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Perspectives on Business English as a Lingua Franca in Business Communication

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Abstract: The importance of using one shared language has been realised as the world becomes more globalised. Moreover, businesses, organisations and multi-companies have acknowledged the importance of using one language as an internal and external communication tool. English language is the common worldwide shared language and has been adopted as a primary communication language in some countries over the years. The key aim of this paper is to focus on the various perspectives about the English language as a practical and communication tool in the global world between the individuals who don't share a common native tongue or culture and those who use the English language as a preferred language for foreign communication. In addition, this article will present the consequences for teaching business English.

Keywords: English as Lingua Franca, Business English, Language Teaching, English for Specific Purposes

1. Introduction

The English language is growing, and its dominance has been demonstrated in social and commercial communications as well as academics in the entire globe. A concise indicator of this is the international periodical publications in the 1990s, more than 75% and 90% respectively of social and natural science were published in English while 98% and 83% were published in German [1]. Currently, Chemistry and Physics disciplines are using English as their working language. Regarding business, English is gaining dominance since almost 85% of international organisations use English as their official language [2]. Moreover, regions such as Asia and Pacific conduct approximately 90% of their proceedings in English [2]. Internationally, English is used as the default language in international e-commerce [3]. Globally, the English language is used by 1/3 of the total number of online users' i.e. 536 million out of 1.7 billion users [4].

As a result, almost 91% employers in international companies reported that English is highly relevant to their performance. 89% of the employees said that they would prefer employing employees who are in a better position in communicating English up to certain levels [5]. Despite the controversy and the criticism that has come as a result of

English dominance over other languages, it is much clear that English is the most common and widely shared language in international relations and it is not likely to be replaced by any other language soon [6, 7, 8].

According to [9], the world's population engaged in English i.e. user groups such as L1 (English as a First Language), ESL (English as a Second Language) and/or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) can be grouped into three centric circles i.e. (1) Inner (2) Outer and (3) Expanding. Though this model isn't fit or perfect to fit all the countries around the globe, the model can give a deeper insight into the current distribution of English users in the world.

From the model, the inner circle represents users who use English as their primary medium of communication such as USA, UK, New Zealand and Canada. In these four countries, the main reason why English has spread is because of the migration of English speakers. In these regions, the speakers amounting to 320-380 million are native English speakers since they learned English as a sole language in their childhood [10]. On the other hand, the outer circle in the model represents users who speak English as their second Language. In this case, English has spread because of colonisation of English speaking Nations and thus English gaining official status in most government activities. Users in this category amount to 300-500

million from Singapore, India, Philippines, and over 50 countries.

Lastly, the expanding circle in the model represents users where English is taught as a foreign language. Regions in this category are mainly from Japan, China, Korea, and Greece. Users in this model amount up to 500m-1 billion. The reasons why these regions don't use English as their official language is because they do not have historical colonisation by English speaking nations and thus do not give English an official status. These countries use English in international relations and communication. Moreover, users are not proficient and fluent in English due to lack of familiarity with English [2]. Nevertheless, this category is important since it accounts for the largest portion of English users will become increasingly significant since the increasing population in this group engages in every part of world communication using English [8, 11, 12]. To support this statement, [11] developed a model known as 'engco forecasting model' which approximated the numbers of L1, ESF and EFL speakers from the year 1950 to 2050.

In his model, the EFL speaker group appears to be rising and forming a majority group whereas L1 speakers seem to be eliminated from the majority speakers. Moreover, the model showed that more interactions between the EFL speakers are expected to rise in this group. This implies that though the influence of English may shoot up, the current supremacy of native speakers cannot be sustained -and, indeed, may, in fact, reduce in the future as far as international communication is concerned. Thus, the previous perception that native speakers English should be a norm of communication and teaching in the world will be challenged [7, 10, 13, 14]. Furthermore, new perspectives on language teaching on effective communication with different people from different English origins have become more dominant [15, 16].

In his model [11] added that English language teaching from L1 speakers market shares are likely to decrease while the contribution of ESL and EFL will have a significant increase as a more extensive range of global English arises. This implies that communication out of the inner circle is widely concentrated since the majority English users are from these groups, more particularly in the global business setting. As a result, this article concentrates on the expanding and outer circles and language use in their multinational business context, which is likely to become the primary determinant of English communication in the future.

Furthermore, there is an objective emphasis in the literature on the practical use of English as a lingua franca, which is considered as having an ownership that is shared [18, 66]

This tendency has brought about much progress for a new model for international communication which is focused on 'mutual intelligibility' and 'functionality', outside the dispute over a 'world standard' English, or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and research into ELF is dynamically being conducted [12, 14, 17]. In the discussion below there are some features of ELF communication which pay attention to international business settings, or Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), will be reviewed, and its consequences regarding language teaching will be debated.

2. The English Language as the Language for Business

English language has dominated and has been extensively adopted as a real-world communicative tool globally between the primary speakers and for those who use English as a foreign language [18]. When limiting its focus specifically to business interaction in a lingua franca situation, the expression 'Business English as a Lingua Franca' (BELF) can also be used as an analogous concept [19].

Regardless of the terminologies used, they are perceived as a language which enables effective and elaborate communication between non-native speakers in the multi-national system. Nevertheless, Business English as a Lingua Franca is not only focused on non-native speakers but can also be used as a communication tool between native and non-native speakers. However, this can only be used in small amounts of BELF interactions since native speakers only contribute to 25% of World's English Users [6].

According to [20], English as a Lingua Franca has a core focus on Kachru's expanding circle, but it's quite clear that communication via ELF is rare to happen across all the three circles. Business English as a Lingua Franca includes communication between all the three Kachru's circles, which mostly happens between non-native speakers. BELF mostly focuses on achieving fruitful and effective communication so as to reach communicative goals based on mutual intelligibility in a multicultural situation. BELF does not focus whether it conforms to English speaker's standards or not, which has been a concerning issue and has been regarded as a standard in past language instruction.

Lingua Franca originated from a variety of languages which was used on the South-Eastern coast of Mediterranean between the 15th and the 19th century [21]. It was used as a language between traders who never shared the native language. Haberland (2011) tries to discuss lingua franca into a more detail and differentiates between micro and macro-sociolinguistic approaches. Lingua franca emerges into two approaches, the first approach, lingua franca is seen in certain interactions where it is used as a communication tool among speakers with different native languages. The second approach emerges as a property of a particular language in a historical setting e.g. as a language of religion in Europe.

Despite the contradicting definitions of lingua franca over the past decade, [23] have come up with a definition which many scholars seem to allude to. They define lingua franca as a communication tool which is used by speakers of a different native language, which means that native speakers are included. Moreover, English as a Lingua Franca is considered as different from English as a native language and therefore has to be learned by native English speakers. Few percentage of English scholars agree with [18] definition which puts emphasis on the role of English as a contact language between people none of whom have English as their mother tongue and

who choose to use English as a common "foreign" language.

EFL has been significantly adopted in academia. Case studies, scholarly review articles, and books have focused on the application and the nature of ELF. Surprisingly, in 2012, the very first academic journal completely focusing on ELF was published [24]. Moreover, there is a growing number of researchers interested in the issue [25, 26, 27, 28, 29], among others.

According to an ELF research conducted by [12], the author outlines the characteristics of English as a Lingua Franca and English as a Native Language. She goes ahead and argues that despite English being adopted widely and its consequences being long focused, less attention has been paid to the nature of the language being used. Moreover, she goes on and advocates for the reformation of the English language. Later on, [23] focused on the developments in research into ELF in general and discussed linguistic research specifically on the levels of lexico-grammar, phonology and pragmatics.

In their research, they presented the characteristics of ELF grammar as: dropping articles and using them where they are not required, eliminating the third person present tense "-s", confusing relative pronouns such as "who" and "which" and inserting unnecessary prepositions. Seidlhofer (2004) argued that such errors occur due to the regularisation of the linguistic system. Nevertheless, though the identification of such linguistic features increases the knowledge about ELF discourse, a question has emerged with more empirical information becoming available: what functions do such linguistic structures assume in communication? In other words, what encourages the use of certain linguistic forms in ELF [23]. Earlier researchers on ELF focused their attention on ELF regular discourse, but it now appears to focus on the dynamic nature of ELF.

2.1. Business English Features

Brutt-Griffler (2002), [31] and [32] argued that there are various terminologies that try to explain the supremacy of English in international communication such as English as an International Language, World English and International English. These vocabularies seem to have a shared ground regarding the role of English as international communication. However, it is entirely different since BELF has three major distinctive features: (1) neutrality (2) practicability and (3) cultural diversity.

First, Business English as a Lingua Franca is an impartial and shared communication system since it is shared between non-native speakers and acts as a neutral tool for all persons ([19]. Moreover, since it's a common communicative tool in the world business communication [33], it can be a shared language to all participants. Therefore, this means that BELF does not draw its attention on nativeness but communication strategies. This is because native English speakers are not used as a measurement tool for measuring the English competency and fluency of non-native speakers [12, 34].

BELF language competence can be assessed based on the accuracy and the correctness of the content and the knowledge of business terminologies rather than the linguistic correctness

and English knowledge [35]. This means that BELF users fully acquire the knowledge shared by the international business community which results in individual satisfaction [16]. Hence, users are likely to be equipped with the competence of language in professional meetings, for example.

Secondly, [36] stated that BELF is of a high practical type which focuses on the efficient, relevant and economic use of language considering English a sole communicative tool in the world of business. Since the core objective of BELF is to enable operative and congruent communication between non-native speakers for successful communication, it does not focus on errors and nativeness but rather understanding [12, 18, 37, 38].

The last characteristic of BELF is that it has cultural diversity and has no predisposition towards one culture since participants are non-native speakers from different backgrounds and cultures [35, 39]. Although BELF may be somehow influenced by various and different cultural identities, it does not block fluent stream of communication. It rather contributes to the achievement of communicative objectives since participants acknowledge their differences and adopt them.

The discussed characteristics of BELF changes the traditional perceptions of lingua franca users as disadvantaged English users. Today, it suggests that users are advantaged since they are in a position to achieve their communication goals fruitfully, with an ideal understanding if certain generics and business knowledge [12, 18].

2.2. Language and Linguistic Characteristics of Business English

The characteristics of Business English as a Lingua Franca communication discussed above have certain features which affect the form, language use, and have some distinctive language characteristics. Seidlhofer (2005) conducted research using an ELF corpus based on the Vienna-Oxford International corpus of English. In her investigation, she focused on a broad range of linguistic phenomenon attributed to BELF putting more focus on what it looks and sounds and how people use it to communicate. This means that BELF mainly focuses on lexico-grammar, phonology and pragmatics as discussed below.

According to [41], in BELF communication, there are various lexical and grammatical aspects which mostly focus on effective communication rather than correctness. Thus, BELF communication puts emphasis on the function rather than the form thus delivering the speaker's intention in correct and precise manner. Various investigations [12, 42, 43, 44] have researched on ELF-oriented lexico-grammar characteristics and have come up with the functions and usages within an ELF context. Some of the lexico-grammar features are illustrated below:

Dropping the use of definite and indefinite articles such as, *he is a do*ctor;

Omission of the third person singular present tense such as, *she like*;

Plural of uncountable nouns such as, *informations*;
Interchangeable use of who and which;
Extended application of semantically flexible verbs;
The regular use of invariable tag questions such as, *isn't it*

Moreover, the active use of various strategies such as paraphrasing and repetition can be applied so as to improve mutual intelligibility [45]. Both in non-native and native speakers or competent and less competent, the collaborative nature of BELF communication is well established through international talk with an effort of reducing lexical and grammatical elements which are a result of native speakers, so as to establish smooth communication [46]. In BELF communication, corrective use of lexico-grammar is not unavoidably correlated, and thus language competency in BELF interaction needs to be re-formulated.

Concerning the second linguistic aspect in BELF communication, phonology, [47] performed an investigation to ascertain whether the globalisation of English has created greater problems considering nine LI English speakers with different backgrounds comprising inner, outer and expanding circles. In his research, he found out that non-native speakers had different phonological aspects affected by their first language but did not have a significant communicative barrier between interlocutors in an ELF setting. However, it was found out that British and American native speakers were the least comprehensible among the interlocutors and, moreover, the native speakers were rather poor listeners.

Jenkins (2000) carried out research on the phonological aspect in a deeper way. In her research, she emphasised mutual intelligibility between ELF users by researching on communicative interruption due to pronunciation difficulties among non-native users. In her discussion, she suggested some important phonological factors for enhancing mutual intelligibility in international communication, such as vowel length, consonant cluster simplification and nuclear stress. Some of the outlined features can be regarded as errors from a native speaker perspective. However, she says that they can be seen as legitimate aspects of international communication between ELF members.

Lastly, pragmatic functions are visible in BELF communication through verbal and non-verbal features which are seen in native speakers´ language [49]. The lexical, grammatical and phonological features discussed above are somehow related to pragmatic functions sowing cooperation, negotiation, and adoption just beyond efficiency and intelligibility [18, 50, 51]. This tells us that despite the linguistic fulfilment can be less consistent with native speakers, Business English as a Lingua Franca has various linguistic aspects of interpersonal communication which are not intended for transactional objectives.

3. Teaching Business English

Business English is one of the major features of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching. It is usually related to how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organisations so as to get their work done [52]. In order to optimise business English in classes, various factors have to be determined before organising the class such as who the learners are, the mode of communication and what work should be done. Furthermore, since the language plays an important role for effective communication, a much deeper understanding is needed regarding how the language structures and language items are interrelated in the given setting to deliver the interlocutors' purpose and accomplish their objectives the most efficiently and appropriately way [16, 53].

Since business English is not limited to native speakers only but has extended between native and non-native speakers and between non-native speakers, teaching techniques should be therefore differentiated according to learners' first language, and according to their social and linguistic. This implies that comprehensive consideration based on business context, target learners, relationship with interlocutors and purpose of interactions should be considered during the design of English Business classes [33, 54, 55, 56].

Sharifian (2008) focused on the use of English in an international context where he emphasised that it is not a language for any specific variety but is an international language, and thus a means of multicultural communication. Statements made by [47] describe English as an international language. However, parallels can be drawn to refer English as Lingua Franca. In addition, since the majority of users are non-native speakers interacting with non-native speakers, the need for internalisation of native speakers' cultural norms is widely unnecessary.

It is much correct to say that the focus concerning the use of English in international business is facilitating the effective communication of a business idea within different cultures. Since language is rooted in the culture(s) in which it is used, the importance of cultural awareness in international business has become a significant matter in Business English courses, due to the need of 'non-native English language' business people to communicate with other (both native and non-native) speakers of English for Business Purposes.

However, it is still necessary to equip learners with linguistic knowledge as teachers need to provide students with intercultural knowledge particularly the knowledge of cross-cultural communication. This means that Business English educators are required to prepare students to communicate effectively in multicultural settings. Since business English is mostly taught at a tertiary level where a learner must have knowledge in general English vocabulary and grammar, more emphasis should be put on business-related terminology.

Over the last years, the importance of ESP has been emphasised more particularly where English is taught as a foreign or a second language [55]. Earlier ESP concentrated on teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to those who wished to specialise in a particular academic domain at a higher level of education, or who were already engaged in the target field of study [58]. However, due to the spread of business English and the world involvement in business,

English for business purposes has come to dominate in most ESP areas.

Jordan (1989) categorised English for Business Purposes into two: English for General Business purposes (EGBP) and English for Specific Business purposes (ESBP). However, there are various sub-divisions that exist according to different spotlights such as the time the course takes place (i.e. pre-experience, simultaneous/in-service and post-experience) [60] and/or different professional areas dealt with (e.g. English for Medical Purposes, English for Vocational Purposes) [55]. EGBP is mainly targeted with new learners on their early periods of their career and deals with a broad range of people focusing on various business settings such as meeting people, and travelling by utilizing genre-oriented lexis and grammar in addition to all four main language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) [55].

In the case of ESPB, it pays attention to experienced learners. Here, learners are encouraged to use their accumulated business knowledge and skills to the learning language situation. More focus is put on enhancing a few major job appropriate skills and business language interactions.

Also, these learners can be classified into three categories which are: pre-experiential, job experiential and general business experiential. Pre-experiential learners are those wishing to enter the business world and have no experience in the business world [56]. Here, learners require teachers help to assist them to understand the nature of the business world and business language. The second category, job experiential learners, has an in-depth knowledge of the business world and the specific needs in studying the business language [33, 56]. The general experiential learners are between pre-experiential and job experiential learners. Individuals in this category may study business English so as to find a new job and a new work experience [56].

From the discussion above, one can deduce that the vital role of business English practitioners is to teach language for effective communication in a business-related environment. Thus, the key role of English Business teachers is to enhance communicative skills and language competence among their learners. This enables them to effectively communicate in business-related situations so as to avoid mistakes.

Still regarding English as a Lingua Franca, and although it has to be stated that more research is necessary, literature findings, as some mentioned previously, are significant and should have a consequence on teaching English [67]. Moreover, data concerning English as a lingua franca are important as they echo the usage of language elements and the pragmatics perspective of communication.

4. Conclusion

With regards to Business English as a lingua franca, practitioners and trainers should approach intercultural business communication from a new perspective [35]. In other words, regarding the incorporation of the topics on culture into Business English language courses any such course should equip the students with, at least, an understanding of how communication differs across cultures despite being carried out in the same language. Even further, it would be important to learn about similar cross-cultural theories and their relevance to everyday business practices in a world that is globalized. Combining vocabulary, reading, speaking, and writing skills, there is some relevance in learning how language plays an important role in cross-cultural communication enhancing cross-cultural understanding and allowing the use of vocabulary, tone, style, and spoken / written communication skills within a cross-cultural business situation.

The introduction of BELF has shown some relevance for scholars in international communication. Nevertheless, as ELF/BELF research assumes a radical epistemological perspective, demanding that the object of study, in reality, is not similar from the notion of "English", it is only expected that there is also opposition to this concept among scholars.

It can also be argued, in another perspective, that ELF/BELF research could be extended and further promote research in business disciplines such as international business, finance, accounting, business law and management, in which "language-sensitive" research has produced knowledge about language questions in (multinational) companies [65]. For instance, several features of business language have been dealt with but without problematizing or questioning the notion itself. As a matter of fact, the question of expertise and power in the context of business language vs. Business English as a Lingua Franca use would take advantage from further research.

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