

# Business English – An Overview of Studies

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**Abstract:** *The world has become a huge marketplace wherein trade between various cultures and nations is taking place, thus leading to an overwhelming need for one common language used worldwide among speakers of various native languages. Historically, this role has been occupied by different languages, even though the use of none of them can be compared to the current omnipresence of English. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to discuss the notion of English as a global language, global lingua franca with a major focus on the development of Business English as lingua franca (BELF), which has been embraced as a common language in multilingual and multicultural companies. Furthermore, this paper examines general characteristics of BELF and compares it to other similar concepts such as Business English (BE) and English as Lingua Franca (ELF). With the growing importance and presence of BELF worldwide, the teaching aspect has arisen as an important issue, so this paper touches upon it as well.*

**Keywords:** Business English (BE), Business English as lingua franca (BELF), English for Specific Business Purposes (ESP).

## **Article History**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, one of the main objectives of the modern civilization has been to strive towards globalization and make the world interconnected in all aspects of life, starting from communication, education, sport, and medicine to the development of worldwide business cooperation. Although complete globalization has not been achieved yet, it has been making considerable strides in the last fifty years. Sing (2017) suggests that globalization, under the influence of various societal factors, has seen a steady development in the period after World War II, which is visible in modern day and age. Over the course of time, with the development of means of communication, correspondence between people has increased exponentially in all aspects of human interaction, including business relations. With the rise of multiculturalism in multiple companies, with employees originating from different countries, a need for one common language has arisen. Even though other natural languages such as French, German, Spanish, as well as artificial languages like Volapuk and Esperanto have strived to occupy this role, the extent of their use cannot be compared to the current omnipresence of English (Dewey, 2007; Vandermeeren, 1999). For instance, nearly 85% of organizations nowadays use English as the first choice in business communication, especially in Asia and Pacific wherein the business dealings conducted in English rose as high as 90% (McKay, 2002). With the development of online communication, English has been dominant in the domain of e-commerce, with 1/3 of English users, which amounts to 536 million out of 1.7 billion users (Internet World Statistics, 2010).

However, the current widespread use is a result of the ever-growing popularity of English evident in the three main “waves of globalization” (Poppi & Cheng, 2014, p. 1), the first taking place during the period from 1492 to 1800, the second from 1800 to 2000, and the third one presenting the current ongoing process. However, English gained a new dimension during the Industrial Revolution when it found its use in the exchange of goods between different cultures and nations facilitating communication, implying that “in this context, international trade as an agency of this dynamic serves as an ‘umbilical cord of culture diffusion’ (Brinkman & Brinkman, 2002, p. 732).

As a result of a superior status of English in business transactions in general around the globe over the course of the last two decades, the English language has been embraced as Business English as lingua franca, or commonly known as BELF. The following sections discuss the development of English as lingua franca (ELF) and BELF in more detail.

## 2. ELF vs BELF

Firth (1966, p. 240) defines ELF as a “contact language” between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (notional) culture, and for whom English is the chosen *foreign* language of communication. A lingua franca serves as a connecting medium which enables communication between persons whose languages present an obstacle in communication. According to Jenkins (2009), ELF is simply defined as a contact language between cultures who have different native languages. In a similar fashion, Kirkpatrick (2007, p. 155) defines ELF as “a medium of communication, used by people who do not speak the same first language.” It can be concluded that ELF is still being developed and researched in many other areas such as medicine, tourism, and education. The need for English as lingua franca is apparent because it can be used in a wide range of social settings such as trading, exchanging information between scientists, in resolving administrative issues, or establishing diplomatic relations. Much research has been conducted in the field of EFL, leading to the conception of numerous interrelated terms. A case in point is the variety of terms used to denote the object of inquiry, including Business English (BE), English for Business Purposes (EBP), International Business English (IBE), Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), Business Discourse (BD) or Business Communication (BC) (Sing, 2017). However, instead of creating additional fields which would serve in the advancement of the EFL, the terms are simply coexisting in the “theory jungle” (Du-Babcock, 2014, p. 72). Among them, BELF stands out, directly evolving from Business English (BE) and expanding upon it in the sense of wider teaching and research applications. Mark Ellis and Christine Johnson (1994, p. 7-13) assigned the following five characteristics to BE:

- 1) Much of the language needed by business people (apart from social language) will be transactional.
- 2) Social contacts are often highly ritualized.
- 3) Clear information should be conveyed within a short time.
- 4) The language used in business will be neither as rich in vocabulary and expression nor as culture-bound, as that used by native speakers, but will be based on a core of the most useful and basic structures and vocabulary.
- 5) Business English courses differ greatly in some aspects like needs analysis, assessment of level, syllabus, course objectives, etc.

Lin (2004) has looked upon international Business English from four distinctive aspects, the first referring to business English from the ESP perspective, i.e. an attitude or viewpoint in dealing with language in international business communications, rather than an innovative or creative work. Next, the scholar discusses Business English from the international language perspective which draws distinction in accordance with native English or Standard English. Furthermore, the author mentions that as a major well-developed branch of ESP, its teaching falls into EGBP (English for General

Business Purposes) and ESBP (English for Specific Business Purposes). Finally, Lin (2004) emphasizes that learners' needs should always be taken into account and the respect for individual differences should be showed.

In order for English to uphold the development in the context of business, it is of great significance to explore the concept of communicative settings in both variations, namely, Business English and BELF. The time and place in which communication takes place plays a crucial role which affects its participants. BE and BELF entail different communicative settings, whereas BE, according to Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009, p. 180), appears to be used within international business enterprises as well as in correspondence between them and external stakeholders, BELF seems to be common in the following four communicative settings:

each involving a speaker A with a first language A and speaker B with a first language B:  
1) Both speakers use language A; 2) Both speakers use language B; 3) Person A uses his or her first language, Person B uses his or her first language; 4) Person A and Person B opt for a third language C, a lingua franca. The four situations require different communicative strategies and highly proficient users. While scenarios 1) and 2) rely on accommodation, 3) and 4) presuppose users proficient in several languages.

Thus, BELF is not only used for communication between non-native speakers, but native and non-native as well, thus enabling effective and purposeful correspondence between participants in a multilingual and multicultural environment. The principal aim of BELF is to foster useful and competent communication between non-native speakers ultimately leading to the achievement of set goals. In comparison to English as an International Language, World English, and International English, BELF possesses three distinctive features, namely neutrality, practicability, and cultural diversity. As a neutral tool used among non-native speakers, it becomes "an impartial and shared communication system" (Louhiala-Salminen, 2005, p. 403-404), in which developing strategies of effective communication overshadow the importance of reaching the native-like level of accuracy. This focus on understanding messages and successful communication, and therefore neglecting flaws and inaccuracies which arise during communication, further illustrates the second BELF characteristic, i.e. practicability. As Seidlhofer states (as cited in Martins, 2017, p. 63) "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." Finally, although BELF is being affected by numerous cultures, it is not stifled by them, but tends to acknowledge, adopt, and assimilate all the present cultures to achieve its objective. Hall and Hall (1990), differentiate between high-context and low-context cultures, adding that in high-context cultures, which include Arab countries and Japan, communication is implied whereas writing is mainly indirect. Conversely, they maintain that explicit communication and direct writing is present in low-culture context cultures,

including Anglo-Saxon countries, German-speaking countries, and Scandinavian countries. In relation to the principle of linguistic relativity, the structure of a particular language can affect the way humans think and behave. This view is also shared by Richard D. Lewis (2006), who focuses on cultures and their communication patterns primarily in business contexts. In his book on conducting business across cultures, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, Lewis (2006, p. 63) writes: "Whatever the culture, there's a tongue in our head". Here, Lewis affirms that different people from different cultures express their language and speech in a manner applicable to their language. It means that communication varies across the world and non-native speakers rely on using patterns of their own native language rather than English. Despite cultural preferences, one has to be able to effectively communicate his or her ideas to other business partners for a job to be successful as Rogerson-Revell (2010, p. 443) state that "while people may well need to 'speak the same language' in [...] multilingual contexts, they may not necessarily 'speak the same way', for instance, because of underlying differences in sociocultural conventions or differences in linguistic competence." Lewis (2006) has conducted an in-depth research in the field of various cultures and their communications styles concluding it with three cultural types, that is - the linear-active cultures (e.g. Germany, the USA, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands), the multi-active cultures (e.g. Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Chile) and the reactive cultures (e.g. Japan, China, Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia). Following the research, Lewis (2006) concluded that linear-active cultures, among other features are considered polite but direct in conversation and rarely communicate using body language, whereas multi-active cultures are considered emotional and actively engaged in conversation. Finally, the reactive cultures spend most of their time listening and are polite and indirect in conversation.

Summing up, to define BELF in the most straightforward manner, we can say that BELF is ELF used in the context of business, whereas a number of authors have offered a more in depth representation of BELF stating that BELF refers to English used as a neutral and shared communication code. BELF is "neutral in the sense that no speaker can argue about it, as its mother tongue; it is shared language, as it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right, not non-native speakers or learners" (Charles, Kanraanranta, & Louhiala-Salminen, 2005, p. 403-404). Apart from its use in conducting business, BELF also entails asking questions, explanations, and developed listening skills in order to understand different types of English and unique styles of communication.

### 3. TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC BUSINESS PURPOSES

As demand for Business English continues to rise, so the requirements to support it rise which have eventually led to the inception of its promotion in classrooms. There exist two main traditions involved in the process of teaching Business English. Sing (2017) describes the first tradition as the one originated in the inner-circle setting of American business schools, where it was viewed as an integral part of management and organizational behavior studies, themselves an outgrowth of classical management theory and business administration programs. It is primarily designed to fulfill a managerial function concentrating on general business communication introduced to American business students. According to Du-Babcock (2006, p. 254), "the focus was on teaching Americans how to exchange business messages within the context of an American communication environment in which the communicators shared a common background context (economic, linguistic, social, political, legal, physical, and technological)". In keeping with Sing's (2017, p. 12) classification, the second tradition of teaching Business English is integral to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement, which is very much an outer-circle phenomenon thriving in postcolonial settings. Robinson (1980, p. 6) provides more information on the focus of ESP stating that ESP emphasizes the learner's specific, chiefly utilitarian purpose of learning English, contrasting it with the "general, education-for-life, culture and literature orientated language course, in which language itself is the subject matter and the purpose of the course." However, in terms of teaching Business English, McKay (2002, p. 12) proposes several points to be considered:

- (a) learners of an international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language,
- (b) the ownership of an international language becomes 'de-nationalized', and
- (c) the educational goal of learning it is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and culture to others.

It can be safely assumed that certain parallels can be drawn along with BELF due to the fact that a great majority of communication is carried out among non-native speakers of English. Thus, while teaching this language, the focus should be on enabling the users to conduct business successfully, use the language as their own tool for expressing ideas and opinions, i.e. make them feel like users of their language, not slavishly following the norms dictated by native speakers of English.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to provide an overview of Business English along with its origins, main features, and teaching prospects. Firstly, we have introduced the origins of BELF and the concept of lingua franca and its gradual development in the past decades, particularly in the domain of business sector. Secondly, we have identified the main features of BE and BELF taking their differences into account. Additionally, the concept of English as lingua franca has been discussed including the effect of a great variety of research that has convoluted rather than fertilized the field of inquiry. Thirdly, the English language as the language for business has been researched, shedding some light on how globalization affects its expansion. Finally, we have briefly analyzed how the teaching of Business English progressed discussing the two main traditions involved in it.

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