Business Discourse Patterns in an ELF Setting between Thai and Burmese Professionals

Tabtip Kanchanapoomi, Wannapa Trakulkasemsuk and Sonthida Keyuravong

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

Thai and Burmese people have their own national languages. Therefore, to be able to communicate with each other when doing business, they use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). When two different groups of people who are from different places and cultures are together, their discourse patterns are distinguishable. How they pattern their talk, what goals are hidden, how some attempts to achieve these goals are met with success, and how others result in failure are issues worth exploring. This study investigates the patterns of cross-cultural spoken discourse observed in business dealings between Thai and Burmese professionals in the glass and aluminium field. By means of audio recording, observations, field notes and interviews, the data in four different contexts, an airport, the company van, a restaurant, and a meeting room, were collected. Based on the SPEAKING Model of Hymes (1974), the findings demonstrate how the speakers patterned their speech as they engaged in conversation, and it reveals the overall pattern of talk between the Thai and Burmese professionals.

Introduction

In the past, people from Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) perceived each other as hostile neighbors, reflected in a number of wars between the two countries. Indeed, relations between them have had their ups and downs in terms of politics and economy. However, with better understanding and more formal and informal talks, Thai-Myanmar relations improved remarkably under the government of Prem Tinsulanonda (1979–1988).

Thailand has undoubtedly now become an important business partner with Myanmar. It is interesting to note that Thailand imports large amounts of natural gas from Myanmar (BOI, 2014), while Myanmar depends heavily on Thai imports of both industrial and consumer goods.

According to the latest information from the Trade Policy and Strategy Office (Ministry of Commerce, 2015), between 2005 and 2009, 3.39% of Thai exports by value went to Myanmar, whilst 10.05% of imports by value came from Myanmar, almost three times Thailand's export value to Myanmar. Undoubtedly, Thailand is an important business partner for Myanmar in ASEAN.

In 2015, while energy investment from Thailand is expected to remain steadily strong, the construction industry is likely to play a major role in Myanmar. Why the construction industry? In 2011, the Myanmar government launched impressive reforms, primarily emphasizing the political system and moving quickly to implement a program of economic and social reform. The result is promising. In the first quarter of 2014, the Myanmar government approved 340 skyscrapers nationwide as well as 705 low-rise buildings across the country (Deboonme, 2014). Therefore, there is an anticipated high demand for steel, cement and other construction materials in response to property development in Myanmar. In addition, Myanmar's advantages from a range of factors, including its strategic location, a youthful labor force, low labor costs, and ample natural resources, are attracting foreigners to invest in the country.

When the opportunity presented itself, in 2013 an aluminium and glass company in Thailand did not hesitate to expand their operations in Myanmar, and they are the focus of the current research. This Thai company has now established a joint venture in Yangon, Myanmar.

In the business world 'Time is money' (Franklin, 1748), and understanding the patterns of business talk can improve the efficiency and productivity of discussion time. This study makes a contribution to intercultural communication theory, which involves communication that attempts to convey a message across cultures and social groups. In other words, it is seen as a 'negotiated understanding of meaning in human experiences across social systems and societies' (Arent, 2009: 2).

Even though parties are from different countries, have different cultural backgrounds, and talk in different languages, they can do business together. To be able to communicate and understand each other, they need to use a lingua franca, which in the modern world is generally English. The use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been studied by many researchers, and a number of issues concerned with ELF have been explored. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) investigated the English pronunciation features of by people from ten different ASEAN countries, and they noted that different pronunciation is one of the factors which can lead to misunderstandings. Deterding (2013) further considered other factors which caused misunderstandings such as grammar, word choice and discourse. In addition, he showed how these misunderstandings could be repaired and avoided. Moreover, research on ELF has included a number of studies of business in English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), and it is worth investigating BELF discourse patterns and how people engage in conversation in a real situation.

Most previous research on BELF has been conducted in European business contexts (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Koester, 2014). In addition, there are some studies investigating how communication strategies are used in various business settings in Asia (Yamada, 2002) including between Thailand and Japan (Kardkarnklai, 2009). According to Holmes (2009), research on spoken workplace discourse has focused on issues such as different types of workplace interaction, power and solidarity analysis, and gender and ethnicity in the workplace, but the literature on these issues in Thai business settings remains scarce.

This study focuses on the business discourse patterns between Thai and Burmese professionals involved in glass and aluminium construction in an ELF setting, to investigate how they do business in this region.

Literature Review

A lingua franca is regarded as a typical language to enable people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to communicate at a reasonably basic level. In other words, a lingua franca is seen as a contact language. It is used among people who share neither a first language nor culture, and English is generally chosen as the foreign language of communication (Firth, 1996). English is widely spoken and it is believed that its worldwide reach is much larger than any other language throughout history, including Latin and French (Crystal, 1995).

Seidlhofer (2015: 7) identifies ELF as 'any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option.' She further highlights that its conceptualization is not formal, but functional. Certain grammatical mistakes or some communication strategies such as code-switching are not seen as 'wrong' or indicative of low proficiency language use as long as the conveyed messages are understood by other interlocutors.

Using the Three Circles model proposed by Kachru (1996), the ten countries in the ASEAN Community can be subdivided into two major circles: the Outer Circle and the

Expanding Circle. Both Thailand and Myanmar are categorized in the Expanding Circle as English is not their official language. Still, English is a growing medium of communication between these two countries especially in a business context. Kachru and Nelson (2006) describe the functional domains of English across the Three Circles to reinforce the importance of English and how it has spread.

While ELF tends to dominate the international business world, Louhiala-Salminen & Charles (2006) define Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) as a language shared by professionals who have different cultural backgrounds and speak different languages but have a common communication goal which is to succeed in an international business purpose. This definition accords with Handford's (2010: 145) argument that in the business world, the most important issue is not language ability, but the community of practice which business people inhabit. BELF is considered different from ELF because it focuses only on language use in the business world and 'its frame of reference is provided by the globalized business community' (Charles, 2007: 264). This implies that the communication code in the BELF world is investigated in its own right, not as English in the traditional sense (Rogerson-Revell & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010: 376).

To be able to understand English used in the business area, it is important to study previous research on business discourse. The study of business discourse has attracted the attention of researchers for a long while. Business discourse is a part of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). A major purpose of most research in this field is to investigate how people in business organizations achieve their organizational and individual goals through the use of language (Johns, 1986; Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken. 2007).

Early research was done in the doctor and patient field by Fisher and Todd (1983), while the topic that was mainly explored in the mid and late nineties was the use of language in negotiation (i.e. Candlin, Maley & Sutch, 1999; Firth, 1995). Later in 2002, Yamada investigated the differences between Japanese and American meetings which included both cross- and intercultural analysis between two different cultures in the business setting. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) studied email messages and meetings in which English was used as a lingua franca between Finnish and Swedish employees. It was concluded that when English was used in an international business context among non-native English speakers, they would use 'simpler' English to facilitate communication. Additionally, the issue of face work was scrutinized to find out how it was used to achieve interpersonal goals in intercultural sales negotiations between ELF speakers in the European context. The results revealed that the use of personal pronouns was regarded as one of the indicators of the negotiator relationship (Planken, 2005).

Rogerson-Revell (2007) explored the use of English as a lingua franca or English for International Business in a particular European business organization. She reported that most Native English Speakers (NESs) suggested that they had some difficulties in understanding other native English speakers (NESs) and non-native English speakers (NNESs) in international meetings, while 56 percent of NNESs felt 'quite comfortable' in small meetings or one-to-one conversations. Kardkarnklai (2009) investigated how Thais and Japanese managed conflicts in intercultural business meetings, what conflict-softening strategies were employed and what significant cultural values underlay the use of these conflict strategies. She discovered, in a business context in which conflict arises, Thai and Japanese speakers expressed their implicit and explicit disagreement through various strategies. Furthermore Handford and Matous (2015) analyzed the discursive realization of on-site problem-solving which was encountered in a large international construction project between Japanese engineers and Hong Kong foremen in a Hong Kong working site. The result revealed that Asian professionals preferred a cyclical problem solving pattern, while the westerners preferred a linear style.

This particular type of communication is complex and is associated with other disciplines such as genre analysis, discourse analysis, and pragmatics. However, which discipline is used as a theoretical framework of the research depends on the aim of the research. For example, professional discourse has been explored from the genre analysis perspective (Bhatia, 2008). It is believed that this approach is helpful for analyzing distinctive characteristics of business discourse. Additionally, Miller (1984) and Hasan (1985) showed that genre analysis is capable of bringing together various disciplines such as social constructionism and linguistics. This allows, Koester (2006) claims, 'a thick description' of data in terms of the social context of interaction. On the one hand, conversation analysis (CA) is suitable for the analysis of the dynamic of spoken interaction. This method helps identify general structures of talk-in interaction, such as turn-taking organization and adjacency pairs (Koester, 2006). On the other hand, Kardkarnklai (2009) considers the use of the ethnographic method (Hymes' SPEAKING framework) most suitable in investigating business discourse between Thai and Japanese professionals as it does not focus only on linguistic aspects but it considers social issues as well.

Before Hymes' framework, Chomsky introduced the concept of 'linguistic competence,' the ability to know the language perfectly, in 1965. However, Hymes had a different view. He suggested that when two people communicate with each other, what is required is 'communicative competence'. Being able to know the language is insufficient to achieve the goal of communication. Therefore, Hymes remarks that it is necessary to know the language as social knowledge, about how and when to use the language appropriately. Then he proposed a three-unit-analysis; speech situation, speech event and speech act. Speech situation is concerned with the social situation in which interaction takes place, speech event analyzes the language in use in each situation, while speech act includes all the acts people perform when speaking. Nonetheless, what seems to be the most important unit is speech event. Hymes (1974: 52) states that a speech event refers to activities which are governed by rules or norms of speech.

There are various components which are relevant to the analysis of the speech event. Therefore, Hymes (1974) introduced the SPEAKING Grid framework. There are eight components to be considered: *s*etting (location and time), *p*articipants (people who take part in the conversation), *e*nd (goals of the communication), *a*ct sequence (speech acts conducted in the conversation), *k*ey (time and manner), *i*nstrumentalities (medium of communication), *n*orm of interaction (rules of communication) and *g*enre (speech categories). Applying Hymes' model for research can assist in the analysis of naturalistic speech; we investigate the essential elements of each context in the study.

Understanding business talk is not an easy task. Therefore, a careful look at the relevant theories is crucial. The SPEAKING Grid proposed by Hymes (1974) is a valuable tool in the analysis of the data in the current study because the list of components proposed by Hymes is meant not only to explain how language works but also to understand people's goals and needs in an actual communication. Speaking is considered as a social and cultural system in a specific context of different speech communities (Philipsen & Coutou, 2005). In addition, Cameron (2001) explains that the framework both describes the surface level of discourse and answers the questions why particular events occur and why they have distinct characteristics.

A variety of different types of data have been used in business discourse research. Despite difficulties in obtaining the data, business discourse researchers are still interested in conducting this type of research as it provides invaluable insights into how people actually communicate in business organizations (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2007).

Methodology

Participants

Before selecting the participants, the researcher received official ethical approval from King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). The next step was to create the criteria for choosing the participants as follows:

- employers and employees of Thai and Burmese construction organizations
- those who are involved in Thai and Burmese business meetings
- those who are able to communicate in English

Then the selected people were informed of the scope of the study and they were allowed to refuse to participate. After that, the first researcher conducted an unstructured interview with them in order to collect information about their personal and working experience. In addition, the participants were asked to evaluate their English speaking skills on a scale of very poor, poor, average, good and very good. Details about the participants are given below.

Thai Business People

Th1: Engineer, 32 years old. He spent two years in the US studying for a diploma in business studies. He did his Masters in Business Administration at a well-known public university in Thailand. He had worked for the company for almost three years as an engineer. His trips abroad were often related to business. With regard to his English speaking proficiency, he evaluated himself as average, whereas the researcher (who received a Master's Degree in Professional Communication from University of Sydney) thought that his English speaking proficiency was good.

Th2: Project Coordinator, 30 years old. She obtained her bachelor from a famous public university in Thailand. She could speak three languages: Thai, English and Japanese. She had started to work at the company a year before. Her responsibilities were to correspond with the Burmese party, to file the documents related to working projects and to attend the meetings as requested. She evaluated her English speaking skills as good. However, the researcher found her speaking skills quite fluent compared to others. Even though she seemed to have potential problems with technical terms used in the field, she could generally guess the meaning from the context.

Th3: Marketing Manager, 37 years old. He was not present but was mentioned twice in the transcription.

Burmese business people

M1: Project Manager, 60 years old. He finished his studies at high school in Myanmar. He had lived in Thailand for a few years and was able to speak Thai. He was an experienced project manager. He evaluated his English speaking skills as average, but the researcher rated him as good because he was quite fluent in speaking English.

M2: Project Coordinator, 34 years old. He obtained his Bachelor degree in Myanmar. He had worked as a project coordinator for two years. He could speak three languages: Burmese, English and Japanese. He evaluated his English speaking proficiency as average which accorded with the researcher's opinion. Though he could communicate reasonably well in English, one of his problems was a lack of confidence whenever he spoke.

M3: Foreman, 30 years old. He finished his studies in Myanmar. He had worked for the company for almost two years. He could speak Burmese and English. He evaluated his English speaking skills as poor, but the researcher rated him as between poor and average. He was able to communicate with a Thai engineer, but he sometimes needed a Burmese project manager to assist him with translation from Burmese to English.

The names used in the transcription are pseudonyms (i.e. Th1, Th2, M1, M2 and M3) including the names in a quotation mark for example 'son,' 'yen,' 'mao' etc.

Research Instruments

An audio recorder was employed together with participant observation in business dealings. The use of a video recorder was not an option for this study as the researcher considered it intrusive for the participants. The participant observation and field notes assisted in recording their behavior or other gestures of participants during the discussion. In addition, taking photographs seemed to be useful, as they acted as visual aids which were used to assist the participants' memories. The recorded data was transcribed. After the data was transcribed and analyzed, the participants were able to see the transcription and photos (if possible) and were asked the reason(s) why they spoken as shown in the data set.

Data collection

The data required for the analysis was collected in Yangon, Myanmar. The four selected contexts are an international airport, a company van, a cozy restaurant in a supermarket and a meeting room at the office. The recording equipment was turned on from when the conversations started until they ended in each context. The total length of the four recordings was almost four hours.

Transcription

The researcher mainly applied typical discourse transcription. However, some transcription conventions from Conversation Analysis (Jefferson 2002) such as prosody (i.e. high pitch, forte) and sequence (i.e. overlaps), were added to facilitate the analysis. Also, the data obtained from the participant observation proved a useful source of information to support the analysis.

Analysis

The researcher applied the *S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G Model* of Hymes (1974) and followed each component step by step. This framework reminded the researcher what components should be observed in the conversation in order to categorize the data. This is illustrated below.

Settings: The data were collected from four different settings which were at the airport, in the company van, at the noodles restaurant and at the office. These settings were located in Yangon, Myanmar.

Participants: The number of participants increased only when the meeting was held in the office, while in other settings, they remained the same. There were two Thai participants who were an engineer and a project coordinator, while the three Burmese participants were a project manager, a project coordinator and a foreman. Their ages ranged from 32 to 60 years old.

Ends: The goals of the communication were different to a certain degree in each context. The communication goals at the airport were simplest, since the time spent at the airport was

short and it was crowded and noisy. However, the goals were more complex when the conversation was conducted in the company van, in the restaurant and at the office respectively. The outstanding goal was to build a relationship as this was fundamental when doing business and was found in every setting.

Act sequences: The expressive act was dominant in all settings, as shown in Figure 1.
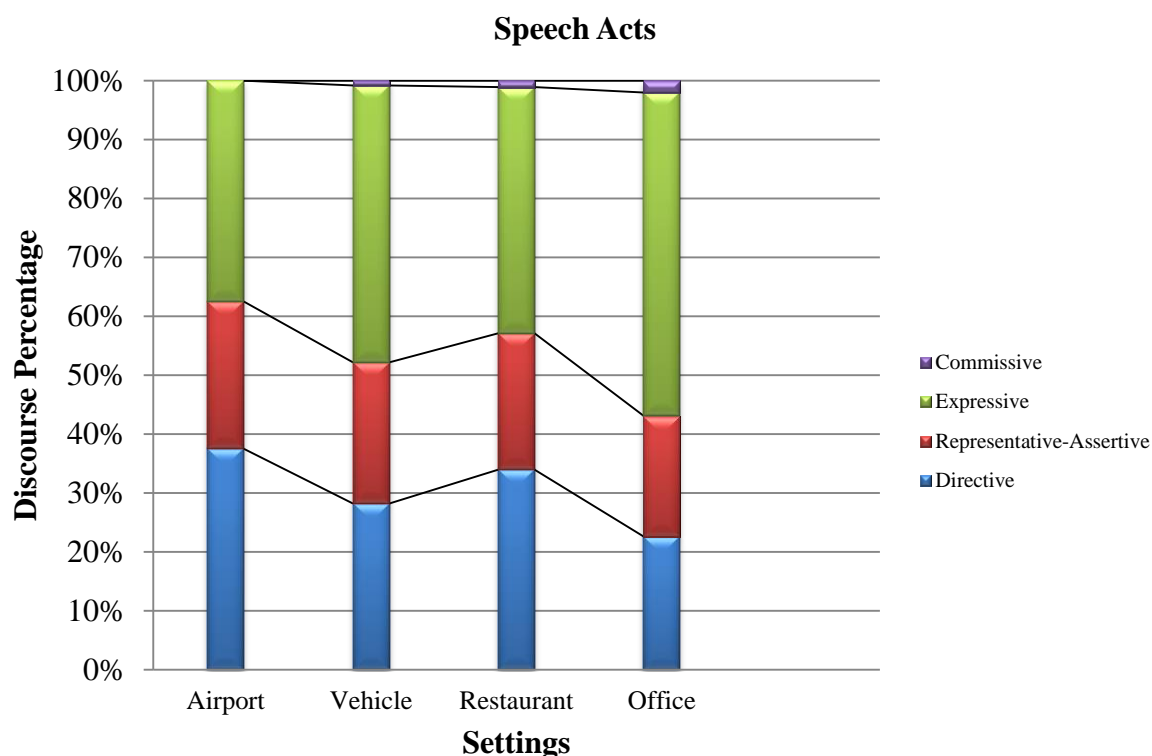
Speech Acts

Figure 1. Speech acts in different settings

Key: The tone in all settings was friendly except the office where a more serious tone was used. In terms of manner, all interactions were polite and mostly considerate.

Instrumentalities: The channel of speech in three settings, the airport, vehicle and restaurant, was completely oral and casual. However, in the office writing and drawing channels were also employed.

Norms: There were both different and similar norms of interaction. When the settings changed (i.e. from the airport to other settings), language use seemed to change accordingly from fragments to simple and compound sentences. Other interesting features were identified. For example being considerate and flexible were shared cultural features emerging from the discourse. While talking, the topics and number of participants could change according to the situations. The next feature was joke sharing which occurred in almost all settings, even in the meeting. The last feature, the communication style which was considered assertive enabled the speakers to take turns to talk and to give opinions.

Genre: In each discourse, three typical types of talk were recognized. The participants were engaged in small talk and general conversation in order to build and maintain their relationships, while the business talk was the key issue and the main goal of their visit.

Example 1 illustrates the use of expressive acknowledgement, for example 'hmm, uh huh, yeah', by both Thai and Burmese participants.

Example 1

In the meeting, Th1 mentioned the work responsibilities of each person including Thai staff working in Yangon, Myanmar.

1	Th1:	but if if you if the you you i i i will talk to him on the phone too [but]
2	M1:	[yeah]
3	Th1:	M1 you have to talk to 'son' ask him or or if or the the support
4	M1:	hmm
5	Th1:	is done take him out 'pruek' can
6	M1:	hmm
7	Th1:	make it 'yen' can make it M3 can make it so so
8	M1:	hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm
9	Th1:	take take him out with another people set another group doing this job yeah
10	M1:	hmm hmm hmm away
11	Th1:	and but you need to put more labor help helping them or or
12	M1:	hmm hmm
13	Th1:	subcontract[or] to to do the [cladding] things
14	M1:	[hmm] [hmm]
15	M3:	yeah hmm

In the first three settings, directives (i.e. questions) were used in order to request and/or collect information, while the use of narrative increased when it came to a formal working discussion section.

At the beginning, the researcher counted every time each interlocutor expressed 'hmm' 'uh huh' and 'yeah.' Later on, the results were transformed into percentages, and they are displayed as expressives in Figure 1. After that the analysis was conducted and was confirmed by the participants' interviews.

Discussion

To answer the research question about the cross-cultural business discourse patterns, the recorded data together with the data gained from the observations, field notes and interviews with the participants provided substantial insights. Four settings were chosen. In each setting, the number of participants was similar. In other words, Th1, Th2 and M1 were together in the in the following settings which were the airport, the vehicle and the restaurant except for the meeting at the office as a Burmese project coordinator and a Burmese foreman were later involved in that discussion.

When comparing the settings in the company van and the meeting, the level of formality of the talk tended to shift depending on the contexts. Also, when the atmosphere and the setting were suitable for business dealings, the talk seemed to be more formal and serious. However, it was noticeable that, even when the formality level increased, there was still considerable flexibility. For example, no meeting agenda was distributed to the participants, and instead the chairman briefly informed the others what would be discussed in the meeting. In addition, the Burmese foreman was allowed to leave the room in the middle of the talk when the topic did not relate to him, while the Burmese project coordinator was later invited to attend the meeting when it was his turn to inform the participants of the future projects and he was asked for solutions to problems.

In the office, when the participants were settled and the setting was appropriate for the business discussion, they sometimes applied more than one channel of communication, as

writing and drawing were needed especially when a Thai engineer explained to the Burmese project manager and foreman how to do the area calculation. This assisted the understanding of the other participants. The topics of the talk varied and the portion of each topic was influenced by the settings. In fact, business-related talk occurred in all three settings except the airport. This was because the time spent at the airport was rather short, approximately five minutes before they got into the van. Later, in the follow-up interview, a Burmese project manager suggested that it might be an Asian business style, which was not the same as the western style. He further explained that they could talk about business even when they had meals or were in the van. To him, this was normal in business dealings.

A common business goal that emerged from the data was to build and to maintain the business relationship. Even though they had worked closely for almost three years, they did not meet each other every day. The Thai professionals usually visited once every two weeks or once a week if anything urgent happened. Therefore, whenever they met, they needed to have an ice-breaking conversation before progressing with further discussions. The business talk would come afterwards and it could happen in almost every setting. The portion of the business talk more or less depended on the context in which the conversation took place. On the other hand, the type of interaction that served to build and maintain the business relationship can be described as small talk.

Small talk can be regarded as free, aimless social intercourse (Malinowski, 1972). However, it also serves an important social function (Holmes, 2000; Spencer-Oatley, 2000). The frequent use of small talk by both parties indicated that it was important in reinforcing their business relationship even though it might seem to be aimless. Much of the small talk involved gossip, often on personal topics such as the wealth of the Burmese boss and also his daughter's business. Such personal issues might be seen as inappropriate in western business interactions, but for Thai and Burmese business professionals, discussion of such issues showed personal trust. The use of this kind of gossip is illustrated in Example 2.

Example 2

1   M1:   here here

Th1 turned and talked to Th1 about how rich the Myanmar Director is.

2   Th1:   very rich man huh your boss
3   M1:   haha
4   M1:   yeah I heard the the the the rumours go the
5   daughter 'wendy' lost some money from em: this 'omany'
6   Th1:   ['omany'] [aha]
7   M1:   ['omany:'] [yeh]
8   Th1:   'wendy' lost some money
9   M1:   yeh
10   Th1:   why
11   M1:   i i think it the the the power inside …(inaudible)… outside…(inaudible)…she
12   i think she: invest too early
13   Th1:   ah: [ao:]
14   M1:   [hmm] hmm yeah and the 'omany' not not a good marketing you [know] [to]
15   Th1:   [aha] [aha]
16   M1:   [it's not that good hmm] [they said] she rushed into too early
17   Th1:   [ao: i see] [hmm:]

Example 2 includes two stories. The first one was about the land owned by the Burmese boss. When the company van went past the empty land, M1 pointed at it while Th1 told Th2

that the land belonged to the Burmese boss. After that he turned to the Burmese colleague and teased him about his boss. The laughter in line 3 shows the acceptance and M1 then started a new topic which was about the business of the Burmese boss's daughter which was not very successful. When Th1 asked what the cause was, M1 did not hesitate to express his thoughts. Even though the topic of this small talk was somewhat personal, both parties seemed to feel at ease talking about it.

Another feature discovered in the business talk was the frequent use of expressions such as 'hmm', 'uh', 'huh' and 'yeah' as acknowledgement or agreement by both Thai and Burmese participants in all four settings. Example 3 took place in the company van when Th1 wanted to know what the destination was.

Example 3

After getting into the company van, Th1 asked M1 where they were heading.

1	Th1:	so we are going to the office in the city
2	M1:	no in the city the the the factory
3	Th1:	oh the factory i i thought you talk about the [there's] the payment
4	M1:	yeah no no [fac]
5	Th1:	[something]
6	M1:	[factory] near nearer
7	Th1:	[o:k]
8	M1:	[haha] haha nearer ha I think short time ma shorter time yeah
9	Th1:	uh hmm

Th1 was not sure about where M1 was taking them, so he asked M1 and found out that his initial assumption was wrong. He originally thought that M1 was taking them to the office in the city center to make a payment, but M1 explained that he would take them to the factory because it was closer to where they were, and he did not mention the payment.

Example 4 involves a discussion in a restaurant.

Example 4

At a cozy restaurant, while Th1, Th2 and M1 were waiting for their dishes to be served, Th1 follow up with the ongoing project.

1	Th1:	M 1 have you talked to the owner of 'tiantian' project end of this [month]
2	M1:	[i:]
3	Th1:	[is that ok]
4	M1:	[i i i] but i can request to them because ah: ah: materials are almost
5		come are almost [finished] and the site is
6	Th1:	[uh hmm]
7	M1:	almost finished actually they want to take a photo /nae/ so I'm thinking of
8	Th1:	hmm
9	M1:	this way if the material not arrive i just …(inaudible)…a few panel just to take
10		photo but now today [they arrive:]
11	Th1:	[it's in maesod]
12	M1:	yeah maesod and tomorrow can arrive here so i will talk to them no problem
13		maybe [no problem]
14	Th1:	[uh hmm:]
15	M1:	only: alwa they they worry what ah: whether we cannot finish by
16		[this month] [and da]
17	Th1:	[hmm:] [this] this month i don't i don't think [so]

18		but the: yeah so i come to talk to you about the rest of the job [what]
19	M1:	[yeah]
20	Th1:	what we gonna do
21	M1:	the: problem is alwa and 'tiantian' 'tiantian' we will finish /wae/ the rest
22	Th1:	yeah
23		the the the the small one but small one not not not gonna be a problem [for us]
24	M1:	[yeah]
25	Th1:	right
26	M1:	yeah like they knew we gonna get the big one [haha]
27	Th1:	[yeah]
28		[kue]
29	M1:	[how] how about other things like 'sc' about 'sc' and everything [for]
30	Th1:	[no] pen pen pending pen[ding] yeah because one of the 'sc' project they stop
31		because
32	M1:	[pen]ding
33	Th1:	Th3 told me it's about the tax
34	M1:	hmm ao: i see

In Examples 3 and 4, Th1 and M1 took turns. While they were talking, 'hmm' and 'yeah' were used quite often to express the acknowledgement and agreement. What is interesting is that when they used 'hmm', 'uh', 'hmm' and 'yeah', it did not mean that they completely understood their interlocutor. In the separate follow-up interviews, Th1 and M1 admitted that sometimes they did not understand what another person had been talking about, but they considered it inappropriate to stay silent when another person was talking. In other words, the signal words (i.e. 'hmm', 'uh', 'hmm', 'yeah') were used as an enthusiastic way of showing they were listening. They preferred to say something in order to encourage the person who was talking, or if they were not really certain what s/he was talking about and it was important information, they preferred to ask later. Example 5 is a clearer example.

Example 5

In the meeting, Th1 mentioned the work responsibilities of each person including Thai staff working in Yangon, Myanmar.

1	Th1:	but if if you if the you you i i i will talk to him on the phone too [but]
2	M1:	[yeah]
3	Th1:	M1 you have to talk to 'son' ask him or or if or the the support
4	M1:	hmm
5	Th1:	is done take him out 'pruek' can
6	M1:	hmm
7	Th1:	make it 'yen' can make it M3 can make it so so
8	M1:	hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm
9	Th1:	take take him out with another people set another group doing this job yeah
11	M1:	hmm hmm hmm away
12	Th1:	and but you need to put more labor help helping them or or
13	M1:	hmm hmm
14	Th1:	subcontract[tor] to to do the [cladding] things
15	M1:	[hmm] [hmm]
16	M3:	yeah hmm

………………………..

| 54 | Th1: | i send only one for 'tiantian' but because mostly of the 'tiantian' is |
| 55 | M1: | yeah |

56	Th1:	do[ne from from Bangkok] hmm
57	M1:	[yeah yeah yeah] mr 'son' can can leave this this working site
58	Th1:	\<Th 2 nodded.\>
59	M1:	ok

……………………………..

78	M1:	sorry if: if er: mr 'son' do do the survey and let the other do after like
79		(…inaudible four words…) it's ok
80	Th1:	do what
81	M1:	he only do the the the installation i mean he only do the survey and the
82		other
83	Th1:	uh huh
84	M1:	they can move around the the yeah hmm like this it will be
85	Th1:	uh huh uh huh
86	M1:	faster
87	Th1:	yeah yeah we we like i told you mr 'son' 'mao' ['preuk'] they all the
88	M1:	hmm hmm 'mao' hm[m yeah]
89	Th1:	headman
90	M1:	yeah
91	Th1:	so normally they have to you have to put some
92	M1:	hmm hmm
93	Th1:	labour for for him right
94	M1:	hmm hmm
95	Th1:	but maybe put 'yen' team together with him so two of them can
96	M1:	hmm hmm
97	Th1:	help each other
98	M1:	hmm

Example 5 is taken from the recording in the meeting; some of the dialogue is omitted from the example since it was not related to the topic in focus. The transcription above was divided into three parts. At the beginning, Th1 was trying to delegate and explain carefully what each person should do in order to finish the current project. Then he assigned the tasks to M1 and M3 and told them that they needed to talk to a Thai workman named 'Son' in order to move him to a new project and set up a new team to work on the project. It can be observed that both M1 and M3 acknowledged while Th1 was explaining. Later M1 asked Th1 again about whether the same Thai workman, 'Son', could be moved to another site. This time Th1 gave him a non-verbal 'yes' response (a nod) and M1 said 'ok.' In the last part of the excerpt, M1 asked about the same issue again. This time he elaborated more. Th1 was not sure what M1 was saying; therefore, he asked M1 to repeat what he was saying. When he understood, he repeatedly gave an explanation and told M1 what he could do. Again the use of 'hmm' can be seen frequently during the conversation.

In the follow-up interview, M1 admitted that in the first part he knew that Th1 mentioned a Thai workman, 'Son', but he did not understand clearly what he should tell 'Son'. He said the use of 'hmm' and 'yeah' was considered an automatic sign of attention to encourage Th1 to speak. When he thought that it was an appropriate time, he decided to ask Th1 about the Thai workman to avoid any misunderstanding occurring. Later he asked again in order to confirm his understanding and to clarify what he had to do. From Example 5, it is interesting that although M1 realized that he had missed some information, he did not attempt to interrupt Th1 immediately, perhaps adopting the 'let-it-pass' strategy noted by Firth (1996) in the hope that things would become clear on their own. Finally, however, he waited for the right time to ask and later again to confirm his understanding.

Conclusion

This research investigates the patterns of business discourse between Thai and Burmese professionals when they engage in business dealings. Much earlier research on business discourse has been conducted in European (Plaken, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007) or East Asian contexts (Yamada, 2002), and most of the time, the researchers paid attention to certain aspects of the discourse and provided an in-depth analysis, exploring issues such as face-saving, leadership, and communication strategies in negotiation. However, if we move back a step, we can gain a clearer picture of how the patterns are formed. This is valuable background information which leads the researcher to achieve a deeper level of analysis.

In conclusion, the business discourse patterns in an ELF setting between Thai and Burmese professionals are worth investigating. This study enables us to realize how the patterns are organized and to be aware of how communication goals are achieved in authentic business situations. The findings of this study can enable us to understand interactions between Thai and Burmese counterparts in similar types of business.

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