*At one time, I asked the lecturer a question, but I wasn't sure how it sounded, even though I had prepared it beforehand. I ended up repeating myself several times, but the lecturer still understood and responded without any judgment. After that, whenever I asked questions, I would record the answers so I could listen to them again later. The explanations were often in more academic English, with Turkish accents, so it took me some time to fully understand them. That's why I recorded them. (Individual interview 2)*

Her strategy of recording lectures for later review reflects an effort to manage variation in spoken English. This can be seen in relation to the challenges of mutual intelligibility in ELF communication, where understanding is not always immediate but negotiated over time (Seidlhofer, 2011). Rather than indicating a lack of proficiency, such experiences point to the situated nature of comprehension in multilingual contexts, where familiarity with particular varieties plays an important role.

Despite the challenges of mutual intelligibility, Yasmin remained enthusiastic about engaging in multilingual communities using English as a lingua franca. She noted that most of her acquaintances were local students that she met on campus, and she also interacted with many international students from Central Asian regions, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. "Even though their English was limited, with local accents, it was still fine—still understandable—and they were open to the conversation too," she remarked.

Their ability to navigate these difficulties reflects one of the IISMA program's aims—to broaden participants' experiences and support their engagement with local communities. Another participant, Lala, shared that during her program abroad in South Korea, she volunteered for an event organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Seoul to showcase Indonesian culture and tourism, which displayed national and traditional products:

*My role involved explaining the items at the booth to a diverse audience, including Koreans and other foreigners. We had to frequently switch between languages—Indonesian, Korean, and English—since our target audience was multilingual. We explained various aspects of Indonesian culture, such as the different tourist destinations beyond Bali, and the significance of traditional fabrics like batik and tenun. (Individual interview 6)*

Lala's practice of code-switching between the three languages can be understood as translanguaging, where speakers draw on their full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning (García & Wei, 2014). Here, code-switching is not simply a way of dealing with communication barriers but

as a resource for engaging with diverse audiences. Her account also suggests that, in EFL contexts, achieving understanding is prioritized over linguistic accuracy, reflecting a pragmatic orientation often associated with ELF interaction.

A similar dynamic is evident in Shasha's experience in Malaysia, where the presence of Malay alongside English helped her better understand exam questions: "...The similarities between Indonesian and Malay supported my understanding of the materials, and this also made me realize the unique nature of the language system in Malaysia, where monolingual approaches are rarely used, and multilingualism is embraced." (Individual interview 4)

Shasha's experience highlights how linguistic proximity can support meaning-making, particularly in multilingual educational contexts. The similarities between Indonesian and Malay not only facilitate comprehension but also allow speakers to draw on overlapping linguistic resources in ways that blur the boundaries between the two languages. Seen in this light, understanding is not achieved through a single linguistic system, but through the flexible use of related repertoires.

At the same time, Shasha's account points to a broader institutional orientation in which multilingualism is normalized rather than treated as an exception. The presence of Malay alongside English suggests that communication is not confined to a monolingual English framework but is shaped by the coexistence of multiple linguistic resources. From an ELF perspective, this challenges the assumption that English alone carries the communicative load in intercultural settings. Instead, Shasha's experience illustrates how ELF operates alongside other linguistic resources, where understanding is co-constructed through a combination of proximity, flexibility, and contextual awareness.

The data revealed that participants' ability to engage with ELF appears to be shaped not only by proficiency, but also by their capacity to adapt to linguistic variation and draw on available resources. This aligns with perspectives that view ELF as a fluid and context-dependent practice, rather than a fixed linguistic system (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2018). In this sense, participants' experiences point to the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in navigating multilingual and multicultural environments. Beyond this, their experiences also suggest that engaging with ELF involves developing the capacity to interpret, respond to, and participate in diverse communicative practices, where language use is closely tied to cultural expectations and interactional norms (Baker, 2018).

### 3.2. Negotiating Understanding and Misunderstanding in ELF Contexts

Participants frequently encountered communication challenges, particularly in contexts where English was not widely used outside institutional settings. Yasmin, for instance, described the difficulty of interacting with local residents in Turkey: "It's really difficult... outside the campus area, they speak limited English... so you can only [communicate] using what you both know..." (Individual interview 2)

This experience points to the role of English as a lingua franca under conditions of limited shared proficiency, where communication depends on partial linguistic overlap rather than full competence. In such situations, understanding is achieved through mutual intelligibility, where speakers rely on shared, simplified resources to negotiate meaning (Seidlhofer, 2011). Rather than representing communicative failure, Yasmin's account reflects how interaction remains possible despite linguistic constraints.

A similar pattern is evident in Elana's interaction with a stranger in Lithuania: "...we communicated in English, though it was very limited... we waited for the right time to ask for clarification... and used gestures to keep the conversation going..." (Individual interview 1)

Here, communication is sustained not only through language, but also through multimodal strategies, including gestures. This can be understood as part of accommodation practices, where speakers adjust their communicative behaviour—linguistically and non-linguistically—to facilitate understanding (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012). The use of clarification and non-verbal resources highlights how meaning in ELF contexts is co-constructed, rather than transmitted in a linear way.

Yasmin's experience in checking out a lodge further illustrates how misunderstandings may arise even when prior communication appears clear:

*I had asked through messages if it was okay to leave my luggage in the room until 5 PM after checking out. They said yes, it was fine to leave it in the room. However, when I was still outside around 3 PM, they suddenly called me and asked, 'Why are you not taking your luggage out [of the room]?' I was shocked because they had said it was okay. I took a screenshot of the chat as evidence and sent it to them, but they still didn't understand. But when we came back around 6 PM, there was no problem; they just smiled, like nothing happened. I didn't know why they made it an issue on the phone because they sounded super angry. I thought maybe they initially didn't know how to handle it, or maybe simply forgotten, or perhaps they didn't agree but said 'yes' anyway. It was truly a weird and unexpected misunderstanding. (Individual interview 2)*

Rather than simply reflecting a 'communication breakdown,' this interaction can be seen as a case where shared understanding is not fully aligned, despite the use of a common language. ELF research suggests that meaning is always negotiated within specific contexts, and may be shaped by differing expectations, pragmatic norms, or levels of familiarity with English (Mauranen, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2011). The participant's reliance on screenshots and clarification indicates an effort to stabilize meaning in a situation where linguistic and contextual cues are interpreted differently.

In contrast to difficulties in understanding others, Rafa noted the need to adjust his own language when interacting with non-native speakers: "...when I used complex phrases... they didn't understand... so I had to simplify the sentences... I also toned down my speech..." (Individual interview 5)

This reflects a shift toward language simplification as an accommodation strategy, where speakers modify their linguistic output to ensure comprehension (Mauranen, 2012). In ELF contexts, such adjustments are central to achieving mutual intelligibility, often requiring speakers to reduce syntactic complexity or slow down their speech. Rafa's account highlights how communicative success depends not only on proficiency, but also on the ability to adapt language use to the needs of others.

Likewise, Shasha's experience also illustrates how challenges in ELF communication are not limited to comprehension but also involve pragmatic and interpersonal dimensions. She recalled that despite having a solid foundation in English, she faced difficulties in expressing friendliness and engaging in casual conversations as she sounded "too formal": "... I think, my English could sound stiff and come out as too formal sometimes. For example, during group discussions, most [of my classmates] would start having some casual conversation using Malay, and they kind of expect me to understand and participate, too." (Individual interview 4)

Shasha shared that most Malaysians understood Indonesian and were even familiar with its slang and everyday expressions. As a result, her classmates assumed that Indonesians could also understand and speak Malay:

*However, during group work, I prefer to keep things brief and avoid discussions that are out of context, so I would usually steer the conversation back to the topic. Then some of them would say things like, "Oh, just chill, are you in a rush?" [Occasionally] my classmates would give me feedback on how I use and express myself in English; honestly, it affected my confidence. I started to wonder, Is my English not good enough? Is it wrong, or just different? I was surprised [regarding the feedback] because I learned English at school, not at home or through everyday use. I learned it through textbooks, so when it was used in real life, it felt new to me.... I had never been on an exchange program before, so this was my first experience. It made me question whether my English was lacking, despite my preparation, especially among those for whom English is a second language. It made me feel a bit insecure. (Individual interview 4)*

At the same time, many locals initially assumed that she was Malaysian, likely due to her appearance, which closely resembled that of local Malaysians. This misunderstanding appeared to shape their expectations of her, contributing to interactions that felt less accommodating and, at times, somewhat confrontational. Over time, Shasha came to better understand the situation and

began to see that some of the difficulties she experienced were shaped by her classmates' assumptions and limited familiarity with her linguistic background.

Shasha's reflections highlight the challenges of intercultural communication in multilingual environments, particularly how assumptions about language familiarity and cultural knowledge can lead to misunderstandings and strained interactions. Her classmates' expectation that she could participate in casual Malay conversations reflects a broader tendency to project linguistic capabilities onto others. Shasha's account further suggests that difficulties in communication may arise from differences in language norms, particularly between formal, classroom-based English and more informal, socially embedded uses. This aligns with research indicating that ELF communication involves not only intelligibility, but also the negotiation of appropriateness and relational meaning (Cogo, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). Shasha's sense of insecurity reflects the gap between learned forms of English and their situated use in intercultural interaction. The challenges faced by the participants in this study are parallel with research by Yao, Garcia and Collins (2019) which revealed that despite students' willingness to use English as a common language, they still faced difficulties in navigating language barriers and contextual differences in multilingual settings.

Viewed collectively, the participants' experiences demonstrate a sustained effort to adapt, clarify, and persist in communication despite challenges. In this sense, perseverance is not simply an individual trait but is closely tied to how speakers manage the dynamic and context-dependent nature of ELF communication (cf. Liu & Kinginger, 2021). Further, their experiences point to communication in ELF contexts as an ongoing process of negotiation, where understanding is not guaranteed but actively achieved. Successful engagement appears to depend less on linguistic accuracy and more on flexibility, responsiveness, and a willingness to adjust to others—drawing on available linguistic and cultural resources to sustain interaction. It is worth noting that participants with prior exposure to different languages or language varieties appeared better able to adapt to diverse communicative contexts, suggesting that familiarity with linguistic variation supports this flexibility (cf. Cenoz, 2017; Mu, Lee & Choe, 2023).

From this perspective, practices such as accommodation, translanguaging, and simplification are not simply ways of managing difficulty in communication but are, in fact, central to how meaning is constructed (Cogo, 2009). These practices foreground mutual intelligibility as the primary orientation of communication, where speakers prioritize shared understanding over adherence to fixed linguistic norms (Cogo, 2008; Jenkins, 2015). Seen in this light, communication is not the transmission of linguistic forms alone, but a situated activity shaped by context, interlocutors, and the resources at hand.

At the same time, the findings suggest that challenges in ELF interaction are not limited to comprehension but also involve negotiating appropriateness and relational meaning. The tension between formal, learned forms of English and more fluid, interactional uses highlight the gap between *language as taught* and *language as lived*. Navigating this gap requires not only linguistic adjustment, but also sensitivity to context and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. In this regard, engaging with ELF also entails the development of intercultural competence, as speakers learn to interpret, respond to, and position themselves within diverse communicative practices. This view is also in line with Mauranen's (2018) conception of ELF as a multifaceted phenomenon involving dynamic interactions between language and individuals.

Overall, these insights point to ELF as a dynamic practice, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction in context. It follows that adaptability is not simply an individual trait, but an interactional response to the demands of multilingual communication—one that reflects how speakers manage difference, negotiate meaning, and sustain understanding across diverse settings, while navigating the interplay between language, culture, and identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study highlights how participants' engagement with English as a lingua franca (ELF) is shaped by the interplay between language, culture, and context. Their experiences point to ELF not

as a fixed system, but as a dynamic and negotiated practice, where meaning is constructed through interaction rather than determined solely by linguistic forms. In this process, successful communication depends less on accuracy alone and more on the ability to adapt, draw on available linguistic and cultural resources, and remain open to difference.

The findings also suggest that prior exposure to different languages and language varieties supports participants' ability to navigate diverse communicative settings, enabling them to engage more confidently across linguistic boundaries. This highlights the importance of recognizing linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a limitation, and of prioritizing mutual understanding over adherence to standardized norms.

These insights carry implications for higher education, particularly in the context of international mobility programs. Supporting students' engagement in ELF requires not only linguistic preparation, but also opportunities to develop intercultural awareness and practical communicative flexibility. In this sense, programs such as IISMA can be seen not only as sites of academic exchange, but as spaces where students learn to negotiate meaning, manage difference, and participate in multilingual communication. Ultimately, engaging with ELF involves more than learning a language; it entails developing the capacity to respond to diverse communicative contexts with flexibility, awareness, and a willingness to negotiate meaning.

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### Declarations

- Author contribution** : The first author conceptualized the study, collected the data, conducted the initial analysis, and drafted the manuscript. The second author refined and further developed the analysis, strengthened coherence and concision, and revised the manuscript to meet the journal's requirements. Both authors collaboratively designed the interview questions and contributed to the development of the manuscript.
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