

English as a lingua franca for global business communication

Evren Önek Bircan

Hacettepe University School of English Language, Department of Modern Languages,
Ankara - TURKEY
evrenon@hacettepe.edu.tr

Abstract. It is a widely known fact that English is used as the language of business communication; therefore, it is an essential tool of communication in multicultural settings. However, to what extent English is used accurately for effective communication and the extent to which accuracy can actually fall behind communication is a problem that most non-native speakers in the business world face. Lingua franca users communicating with each other as non-native speakers and with native speakers face challenges and are entangled in the dilemma of effective communication at the expense of accuracy versus effective language use at the expense of effective communication. Having to develop strategies to write correspondences and reports, attend business meetings, deliver formal business presentations, gain knowledge of current issues, negotiate, develop intercultural communication skills and become more independent operators in the global business environment; business people encounter some obstacles that hinder effective communication. These problems will be analysed and strategies to overcome them will be suggested. Ways to foster successful business communication between non-native speakers and native speakers as well as communication between non-native speakers and non-native speakers, create an awareness to target problems, and seek ways to eliminate them are the key elements of the article.

Keywords: Business English, ELF (English as a lingua franca), successful business communication, strategies for business communication.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's global world, it is an undeniable fact that English has become the language of both oral and written communication, specifically competitive business world where professionals have to be competent communicators (Martinez & Gutierrez, 2013; Li & Chen, 2011; Ariana, 2008; Nicoleta, 2008). International business professionals need to establish contact with others whom they never met before or know slightly and the interaction is mostly limited to short meetings (Nicoleta, 2008). English is no longer associated with one single culture or country, on the contrary, it is considered a means of communication which is used in interaction with different languages (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Nickerson & Camiciottoli, 2013). The term *lingua franca*, in its simplest sense, refers to a language spoken by "people whose first languages are different" (Li & Chen., 2011). Because this global usage of English has made it the contact language in different kinds of communication between people, especially business professionals (Li & Chen, 2011), the term ELF (English as a lingua franca) needs the addition of the letter, B, to form the term "BELF" (Business English as a lingua franca) (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2007). According to Charles (2007), BELF is the "shared" language and used by international business professionals to conduct business. The addition of the terms "international" and "business" gives a sense of divergence from the "sole realm of native speakers" (Charles, 2007). Charles (2007) argues that the number of people who speak English as their second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL) outnumber the people who speak it as their mother tongue. Therefore, most global business communication takes place in non-native English, which means that none of the

communicators speak English as their first language (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2007). The fact that English is used as a lingua franca in international business settings creates a challenge for non-native business people in that they feel the need and pressure to use both oral and written English effectively. Because most communication in globalised business takes place between non-native speakers of English, the competence in BELF is a crucial part of business knowledge. Various studies (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Charles, 2007; Evans, 2013; Nickerson & Camiciottoli, 2013; Li & Chen, 2011) come to the conclusion that most non-native speakers of English are aware of the need to practice both oral and written communication skills rather than grammar. The participants in these studies put special emphasis on pronunciation and informal communication which they say is a must in successful business communication (Charles, 2007; Ariana, 2008; Trinder & Herles, 2012).

The aim of this article therefore, is to discuss the necessity of English for business communication by analysing the studies conducted with non-native business professionals in Finland (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Charles, 2007), Taiwan (Li & Chen, 2011) and Hong Kong (Evans, 2013); and with university students of BELF in Vienna (Trinder & Herles, 2012). The findings of the above mentioned research support the fact that BELF necessitates special attention and, thus, needs to be studied separately.

2 BELF AS A SEPARATE FIELD OF STUDY

There might be some arguments that emphasise the futility of studying BELF in itself as an independent field from EFL. Some might also question the use of BELF in current global business communication. The answer is simple: as Charles (2007) argues, “its domain is solely business and its frame of reference is provided by the globalised business community”. “Real business communication involves real business people”, either from different countries with different languages or the same country with the same mother tongue (Li & Chen, 2011). Because most business communication is dominantly between non-native speakers of English, the competence in BELF is a complementary part of today’s global business communication.

The surveys conducted by Kankaanranta & Planken (2010), Charles (2007), Evans (2013), and Li & Chen (2013) aim to explore the different perceptions about and challenges posed by BELF communication. The respondents of the surveys experience regular international interaction.

2.1 BELF Competence As Perceived By Users

The figure (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) below shows how respondents rated their idea of having a wide vocabulary of English, using grammatically correct language and knowing the English vocabulary i.e. jargon related to their business area. The figure illustrates the present competence of the respondents.

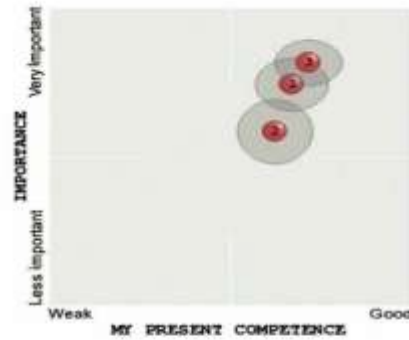


Figure 1. Sample Graph

For my communication to succeed, it is important that (1) I have a wide vocabulary of English; (2) the English I use is grammatically correct; (3) I know the English vocabulary of my own business area.

As can be seen in figure 1, having a wide vocabulary of English and knowing English vocabulary of the respondents' own business area are more important than using grammatically correct English. According to the respondents, their rate of grammatical competence is lower than their lexical competence. Evans' study (2013) in Hong Kong with business professionals also supports the findings of Kankaanranta & Planken (2010). Evans' interviewees concluded that "English is evidently viewed as a tool to expatiate business rather than as a language whose conventions need to be observed". Evans argues that there is an "interplay" between Cantonese (a language spoken in Hong Kong) and English occurring in both written and oral business communication. English is the medium of written business communication whereas its use in spoken communication is limited, so this "interplay" is inevitable in this context. For example, one of the interviewees in this study stated that "Cantonese is used in small talk, but most of the business presentations are in English. It is natural to use English in the discussion but we chat in Cantonese afterwards" (Evans, 2013). This means that these participants are fluent English speakers in work related contexts, but otherwise do not prefer to speak English or they do not consider it essential. Although native speakers (NSs) have no difficulty chatting in English, BELF speakers may find it challenging. Charles' study conducted in Finland shows that learning the jargon was not a problem for the participants; however, they find it difficult to decide on the right expressions "in ordinary small talk" and "being able to suddenly and effectively express opinions" as it is the case with participants from Hong Kong. Informal communication rather than the language of formal communication seems to be a challenge that results in emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy.

2.2 BELF Communication: Native Speakers (NSs) Versus Non-Native Speakers (NNSs)

There are opposing views on which communication i.e. that with NSs or NNSs proves to be effective in business interactions.

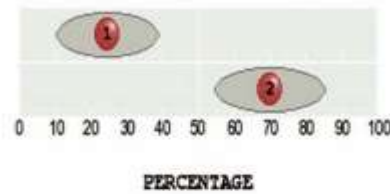


Figure 2. Communication With Native Speakers (1) and Nonnative Speakers (2)

What percentage of your communication in English takes place with (1) native speakers of English? (2) nonnative speakers of English?

Figure 2 shows the respondents' estimates of their communication with native speakers (NSs) versus non-native speakers (NNSs) of English (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). According to this figure, there is a striking difference between communication with native and non-native speakers. 70% of the English communication of internationally operating business professionals can be characterised as BELF as it takes place between NNSs. Despite the fact that BELF communication with NNSs is more widespread in its usage, there are also some arguments in favour of communication with NSs so as to improve language use.

The findings of a study conducted with students at Vienna University of Economics and Business reveal that most students preferred interaction with the NSs: "only from native speakers, they reasoned, could they learn how to speak fluently and 'correctly'" (Trinder & Herles, 2012). They emphasised fluency and accuracy equally, putting them in the centre of effective communication. It might be argued that their views can be ignored or disregarded as they are not professionals, but students who are trained to be professionals. Yet, their opinion is highly valuable as they are going to work in the field and use BELF in their future communication with business partners. They also stated that native-like pronunciation would give them more "credibility and status on business occasions", which is true in most cases. Similarly, the respondents of Kankaanranta & Planken (2010) noted that the flow of communication was often more natural and smooth in contacts with NSs than with NNSs, which made them more comfortable in such interactions. They highlighted the necessity of fluency and the comfort they experience when communicating with NSs, which in return can lead them to polish and refine their lexical and even grammatical use of the language.

Some BELF speakers prefer interaction with NNSs in their business communication. According to Kankaanranta & Planken (2010), there are three major problems experienced by their non-native interviewees in their communication with native speakers: first, relative lack of competence in relation to overall flexibility in using English due to lack of competence in language use and "repertoire of phraseology, idioms and stylistic nuances"; second, speed of speech and delivery; third, different and sometimes "incomprehensible" regional UK or US accents. As the survey (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) points out, the respondents did not feel that they were more successful in their communication with NSs than NNSs as the latter often used simpler sentences and spoke more slowly as opposed to the complex structure and quick pace of NSs. In contrast to NSs, NNSs are relatively equal communication partners for the interviewees although they have different accents and different levels of English. They stated that they can adjust their level of English and adapt their communication according to the level of the other party. However, some interviewees noted that they did not observe such adaptation of NSs while speaking with NNSs. Even if NSs attempt to simplify their language, they tend to quickly change back to their normal speed and complexity. Most of the interviewees of this study also stated that they did not consider NSs as role models for their English competence, nor NS-like pronunciation an essential element in effective communication. On the contrary, they emphasised "clarity" which can be achieved by consistent and

natural simple and refined utterances rather than “correctness” which is displayed by NSs at the expense of effective communication. (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

The interviewees also claimed that oral interactions with NSs are “unequal and asymmetrical”; and therefore, more difficult than with NNSs. Another result of the survey reveals that interviewees paid special attention to their language while talking to NSs and are under the pressure to produce correct sentences since they felt that NSs are advantageous because of their mother tongue, which made the communication unequal. As can clearly be seen from the above results, there is a stress on equality between NSs and NNSs which explains the reason why NNSs prefer interaction with NNSs in BELF communication as they feel they are on the equal grounds with NNSs.

3 PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED

All of the examples and views given above support the idea that BELF is an indispensable mode of communication in business. Therefore, it is essential to closely analyse and understand the nature and characteristics of BELF discourse so as to foster successful business communication on a global scale between NSs and NNSs. In order to do this, challenges and problems must be detected. According to Kankaanranta & Planken (2010), there are three challenges of BELF discourse: The first is “simplified English”. Their interviewees emphasise the use of “simple and clear English” in their responses. This means that BELF used with NNSs does not contain complex structures and complicated phrases. In addition, grammatical inaccuracies were reported but they do not lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication. One of their Finnish interviewees summarises this as follows: “As long as your core message gets across, your English doesn’t need to be perfect.” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). This is actually the core of BELF communication since business professionals do not need to be proficient users of the language, but good communicators in most cases. The second challenge of BELF is “specific terminology related to business in general and professional expertise in particular” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). As figure 1 demonstrates, the respondents consider English vocabulary in their own field as more important for successful communication than grammatical accuracy. Therefore, business professionals quite often adjust their language and use different language while communicating with their colleagues and customers. They need to adapt and adjust the content in a flexible way, regardless of the language they use. The third challenge of BELF discourse includes hybrid features originating from the speakers’ own mother tongues. As Charles (2007) argues, BELF is not a language without a culture. On the contrary, it involves other factors like cultural backgrounds and NNSs of English naturally transfer the characteristics of their mother tongue and cultural background to the foreign language (English in BELF case) they speak. NNSs of BELF interact with the speakers of other languages and they adopt different features of the language, which in return gives way to a new and “hybrid” discourse.

4 STRATEGIES

According to Kankaanranta & Planken (2010), the users of BELF can adopt three strategies for successful BELF communication, the implementation of which is a unique challenge in itself: “getting the facts right”, “making the discourse clear”, and “making the recipient feel good”. In order to convey information clearly, the interviewees need to “analyse the audience, estimate their level of professional knowledge and act accordingly”. They think that “getting the facts right was more crucial than getting the language correct”. Some minor mistakes and misunderstandings are acceptable as long as the message gets across. There are no significant misunderstandings in such communication despite “frequent syntactic and lexical anomalies” (Charles, 2007). Charles attributes this to the “shared business background and shared purpose”. People who have the same business background and command of the jargon cannot possibly misunderstand each other unless there is a major mistake. Another strategy that BELF

users may adopt is “clarity”. The key elements to achieve clarity are “being explicit (unambiguous), simple (without complex words or structures) and compact (without unnecessary words and repetition)” (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010). The interviewees simply stated that “less is more”, which explains the idea of clarity. When it comes to writing and written communication, the interviewees added that using bullet points and listing were effective (Charles, 2007) to reach clarity. The third important strategy is “making the recipient feel good”, which means in the business context “communicating information that is useful or usable to the recipient and in a manner appropriate to the context and in line with the expectations of the recipient” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

5 CONCLUSION

BELF competence is an essential part of business knowledge and most business English spoken is between NNSs, which creates a stress factor on NNSs of English. Further research into Business English communication strategies can be done so as to evade the stress and drawbacks experienced by NNSs in their communication with NSs. More successful business communication requires awareness raising and the relief of stress factor. Moreover, when the need for speed in global business environment is taken into consideration, it would not be wrong to argue that there is a shift from “complex and grammar-heavy” ideas of correctness to fast and effective communication (Abrudan, 2012). The interviewees of the survey conducted by Charles (2007) concluded that “despite the various English courses that they might have followed, it is the real-life practice that is the best school for learning to use BELF”. BELF competence is adequate as long as business professionals can carry out their work no matter how limited their English is. Furthermore, because getting the message across is the core element of BELF competence, “a successful BELF speaker need not be highly fluent, produce grammatically correct language, or have a native English pronunciation” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Unambiguously conveyed business content and clearly transferred information count as good BELF competence. As Charles (2007) puts it, “language does matter in global operations and language matters are important for companies”. Therefore, in order to bridge the gap, research into both NSs and NNSs’ behaviour in business communication should be continued so that more effective business communication can occur. It is important that both groups’ modes of conduct, cultural backgrounds and motives are understood so as to establish a more prosperous business environment based on reciprocal and mutual respect and understanding.

References

- Abrudan, C. (2012). New Trends In Teaching And Learning Business English: Adapting To Internalization. *Annals Of The University Of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, 21(1), 17-175.
- Charles, M. (2007). Language Matters In Global Communication. *Journal Of Business Communication*, 44, 260-282.
- Evans, S. (2013). Perspectives On The Use Of English As A Business Lingua Franca In Hong Kong. *Journal Of Business Communication*, 50(3), 227-252.
- Li, M., & Chen, P. (2011). Faculty Profession Development On Teaching ELF In International Business Communication. *Education Research Journal*, 1(7), 120-127.
- Martinez, R. M., & Gutierrez, A. C. (2013). Developing Communicative Competence In English As A Second Language By Integrating Business Competencies. *Business Education & Accreditation*, 5(2), 65-77.
- Nickerson, C. (2005). English As A Lingua Franca In International Business Contexts. *English for Specific Purposes* 24, 367–380.
- Nickerson, C., & Camiciottoli, B. C. (2013). Business English As A Lingua Franca In Advertising Texts In The Arabian Gulf: Analysing The Attitudes Of The Emirati Community. *Journal Of Business And Technical Communication*, 27.329.

- Nicoleta, B. (2008). The English For Business Syllabus And Its Effects Upon The Business Environment. *Annals Of The University Of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, 11(7), 572-575.
- Kankaanranta, A., & Louhiala-Salminen, L. (2007). Business Communication In BELF. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 70(1), 55-59.
- Kankaanranta, A., & Planken, B. (2010). BELF Competence As Business Knowledge Of Internationally Operating Business Professionals. *Journal Of Business Communication*, 47(4), 380-407.
- Ariana, S. M. (2008). Teaching English In Several Central And Eastern European Countries. *Annals Of The University Of Oradea, Economic Science Series*, 11(7), 644-648.
- Trinder, R. & Herles, M. (2012). Students' And Teachers' Ideals Of Effective Business English Teaching. *ELT Journal*, 67(2), 220-229.
- Weninger, C. & Kan, K. (2012). Language Awareness In Business Communication. *English For Specific Purposes*, 32, 59-71.