

ENGLISH AS A GATEWAY TO GLOBAL MARKETS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF VANILLA BUYER OUTREACH

Rahmatul Khasanah, M.Pd.¹, Yanti Rahayuningsih, S.S.,M.Pd. ², Nuria Mufidah, S.S.,M.Pd.³

ABSTRACT

English plays an important role in international business communication and provides opportunities for small businesses to access global markets. This qualitative exploratory case study investigates the role of English in international buyer outreach conducted by an Indonesian vanilla business owner. Data were collected from 22 outreach attempts targeting prospective buyers in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States. Additional data were obtained from buyer response records and local purchasing cases. Data were analyzed using the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña.

The findings indicate that English facilitated initial communication with prospective international buyers but did not always lead to business opportunities. Four themes emerged from the analysis: English as a gateway to international communication, positioning ambiguity, product-market compatibility, and trust and credibility. The findings suggest that successful buyer outreach depends not only on English proficiency but also on clear business positioning, product relevance, and trust-building strategies. This study contributes to the fields of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), business communication, and SME internationalization.

Keywords; *English for Business Communication, Buyer Outreach, International Communication, Vanilla Business, SME Internationalization*

Correspondent Authors;

- 1) Rahmatul Khasanah , rahmatulkhasnaah689@gmail.com
- 2) Yanti Rahayuningsih, yan_sada@yahoo.com,
- 3) Nuria Mufidah , nuriamufidah@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The development of globalization and digital technology has created new opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to access international markets. Through social media, email, and instant messaging applications, business owners can communicate directly with prospective buyers across countries without relying entirely on intermediaries. In this context, English has become the dominant language of international business communication and functions as a bridge connecting business actors from different linguistic backgrounds [1]. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) refers to the use of English among speakers who do not share the same first language [1]. In international business settings, English enables communication, information exchange, and relationship building among individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of English in facilitating international business activities, particularly in export-oriented industries and

multinational business environments [2], [3].

Research on English in business communication has primarily focused on multinational corporations, business negotiations, and English proficiency in workplace settings [2], [3]. Other studies have examined the role of English in international trade and cross-cultural communication [1], [4]. These studies generally conclude that English plays an important role in supporting communication effectiveness and international business performance. However, most previous studies have focused on established companies or experienced exporters. Limited attention has been given to small business owners who are still in the early stages of international market exploration. In particular, there is a lack of studies investigating how English is used during buyer outreach activities conducted through digital platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and business contact forms. Furthermore, previous studies rarely

examine communication outcomes beyond successful transactions, including buyer rejection, misunderstanding, and non-response. As a result, the communication experiences of small business owners attempting to establish initial contact with international buyers remain underexplored.

This study offers a different perspective by investigating international buyer outreach conducted by the owner of a small Indonesian vanilla business. Unlike previous studies that focus on export performance or completed international transactions, this research examines the communication process itself, including successful responses, rejection cases, communication misunderstandings, and non-response situations. Therefore, the novelty of this

study lies in its exploration of English-mediated buyer outreach from the perspective of a small business owner who is actively seeking international market opportunities through digital communication channels. Based on the background above, this study aims to explore the role of English in international buyer outreach activities, identify communication challenges encountered during the outreach process, and analyze various buyer responses toward English-mediated communication. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), international business communication, and SME internationalization studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine communication experiences and buyer responses in their natural context. The study focused on understanding how English was utilized during international buyer outreach activities conducted by the owner of a small Indonesian vanilla business and how prospective buyers responded to such communication. The primary data were obtained from international buyer outreach activities conducted through digital communication platforms, including Instagram Direct Messages, WhatsApp, email, and business contact forms. A total of 22 outreach attempts were directed toward prospective buyers in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States. Additional supporting data were obtained from documented buyer responses provided by an experienced vanilla business practitioner and from local purchasing cases involving a home bakery and a hotel chef.

The research instruments consisted of outreach records, communication screenshots, WhatsApp conversation records, field notes, and buyer response documentation. These instruments were used to identify communication patterns, buyer responses, and challenges encountered

during the outreach process. Data collection was conducted by documenting outreach activities and recording buyer responses. The collected data included positive responses, rejection cases, communication misunderstandings, and non-response cases. The researcher also maintained field notes to record observations and reflections related to communication outcomes.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [5]. The analysis consisted of three stages. First, data reduction was conducted by selecting and categorizing communication records based on buyer responses. Second, data display was performed through tables and thematic categorization to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were carried out to identify patterns and themes emerging from the data. The analysis resulted in four major themes, namely English as a gateway to international communication, positioning ambiguity, product-market compatibility, and trust and credibility in buyer responses. These themes were used as the basis for interpreting the role of English in international buyer outreach activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. International Buyer Outreach Results

The study examined 22 international buyer outreach activities conducted through digital communication platforms. The outreach targeted

prospective buyers in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States.

Table 1. International Buyer Outreach Results

Country	Number of Buyers	Responses
Malaysia	5	2 responses, 1 WhatsApp follow-up
Singapore	3	No response
Brunei Darussalam	5	No response
Saudi Arabia	3	No response
United Kingdom	2	No response
Japan	2	No response
United States	2	No response

The results show that only Malaysian buyers responded to the outreach messages. Most communication attempts did not receive responses. Although the response rate was relatively low, the findings demonstrate that English enabled the researcher to establish initial communication with prospective buyers located in different countries.

2. English as a Gateway to International Communication

One important finding of this study is the role of English as an entry point for international communication. Through English-mediated communication, the researcher was able to contact prospective buyers from seven countries despite differences in geographical location and linguistic background. This finding supports the concept of English as a Lingua Franca proposed by Seidlhofer [1], who argues that English functions as a practical communication tool among speakers from different language backgrounds. The ability to communicate with businesses in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States demonstrates how English facilitates access to international business networks. However, the findings also indicate that communication access does not automatically lead to commercial engagement. While English enabled the researcher to initiate communication, additional factors influenced whether buyers chose to respond.

3. Positioning Ambiguity in Buyer Communication

A significant finding emerged from communication with a Malaysian buyer. Initially, the buyer responded positively and continued the

interaction through WhatsApp. However, the communication eventually stopped because the buyer misunderstood the

researcher's role. Rather than perceiving the researcher as a vanilla supplier, the buyer assumed that the researcher was interested in purchasing products. As a result, the conversation failed to progress toward product discussion. This finding suggests that successful communication depends not only on language proficiency but also on message clarity and business positioning. According to Bovee and Thill [2], effective business communication requires clear communication objectives and accurate interpretation of messages by the receiver. Although English facilitated communication, the intended business identity was not communicated effectively. The finding indicates that positioning clarity is a critical component of international buyer outreach activities.

4. Product-Market Compatibility and Buyer Responses

The study also identified the importance of product-market compatibility in determining buyer decisions. Comparative data obtained from an experienced vanilla business practitioner revealed two contrasting responses from South Korean buyers. One buyer rejected the offer because the business primarily used vanilla syrup rather than vanilla beans in its production process. Consequently, the product offered by the supplier did not align with the buyer's operational needs. In contrast, another South Korean buyer showed interest in Indonesian planifolia vanilla because the company previously used Tahitian vanilla and considered planifolia a more cost-effective alternative. These findings indicate that communication success is influenced not only by

language use but also by product relevance. Even when communication is effective, purchasing decisions remain dependent on whether the offered product meets buyer requirements.

5. Trust and Credibility in Purchasing Decisions

Trust emerged as another important factor influencing buyer responses. This finding was evident in local purchasing cases involving a home bakery and a hotel chef who decided to purchase vanilla products after receiving information regarding product quality and suitability. The findings support Gefen's argument [4] that trust reduces uncertainty and increases the likelihood of commercial transactions. In business communication, buyers often evaluate product credibility before making purchasing decisions. The local purchase cases suggest that communication becomes more effective when supported by product credibility and buyer confidence. Therefore, trust-building activities should be considered an essential component of international buyer outreach.

6. Non-Response as A Communication Outcome

Another important finding concerns the high number of non-response cases. Buyers from Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States did not respond to the outreach messages. The absence of responses does not necessarily indicate communication failure. Various factors may influence buyer responsiveness, including message timing, workload, supplier credibility, platform algorithms, and market competition. This finding demonstrates that international buyer

outreach is a complex process that extends beyond language proficiency. Consistent with previous business communication studies [2], communication outcomes are influenced by multiple contextual factors.

7. Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that English plays an important role in facilitating international buyer outreach. English enabled the researcher to communicate with prospective buyers across multiple countries and served as a gateway to international business interaction. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that English proficiency alone is insufficient to generate commercial outcomes. Positioning ambiguity, product-market compatibility, trust, and buyer needs emerged as more influential factors in determining communication outcomes. The findings support previous studies emphasizing the role of English in international communication [1], [3]. However, the present study extends existing literature by highlighting the experiences of a small Indonesian vanilla business conducting buyer outreach through digital platforms. The findings suggest that successful international communication requires a combination of language competence, strategic communication, trust-building, and market understanding.

The findings suggest that small business owners seeking international buyers should clearly communicate their business identity during initial outreach. In addition, buyer targeting strategies should prioritize businesses whose operational needs align with the characteristics of the product being offered. Finally, trust-building activities and consistent follow-up communication may improve buyer engagement in international markets.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of English in international buyer outreach conducted by the owner of a small Indonesian vanilla business. The findings indicate that English functions as an important gateway to international communication, enabling business owners to

establish initial contact with prospective buyers across different countries. Through English-mediated communication, outreach activities were conducted in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States. However, the

findings demonstrate that English proficiency alone is insufficient to generate positive business outcomes.

The study identified four major factors influencing buyer responses, namely positioning clarity, product-market compatibility, trust and credibility, and buyer engagement. The Malaysian case revealed that communication may fail despite successful interaction when business identity is not communicated clearly. The South Korean cases demonstrated that purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by the compatibility between buyer needs and product characteristics. Meanwhile, local purchasing cases highlighted the importance of trust and product credibility in supporting purchasing

decisions. Furthermore, the large number of non-response cases suggests that international buyer outreach is a complex process influenced by multiple factors beyond language use.

The findings imply that small business

owners seeking international market opportunities should not rely solely on English proficiency. Effective international communication also requires strategic business positioning, a clear value proposition, an understanding of buyer needs, and trust-building practices. Therefore, English should be viewed not only as a language skill but also as a strategic business communication tool that supports international market exploration.

This study contributes to the fields of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), business communication, and SME internationalization by providing empirical insights into buyer outreach activities conducted by a small Indonesian vanilla business. Future research is recommended to involve larger datasets, longer observation periods, and a greater variety of business sectors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of international buyer communication and engagement.

REFERENCES

- [1] B. Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [2] C. L. Bovee and J. V. Thill, *Excellence in Business Communication*. Pearson, 2021.
- [3] J. Jenkins, *Global Englishes: A Resource Book for Students*. Routledge, 2015.
- [4] D. Gefen, "E-commerce: The Role of Familiarity and Trust," *Omega*, vol. 28, no. 6, pp. 725–737, 2000.
- [5] M. B. Miles, A. M. Huberman, and J. Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. Sage Publications, 2014.
- [6] J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. Sage Publications, 2014.