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Narratives of *lingua franca* English for transnational mobility

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This paper explores, through narrative inquiry, the acquisition and use of English as a *lingua franca* in the careers of three transnationally mobile managers in the global hotel and hospitality industry. The narratives presented here are interwoven with the context in which the multinational participants were situated at the time of the study: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which is diversifying economically and socially in preparation for the post-fossil fuel era. In a country where the temporary immigrant population outumbers national citizens, participants' situated language practices are explored through narratives of their multilingual and translingual repertoires, while focusing on English as a key resource for their self-initiated transnational mobility. These personal stories of the acquisition and use of English as a global language weave a linguacultural web that connects the Gulf region across global space, people, and time. Participants tell of the utility of English for their careers, their multilingual repertoires, and their enjoyment of their temporary working lives in the Emirates. Such voices are seldom heard in the literature.

KEYWORDS

English as a *lingua franca*, transnational mobility, United Arab Emirates, narrative inquiry, hotel and hospitality industry

Introduction

Millions of people choose to traverse the globe nowadays for economic and employment purposes, whether intending to stay abroad for a temporary period or on a more permanent basis. The World Bank (2023) estimates that approximately 184 million people now live outside of their country of nationality, and the new mobilities paradigm within human geography and cultural studies investigates the increased global mobility of people as one of the more salient aspects of contemporary globalization (Sheller and Urry, 2006). This phenomenon of mass global human migration is both facilitated by and supportive of English, the bridging language that connects speakers of other languages, and which is termed the world's "hyper-central language" (De Swaan, 2001). As such, English has come to provide a passport for transnational mobility, having become associated with multiple spheres of global economic activity including the international hospitality and tourism industry (Heller, 2010).

The hotel and hospitality industry is a rapidly growing sector of global employment, estimated to be worth over 5.5 trillion US dollars (Statista, 2024). For managerial-level employees who seek to migrate to work in international hotel and hospitality hotspots, proficiency in English is a significant advantage – if not a pre-requisite. Given that language is "a practice as well as a resource that can have both symbolic value and exchange value in a market economy" (Duchêne et al., 2013, p. 5), this paper investigates stories of individual engagement with transactional English as instrumental to transnational employee mobility. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of acquiring and using English as a *lingua franca* through the life stories of three

purposively selected transnational multilingual managers in the global hotel and hospitality industry.

English in the United Arab Emirates

The countries of the lower Arabian Gulf are a magnet for global employment migration, due to their gas and petroleum-rich economies as well as recent economic diversification efforts into sectors such as technology, sport, tourism, hospitality, and leisure. As the setting for the present study, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a progressive and prominent Gulf state where Arabic is the official language but where most spheres of economic, social, and leisure activity require proficiency in English, including the petroleum and related heavy industries, sports, higher education, business, digital communication, and tourism. In the UAE today, competence in English ensures successful communication in multiple domains and secures job opportunities (Lorenz, 2022), while historically, English in the UAE was associated with colonialism, as the region was a British "protectorate" before gaining independence in 1971.

Today, speakers of different varieties of English from around the world commingle in the UAE, including, for example, millions of multilingual speakers of Indian English, as well as hundreds of thousands of monolingual speakers of English from Anglophone countries. With more speakers of English (mostly as an additional language) than of Arabic which is native to the UAE, English provides a common language for all residents, and thus can be considered as the national, if unofficial, *lingua franca* (Siemund et al., 2021). As English loses its colonial identity, it has become associated with global economic activity including international tourism and hospitality (Heller, 2010). The inflows of globalization and neo-liberal economic agendas associated with the global spread of English (Holborow, 2015; Barnawi, 2018) assign it special prominence in important spheres in the Gulf, including in higher education which has been well-documented (Badry and Willoughby, 2016; Gallagher, 2019), although its influence in other spheres has been less studied.

Since its initial spread from Anglophone countries and their colonies around the world, through processes of globalization and global communication, a neutral view of the spread of English is that it has "taken on a life of its own, as people all over the world have found it to be increasingly a language of access to desired changes in their personal lives and their societies" (Nelson et al., 2020, p. xxvii). The neutral view of the spread of English as beneficial for all has been strongly contested in the literature, however. Critical applied sociolinguists have interrogated the hegemony of English, led by Phillipson (1992) who, in his deconstruction of the political and economic forces behind the spread of English globally, accuses it of perpetrating linguistic imperialism. Others, including Pennycook (1994) and Canagarajah (1999), have probed the power structures and the cultural politics behind the global dominance of English, while researchers such as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) advocate for linguistic human rights in the face of the hegemony of English, and Piller (2016) argues against neoliberal linguistic homogenization. In counterpoint to this compelling body of literature, a utilitarian – but multilingual – stance toward English portrays it as a deliberate choice made by individuals for instrumental purposes to support their transnational mobility, alongside the other languages in their linguistic repertoires.

Most English users in the Emirates today are bilingual, or more often, multilingual speakers of English who originate from what Kachru (1985) termed "outer circle" countries, especially post-colonial South Asian nations, where English is used extensively as an additional language. Together with the more recent influx of migrant workers from "expanding circle" countries (Kachru, 1985), such as Africa, Eastern Europe, and the continuing movement of workers from other countries in the Middle East where English is a foreign language, there are also significant numbers of users of English as a first language from so-called "inner circle" countries (Kachru, 1985), that is, from Anglophone countries including the UK, USA, Ireland, and Canada who bring their own distinctive varieties of English as a first language into the linguistic mix. As a result, multiple varieties of World Englishes are heard in the UAE alongside varieties of Arabic from across the Middle Eastern region, as well as scores of other world languages. In daily life, then, while English is widely used for certain purposes such as work or study, another language or languages are also used regularly by most of the population for other purposes, such as communication with family and friends. Moreover, there is not necessarily a strict segregation between languages or language registers, and translanguaging, which refers to the use of one's full linguistic repertoire without regard for socially and politically defined language labels or boundaries (Otheguy et al., 2015), is a feature of everyday discourse in the UAE. As such, speakers of English may draw freely upon other language resources and registers at their disposal, moving fluidly across English and other languages or language registers.

A magnet for transnational migrants

Since independence, globalization has been embraced as the driver of development for the UAE; however, with just a small indigenous population, millions of migrants have been recruited to its shores to meet labor demands across all sectors. By the year 2020, the migrant population of workers from East and West, North and South, was almost 90 percent (World Bank, 2023), with approximately nine million expatriate migrants living and working alongside around one million native citizens. It is a country of temporary immigrants, however, where expatriate existence has been characterized as transient, temporary, and precarious (Elsheshtaway, 2021). Residence is directly linked to employment, with visas and work permits for all migrant workers provided by their employers, and are of a maximum three-year duration, although renewable (GDFRAD [General Directorate of Residency and Foreign Affairs], 2021). The work of non-nationals is governed by the kafala system, which is not only a legal and administrative framework governing employment but has been described as "a complex array of socio-cultural practices that link a migrant worker's immigration and employment status to one specific sponsor" (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2021, p. 5). In addition to this long-standing system which ensures transience, so-called golden 10-year visas have been introduced in recent years for elite non-nationals who are purchasers of property, or business owners, or highly skilled and highly qualified professionals (ICP [Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security], 2023). However, only the minority national population are assured of permanent residency.

Hotels and hospitality in the UAE

Among the Gulf states, the UAE stands out as "a global leader in the higher-end leisure market" (Karolak, 2018, p. 187). Internationally, tourism has been characterized as "[a] tertiary industry of prominence in language and globalization research" (Piller and Grey, 2019, p. 9). However, the centrality of English to hotels and hospitality in the Gulf has not yet been researched, even though it is a significant sector in terms of efforts toward economic diversification and development and is estimated to have contributed 9% to the UAE's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022 (Ministry of Economy, 2023). Post-pandemic, the sector is growing rapidly again across the Gulf, with emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia developing their hotel, hospitality, and tourism infrastructure on an unprecedented scale (Mansoor, 2022; Ali and Ninov, 2023).

English as a *lingua franca*

From an applied linguistics perspective, this paper focuses on English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), taken to mean the everyday, transactional use of English as the common language amongst speakers of different languages in an intercultural communicative setting (Marlina and Xu, 2018). Given Seidlhofer's widely accepted definition of ELF as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice" (2011, p. 7), it encompasses all use of English as a common code of communication, regardless of how, where, or when it was acquired. Within the ELF paradigm, all varieties of English are accepted as valid, and English is owned by all who speak it (Marlina and Xu, 2018). As a flexible variety of English, ELF favors communicative efficiency over grammatical accuracy, with speakers typically using simplified, non-standard grammatical structures. Function is prioritized over form, with mutual intelligibility as the priority. The original conceptualization of the phenomenon of ELF was led by Seidlhofer (2001), while the initial codification of ELF pronunciation patterns was conducted by Jenkins (2000). For the purposes of this paper, ELF denotes both the intercultural setting in which speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use English, and the use of English as the medium of communication between speakers of other languages (Marlina and Xu, 2018).

There have been a small number of published investigations into ELF in the UAE, some of which have focused on lexico-grammatical features of the language that bear the influence of Arabic and English spoken by Asians, particularly Indians who in 2023 comprised almost one third of the total population of the UAE (Global Median Insights, 2024a). One of the first such linguistic studies was conducted by Boyle (2011) who examined non-standard lexical and grammatical instances of English in the Dubai-based English language newspaper, the *Gulf News,* which he dubbed "UAE English." Despite finding recurring instances of non-standard forms linked to both Arabic and to Indian English, however, Boyle suggests that codification of Gulf Arabic "is likely to be a distant dream" (2011, p. 157). Meanwhile, a study of the use of what was termed "Gulf English" by Fussell (2011) found that it is used in areas including local English-medium media, advertising, and online social networking. Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) recorded a relatively small corpus of "non-standard English utterances" ($n = 179$) and concluded that grammatical simplification is a hallmark of non-standard features of ELF in transactional communication among multilingual people in the neighboring emirates of Dubai and Sharjah.

An early study which took a sociolinguistic perspective on ELF investigated the domains of English use by police personnel in Dubai (Randall and Samimi, 2010). They reported that it was used instrumentally for work as well as for social and daily life. The authors concluded that there is "an underlying pragmatic imperative underlying the use of English […] in the UAE in general" (Randall and Samimi, 2010, p. 49). Recently, Cook (2020) conducted a linguistic ethnography amongst students and staff from a language school in one of the smaller Emirates, and concluded that English is firmly tied to global consumerism and middle-class mobility.

Most recent studies of English in use in the Gulf, in tandem with the rapid growth of English-medium higher education, have drawn upon convenience samples of tertiary student populations. For example, the "language repertoires and attitudes of students in the United Arab Emirates" (LARES) project, conducted at the American University of Sharjah which has a diverse population of students, both Emirati and non-Emirati, examined students' language repertoires, diverse social backgrounds, migration histories, patterns of use, and attitudes toward English (Leimgruber et al., 2022). However, much of the research elsewhere has been restricted to young Emiratis' language use and attitudes – for example, O'Neill (2017), van den Hoven and Carroll (2017), and Hopkyns et al. (2021) – and draws upon convenience samples of national Emirati students in federal higher education.

Differing from these approaches, this study takes a life story approach to investigating individual narratives of how English has been acquired in diverse international contexts and then used for transnational employment mobility to the UAE. The purpose is to expand understanding of how ELF (and other languages) are acquired and used by participants in people-facing managerial roles in an unexplored sociolinguistic context in the Gulf: hotels and hospitality. In what follows, the choice of narrative inquiry methodology is discussed, the selection of participants for the study is explained, and the researcher's positionality is set out. This is followed by a portrayal of the language stories of this study's three participants. From their stories, themes are extracted relating to their daily use of English, its acquisition in diverse contexts, and the interplay between English and other languages in participants' work and lives.

Methodology

Research questions and narrative inquiry

Within the UAE, where ELF is the dominant transactional mode of communication in the hotel and hospitality sector, which is staffed by multinational expatriates, this paper is driven by the following two research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: What are the self-narrated stories of English acquisition and use by purposefully selected, multilingual, transnational managers in the global hotel and hospitality industry in the UAE?
>
> RQ2: What role does *lingua franca* English played in their transnational career trajectories?

To answer these questions, narrative inquiry was employed as "a qualitative research strategy in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p. 332). Narrative research typically involves "one or more individuals" who have had "[similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied" (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Narrative inquiry opens up lived and told stories, interpreted through the lenses of time, people, and space. As a research method, it strives for depth and richness in the portrayal of lived experience. Originating from the seminal work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry is premised on the fact that people by nature lead storied lives and like to tell stories about those lives, while narrative researchers like to retell those lived stories. It investigates lived experience through the lenses of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Thus, narratives are shaped by the social and historical contexts in which they are told; they do not exist in a vacuum (Bell, 2002). Within the field of applied linguistics, in which this study is situated, narrative inquiry represents a niche, yet perennial, methodological thread of inquiry into aspects of language acquistion, identity, and use (Benson, 2014; Barkhuizen, 2020).

For this study, participants were invited to recount how they had acquired English, its importance to their careers, the role of other languages in their lives and work, and with whom and how they use English and other languages in their current places of work. By focusing in detail on a small number of stories, detailed depictions of English acquisition and use in the global hotel industry are made possible, with the overall aim of narrative inquiry being to provide knowledge of "people's experiences from their perspective" (Barkhuizen, 2020, p. 190).

Researcher positionality

As researcher positionality is often a feature of narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen and Consoli, 2021), a brief account of the researcher's position follows. As a researcher in applied and educational linguistics, the author of this paper is also, like the research participants, a sojourner in the region who teaches postgraduate English education courses which include areas such as English as a global language and ELF, topics which are germane to this paper. In the past, as a student in Europe, the author worked in the hotel sector and has retained a fascination for the complex webs and hieracrchies of employer interactions in the industry. Following several informal conversational encounters as a customer with multilingual transnationals in people-facing managerial roles in tourism and hospitality in the Gulf, curiosity arose about the nature and role of English in their life stories and work – and of other languages too, for English as a global language is closely intertwined with multilingualism (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2018). To investigate this phenomenon, institutional research ethical approval was received to conduct narrative inquiry with volunteering participants.

Research participants and setting

The selection of participants was driven by a search for the stories of a small number of "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002) who have similar lived experience of using English for transnational mobility in managerial-level, people-facing roles in upmarket hotel-based tourism and hospitality in the UAE. Opportunity sampling was used initially: potential participants were identified through observation and interactions during visits to international hotels by the researcher, as a paying customer in various coffee shops, cafes, restaurants, and open lobby areas. Such hotels in the Emirates cater for a mix of businesspeople, tourists, and short-stay residents, and they house numerous food and beverage outlets that are open to the general public. Possible participants from diverse backgrounds, genders, roles, and employment sites were approached directly, following conversational interaction during which the researcher mentioned her interest in their personal stories of the acquisition and use of English. They were informally invited to consider participation in the study and/or to recommend other potential participants. If interest was expressed, the researcher explained the project further and provided each potential participant with an information and consent form so they could inform themselves fully about the study, before signing their consent to participate.

Three diverse participants were identified for the present study, one from South America, one from Asia, and one from the wider Middle East. To assure their anonymity in this study, culturally appropriate, gender-neutral pseudonyms are used: Fran, Sam, and Noor, along with gender netural pronouns. Fran is one of a small, but growing number of South Americans in the UAE, Sam is one of approximately 600,000 Filipino migrant workers in the country, while Noor is one of an estimated 1 million Egyptian migrants in the Emirates (Global Median Insights, 2024b). They work in varied settings within hotels, settings that are often typical of the "rampant globalization" (Pagès-El Karoui, 2021, p. 6) that characterizes the UAE today: a themed bar restaurant, a city hotel front desk, and a European restaurant.

The three participants are characterized by mobility, both horizontal (across countries and continents) and vertical (in terms of career progression). All three are multilingual and have learned English as an additional language, having grown up in outer or expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1985) where English is not the native language. Although they have lived and worked in the Emirates for periods ranging from 7 to 24 years, none have permanent residency rights, and their continuance in the country depends on their employer renewing their residence visas periodically, usually every 3 years.

Some potential participants who had initially expressed interest declined to be interviewed subsequently due to lack of approval from their employers. Others who were approached and were initially amenable did not wish to proceed for unknown reasons, including for example a Ukrainian duty manager in an international chain hotel, a Greek manager in a Japanese restaurant in another hotel, and a Moroccan food and beverage manager for yet another hotel group. In addition, some potential interviewees who were recommended to the researcher through snowball sampling were not interviewed, either because they worked in non-people-facing roles (for example, a hotel accounts manager), or their background was too similar to an already identified participant, or they declined. Eventually, out of dozens of informal conversations with potential participants, the three participants were selected for this narrative inquiry because of their different international backgrounds, their gender

representation, the variety of people-facing managerial roles they occupy, and their work in different sites of employment in upmarket hotels in the UAE.

Interviews

Interviews were arranged for a convenient place, time, and mode (phone, online or face-to-face), as chosen by each participant. Perhaps surprisingly, instead of choosing to meet online or outside of their places of work, each one selected a face-to-face interview in their own workplace during a quiet time in the afternoon when they were not working. Upon arrival at the venue at the agreed time, the researcher was greeted and taken by the interviewee to a quiet corner within the open work area. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted for approximately 1 h, without interruption. Although co-workers were sometimes in the vicinity, they were not within earshot. For consistency of data, a semi-structured approach was adopted. A core set of questions was developed in accordance with the research questions, with flexibility to explore additional areas that arose from participants' stories. The focus of the interview questions was on participants' acquisition and use of English, while also touching on their multilingual repertoires which are reflective of a variety of linguacultural backgrounds.

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' approval and then transcribed using TransLingua transcription software. Each transcript was later read and reread multiple times by the researcher, and themes were extracted from the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive (and recursive) thematic analysis process of data familiarization, data coding, and generation of themes, followed by thematic development, review, and refining. Moreover, there are two elements to data analysis in narrative inquiry, as adopted here: the researcher's retelling of participants' stories in relation to their setting *and* interpreting their stories in light of the research questions, using reflexive thematic analysis "to identify 'patterns' in data" (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p.3).

In terms of transcription, in the narrative interview excerpts later in this paper the words of the participants are rendered as they were recorded and transcribed, apart from minor changes for intelligibility or to connect related phrases together from different parts of the interview. Many of the non-standard grammatical features typical of ELF (Ranta, 2018) are evident in the interview excerpts reproduced below. Variation in pronunciation is also a feature of ELF and is often based on mother tongue language transfer (Jenkins, 2000), and although such variation is also heard throughout the interview transcripts, it is not reproduced in the written excerpts. Overall, authentic ELF voices are heard in this paper, and while meaning is always clearly conveyed, varying levels of proficiency in English are apparent.

Results

As life stories are the data of primary interest in narrative inquiry, participants' stories are first presented, followed by an analysis of themes arising from the narratives that relate to participants' use and acquisition of English as a *lingua franca*. Each narrative starts with the participant's initial acquisition of English, then their use of English in their workplace in the UAE today, followed by an insight into how each one views their life and work in the Gulf.

Narrative 1: Fran

Fran is in their mid-30s and grew up in Spanish-speaking South America. They manage a themed restaurant in the Emirates. Spanish was their mother tongue, and their father also spoke Quechua, the language of the Incan empire. They started learning English as a foreign language from Grade 4 onwards in school. However, most of their initial English was acquired in regular private classes after school which the family could afford for them, unlike most other families there. Their father believed English would be very important for his children's future. Their first exposure to using English in their daily life was in Switzerland where they completed a master's degree in hospitality management through the medium of English, alongside multilingual students from all over the world. They primarily use English in their daily work. They say that it is necessary for an international career and believes it would be very difficult for them to work internationally without English.

Fran had 7 years of experience in hospitality management in the UAE at the time of the interview. They say that they find the UAE attractive as a career destination for them as a manager because, as they note,

(1) Here we are, all of us are foreigners that are trying to get into a certain position, or we are trying to get ahead in a certain business […] What matters is if I have the experience and have the education and I am good at what I'm doing.

Narrative 2: Sam

Sam is in their mid-40s and grew up in the Philippines where they studied Business Management. They are currently the front desk manager in a hotel in the Emirates. Their mother tongue is Mandaya, the spoken Austronesian language of Mindanao province. They also speak Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines which they first learned as a school subject. They also speak some Spanish due to the linguistic remnants in the Philippines of Spain's past colonial influence. Their initial exposure to English occurred upon starting school as a young child, as it is the medium of instruction in public schools across the Philippines. They began their work in the UAE as a hotel pool attendant and worked their way up to a managerial role. They say they initially took a hotel job because it was the only option at the time, but then they discovered that the industry offered wide opportunities for career growth. Like many of their expatriate compatriots in the Gulf, Sam supports the education of family members back in the Philippines. English is the language of their daily work in the hotel.

Sam moved to the UAE 17 years ago. Before moving to the Emirates, they mentioned that they thought that it was very "religious conservative […] and then I found out that it's not what I thought." They say that they appreciate "the different cultures and beliefs which really make me feel at home here." Despite this, as there is no possibility of a permanent home for them in the UAE, they are investigating a move to Canada where they could seek permanent residence.

Narrative 3: Noor

Noor is in their late 40s and grew up in Egypt. They manage a European restaurant in the Emirates. Upon relocating to the UAE, they worked first as a coffee shop attendant, and then as a server until their recent promotion to restaurant manager. The UAE was their first transnational work experience outside of Egypt. Their mother tongue is Egyptian Arabic. They learned some basic English as a foreign language at school but has acquired it mostly through communication with workplace colleagues who also use it as a *lingua franca* with international guests. They speak a little French which they also learned at school. They studied Arabic at university, and they taught it to school children in Egypt for a brief period before moving into the hospitality industry there where they worked for 6 years before leaving their home country. They explain that here are many varieties of Arabic spoken across the Middle East and North Africa, some of which are not readily understood by speakers of other Arabic dialects due to major lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation differences. But because Egyptian Arabic is widely understood by most speakers of regional dialects from across the Middle East and North Africa due to Egypt's dominance of film and other media industries, Noor notes that their Egyptian Arabic is intelligible to all Arabic-speaking restaurant customers and colleagues. Although they use Arabic frequently with customers and in their personal life, English is the primary language of their daily work with colleagues and guests alike.

Noor moved to the UAE from Egypt 22 years ago. They say that they appreciate the safety of the UAE, and they note the kindness of the people they have encountered there. "Here the people are different than anywhere in the world, really," they say.

Themes arising from the narratives

In what follows, key linguistic themes arising from the interviews are presented and illustrated through narrative excerpts. These themes address the research questions on the acquisition of English and its use as a *lingua franca* and are as follows: the ordinariness of English in the UAE and globally nowadays; the acquisition of ELF through interaction with other learners of English; the lesser importance of Arabic in the tourism sector in the Gulf; and the practice of translanguaging across mother tongues and other acquired languages within an ELF context.

The ordinariness and ubiquity of English: "it's just like the internet now. You need it to survive"

One key theme emerging from the narratives is the ubiquity and ordinariness of English in the world today. The following excerpts illustrate this, starting with Fran from South America who points out that it's not a language reserved for the global elite anymore:

(2) I think that because everyone has taken English as the only way of communicating outside your normal language. It is very important for you to start early, and I think that's why in [home country] as well, they started to teach English even when you are in a very young age in any of the schools, private or public. I mean, it's just like the internet now. It's like you need it to survive. You need to learn English as an additional language, for sure. So, for sure English is something that is basic now, nowadays […] It's not a luxury item anymore.

According to the informants in this study, international travelers from non-Anglophone countries who visit the UAE are increasingly able to communicate in English, the common language of tourism and hospitality for workers and guests alike. This is evident from Sam's intention to acquire other languages when they moved to the Emirates from their native Philippines, but because of hotel guests' increasing ability to use English, they found they did not need to learn other languages. In their words, "even the Russians" can speak English nowadays:

(3) To be honest, at the start I was really planning to study Arabic and Italian and to enhance my Spanish communication skills, but then found out that most of the guests coming in here speak English, so then that interest was gone. Then I said to myself, I prefer to just use English […] Even the Russians, they hardly speak English before; but now when they come, they speak English.

For Noor, English is also a prerequisite for their work in the Emirates. They initially learned it as a foreign language in very large-sized classes at school in their home country of Egypt and say they have acquired it mostly through workplace interactions with other learners of English. Asked about the importance of English for their work as a restaurant manager, they replied:

(4) [It's] 100% important. Yeah, very important. We have many nationalities here in the country and it's very important to have English to talk to people here. Without English we cannot stay here. It's difficult too much. English is very important here now.

A key characteristic of English as a *lingua franca* is that it is mostly used and acquired through interaction with people for whom it is not their mother tongue [although, as Jenkins (2009) points out, mother tongue speakers may also use ELF when speaking with other users], and this is the next theme arising from the narratives.

Acquisition through interaction: "I catch the English from participating with people"

Despite varied experiences in their initial acquisition of English, from learning it as a foreign language in school in Egypt alongside 60 other students (Noor), to attending regular private lessons after school in South America as well as classes at school (Fran), to full immersion as the sole medium of instruction in state schools in the Philippines (Sam), spoken competence in English for all of them has been developed through interaction with other learners of English as a *lingua franca*.

Illustrating this point, Fran noted that they learned spoken English through communication with others, whom they described as all having "broken English," during their hospitality management studies in Switzerland:

(5) In my course we all had to speak English, but we had a lot of Russian, Chinese, Thailand, Vietnam, you know, a little bit of every country. So, we all like had broken English but we all had to expose ourselves and, you know, lose fear to start talking because in the master's degree we needed to express ourselves, make presentations and things like that.

For Noor, as mentioned earlier, English has been mainly acquired through their daily dealings with restaurant guests from around the world who use it as their common language of communication. They describe this is as follows:

(6) Everybody comes here. Filipino, English, Arabic, all kind of Arabic; all nationalities. Sri Lankan guests I have, Indian, everywhere in the world comes here […] Too much people coming here. I catch the English from participating in the language with them.

Acquiring or developing English through interactions with other learners of English is a hallmark of the phenomenon of ELF, as noted above. For both Noor and Fran, it was not until they needed to speak English with others that they felt they acquired spoken competence in the language. Sam, on the other hand, uses English fluently because they acquired it through full immersion from when they started school as a young child. Fran explains their acquisition of spoken competence in ELF in this way:

(7) Well, what is good about living abroad is that you start losing fear of making mistakes when you speak English. Because in the beginning of course I learned and everything, but I was not as sure like to talk or to speak because I was feeling that I was making a mistake in grammar. So, I think that when I moved to Switzerland, and I had to speak English I started to feel less afraid and the people that were around me their first language was not English so then we all make mistakes, and we all learn from it.

Noor also mentioned how their oral competence developed through interactions with other learners of English in the workplace:

(8) I have vocabulary […] I have vocabulary English, but I am going to work in hospitality, and I learn English already, but I cannot speak. So, the people getting the work, practice with me, I get it. Otherwise, I would never learn English.

In the UAE, language discourse and research tend to focus not only on the role, status, and use of English, but inevitably also on the role of Arabic as the official and indigenous language. Therefore, the role of Arabic for the participants in this study is the next theme to be addressed.

The role of Arabic: "Here Arab people can speak English"

Arabic is not just the official and indigenous language of the Emirates, but it is the language of the home for Emirati and expatriate Arabs alike; it is the language of Islam, of traditional Gulf culture, of Middle Eastern film and music, and of the law (Kennetz and Carroll, 2018). For two of the participants in this study, it is not needed for their line of work, however. Sam, for instance, has acquired some limited conversational Arabic since moving to the UAE, but when asked about the role of Arabic and their use of it in their daily work, they replied:

(9) Yeah, like 20% I can converse in Arabic, basic Arabic phrases. I do not really need it, because here Arab people can speak English; the new generation speaks English.

Fran does not speak Arabic either, but if they need Arabic to communicate with a colleague or guest as a manager, they can find someone to translate for them, so they feel it is not necessary for them to speak it. They contrast this with Korea where a sibling works and where it is necessary to speak Korean to survive, and where they would be interested in working, if not for the language barrier. They noted that:

(10) I will always find someone […] that speaks Arabic in the hotel. So, it is not necessary, actually, even though we are in an Arabic country. Compared to Korea, for example.

They further explained that:

(11) I have applied, for example, to go to Korea. But just because I do not learn, I do not know Korean, it's more complicated for me to go there, even though I speak English and Spanish and over there they have a lot of travelers that are from you know, that are international, that they will speak English and actually I have traveled a few times to Korea […]. They do not all of them speak English. Like they avoid completely to talk to someone that looks like they do not know Korean. Yeah, it's interesting.

Conversely, Noor for whom Arabic is their mother tongue and who studied it at university, naturally uses it with their Arabic-speaking guests from across the Middle East and North Africa. There are multiple varieties of spoken Arabic, some of which are mutually unintelligible as mentioned earlier, but because they speak Egyptian Arabic which is widely understood due the former dominance of Egypt in the Arabic movie industry, they can be understood by speakers of all Arabic varieties. Noor explains this as follows:

(12) If there is Arabic guest, they are using with me Arabic. I have here […] Lebanon nationality, Jordanian, Palestinian I have, all Khaleeji [Gulf] people coming here. Emirati also I have, UAE people also coming. We have also Egyptian, Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, all this kind of people. Everybody knows Egyptian Arabic. It's very famous because our cinema before it's very wide in Arabic country. We cannot understand them, but they can understand us.

Although there are advantages for Noor in being a speaker of Arabic, lack of Arabic does not hinder the work of Sam and Fran. On the other hand, English is essential for work for all three. In addition, other languages and language registers are important in their lives as well, as discussed in the following section.

Translingualism and multilingualism

English aside, participants' translingualism, that is, their ability to marshal their varied linguistic repertoires for different communicative purposes and with different speakers, also emerges from their narratives. Within the multilingual ecology of the Emirates, although English dominates in the workplace, Sam for example speaks their native tongue (Mandaya) outside of work with their family and friends from their home community whom they say tend to live together, but they switch to Tagalog (the Philippines national language, alongside English) when they meet with other compatriots from different regions in the Philippines. For Noor, they say that they draw inspiration from the Egyptian heroine Queen Cleopatra, whom they mention as having spoken seven languages which to them indicated open mindedness. Being able to speak more than one language is important for Noor, who speaks Arabic, English, and some French, making them better able "to understand the humanity of people, the manner of people" as they explained during their interview.

For Fran, being surrounded by different nationalities in the multilingual Emirates has not only exposed them to different languages, but also to different cultures. They say:

(13) […] to be in a pluricultural place, it's really, I mean, it's open, has opened not only my, the way of, my way of thinking or my way of leading a team, but also like it opens my mind to different cultures, different understandings of how people, you know, how they act in a certain way or why are they built in a different way than me or than my, you know, nationality.

Fran is also aware of the need to use adopt different registers of English in different communicative situations and with diverse users of ELF, indicating translanguaging not only across languages but also across registers of English, depending on who they are speaking to. They explain this as follows:

(14) There are some people that I have to talk to in a more technical way of English, and then there are some that I have to be more, delicate when I speak to or if I want to coach someone that is in a lower level than me, you can say, or that English is not their first language, definitely I have to adjust.

Overall, these interview excerpts portray the diversity of English in use by these speakers who have acquired it under diverse linguacultural conditions, while using it effectively as their daily communicative working language. The narratives in this paper reify instances of the plurilithic (Pennycook, 2009) realities of English as it is learned and used globally by multilingual migrant speakers in the UAE today. At the same time, these stories also tell how participants' main other languages (Spanish in Fran's case, Mandaya and Tagalog for Sam, and Arabic for Noor) survive and thrive in daily life and communication with fellow users.

Discussion

This paper has investigated the acquisition, role, and use of ELF though the narratives of three transnationally mobile managers in the global tourism and hospitality industry. For them, it is essential as an instrument of their transnational mobility which they have appropriated for its utility value, rather than being seen necessarily as a language of prestige. And despite concerns in the literature about the hegemony of English in the world today, participants in this study continue to use their other languages in different domains of their lives.

In terms of the acquisition and observed levels of oral proficiency in English, it is clear from the interview recordings that Sam, who acquired the language under *early* full immersion conditions from the start of schooling in the Philippines where English is the medium of instruction, has the highest level of fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation in the spoken language. In fact, Sam has a noticeable North American accent, a legacy of US colonialism which brought American teachers into schools in the Philippines (Lim and Ansaldo, 2021) when English became the national language and the language of schooling there in the first half of the 20th century. In many non-anglophone countries today, including the UAE, English-medium instruction is becoming increasingly prevalent and provides school and college students with immersion in the language (Gallagher, 2016), a condition which, as Sam's case here illustrates, produces high levels of proficiency in English.

Fran acquired English under different conditions from Sam, initially as a foreign language at school and in private classes in Spanish-speaking South America, and then experienced full *late* immersion during their studies in Switzerland, and also speaks it confidently and is quite proficient. By contrast, for Arabic-speaking Noor, who did not experience formal pedagogic immersion conditions in English during their education, they have acquired it through interaction with other learners of English in the workplace. As such, their interview recording is replete with the non-standard pronunciation and grammatical features of *lingua franca* English, albeit with full intelligibility. Examples of grammatical features from the interview excerpts above include their use of the present continuous instead of the present simple tense ("they are using" instead of "they use") and "too much" instead of "a lot." Yet, as ELF users, all three can communicate effectively (Seidlhofer, 2011).

Overall, in terms of linguistic identity, their stories speak to the creation and maintenance of individual, agentive, transnational self-identities. They present as social agents with complex linguistic identities (Early and Norton, 2012) in which English is the common denominator. Participants' narratives are interpreted here as what we may term *scripts of agency*, wherein the discursive positioning of the self is as active, responsible, and in control. These stories, as narrated by the participants in this paper, can be contrasted with the "scripts of servitude" of less advantaged migrant workers in the Gulf region, for example the domestic workers from Asia portrayed in Lorente's (2017) book-length study. Equally, the voices of the participants here are not amongst the UAE's "privileged migrants" from Europe or North America (Fechter and Walsh, 2010), and the stories told here of managerial level transnational workers in the hotel industry in the region have not been depicted previously.

Their stories reify the role of English as an instrument of mobility (Theodoropoulou, 2021) and epitomize the new mobilities paradigm whereby "all places are tied into … networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place" (Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 209). The UAE epitomizes a fourth circle or "fourth space" (Prodromou, 2010, p. xiv) where users of English from the three circles as originally conceptualized by Kachru (1985) – as a foreign, second, or first language – commingle and use it as their common communicative means. Cosmopolitanism, defined as "a willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz, 1990, p. 239), is a feature of the working lives and outlooks of the participants in this study, and is enabled by English. The "intense segregation" of population groups reported by Pagès-El Karoui (2021) in her study of cosmopolitanism in Dubai is not apparent in the workplace narratives shared by the participants in this study. Rather, participants expressed more convivial than segregationist sentiments. Characterizing how diverse people can work together across difference, "conviviality" as a term that has been used to describe interpersonal interactions in multilingual settings, however transient (Neal et al., 2013), seems appropriate, as seen for example in the remarks made by participants about their enjoyment of their working lives in the UAE which were cited at the end of each narrative section earlier in this paper. Perhaps because of a combination of factors including the notoriously long working hours, the variety of internationally themed food and beverage outlets, and the multinational diversity of employee and guest backgrounds, workers in this sector typically spend extended periods of time interacting across population groups. Perhaps also hotels and restaurants that cater for tourists, nationals, and expatriates alike are

one of the few contexts which are truly cosmopolitan and non-segregationist in the UAE, places where nationals and immigrants (albeit only those with sufficient disposable incomes to afford them) can relax and communicate through ELF with transnational staff members.

Interestingly, although work visas are typically valid for just 3 years, at the time of the interviews, Fran, Sam, and Noor had remained for periods from 7 to 22 years, suggesting a trend toward longer sojourns and a sense of a "semi-permanent belonging" (Cook, 2020, p. 197). None of them expressed concern about what Pagès-El Karoui (2021) has described as the precarious and transient status of all temporary migrants in the country; perhaps transience is accepted as part of a managerial career in international hotels around the world. Despite their apparent contentment with their lives in the UAE, they are aware that it is a finite experience, and as seen in these narratives, both Sam and Fran are weighing up their future work destination options.

Study limitations

Narrative inquiry intentionally involves a small number of participants to portray the richness of lived experience in some depth and detail (Tcherni-Buzzeo and Pyrczak, 2024), and to interpret life stories in relation to specific contexts and specific times. While depth and detail are the strength of the method, the small number of participants is arguably a limitation; however, the goal is not to generalize but rather to uncover and share rich descriptions of lived experience. In addition, another possible limitation of this study is the choice made by the participants to be interviewed in their places of work, which may have curtailed their personal sense of freedom of expression. On the other hand, the interview questions focused on topics about personal language acquisition and language use and did not include any potentially sensitive questions about employers or employment conditions.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the self-narrated stories of English acquisition and use by three purposefully selected, multilingual transnational managers in people-facing roles in the global tourism and hospitality industry in the UAE, and to explore the role of *lingua franca* English in their transnational career trajectories. While acknowledging the limitations to generalizability posed by the small number of life stories portrayed in this study, the use of narrative inquiry necessitates and enables a deeper dive into the richness of the individual lived experiences of the few over the many. The three narratives presented in this paper weave a linguacultural web across global space, people, and time, and have enabled a nuanced understanding of the enactment of *lingua franca* English in the international tourism sector in the UAE. As mid-level managers in public-oriented roles in international hotels, English has benefitted them, although for many others in the hotel industry who have not had opportunities to acquire functional use of that language, it may present an insurmountable barrier to career aspirations.

Participants give voice to and through English and other languages in their past and present and sometimes, their future, as they talk not only about the place where their stories are currently unfolding, but also about the places whence they came and to places to which they might go in future. While future studies with larger samples may provide more insights into the topic, this study has provided privileged access into the lived experience of ELF for middle-level managers in the international tourism sector in the UAE, emphasizing its importance as a major enabler of transnational mobility in the working lives presented here. As tourism and hospitality are expected to play an increasingly important role in the post-fossil fuel economies of the Gulf, and as English is expected to continue for the foreseeable future as the global language of communication, this narrative study contributes insights into factors in the learning and use of EFL in this globalized context and emphasizes the ongoing necessity of its acquisition for those seeking similar temporary employment in the Gulf states and in other such internationalized settings.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the interview data will not be shared. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to kay.gallagher@ecae.ac.ae.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by IRB, Emirates College for Advanced Education, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

KG: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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