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Author(s): Kankaanranta, Anne & Louhiala-Salminen, Leena
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Research Note:

"English? – Oh, it's just work!": A study of BELF users' perceptions

Abstract:

With the increasing number of business professionals operating globally, knowledge of successful English lingua franca in business contexts (BELF) has become an important element in overall business know-how. Here, we report on a research project focusing on everyday BELF communication at work. It consists of an extensive survey, and related interviews among international business professionals. In addition to offering some quantitative data on communicative situations, the survey results show the respondents' views of situation-specific factors in their communicative situations in relation to each other. Our findings suggest that English in today's global business environment is "simply work" and its use is highly contextual. Thus, knowledge of the specific business context, the particular genres used in the particular business area, and overall business communication strategies are tightly intertwined with proficiency in English, which impacts teaching.

Key words:

ELF (English as a lingua franca); BELF (English as a lingua franca in business contexts); business communication; international business; globalization

1. Introduction

The use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in international business has gained increasing attention among researchers of business communication, business discourse, and English for Specific Purposes (see, e.g. Vollstedt, 2002; Poncini, 2004; Planken, 2005; Charles, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson, in press). As Nickerson (2005, p. 369) argues in her editorial to the 2005 Special Issue of *English for Specific Purposes*, there are two distinct trends in the research of English for Specific Business Purposes. First, there has been a "discursive turn", a shift from the analysis of isolated business texts to the analysis of contextualized communication (e.g. Poncini, 2004) and second, the focus has moved

from language skills to language strategies, i.e. identification of strategies that make the communicative event successful irrespective of the mother tongue of the English speaker (e.g. Planken, 2005). In our earlier study (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), which was presented in the Special Issue, both trends were visible: a communication survey in two merged Finnish-Swedish corporations was followed by an integrated analysis of both spoken and written genres in use.

The two trends – focus on contextualized communication and strategic use of language - can also be observed in the present research project focusing on ELF, or rather, BELF that we will discuss in this Research Note. We use the term BELF (English as a Lingua Franca in business contexts) to highlight the overall goal and the domain of use of the language of business professionals operating internationally (see Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). In addition to being ELF users (see, e.g. Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2000, 2004), the speakers and writers of BELF are members of the global business discourse community and use the language to do their work. They thus share the “B”, i.e. the context of business although their individual jobs may be very different. As ELF users, they also share the “E”, i.e. the English language, but are separated by the communicative frameworks connected with their various native discourse practices, and, in particular, the hidden, implicit rules involved in mother tongue communication.

For our conceptualization of BELF, the “B” is of utmost importance. As BELF is used in the business domain to get the job done, it automatically implies certain roles for the language users (e.g. buyer, seller, manager), the kind of jobs they do (e.g. negotiate deals, manage projects, lead people), the issues they discuss (e.g. prices, recruiting, finance), and the genres they use (e.g. business email, intranet, meetings). Further, their

ultimate aim “is to achieve the goals of a buying-selling negotiation” (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999, pp. 212-213) which can be taken either literally to refer to the negotiations with company-external stakeholders or figuratively to refer to the various kinds of interactions between employees within the company. Interestingly, the interplay between the “B” and language has recently also gained attention in international management research (see, e.g. Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Maclean, 2006).

The concept of ‘BELF discourse/communication’ entails that various languages and cultures are always present – at least implicitly, but occasionally also explicitly (e.g. Poncini, 2004; Kankaanranta, 2006). In this sense, BELF discourse/communication is inherently intercultural and the context is necessarily multilingual. For example, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) showed how the characteristics named as typical of Finnish and Swedish communication by survey respondents were much more complex phenomena in authentic meetings and email discourse. The “talkative” Swedes generated talk by asking questions and offering opinions, addressing their partners directly, and using metadiscourse to refer to what had been said earlier, whereas the “few-worded, direct” Finns focused on the information at hand, using fewer metadiscursive elements in their talk (see also Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; also Mauraanen, 1993). However, the amount of talk by Swedish and Finnish speakers was the same. In email communication, both groups showed interpersonal orientation although Finnish requests were somewhat more direct than the Swedish ones (see also Kankaanranta, 2006). These types of implicit differences that seem to be related to native discourse practices are

highly interesting from the ELF/BELF perspective since they may have an impact on the intended message and thus on the “success” of the interaction.

In this Research Note, we explore the perceptions of business professionals of their own BELF communication at work. Our analysis focuses on the reported experiences and opinions of the significance of the various factors in a communicative situation affecting the outcome, as perceived by the informants. Although we are fully aware of the complex, normative nature of the concept “communicative success”, we use “success” to refer to the extent to which the goals of a particular communicative event are achieved as *reported* by the respondents and interviewees. “Success” thus refers to the personal experience of the participants, the context, the message and the language of a particular communicative event.

Our research project “*Does business know how?*” *The role of communication in the business know-how of globalized operations* (www.hse.fi/ckh) is part of a larger research program funded by the Academy of Finland to investigate business know-how. Business know-how, or business expertise, can be seen as an ability to manage a business, position it to its environment and proactively consider future risks and challenges (see, e.g., Näsi & Neilimo, 2006). Thus, traditionally, business know-how resides in innovations, entrepreneurship, marketing, business processes, and management strategy, but as all these require the ability to build networks and create knowledge, we argue that the communication know-how of today’s business practitioners is an integral part of their business know-how. Since much of the communication in globalized business takes place between non-native speakers of English (NNS), we further argue that an integral part of the communication know-how and expertise required of today’s business professionals is

competence in BELF. The present study aims to increase our understanding of the various dimensions of this competence.

2. Study

Because of the complex and multifaceted nature of language use in the global business context, we approach communicative situations drawing on various disciplinary perspectives and adopting different methodologies, as suggested by Nickerson (2005; see also Bargiela et al. 2007). In the present phase of the project, we have administered an on-line questionnaire survey targeted at business professionals in five globally operating Finland-based companies, and conducted related qualitative interviews; authentic texts produced by such professionals are also being investigated by our co-researchers. The companies operate in different fields such as IT and intelligence services, cargo handling, and logistics. In total, 987 survey responses were received and the response rate amounted to 52%. Although our respondents represent 31 different native languages and more than 20 countries, the native tongue of almost 40% of them was Finnish and overall, western European languages dominated. Around 80% of the respondents had a university degree and almost 70% were between 30-50 years of age (for more details of the survey, see Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2008). The survey was followed up by semi-structured interviews with fifteen Finnish survey respondents in two of the five corporations. All but one had a university degree and twelve were between 30-50 years of age. The language of the survey was English, and the interviews were carried out in Finnish.

The survey was aimed at business professionals whose work involves regular international interaction, and our aim was to explore the nature of that communication, as perceived by our informants. Although the survey instrument we used was designed to offer some distinctly quantitative data of our informants and their communicative situations, the major part of the instrument included several items where the informants were asked to evaluate the significance of a particular factor *in relation to other factors*. For most survey items, the respondent, clicking a particular spot in the four-quadrant graph, evaluated his/her belief in a statement along two dimensions. For example, the statement “For my communication to succeed, it is important that I have a wide vocabulary in English” was rated according to *Importance* (y-axis; ranging from ‘less important’ to ‘very important’) and *My present competence* (x-axis; ranging from ‘weak’ to ‘good’). Hence, we did not set out to carry out a needs analysis but rather tap into the professionals’ perceptions about everyday English communication in their various jobs (cf. e.g. West, 1994; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Boshier & Smalkoski, 2002). Accordingly, we inquired about the contextual features of their communication, such as communication partners (e.g. NS, NNS), communication practices (e.g. use of different media, other language/s), and characteristics of the needed English language competence at work (e.g. pronunciation, grammar). In addition, the respondents were asked to indicate how they would rank some (western) characteristics of effective business communication (e.g. directness, clarity, politeness; see e.g. Munter, 2007). The open questions of the survey dealt with the perceived communicative “success” in the global business environment.

Interviews were used to complement the survey data and give us some deeper insight into the opinions and attitudes of our target group; in particular, the interviewees

were asked to elaborate on the notion of “successful communication”. Thus, the perspectives that we combine in our findings represent the views of two groups of informants: 1) a large body of internationally operating business people based in more than 20 countries and 2) fifteen Finnish business people with solid international business experience and daily exposure to global work practices.

3. Findings

In this paper, we report on our informants’ views of (1) the use of English vs. other languages in international interactions, (2) the significance of various contextual factors in perceived communicative success, and (3) the nature of BELF leading to perceived communicative success.

First, globally operating business professionals all seem to need two languages to do their work: their mother tongue and English. However, the distribution of the amounts of the two languages in the daily work varied; on average, the survey respondents estimated that they used the mother tongue slightly more than English. Some of the interviewees were so used to using English in the workplace that they felt that their expertise was stronger in that language. Although only a small number of the informants needed a third language in their work, the added value of knowing the other party’s mother tongue was considered high, especially in building rapport in new relationships. In international interaction, non-native speakers of English (NNS) clearly outnumber native speakers (NS). Our survey respondents estimated that approximately 70% of their communication takes place with NNS partners (cf. Taillefer, 2007; Author B, 2002).

Second, according to the informants, it is important for a business professional to know the other party's specific context to succeed in communication. This knowledge includes both national and corporate cultures, but even more importantly, the informants felt that the better they knew the other party and his/her organizational role the smoother the communication process: "It's much easier when you know what kind of communication to expect." Overall, BELF communication seemed to work smoothly when the parties shared the topic and the specific genre rules. For example, despite some accents being considered challenging in BELF speech, according to the informants, misunderstandings were extremely rare since the shared business context helped when words were lacking. To the question about contacts with NSs of English the interviewees had two extreme answers: "Fortunately, no!" and "Fortunately, yes!" On the one hand, communication with NSs was considered unequal and at times uncomfortable because NSs were able to gain the upper hand by exploiting their mother tongue to the full, whereas in NNS communication everybody was on the same footing. On the other hand, NS contacts were sometimes regarded as "teachers", whose speech the interviewees observed and attempted to emulate. However, it is important to note that in BELF communication, the focus is on getting the job done and the interviewees may have come to think about the 'teacher role' when their attention was drawn to NS vs. NNS communication.

Third, the question of the nature of BELF communication leading to getting the job done was approached from various directions. Our informants regarded proficiency in English as vital for their work, but their understanding of "proficiency" was very pragmatic and intertwined with their conceptualization of business communication

competence, business competence and business know-how overall. For example, they considered knowledge of grammar clearly less important than knowledge of particular genres of their own business area. The interviewees also reported on accommodation practices; for instance, when speaking with a fluent NNS or a NS, they fully exploited their English skills, but if the partner's skills were limited, they simplified their language. Of the three characteristics that business communication textbooks consider essential for effective communication (see e.g. Munter, 2007), the respondents ranked *clarity* slightly higher than *directness* and *politeness* although all three received high rankings. In the interviews, clarity was described as succinct and explicit communication, in which the main point can be found easily; to quote one of the interviewees, "there should be no doubt about what the writer means". *Directness* in communication meant that the main point came early since, according to the interviewees, "there is no time to look for the main point". *Politeness* was conceptualized as interpersonal orientation overall; in other words, it was the non-business part of the communicative event such as small talk or, "making it sound nice", as one of the interviewees put it. For the interviewees, these concepts seemed to refer to language strategies on the one hand (see, e.g. Planken, 2005) and to what we know as "effective business communication strategies" on the other (see, e.g. Munter, 2007).

4. Discussion

The use of English in today's global business environment is "simply work". This is the main message we learned from our informants, whose work involves regular international interaction. For the generation that has entered the labour market since the 1990s, English

is and has always been an integral part of work; however, for many of our informants who were employed in business before advanced communication technologies and the wave of cross-border mergers, English was a foreign language that they had not previously used for work purposes, and these informants characterized their first steps in the English-speaking work context as highly challenging. However, since there was no other alternative but to start using English with new colleagues and partners, they had to learn the use by doing. In the shared business context it was not necessary to master the language perfectly; rather, mastering the business-related issues formed the basis for communicative success.

For BELF communication, then, business competence together with knowledge of business communication and genre rules are clearly more important than, for example, grammatical and idiomatic correctness. Consequently, NS fluency is not a relevant criterion for success in international business work, and in addition, since most interactions take place between NNSs of English, it might not be even desirable.

How then can our findings inform the teaching of English for business purposes or English business communication? First, the curriculum should be planned in such a way that it incorporates as much business knowledge and awareness of the business context as possible. It may require changes in the entire national curriculum of English studies for business purposes as, for example, Zhang (2007; see also Taillefer, 2007) has suggested. On the practical level, cases are an effective method in bringing the real world into the classroom. Second, it seems that the strategies of effective business communication, whose ultimate aim is always the desired response, work well in BELF communication as well. Indeed, the perceptions of the interviewees about the success

factors were surprisingly similar to those presented in textbooks. This finding suggests they could be used as guidelines in all course work and should thus also serve as the criteria for assessing the final products of students. However, since the strategies are context-bound, neither business nor lingua franca communication has a place for rigid norms; therefore, students need to be trained to be flexibly competent. The ultimate aim of all student work should always be its ability to do the job (see, e.g. Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2007).

Third, the NS model is as outdated in today's BELF communication as it seems to be in all ELF communication (see, e.g. Jenkins, 2007). This may entail a major shift in, for example, the target groups of corporate training programs. Indeed, Charles & Marschan-Piekkari (2002) have suggested that rather than training NNSs to master English, internationally operating corporations should train their NS employees to accommodate to the NNSs of the language.

In the end, we believe that the particular kind of BELF required in a particular job can primarily be learned on the job. However, as teachers of BELF we can pave the way for our students by helping them learn about contextualized language use in business.

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