

REALIZATION AND UNREALIZATION OF OFF-RECORD INDIRECTNESS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

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Received: 17 February 2026

Revised: 16 March 2026

Accepted: 17 March 2026

Published: 20 April 2026

Citation:

Pan, Z. (2026). *Realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness in intercultural communication*. *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 26(1), 217–231.
<https://doi.org/10.69598/hasss.26.1.284745>

Since little research has examined the reactions after off-record indirectness is used, the realization and unrealisation, or lack of understanding, of off-record indirectness in intercultural communication using English as a lingua franca (ELF) was investigated in this study. In total, 40 participants were involved. The 20 Chinese and 20 Thai participants were divided into 20 pairs to engage in dyadic intercultural ELF conversations. Conversation analysis (CA) was used for the data analysis. A qualitative method and quantitative analyses were used. Overall, the use of off-record indirectness mainly pertained to one's face according to the perspectives of politeness and impoliteness. Three situations occurred when off-record indirectness was realized: the conversations continued although certain disagreements emerged. These arguments occurred due to face-threatening acts (FTAs), and off-record indirectness was used as a response FTA. Three situations occurred when off-record indirectness was unrealized: communication broke down, FTAs were perpetrated by either the hearer or the speaker of off-record indirectness, and the intersection of a series of unrealized examples of off-record indirectness was observed. This research further contributes to the study of off-record indirectness in intercultural communication, and a model for the realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication is proposed.

Keywords: Off-record indirectness; intercultural communication; English as a lingua franca; face; impoliteness; politeness

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication has received more attention in recent decades due to globalization (Jenks, 2025), and English as a lingua franca (ELF) is used frequently in intercultural communication in different regions across the world, including Asia (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). As individuals in intercultural communication have distinct linguacultural backgrounds, there are many associated issues in intercultural communication, such as intercultural competence and impoliteness (Byram, 2021; Pan, 2024). Despite the aforementioned issues, indirectness has mainly been ignored in intercultural communication, particularly in relation to off-record indirectness.

Directness and indirectness are closely related to effectiveness and politeness in intercultural communication (Chen & Wang, 2021; Terkourafi, 2019). When individuals use a common language to communicate with each other in intercultural communication, their shared intention is to understand each other based on the utterances that they produce (+in order) to maintain the harmony of their interpersonal

relationship (Kecskes, 2022; McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2021). A few studies have found that culture is a significant factor that influences the preference for directness or indirectness (Daar et al., 2023; Ogiermann, 2015). Certain individuals prefer to use directness, while others prefer to use indirectness for different purposes. Indirectness is used extensively in different types of oral communication (Terkourafi, 2019; Zhou & Zhang, 2022), and several studies have focused on on-record and off-record indirect requests from the perspective of politeness (Al-Adaileh, 2024; Ogiermann, 2015). Compared to on-record indirectness as “pragmatically transparent ways of doing an act” (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 140), such as conventional indirect requests like “Can I...?” and “Could you...?” (Pan, 2022, p. 39), off-record indirectness, as an unconventional and opaque way of performing an act (Blum-Kulka, 1987), is not only used often but also deserves to receive more focus. Given that off-record indirectness is “not linked to any specific linguistic or grammatical forms” (Ogiermann, 2015, p. 31), individuals may not realize the intention whenever off-record indirectness is present. Since off-record indirectness pertains to mutual understanding and the issue of politeness and impoliteness (Zhou & Zhang, 2022), the question of whether the realization or lack of realization of off-record indirectness should be investigated arises to reveal how individuals react to it verbally.

Accordingly, the present research is an attempt to fill the gap caused by the limited number of studies on off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication. Furthermore, verbal responses to off-record indirectness have not received sufficient attention. Thus, the research aim was to investigate the linguistic phenomena that occur when off-record indirectness was realized or unrealized in intercultural ELF communication. The research findings will reveal the patterns in the realization or lack of realization of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication. The two research questions (RQs) are listed below.

RQ1: What occurs when off-record indirectness is realized in intercultural ELF communication?

RQ2: What occurs when off-record indirectness is not realized in intercultural ELF communication?

In the remainder of this paper, the literature review pertaining to indirectness and intercultural communication will be presented in Section 2, followed by the research methodology in Section 3. The results and discussion will be elucidated in Sections 4 to 6, while the conclusion will be presented in Section 7.

2. INDIRECTNESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

2.1 Off-record indirectness

According to the Gricean theory of the cooperative principle, effective communication should be based on directness because the maxim of quality states that interactants should be informative, while the maxim of manner states that interactants should avoid obscurity and ambiguity. However, studies have found that interactants frequently violate the aforementioned maxims in communication by using indirectness (Ehmer & Rosemeyer, 2018; Tawilapakul, 2022). Directness refers to delivering the intended meaning directly in an utterance (Blum-Kulka, 1987), such as saying “no” to refuse a request. By contrast, indirectness involves subtle linguistic forms to deliver an interactant’s intended meaning indirectly without stating it directly, such as providing an excuse to refuse an invitation instead of saying “no” (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). Thus, compared to indirectness, directness is used to express clear meanings or intentions to ensure mutual understanding. However, the interactants’ priorities may not be to express a clear meaning in communication, as many factors combine and play various roles that lead the interactants to choose indirectness in diverse situational contexts (Chen & Wang, 2021; Daar et al., 2023).

Many studies have confirmed that the use of indirectness is associated with face from the perspective of politeness or impoliteness (Bregasi, 2020; Haugh, 2024; Pan, 2025). Face is “individually (internally, cognitively, historically) expected by the Self but is interactionally (externally, mutually, continuously) constituted between Self and Other” (Bousfield, 2008, p. 42). No interactions can occur without considering face (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Tantucci et al., 2022). Face can be divided into positive face and negative face: positive face refers to an individual’s expectations of being accepted and approved of in interactions, whereas negative face refers to an individual’s need not to be imposed on in interactions (Bousfield, 2008; Pan, 2024). Interactants consciously or subconsciously consider the use of different linguistic forms according to the situational context of the communication. In the Asian context, interactants tend to use indirectness more often than directness when they interact with their employers or teachers due to differences in the social power and social status of the interactants (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Su & Lee, 2022). Pan (2025) also found that Thai university students used indirectness extensively when they interacted with their lecturers, as the need to ask questions was considered to constitute a high level of imposition. In these circumstances, directness is not the first choice for most of the interactants because it is a face-threatening act (FTA) that damages interactants’ faces in oral communication (Haugh, 2024).

As mentioned above, indirectness includes on-record and off-record indirectness, in which an indirect utterance “has two illocutionary points, namely, primary and secondary” (Zhou & Zhang, 2022, p. 1). For

example, by using the on-record indirect request “May I ask what photo you say?” (Pan, 2022, p. 40), the primary illocution that the speaker wanted to know which photo the hearer was talking about was indicated as the secondary illocution in this request. Thus, instead of using an imperative as a bald-on-record FTA, interactants often choose on-record indirectness to minimize imposition or to deescalate tension (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Pan, 2022). Although on-record indirectness shows more politeness compared to a bald-on-record FTA, off-record indirectness is also used to indicate face-saving and to avoid conflicts in interactions (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Chen & Wang, 2021). Since there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic forms and off-record indirectness, “off-record indirectness is highly contextualized,” requiring an interactant to understand the intended meaning (Zhou & Zhang, 2022, p. 1). Several studies of off-record indirectness have revealed that interactants mainly used it due to considerations of politeness (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Bousfield, 2008; Zhao & Ran, 2022). However, as the intended meaning is hidden beneath the surface level of the utterance, the hearer of an indirect utterance must understand it based on the situational context, including the interactional roles, the social status of each role, and the prior and ongoing context of the communication (Kecskes, 2022; Merino, 2023). Hence, it is assumed that not all hearers are able to realize indirectness; furthermore, a hearer may not always be able to identify or understand different instances of indirectness, and the successful realization of indirectness involves a process of inferencing (Ehmer & Rosemeyer, 2018).

Inferencing refers to the process of “accepting a statement or proposition (called the conclusion) on the basis of the (possibly provisional) acceptance of one or more other statements or propositions (called the premises)” (Ehmer & Rosemeyer, 2018, p. 536). Thus, the intended meaning needs to be decoded through the process of inferencing from an indirect utterance in the situational context. Due to the high reliance on the context, pragmatic inference that is based on the hearer’s default logic, influenced by the ongoing context, increases its important role in the realization or unrealisation of indirectness (Ehmer & Rosemeyer, 2018; Merino, 2023). Hence, context is important in order for the hearers to decode indirectness correctly. For instance, when an interactant makes an off-record indirect request, the hearer must consider the factors in the ongoing context to make an inference to determine the speaker’s intention, including the previous context, the topic that is being discussed, and the communication genre (Al-Adaileh, 2024; Bregasi, 2020). Hence, when indirectness is unrealized, attempted face-saving to ensure politeness, indicated by the intended meaning of the indirect utterance, may not be interpreted as politeness.

Previous research has mainly examined off-record indirect requests in communication in which the interactants used their first languages (L1s; Al-Adaileh, 2024; Daar et al., 2023). The situational contexts in intercultural communication may be more complicated than those in L1 communication due to individual differences and having different linguacultural backgrounds (Pan, 2024; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). As indicated above, “indirectness does not necessarily imply impoliteness” in intercultural communication (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 131) because off-record indirect requests cannot be inferred by hearers in many situational contexts when the literal meanings of the utterances are not overt; consequently, hearers cannot decode the intended meanings (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021). Therefore, intercultural communication will be reviewed in the next section.

2.2 Intercultural communication in English as a lingua franca

Intercultural communication refers to the communication among interactants whose linguacultural backgrounds are different, who use a common language to achieve mutual understanding (Jenks, 2025; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). English has been found to be widely used as a lingua franca in diverse regions across the world, including the Asian region (Pan, 2024, 2025). From a sociolinguistic perspective, ELF has been used by diverse interactants with different linguacultural backgrounds for a variety of purposes, such as daily communication, business meetings, workplace communication, and institutional communication due to internationalization (Baker, 2024; Fang, 2024). Since many interactants’ L1s are not English in intercultural ELF communication, the first issue regarding intercultural ELF communication is whether different interactants can use ELF to achieve mutual understanding (Haselow, 2021; Nam et al., 2023). On the one hand, different grammatical and vocabulary errors can prevent interactants from expressing their intended meaning correctly, resulting in the hearer’s misunderstanding and the breakdown of communication (Byram, 2021; Kecskes, 2022). Pan (2024) determined that a lack of grammatical and vocabulary knowledge could cause impoliteness in intercultural ELF communication. On the other hand, each interactant should have the ability to realize the situational and contextual environment of the ongoing intercultural ELF communication to ensure the appropriate pragmatic use of ELF as a form of sociolinguistic competence (Baker, 2024; Pan, 2023). For example, although both Chinese and Thai learners of English understood that on-record indirectness was more polite than directness for requests or refusals, studies (Fang, 2024; Pan, 2023) have found that these learners tended to use directness in many instances, since they “give priority to mutual intelligibility in ELF intercultural communication” rather than carefully considering the appropriate pragmatic use (Fang, 2024, p. 3). Hence, intercultural ELF communication does not only involve situations in which each interactant has studied English, but also pertains to knowing how to use ELF in different situational contexts (Byram, 2021).

As mentioned above, intercultural communication is more complicated than is L1 communication from a cultural perspective. Since each interactant represents their own linguacultural background, each of them is influenced by cultural factors to some degree. Social norms and values, as two important factors in culture (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2021), have a tremendous impact on interactants' behaviors in communication (Nam et al., 2023). Previous research found that different Eastern and Western social norms and values influenced the verbal behavior of interactants in business meetings and daily communication, causing misunderstandings, impoliteness, and conflicts (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2021; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Several studies have pointed out a lack of research on intercultural ELF communication involving participants with Asian linguacultural backgrounds in the field of intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2022; McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2021; Pan, 2024). Accordingly, the theoretical and practical implications of interactants from different regions in Asia using ELF are under researched. Since the present research included Chinese (CH) and Thai (TH) participants to examine the realization and lack of realization of off-record indirectness, Chinese and Thai cultures will be briefly introduced.

Chinese culture has been deeply influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, in which collective social harmony takes priority and is considered more important than individualism and personal values (Nam et al., 2023; Pan, 2024). Hence, maintaining harmony and interpersonal relationships in public interactions is extremely important (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Off-record directness has been found to serve different functions in L1 Chinese communication, including tactical politeness and impoliteness, understanding or producing humor, making complaints, and expressing disagreement (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). Off-record directness is also used as a mediator for reciprocity in communication (Zhao & Ran, 2022). By contrast, Thai culture is mainly influenced by Buddhism (Pan, 2024, 2025); although harmony in society is also important, individual face and space are considered essential in communication (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Tawilapakul, 2022), and Thai people try not to impose on others' personal spaces and to save others' faces in interactions (Pan, 2025; Tawilapakul, 2022). Accordingly, both on-record indirectness and off-record indirectness are used extensively in Thai communication for politeness and to avoid conflict (Pan, 2022, 2024).

As recent studies have revealed, Chinese and Thai citizens use ELF extensively (Pan, 2024), as English is the primary foreign language that both Chinese and Thai citizens need to learn in schools and universities. Due to the nuanced differences in Chinese and Thai social norms and values, off-record indirectness may not be realized by all the interactants when Chinese and Thai citizens use ELF. To fill this gap, Chinese and Thai participants were involved in this research to focus on the realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and data collection

China and Thailand have had a long relationship throughout history across various fields, including the economy, culture, tourism, and international trade. Accordingly, interactions between Chinese and Thai people have always been frequent. In total, 40 participants were involved voluntarily in this research (20 Chinese and 20 Thai participants); the participants were aged between 21 and 41 years, with an average age of 34.6 years. There were 28 male (70%) and 12 female (30%) participants, although gender was not a variable in this research. Each participant had at least one full-time job during the data collection, including working at different types of companies, working as business owners, and working in the tourism and hospitality industries. Before the data collection, each participant confirmed that they used ELF frequently for different purposes, including in workplace communication and daily conversations.

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Mahidol University with the approval number MU-CIRB 2025/281.3107. Each participant provided written consent. The data collection, which lasted for approximately three months, took place in Thailand. During the data collection, the participants were divided into 20 pairs consisting of one Chinese and one Thai participant. The participants did not know each other prior to the data collection to ensure that the participants in each pair were unaware of each other's individual ways of communicating in ELF, such as the frequent use of indirectness. This led to the greater reliability and validity of the results. To ensure that the conversations were as seamless as possible, each pair was requested to mainly use ELF to discuss different social issues, such as issues that they had encountered in their previous experiences, the problems of living in Bangkok, and issues that they had experienced when traveling to other countries. Each participant was allowed to prepare some related topics before they met their conversational partners. On the one hand, this step ensured that each participant would know what to discuss in the conversations. On the other hand, disagreements could occur when the participants discussed the same social issues (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Zhao & Ran, 2022). Thus, whether certain participants would choose off-record indirectness in the discussions and whether the corresponding hearers would realize or not realize it could be examined.

Each pair then had a dyadic intercultural ELF conversation that lasted for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The researcher arranged face-to-face conversations with each pair in Bangkok, Thailand. The researcher first met both participants at an agreed time and place, such as on a Sunday afternoon at a coffee shop in the city center. The researcher allowed the participants to greet each other for a few minutes and left when the participants began to discuss different topics to ensure that each pair felt comfortable discussing their ideas. Each pair was given complete freedom to discuss anything that they wished. The researcher used the voice memo application on an iPhone to audio record each conversation. The researcher finally received 20 pairs of conversations with an average duration of 17.6 minutes.

3.2 Data analysis

A qualitative method and quantitative analyses were used in this research. Based on the research objectives and following previous studies (Zhou & Zhang, 2022), conversation analysis (CA) was used. CA focuses on turn-taking at the utterance level (Pan, 2024; Su & Lee, 2022). Using CA, the researcher was able to identify a series of turn-taking and sequential utterances when off-record indirectness was used and the corresponding hearer's responses, regardless of whether they realized it or not. Hence, CA was deemed suitable for the data analysis.

Jefferson's (2004) conventions were used for the transcriptions because the conventions are aligned with CA. The first step was to identify all off-record indirectness in the conversations. As off-record indirectness is highly contextualized, the audio recordings were used as the main source for this identification within the interactional context, as well as to identify prosodic features, such as hesitation (Ogiermann, 2015; Tawilapakul, 2022). Based on the concept of off-record indirectness presented previously, a turn that included off-record indirectness was marked as one instance of off-record indirectness when two illocutions were found in order to ensure the clarity of the identification process, as the identification of off-record indirectness has been considered to be difficult in several studies (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Ogiermann, 2015). Examples (1) to (3) below demonstrate the identification of directness, on-record indirectness, and off-record indirectness.

(1)

1 CH02: Um (.) the:n there is no chance to fix it.

2 TH02: Yeah (.) there is no chance at all.

(Pair 2)

(2)

1 CH04: The situation will getting worse.

2 TH04: How about if you skip the first step?

(Pair 4)

(3)

1 CH12: I didn't know (.) the result at time.

2 TH12: No one will ever know our final destination.

(Pair 12)

As seen in Line 2 in (1), TH02 used directness overtly, as he agreed with CH02 in this co-text by saying "yeah" and producing a partial repetition of "there is no chance" that CH02 had uttered. In (2), TH04 used the conventional expression "how about" to produce on-record indirectness. By contrast, in (3), TH12 did not respond directly to the utterance that CH12 produced or use any conventional means. Instead, she produced an utterance that contained an intended meaning that was inferred from the literal one, and the co-text was that CH12 was unable to know the result; this utterance was used to comfort CH12 based on the entire context. Hence, the turn in Line 2 in (3) was identified as off-record indirectness.

In addition, CA was used to identify the immediate turn following off-record indirectness to determine whether the corresponding hearer realized or did not realize the off-record indirectness. To answer both RQs, the entire context of the occurrence of off-record indirectness was included to determine what occurred when off-record indirectness was realized or unrealized. Two steps were conducted after the initial identification to ensure the reliability of the identification illustrated above. First, the researcher conducted the identification step a second time one month after the first identification. The intra-coder reliability was 0.983, indicating high reliability. Subsequently, the researcher invited an experienced coder who had been using CA to study different linguistic phenomena in communication to assist in the identification. The inter-coder reliability was 0.855, indicating high reliability. Both coders had two rounds of discussions about discrepancies in the identification before reaching a final agreement. In addition to the use of the qualitative method, the frequencies of off-record indirectness, and the realization or lack of realization of off-record indirectness by Chinese and Thai participants, were analyzed quantitatively to ensure the rigor of the analysis.

4. REALIZATION OF OFF-RECORD INDIRECTNESS

The quantitative report will be presented prior to the qualitative analysis. In total, there were 13,560 turns in the 20 pairs of conversations, with an average of 678 turns in one pair. Furthermore, 5,966 turns (44%) were identified as off-record indirectness, with an average of 298 turns of off-record indirectness (44%) in one pair. Of all turns of off-record indirectness, the Chinese participants used 2,086 turns (35%), whereas the Thai participants used 3,880 turns (65%). Table 1 illustrates the raw frequencies (RFs) and proportions (P in %) of the use of directness and indirectness that were found in this research.

Table 1: Descriptive data on directness and indirectness

Types	Off-record indirectness		On-record indirectness		Directness		Total
Nationalities	CH	TH	CH	TH	CH	TH	
Per pair	104	194	51	64	179	86	678
All pairs	2,086	3,880	1,019	1,286	3,572	1,717	13,560
P (%)	35	65	44	56	68	32	100
Total	5,966 (44)		2,305 (17)		5,289 (39)		13,560

As shown in Table 1, off-record indirectness was used most frequently in the dyadic intercultural ELF conversations, indicating that the Chinese and Thai participants tended to use off-record indirectness to express intended meanings during communication. Moreover, the Thai participants used more off-record indirectness (RFs = 3,880) than the Chinese participants did (RFs = 2,086), suggesting that the Thai participants tended to use off-record indirectness for different purposes rather than being direct in communication. Table 2 illustrates the RFs, normalized frequencies (NFs per 1,000 turns) and proportions (P in %) of the realization and lack of realization of the off-record indirectness that were used by the Chinese and Thai participants, respectively.

Table 2: Descriptive data on off-record indirectness

Type	Off-record indirectness			
	Off-record indirectness used by CH		Off-record indirectness used by TH	
	Realized by TH	Unrealized by TH	Realized by CH	Unrealized by CH
Per pair	72	32	75	119
All pairs	1,437	649	1,507	2,373
NFs	689	311	388	612
P (%)	69	31	39	61
Total	2,086		3,880	

Table 2 shows that the Thai participants realized off-record indirectness (NFs = 689, P = 69%) more often than the Chinese participants did (NFs = 388, P = 39%). This statistical phenomenon suggests that the Thai participants were more sensitive to realizing the intended meaning when off-record indirectness was used in intercultural communication than the Chinese participants were. The realization of off-record indirectness will be elaborated upon in the remainder of this section.

4.1 Situation 1: Acceptance of off-record indirectness

The first pattern after realizing off-record indirectness was continuing the conversation as usual, although certain disagreements occurred in several instances, as demonstrated in Example (4) below.

- (4)
- 1 CH05: You mea:n (1.5) when they do that↑ (.) they don't think it's a wrong thing to do.
- 2→TH05: U:m (1.8) I once >visit other countries< an:d they also do the same.
- 3 TH05: >You know when you like a tourist< (.) they try to make more money.
- 4 TH05: An:d it happens many many times to me (1.6) and my friend.
- 5 CH05: Oh OK↑.
- 6 CH05: But (1.5) I mean it happens but it's not [right]↓.
- 7 TH05: [I] understand.
- 8 TH05: >I'm agree with you<.
- (Pair 05)

With regard to the prior context of (4), both participants were discussing certain uncivilized behaviors that they had encountered when they had traveled to other countries. CH05 described an example of uncivilized behavior, stating that some Thai vendors would deliberately charge tourists more than they would charge local Thai residents. TH05 then expressed her subjective perspective that the Thai vendors may not have realized that the behavior was uncivilized because they were accustomed to charging extra to make more money. After CH05 attempted to confirm TH05's meaning in Line 1, TH05 did not respond directly but discussed her own experience (Lines 2 to 4) of the same uncivilized behavior instead. On the surface, there was no direct link between the utterance in Line 1 and the series of utterances that TH05 produced. However, based on the story that TH05 shared and the context of this conversation, TH05 attempted to suggest that this uncivilized behavior should be regarded as normal because it often occurs among many tourists in different countries. The realization of this off-record indirectness can be seen in CH05's use of "Oh OK" in Line 5. However, CH05 continued to disagree with TH05 in Line 6, stating that this behavior should be regarded as uncivilized. TH05 replied directly by agreeing in Lines 7 and 8. Hence, as (4) demonstrates, TH05 attempted to use off-record indirectness to disagree with CH05 in order to save face (Chen & Wang, 2021; Zhou & Zhang, 2022), while CH05 continued the disagreement by directly using the utterance as an FTA (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021). There was no further conflict or escalation of the disagreement in this situation.

4.2 Situation 2: Arguments

In this situation, arguments continued when off-record indirectness occurred in a conversation, as demonstrated in Example (5).

- (5)
- 1 CH14: The first thing they do is <to report>.
 - 2 CH14: I just don't understand why they can't talk to me and we solve the problem first.
 - 3→TH14: Someone may be mad when (.) another person directly say the mistake.
 - 4 CH14: It's more rude when they stab other's back.
 - 5 TH14: May:be she didn't realize it's a stab back.
 - 6 TH14: You make this issue too seriously.
 - 7 TH14: It's a routine that >she must report to the manager<.
 - 8 CH14: OH COME ON COME ON NO NO NO NO NO.
 - 9 CH14: It's (.) HOW COME it's a routine?
 - 10 CH14: >They should just have a little talk↑ with me<.
 - 11 CH14: How hard is that↑?
 - 12→TH14: OK (.) sometimes people talk about some mistakes (.) directly.
 - 13 TH14: they will argue or quarrel.
 - 14 TH14: So: (1.4) they maybe just >out of habit report< to someone else.
 - 15 CH14: It is very rude because it's a stab at the back.
 - 16 CH14: It's reporting behavior (2.3) and we DEFINITELY hate people doing this.
 - 17 TH14: >I wouldn't make it like a big deal<.
 - 18 TH14: Maybe because I know in this country people do like this.
 - 19 CH14: OK guess we don't understand each other cause the cultural difference.
 - 20 CH14: This is so: different.
- (Pair 14)

With regard to the prior context of (5), CH14 complained to TH14 that the Thai people whom CH14 had met previously tended to report him if he had done something wrong at a company rather than first speaking to him directly. Following the completion of the complaint in Lines 1 and 2, TH14 used off-record indirectness, starting with "someone," to deliver the reason why some Thai people tended to report others at work. TH14 disagreed overtly with CH14 about this behavior, starting from the off-record indirectness and continuing to the end of the interaction. Based on the audio recording, CH14 used a high-pitched voice to present the series of utterances in (5), indicating that he was annoyed at that moment. Hence, TH14 used off-record indirectness to elicit the reason and to attempt to deescalate the tension (Daar et al., 2023; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Unfortunately, this indirectness, which CH14 realized, did not calm him down, as the arguments continued with directness in Lines 4 to 11. The tension continued to escalate due to CH14's ongoing use of a high-pitched voice. In response, TH14 used off-record indirectness for the second time in Lines 12 to 14. By illustrating the general situation of why people reported the behavior of others, TH14 repeated the reason with the intention of enabling CH14 to understand that this behavior was not a serious issue based on TH14's interpretation, as he also stated directly in Lines 6 and 17. As was the case in the first instance, the off-

record indirectness failed to decrease CH14's anger, as the argument continued until CH14 ultimately paused without the participants reaching agreement.

In (5), TH14 used off-record indirectness twice in an attempt to save both of their positive faces (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Zhou & Zhang, 2022). The Chinese participant, CH14, committed an FTA by complaining directly about Thai people's behavior, which threatened TH14's positive face because TH14 considered himself to be an in-group member due to his Thai nationality (Pan, 2024; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021), while CH14 also expected TH14's agreement following his complaint to enhance his own positive face (Bousfield, 2008; Haugh, 2024). However, the realization of these two instances of off-record indirectness actually escalated the tension, as CH14 understood the intended meanings of both instances of off-record indirectness and completely disagreed with them due to cultural differences, as he mentioned at the end of the context. As shown by this example, although the aim of off-record indirectness was to save face, the opposite outcome was able to occur.

4.3 Situation 3: The use of off-record indirectness in FTAs

Apart from the speakers in a pair using off-record indirectness in a particular situational context, a few instances in which the hearer used off-record indirectness to produce an FTA after the realization of prior off-record indirectness were found, as demonstrated in Example (6).

- (6)
- 1 CH09: I thin:k you need to control your temper when you talk to the customers.
 - 2→TH09: Someone's bad temper is (.) more need to concern.
 - 3 CH09: Right.
 - 4→CH09: That's why people kill each other >and never care about others<.
 - 5 CH09: Because everyone think about themselves.
 - 6 TH09: >If it's not about me< (.) it's about what?
 - 7 TH09: You↑?
 - 8 CH09: I didn't say anything about me.
 - 9 CH09: You have the problem.
- (Pair 09)

With regard to the prior context of (6), both participants were discussing issues they had encountered in their workplaces. CH09 had completed his story, in which he seemed to have had a bad temper toward his colleagues. After TH09 shared his story, in which he admitted that he was sometimes impatient with his customers, CH09 provided a direct suggestion to TH09 in Line 1. Based on TH09's reply, he must have regarded this suggestion as an FTA, as the suggestion caused the loss of TH09's positive face (Bousfield, 2008). Accordingly, TH09 used off-record indirectness as an FTA because "someone" in Line 2 was intended to refer to CH09. Subsequently, CH09 realized that this off-record indirectness was an FTA and also used off-record indirectness as an FTA (Lines 4 to 5) to criticize TH09's behavior. The FTAs continued until the end of this interaction.

As (6) demonstrates, off-record indirectness can be used as an FTA, and the hearer can also use off-record indirectness as an FTA in response (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). Extensive impoliteness was revealed in this situation, as neither participant had any intention of minimizing the FTAs. Thus, both participants used off-record indirectness to be impolite.

5. UNREALIZATION OF OFF-RECORD INDIRECTNESS

5.1 Situation 1: Communication breakdown

When the hearer did not recognize off-record indirectness, the first situation that was found in this research was a communication breakdown, as demonstrated in Examples (7) and (8) below.

- (7)
- 1 CH03: Which one should be select?
 - 2→TH03: U:m (1.4) this one is complicated for the users.
 - 3 CH03: What you mean?
 - 4 TH03: Yea:h (1.5) may:be the left one is better.
- (Pair 03)

(8)

- 1 TH06: We can schedule on Friday.
- 2→CH06: Um:: (2.6) the long conference is next Sunday.
- 3 TH06: Yeah (.) so: morning or afternoon?
- 4 CH06: Morning.
- 5 TH06: OK↑ so Friday morning nine↑?
- 6 CH06: Oh no.
- 7 CH06: I mean >I have an up-coming meeting on Sunday<.
- 8 CH06: I need to prepare before the meeting.
- 9 TH06: Oh sorry.

(Pair 06)

Both contexts in the examples above reflect communication breakdowns caused by the lack of realization of off-record indirectness. However, nuanced differences can be identified. In (7), TH03 used off-record indirectness in Line 2 to give a hint (Ogiermann, 2015) for CH03 to choose the left option. However, CH03 did not realize that this was a hint, causing him to ask directly for the meaning (Line 3). The hearer corrected this situational communication breakdown immediately, thus preventing any further misunderstandings in the subsequent interaction. By contrast, in (8), CH06 used off-record indirectness in Line 2 in an attempt to reject the schedule that TH06 had proposed in Line 1. However, TH06 did not realize this off-record indirectness and continued to propose the schedule in Line 3. Unfortunately, the misunderstanding continued, as CH06 thought that TH06 was asking about the schedule for the long conference that he had mentioned in Line 2. The misunderstanding was corrected when CH06 explained himself in Lines 6 to 8. As shown in both of the examples listed above, the lack of realization of off-record indirectness could cause communication breakdowns in dyadic intercultural ELF conversations. In these situations, the communication breakdowns were corrected at a certain point, and the participants continued the conversation as usual.

5.2 Situation 2: Arguments

In this situation, the lack of realization of off-record indirectness caused further arguments in which FTAs were used, as demonstrated in Examples (9) and (10).

(9)

- 1 CH11: I just don't know how I'm >deal with this type of people<.
- 2→TH11: Last year we had an American expert (.) in the management department.
- 3 TH11: He firstly send all the form back without saying anything.
- 4 TH11: He's fine.
- 5 CH11: >Who's that<?
- 6 CH11: >Why you talk about him (.) to me suddenly<?
- 7 TH11: I thin:k you can send the forms back first (.) to see.
- 8 CH11: Did you just try to let me do the same thing >from someone I don't even know<?
- 9 TH11: <I'm trying to help you:>.

(Pair 11)

(10)

- 1 CH02: One person need to go [there].
- 2→TH02: [Some]one who is professional.
- 3 CH02: Um:: yeah.
- 4 CH02: Um:: so: any idea anyone is OK↑?
- 5 TH02: Uh are you listening to me?
- 6 CH02: What?
- 7 CH02: What's [wrong]?
- 8 TH02: [I] mean YOU.
- 9 TH02: I think you are the best choose.
- 10 CH02: Oh what?
- 11 TH02: Are you pretending now?
- 12 CH02: OH NO.
- 13 CH02: I've no idea you are talking about me.
- 14 CH02: Jesus.

(Pair 02)

Both of the examples above demonstrate arguments that included FTAs following the lack of realization of off-record indirectness. In (9), the FTAs were illustrated by TH11, who used off-record indirectness in Lines 2 to 4.

As TH11 indicated in Line 9, he attempted to use an example to provide a suggestion to CH11. Unfortunately, CH11 did not understand this indirectness and immediately posed two questions to damage TH11's positive face in Lines 5 and 6. According to CH11, this off-record indirectness was interpreted as having no relationship with what he had stated in the prior context, causing the loss of CH11's positive face (Haugh, 2024). This interpretation was revealed by his utterance in Line 8, suggesting that he did not understand the function of the off-record indirectness in this interaction.

In contrast to the FTAs on the part of the hearer, the FTAs in (10) were committed by the speaker of off-record indirectness. In (10), TH02 produced off-record indirectness in Line 2 by using "someone" to indicate that CH02 was the intended subject. However, CH02 did not realize this implication and kept asking TH02 about the choice. As TH02 thought that CH02 was pretending not to understand the implication, TH02 used a high-pitched voice and a rapid speed to question CH02 in Lines 5 and 11, thus directly damaging CH02's positive face. CH02 overtly lost his positive face as a result of the questions; thus, he also used a high-pitched voice and a fast pace to reply to TH02 as the argument escalated in Lines 5 to 14. In this example, the speaker who produced the off-record indirectness may have thought that the hearer was able to understand the hint (Zhao & Ran, 2022). Thus, when the hearer did not understand the off-record indirectness, the speaker used FTAs to question the hearer, as the lack of understanding of off-record indirectness caused misunderstanding (Terkourafi, 2019).

5.3 Situation 3: Intersection of realization and unrealizability

Situations occurred in which the dynamic processes of the realization and unrealizability of off-record indirectness intersected, involving further arguments and FTAs, as demonstrated in Example (11) below.

(11)

- 1→TH17: There's someone try to refuse the idea.
- 2→CH17: Um:: (2.5) I'm thin:k <if this idea is totally OK>.
- 3→TH17: We all: know who that is.
- 4 CH17: What he said again?
- 5→TH17: People always do this cause what we know.
- 6 CH17: Oh yeah (.) I'm just trying to >see if our plan is OK<.
- 7 CH17: Maybe there is something wrong about it.
- 8 TH17: I'm talking↑ about that person's evil gesture.
- 9 TH17: He deliberately don't pass this plan.
- 10 CH17: You really think he point↑ to you↑?
- 11→TH17: The devil will never be an angel.
- 12→CH17: Sometimes failure is not a bad thing.
- 13 CH17: We need this >cause we need to improve ourselves<.
- 14 TH17: OK you don't know him↑ OK↑?
- 15 CH17: OK OK (.) I don't mean that.

(Pair 17)

Regarding the prior context of (11), TH17 shared a failed plan related to his job that TH17 had proposed and stated that a member of the committee deliberately rejected the plan for multiple reasons. Four instances of off-record indirectness intersected with each other in the first five turns in (11), of which only the last instance was realized. TH17 uttered the first example of off-record indirectness in Line 1 using a sarcastic tone to hint that he was dissatisfied with the rejection. However, CH17 did not recognize this off-record indirectness, as he used the second instance of off-record indirectness to indicate that the plan itself may not have been perfect in Line 2. TH17 did not recognize CH17's off-record indirectness, as he continued the conversation by producing the third example of off-record indirectness in Line 3 to indicate sarcasm. After CH17 asked a direct question in Line 4, TH17 used the fourth example of off-record indirectness in Line 5 to hint at the reasons that the committee member rejected the plan. By stating "Oh yeah" in Line 6, CH17 finally realized the intended meanings of TH17's previous utterances and directly stated his concern about the plan in Lines 6 and 7. TH17 overtly expressed his anger when he noticed that CH17 did not understand the intended meanings of his previous utterances; thus, he stated his concern directly in Lines 8 and 9 using a high-pitched voice. At this point, the argument escalated because both participants had different thoughts about the plan. The tension escalated even further in Lines 10 to 14, as CH17 tried to comfort TH17 using off-record

indirectness in Lines 12 to 13, whereas TH17 continued to blame the committee member by using off-record indirectness in Line 11.

As demonstrated in (11), off-record indirectness can be intersected by both participants according to their distinct intentions in the situational context (Al-Adaileh, 2024), causing the extended unrealisation of a series of examples of off-record indirectness. Moreover, when the intentions of both participants were finally revealed, off-record indirectness was used for face-saving or to commit further FTAs in the subsequent conversation. Hence, the dynamic processes of the realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness constructed a situational context in intercultural ELF communication.

6. DISCUSSION

Figure 1 illustrates the situations in which off-record indirectness was used in the dyadic intercultural ELF conversations.

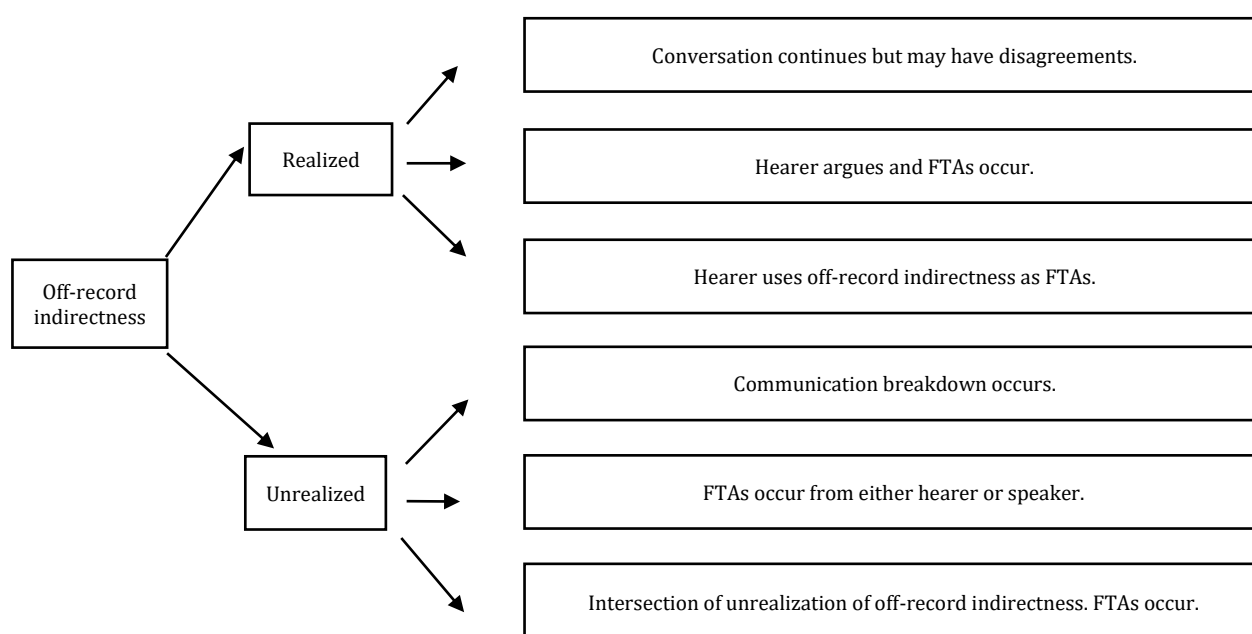


Figure 1: Realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness in intercultural communication

Four theoretical implications were identified based on the above results. First, the use of off-record indirectness in many of the instances was mainly intended to be polite in relation to enhancing the participant's face or minimizing tension in the conversations (Bousfield, 2008; Bregasi, 2020). However, in both the realization and unrealisation of off-record indirectness, the hearers did not always cooperate to save face. In situations involving the realization of off-record indirectness, the hearers may choose to continue to express their personal opinions, as noted in the previous contexts, such as the situation in Example (4), or they may use FTAs to argue with the speakers who used off-record indirectness, as in Examples (5) and (6). In situations involving the unrealisation of off-record indirectness, both the speakers and hearers may initiate FTAs, as in Examples (9) and (10). Hence, in intercultural ELF communication, the use of off-record indirectness to save face and avoid impoliteness may not be successful, as mentioned in a few previous studies (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Terkourafi, 2019).

The first reason for this was cultural differences, as several participants stated directly; for example, CH04's statements in Lines 19 and 20 in (5). In line with the findings of several studies, since Thai citizens tend to be indirect in oral communication due to the long-term influence of Buddhism (Pan, 2024, 2025; Tawilapakul, 2022), they also used more indirectness in intercultural ELF communication than Chinese participants did, as the RFs and NFs presented in Tables 1 and 2 illustrate. By contrast, based on the quantitative results of this research, the Chinese participants tended to prefer the use of directness. Hence, the use of off-record indirectness may not have achieved its original effect based on the speaker's intention (Fang, 2024; Ogiermann, 2015). Individual differences were also a factor. Regarding the various issues possible in intercultural ELF communication, such as impoliteness, people have individual differences when it comes to

their understanding of their own cultures and those of other interactants (Byram, 2021; Jenks, 2025). Thus, some participants did not engage in further arguments, as in Example (4), whereas others' conversations led to FTAs, as in Example (6).

Influenced by the aforementioned two factors, overall, when the participants realized off-record indirectness, they either continued the conversation or began to have further arguments. As shown in Figure 1, the three occurrences of the realization of off-record indirectness were connected to some extent but were distinct from one another. The hearers may continue with the conversations when realizing off-record indirectness, while the use of off-record indirectness may be regarded as face-saving whereby the hearer's face would be enhanced, or at least not threatened (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). Nevertheless, certain disagreements could be found depending on the ongoing topic, without there being FTAs in these situations. When a compromise regarding a disagreement cannot be reached, tension will be escalated via the use of FTAs after the hearer realizes an instance of off-record indirectness. In this situation, directness was mainly used to produce FTAs, as both participants realized that they had different opinions about the same issue. Thus, politeness was compromised due to both participants' intentions to deliver their intended meanings (Fang, 2024; Haselow, 2021). In certain instances, the hearers were aware of the deliberate use of off-record indirectness as an FTA to respond to prior off-record indirectness that resulted in impoliteness (Bousfield, 2008; Tantucci et al., 2022). In this situation, the impoliteness acts could not be temporarily mediated because the hearers intended to use off-record indirectness to damage the prior speaker's face (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Haugh, 2024). Thus, the three situations involving the realization of off-record indirectness displayed progressive seriousness from the perspective of FTAs.

In contrast to the realization of off-record indirectness, unrealized off-record indirectness led to communication breakdowns, as the hearers did not understand the intended meaning. Individual differences were also found in this situation. For example, similar to those instances in Example (7), in which the hearers understood the intended meaning, were found in this research. Thus, the successful inference of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication depends not only on the situational context but also on an individual's ability to infer the intended meaning based on the context (Ehmer & Rosemeyer, 2018). As Examples (7) and (8) demonstrate, an individual's lack of realization of off-record indirectness is complex. As Example (7) illustrates, the literal meaning of TH03's statement in Line 2 is clear. Hence, CH03's lack of realization may have been due to unfamiliarity with off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication. By contrast, in (8), the ongoing misunderstanding in Lines 2 to 5 depended strongly on the ambiguity in the literal meaning of several statements starting in Line 3, in which a subject was lacking. As the Chinese and Thai participants used ELF, the issue of articulating utterances in ELF could also have caused the unrealized off-record indirectness (Byram, 2021; Kecskes, 2022). When the hearer did not realize the off-record indirectness or the speaker did not understand why the hearer did not understand the off-record indirectness, neither the hearer nor the speaker committed FTAs. In this situation, the misunderstanding was intensified by the tension in the conversation due to the unrealized off-record indirectness. Finally, the intersection of the consecutive unrealized of a series of instances of off-record indirectness was found in intercultural ELF communication when neither participant realized the off-record indirectness that they used simultaneously. When the lack of realization continued, each participant used off-record indirectness to imply what they thought, as the situation in (11) demonstrated. One participant finally realized the off-record indirectness produced by the other, and FTAs may have occurred due to having different opinions about the ongoing topic. In this situation, the difficulty of realizing off-record indirectness was demonstrated clearly (Zhou & Zhang, 2022). The situational context promoted limited roles, whereas the individuals needed to receive attention (Kecskes, 2022; Merino, 2023), which caused the intersection of the unrealized off-record indirectness.

Finally, as the quantitative analysis suggested, off-record indirectness was used frequently in dyadic intercultural ELF conversations between Chinese and Thai participants, which contradicted the findings of previous research in which participants often used directness when the priority was mutual understanding (Fang, 2024; Jenks, 2025). On one hand, the scope and the data collection methods in the present and previous research have differed. For example, Fang (2024) used roleplaying as the data collection method to focus solely on Chinese participants' use of refusals. On the other hand, as the examples above have demonstrated, the Chinese and Thai participants not only used off-record indirectness for different purposes, such as saving face, but also used off-record indirectness to respond to the prior speaker for different purposes, including saving face and producing FTAs. Moreover, the Thai participants used off-record indirectness frequently in conversations, resulting in the high frequency of off-record indirectness in this research. As the Thai participants used indirectness frequently due to the influence of Thai culture (Pan, 2024, 2025; Tawilapakul, 2022), the frequency of the use of indirectness may have been due to the participants' different linguacultural backgrounds.

7. CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was on the Chinese and Thai participants' realization or unrealisation of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication, and the model in Figure 1 was proposed accordingly. Based on the findings illustrated above, it was highly likely that impoliteness would occur when off-record indirectness was realized or unrealized due to cultural differences, individual differences, and the situational context. Hence, interactants need to be aware of the use of off-record indirectness in intercultural ELF communication and should attempt to infer the intended meanings of different utterances. In addition, as off-record indirectness may be difficult to understand in intercultural ELF communication, interactants may flexibly choose directness or on-record indirectness in certain situations to avoid communication breakdowns. Moreover, interactants should avoid using off-record indirectness as FTAs to damage others' positive faces in order to maintain harmony in communication and in their interpersonal relationships.

Given that the present research only involved Chinese and Thai participants in dyadic intercultural ELF conversations, future research could include participants from other linguacultural backgrounds and different genres of intercultural communication to confirm the findings of this research and to further develop the proposed model.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

There has been no use of any AI tool for this paper.

3. Data availability statement

Due to the ethical concern, the data used in this research are restricted to the author.

4. Ethics statement

This research has been approved by the Institution Review Board of Mahidol University with the approval number MU-CIRB 2025/281.3107. Each participant has provided the written consent form.

5. Funding

This research has received no specific funding of any kind.

6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)

Zhaoyi Pan: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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APPENDIX

Conversation analysis conventions (Jefferson, 2004)

(.)	A micropause shorter than one second
<u>underline</u>	Indicating emphasis
[]	Place where words overlap
(1.5)	Pauses in seconds longer than one second
no:	Colons show elongation
< >	Decreased speaking rate
> <	Increased speaking rate
CAPITALS	Louder than other words
↑ ↓	Pitch movement