

“What language does global business speak?” – The concept and development of BELF

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of the concept of BELF, which originally stood for “Business English as Lingua Franca”, but later we have used the abbreviation to refer to “English as Business Lingua Franca”. With this change we want to emphasize the domain of use rather than the type of English. The concept of BELF originates from two large research projects conducted at the Aalto University School of Business from 2000 to 2009. The projects were inspired by research into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and, from that perspective, they set on exploring the language and communication practices of internationally operating business professionals. The findings of the projects showed how the domain of business, and particularly its goal-oriented nature, was significant for BELF discourse and for the perceptions of BELF communication of the practitioners themselves. Overall, it can be argued that for BELF speakers, grammatical correctness is not nearly as important as the genre knowledge of their own specific field of expertise, involving a shared understanding of what, why, how and when to communicate. Thus, we argue that professional competence in today’s global business environment involves communication knowhow as an integral element of business knowhow. Further, in an international context, competence in BELF is a necessity.

Keywords: international business communication, ELF (English as Lingua Franca), BELF (English as Business Lingua Franca), global communicative competence, review article.

Resumen

¿Qué lenguaje habla el comercio global? Concepto y evolución del BELF

El artículo presta atención al desarrollo del concepto de BELF, que originalmente implicaba Business English as Lingua Franca (“inglés comercial

como lengua franca”) pero que más tarde se ha definido como English as Business Lingua Franca (“inglés como lengua franca de los negocios”). Con este cambio pretendemos enfatizar el dominio de uso en lugar del tipo de inglés. El concepto de BELF se origina en dos grandes proyectos de investigación desarrollados en la Aalto University School of Business entre los años 2000 y 2009 e inspirados en investigación sobre el inglés como lengua franca (ELF). Desde esa perspectiva exploraron el lenguaje y las prácticas comunicativas de profesionales de los negocios que operan internacionalmente. Los resultados de los proyectos mostraron cómo el dominio de los negocios, y en particular su tendencia al logro de objetivos, eran significativos para entender el discurso BELF y para la percepción que los mismos participantes tenían de la comunicación BELF. Se puede indicar que para los hablantes de BELF, la corrección gramatical no es tan importante como el conocimiento de los géneros propios de su ámbito de experiencia, lo que implica una comprensión común acerca de qué, por qué, cómo y cuándo comunicar. Nuestra postura es que la competencia profesional en los entornos empresariales globales actuales implica que el conocimiento comunicativo constituye un elemento integral del conocimiento comercial. En contextos internacionales, la competencia en BELF es una necesidad.

Palabras clave: comunicación comercial internacional, ELF (inglés como lengua franca), BELF (inglés como lengua franca de los negocios), competencia comunicativa global, artículo de revisión.

Introduction

In the 1980s, when we started teaching English for business students, there was no need to think twice of the conceptualization of the English language. Having MSc degrees in business studies, we were both acutely aware of the particular environment where our teaching and our students’ proficiency requirements were situated, and made every effort to contextualize our teaching appropriately. It was important to stay up-to-date with the developments of the business world and also closely follow the technological advancements that first gradually and later more dramatically, changed the entire scene (see, for instance, Friedman, 2006). Nevertheless, the object of teaching, English, was the language we had learnt at school as a foreign language (EFL) ourselves, with its idioms, phrasal verbs, prepositions and articles. The only occasional debates dealt with the distinction between British and American English, both varieties had supporters and opponents in our small, North European country.

Along with advancing globalization, business structures started to change rapidly in the 1990s. Cross-border mergers and acquisitions took place and the increasing significance of the Internet in all social and societal activities meant that the patterns of communication also changed (see, for instance, Louhiala-Salminen, 1997; Nikali, 1998; Crystal, 2001). When we approached the turn of the millennium, the developments in our environment had led to a situation where practically all societal sectors, spearheaded by the business sector, could be characterized as playgrounds of global players to some extent. No longer did only specific units of organizations deal with partners across borders (as, for example, in imports or exports of goods and services), but entire organizations had to be prepared to engage in international interactions, for a variety of purposes. For example, a Finnish company merging with a German company might place some of their operations in Portugal and some in India, and the unit responsible for corporate accounting would need to keep in touch with all these locations. International collaboration of professional associations, labor market unions or national lottery organizations could serve as another example. Earlier, the general activities of these organizations were taken care of locally, using the local language in communication. Only specific operations were “international” and for these, specific professional qualifications were needed, including proficiency in the languages in question, which in most cases meant English and/or the language of the particular “international” party.

In addition to the more complex environment for international communication, where it was not any more possible to communicate using a number of format-bound export/import related generic messages, another significant trend affected the teaching of English for business students. As various important issues became internationally shared within multinational, multicultural and multilingual organizations and they had to be managed, most of these organizations chose to use English for their organization-wide communication. Some businesses explicitly opted for English as their corporate language and others followed suit in a more implicit manner, making *ad hoc*, pragmatic decisions to resort to English that was the language mastered by the majority of employees (see, for instance, Vollstedt, 2002; Maclean, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). However, what these internationally operating organizations actually used in their daily operations and activities was not the English language of native speakers but English as Lingua Franca (ELF) shared among the non-native speakers of the language.

The trends discussed above have distinctly affected the teaching of “English” in our own institution. Within the past twelve years, the Aalto University School of Business (up until 2010, the Helsinki School of Economics) has implemented a major conceptual and practical change process of the curriculum for language and communication studies (for a more detailed description, see Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2007). The subject that is taught to all business students for their professional, international communication – previously called English, or English for Business Purposes (EBP) – has become English Business Communication (EBC), where the focus is on the words “business communication”, and teaching takes place in English, assuming the *lingua franca* perspective. In addition to offering EBC studies to all the School’s business students, our Department specializes in (international) corporate communication and offers both a Master’s Program and a Doctoral Program. In these degree programs the particular emphasis is on the communication function, and communicative nature overall, of all organizations. The two programs are run in English but the language is regarded as only one – albeit important – aspect constituting organizations through communication.

In this paper, we provide a review of English in the present globalized environment with a special focus on its role in the business context. First, we review research into ELF, which has been relevant for our own approach. Then, we describe two major research projects housed in the Department of Communication at the Aalto University School of Business that contributed to our conceptualization of English as the Business *Lingua Franca* (BELF) as used in the international business context. Finally, we provide conclusions and briefly discuss implications for pedagogy.

English as *Lingua Franca* (ELF)

According to Knapp and Meierkord (2002), the concept “*lingua franca*” originates from a language variety that was used on the South-Eastern coast of the Mediterranean between the 15th and the 19th centuries, enabling trade between people who did not share the native language. Haberland (2011) discusses *lingua francas* over time in great detail and differentiates, for example, between micro- and macro-sociolinguistic approaches. In the first approach, *lingua franca* emerges in specific interactions, in which a particular

language is used among speakers with different native languages, whereas the second approach refers to a property or quality of a particular language in a historically specific language contact situation, for example, the use of Latin as the language of religion and learning in Europe. Although the definitions of the concept have varied a great deal over the past ten years of active ELF research, Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011) point out that today most researchers seem to agree that English as a lingua franca is used in communication by speakers of different native languages, which suggests that also native speakers of English are included. In other words, ELF is considered distinctly different from English as a native language (ENL) and must thus be learned by native English speakers as well. Only a minority of researchers comply with Firth's (1996) definition, which emphasizes 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 shared "foreign" language.

Along with globalization, ELF has drawn a lot of attention in academia, in particular since the turn of the millennium. At an increasing pace, research on the use and nature of ELF has appeared in scholarly journals and books within linguistics and communication, and in 2012 the very first issue of a new academic journal focusing merely on ELF came out (see Seidlhofer, Jenkins & Mauranen, 2012). In addition to the pioneering ELF researchers (such as Jenkins, 2000; Mauranen, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004), there is a growing number of others enticed by the topic (Dewey, 2007; Cogo, 2009; Ljosland, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Björkman, 2013; among others).

In her extensive review of ELF research up until the early 2000s, Seidlhofer (2004) presents a discussion of the role and characteristics of ELF, alongside ENL, English as a native language. Interestingly, she calls for a reconceptualization of the English language and claims that although the global spread of English and its consequences have long been a focus of critical discussion, less attention has been paid to the nature and forms of the language used. Seven years later, Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011; see also Mauranen & Ranta, 2009) provide a review of the developments in research into ELF in general and discuss linguistic research on the levels of lexicogrammar, phonology and pragmatics in particular. For example, they present such typical features of ELF "grammar" as dropping the third person present tense "-s", confusing relative pronouns "who" and "which", omitting articles and inserting them where they do not belong, and inserting redundant prepositions (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). As Seidlhofer (2004)

earlier suggested, it now seems that such features occur because of the regularization of the system. However, although the identification of such linguistic features increases our knowledge about ELF discourse, a question has emerged with more empirical data becoming available: what functions do such linguistic features assume in communication? In other words, what motivates the use of certain linguistic forms in ELF discourse (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). Thus, while earlier ELF research was concerned with what was regular in ELF discourse, now it seems that the focus has turned to the inherently dynamic nature of ELF and the rationale for using particular forms in a particular context.

The focus on the context is no new invention in ELF research since, not surprisingly, the use of ELF in academic discourse has been on the research agenda of academics from the very beginning. For example, at the footsteps of Seidlhofer (2001), who had announced the compilation of VOICE (the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English), our Finnish colleague, Anna Mauranen (e.g. 2003) collected an academic ELF corpus known as ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings). Since the early 2000s, a number of researchers have followed suit (Ammon & McConnell, 2002; Björkman, 2011 & 2013). Also, the context of the ELF classroom and that of education policy have attracted attention among scholars such as Smit (2009), Kirkpatrick (2012), Honna (2012), and Dewey (2012).

Finally, we would like to draw attention to one of Seidlhofer's (2001) arguments that has greatly inspired our own work investigating language use in global business. This is her claim of a "conceptual gap" (Seidlhofer, 2001) in the place where ELF should be firmly established in people's minds. According to her, the gap results from the way language seems to be so closely tied with its native speakers that it is very difficult to open up conceptual space for such a new concept as ELF. As we pointed out in the introduction to this paper, although we had already moved away from teaching English for business purposes towards English Business Communication, the notion of ELF as any speaker's "right" that supports a power balance among speakers, was a turning point in our thinking: no more benchmarking to native speakers but rather to an effective business communicator no matter what his/her native tongue.

Alongside the lingua franca perspective, within the past two decades there have been other approaches to the internationalization of language use and the role of English in this development. For example, the notion of "World

English(es)” has been investigated extensively (Kachru & Nelson, 1996), and such concepts as “Globish” and “basic global English” (Grzega, 2006) have been introduced as new pedagogical perspectives. Within business communication, in fact already before Seidlhofer’s (2001) argument of the conceptual gap, ELF had been discussed in terms of “International English for Business Purposes” (IEBP) and “International Business English” (IBE) (Johnson & Bartlett, 1999) albeit rather superficially, without explicit definitions of the concepts or rigorous empirical research. At the same time, emerging from our own classroom experience and our own research in applied linguistics (see Louhiala-Salminen 1996, 1997, 1999 & 2002; Nikko & Kankaanranta, 2000; Kankaanranta 2000, 2001 & 2005) we were confronted with questions of the nature, use and role of the English language in our English Business Communication courses. With the variety of approaches, philosophies and emphases already available in the early 2000s, and especially intrigued by the lingua franca research proliferating at the time, we decided to engage in empirical studies on language use in internationally operating organizations.

English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF)

Over the past ten years, we have conducted two major research projects focusing on language use and practices in internationally operating organizations; both projects were funded by the Academy of Finland. The first project (in 2000-2002) investigated in-house communication in Finnish-Swedish mergers and was vital for the construction of the BELF concept. The second project (in 2006-2009) examined communication knowhow as integral to business knowhow of internationally operating business professionals and enabled further elaboration of the concept. Thus, our research started close to home addressing communication issues between two Scandinavian neighbours in the early 2000s but went global towards the end of the decade. In what follows, we introduce both projects and address their motivation, objectives, methodology, and the key findings from the BELF perspective.

The merger project (2000-2002)

The name of the first research project reflected our motivation well: “Finnish, Swedish or English? Internal communications in recently merged

Finnish-Swedish companies”. It was one of the seventeen projects in a large research program focusing on “Interaction across the Gulf of Bothnia” (this was also the title of the program that investigated Finnish/Swedish communication largely in a variety of fields). Our own project concentrated on business interaction, and we wanted to find out how employees managed the linguistic and cultural challenges in two large corporations, both of which were the result of mergers across the Gulf of Bothnia at the end of the 1990s, namely StoraEnso, a paper company, and Nordea, a banking group. More specifically our objective was to investigate language use and communication practices among business professionals with two different linguistic backgrounds, Finnish and Swedish. As the name of the project suggests, we aimed to explore what languages were used in the two merged corporations involving two Nordic countries. Although the shared language, *lingua franca*, of the region has traditionally been ‘Scandinavian’ – a fluid combination of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic – the increasingly globalized business has spurred the use of English. Finnish does not feature in Scandinavian, but Finns are familiar with it through Swedish, which is the other official language of Finland and thus a mandatory subject in Finnish schools.

Although the merger project investigated other communicative questions as well, the present paper concentrates on the studies relevant for the construction of the concept of BELF. We used a multi-method approach including a questionnaire survey and related interviews to map out (1) communicative practices in the companies and (2) the perceptions of Finnish and Swedish employees of each other’s communication cultures and their similarities and differences (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). In addition, we conducted analyses of authentic (English-language) discourse: meetings (see Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Nikko, 2009) and emails (Kankaanranta, 2005 & 2006). The questionnaire survey had some 400 respondents and 31 employees were interviewed; the meeting data comprised four video recorded meetings with circa 9 hours of talk; and the email corpus contained 282 email messages with a total of 103 Finnish (n=52) and Swedish (n=51) writers. The journal article introducing the concept of BELF, Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005), combined the three data sets and ultimately constructed the concept of BELF as a language used among Finnish and Swedish business professionals.

The key findings of the merger project from the BELF perspective can be summarized into three points. First, English (*lingua franca*) was the language

used in interactions between Finnish and Swedish business professionals at work to do the work, not Scandinavian or Swedish. Thus, in addition to sharing the “core” of English (the “E”) and the lingua franca (the “LF”) aspect, the nature of the ELF resource we identified was very much determined by the goal of getting a job done in the domain of business (the “B”). English was used in all hierarchical positions in the two organizations and was not limited to, for example, higher level jobs. However, it has to be noted that all communication in the two companies had not changed into English, but the two mother tongues (Finnish and Swedish) were still needed and used extensively in day-to-day activities. While some employees used English in all their company-internal communication, some others mainly used their native tongue. In other words, the choice between English and the mother tongue was pragmatic: the decisive factor was the target audience and their preference.

Secondly, we found that English was perceived as a neutral and equal alternative – indeed, an empowering resource – because it was neither party’s mother tongue and was thus “owned” by neither. In particular, Finnish employees had felt their professional expertise decrease when they used their – often limited – Swedish for professional communication with their native Swedish speaker colleagues. However, this feeling did not emerge when they used Swedish for other than strictly business purposes. For example, Swedish was used in small talk among Finns and Swedes before and after the meeting proper and in email greetings and complimentary closes. In such situations its role was – and it was perceived to be – to build rapport and create a feeling of togetherness.

Thirdly, the merger project data revealed that when our Finnish and Swedish informants were using BELF in their communication, it clearly reflected the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of its speakers. Thus, it was not perceived as a “cultureless” code but a “linguistic masala” (Meierkord, 2002), a variety with a dynamic set of characteristics depending on the speaker and his/her native language and its conventions. This finding was also corroborated by the analysis of authentic data: Finnish BELF seemed to be somewhat more direct and issue-oriented than the discussion-oriented and interpersonal Swedish variety. In a nutshell: whereas Finns were inclined to write “check the figures” in their emails, Swedes favored “could you please check the figures”.

The knowhow project (2006-2009)

The motivation for the knowhow project also becomes apparent in its official name: “Does business know how? The role of communication in the business knowhow of globalized operations”. In this research project we wanted to find out how communication was affected by such dramatic change processes in business as globalization, advancement of IT systems, specialization, modularization, and networks. Again, our project was part of a large research program by the Academy of Finland. Now, the widely defined object of research for the entire program was “business knowhow”. To apply for the funding, we argued that communication knowhow is an integral element of business knowhow of today’s business professionals. In other words, professionals need to know what, why, how, and when to communicate when they are sharing knowledge and building networks, which have been identified as integral practices to such elements of business knowhow as innovations, business processes and management strategy (Näsi & Neilimo, 2006).

The knowhow project consisted of several subprojects that examined communication knowhow in companies at different levels; here, we describe the subproject that continued to investigate issues related to BELF. The objectives of the subproject were two-fold: (1) to examine communication conventions, characteristics, and communication knowhow in globalized and globalizing companies and (2) to identify features that contribute to perceptions of communication being “successful”.

Our methodology comprised a questionnaire survey and related interviews, both of which explored the perceptions of the respondents and interviewees. The survey was targeted at professionals in five Finland-based companies working regularly in international contexts; it was administered on-line and had a response rate of 52%, with 987 respondents. The respondents represented 31 different native languages with Finnish, however, dominating (40%) (for more details, see Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in five Europe-based multinationally operating companies located in Finland and the Netherlands; in total, 27 internationally operating professionals were interviewed. The native tongue of a good half of them was Finnish (for more details, see Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

Next, we report on our findings from the perspective of BELF competence, after which we address the more extensive concept of global communicative

competence. We might argue that the main finding of the whole project was the fact that BELF as a shared resource was now taken for granted by internationally operating business professionals; it was perceived as any other necessary tool to do the work (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). It was also considered “global” in the sense that it was not conceptualized as a language spoken in the UK or USA. BELF competence, involving both knowledge and skills, was perceived as a dynamic construction heavily dependent on the context of its use and the users. For example, it did not seem to have any absolute requirements as to its discursive forms as long as it was sufficient for getting the work done and creating rapport – no matter how limited the English proficiency of the users. However, such a competence, albeit modest on the surface level, implies a number of components. BELF speakers need to possess accommodation skills, listening skills, an ability to understand different “Englishes”, and overall, tolerance towards different communication styles. This view was corroborated by another distinctive feature: grammar was not considered as important as the genre knowledge of one’s own field of expertise. According to our informants, this context-specific genre knowledge involved a shared understanding of, for example, appropriate choice of audience, media and timing as well as the focus and style of the (spoken/written) message.

Interestingly, our findings show that the discourse strategies perceived as “successful” in international encounters were the same as traditionally emphasized in business communication text books: clarity, brevity, directness and politeness (see, for instance, Munter, 2011). This alignment seems to emphasize the shared culture of the international business community (the “B”), which co-existed with the BELF speakers’ individual cultural backgrounds (for more, see Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013). Multiculturalism was perceived as an inherent quality of BELF and was seen to be further strengthened by multilingualism (for more on culture and ELF, see Baker, 2011 & 2012).

Our findings on the role and use of BELF and communicative success in the global context inspired us to expand our perspective into the notion of competence, and we decided to explore the elements of “global communicative competence” of internationally operating business professionals. Using the empirical data from the knowhow project and discussing earlier research on competence in several fields, we suggested a model (Figure 1 below) for what we call Global Communicative Competence (GCC).

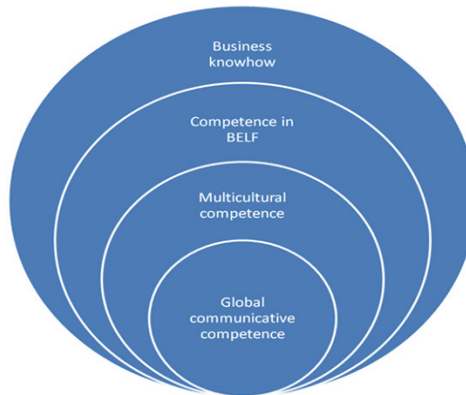


Figure 1. Model of Global Communicative Competence (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011: 258).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the Global Communicative Competence of a business professional is depicted as the bull's eye in the model surrounded by three layers consisting of multicultural competence, competence in BELF, and business knowhow. All the three layers are needed for the GCC to exist. First, multicultural competence refers to the knowledge and skills in managing communicative situations with representatives of different national, organizational, and professional cultures. It requires accommodation skills including respect and tolerance towards “different ways of doing things”, as one of our interviewees so aptly put it. Such skills are strengthened by multilingualism; knowing languages other than English and one's own mother tongue provides new perspectives, together with tacit knowledge which is hard to come by otherwise. The second surrounding layer, competence in BELF, is driven by the idea of managing the task at hand, while simultaneously creating rapport and maintaining the relationship (for maintaining trust, see Kassis- Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen, 2011). It requires competence in the English “core”, business-specific genres, and communication strategies focusing on clarity, brevity, directness and politeness. In essence, BELF is very different from a “natural” language spoken with native speakers because it is highly situation-specific, dynamic, idiosyncratic and consequently, inherently tolerant of different varieties. The dynamism entails that strategic skills, such as ability to ask for clarifications, make questions, repeat utterances, and paraphrase (see Mauranen, 2006), gain in importance for successful communication. Third, the outermost layer of business knowhow is fundamental for GCC; as we have seen, it filters

through and affects all the other layers. The outermost layer refers to business-specific knowledge and combines two integral elements: the particular “domain of use” and the wider, overall goals, norms and strategies of business shared by the business community.

To summarize this section on the concept of BELF, we refer to a table that first appeared in a keynote presentation by Charles in the ELF Forum – the First International Conference of English as a Lingua Franca held in Helsinki in 2008 (for a written version, see Charles, 2007), but we modify the table to illustrate the particular differences between EFL and BELF approaches that we consider critical (see Table 1).

Criterion	EFL	BELF
Successful interactions require	NS-like language skills	business communication skills and strategic skills
The speaker/writer aims to	emulate NS discourse	get the job done & create rapport
NNSs are seen as	learners, “sources of trouble”	communicators in their own right
Main source of problems	inadequate language skills	inadequate business communication skills
“Culture”	national cultures of NSs	business community cultures and individual cultural backgrounds
English is “owned” by	its native speakers	nobody – and everybody

Table 1. Comparison between EFL and BELF approaches.

Table 1 crystallizes our present understanding of the language (that is, BELF) used by internationally operating business professionals to communicate with other (mostly) non-native speakers, and it also provides a comparison with the EFL paradigm, which prevailed at the time we started our teaching careers in the 1980s. As can be seen, there are major differences between the two paradigms addressing some key criteria related to communication and language use, which undoubtedly have an impact on teaching and research.

Conclusions

Since the introduction of the concept of BELF (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005), it has shown its relevance for scholars of international business communication (see, for instance, Bargiela-Chiappini,

Nickerson & Planken, 2007; Charles, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; Du-Babcock, 2009; Pullin Stark, 2009; Ehrenreich, 2010; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). However, since ELF/BELF research assumes a radical ontological and epistemological stance, claiming that the object of study in fact is different from the notion of “English”, it is only natural that there is also an opposition to this conceptualization in the academic community (for a commentary from the teaching perspective, see Maley, 2010). Simultaneously, however, it can be argued that ELF/BELF research could expand and contribute to research in business disciplines such as international business and management, in which “language-sensitive” research has produced knowledge about language issues in multinational companies (Piekkari & Tietze, 2011). For example, various aspects of “corporate language” have been addressed but without problematizing or questioning the notion itself. Indeed, the question of authority and power in the context of corporate language vs. BELF usage would benefit from further research.

Finally, we offer a brief discussion on the pedagogical implications based on our BELF studies. As Table 1 suggests, EFL (English as a foreign language) seems to have a neat set of characteristics that define desirable learning outcomes, whereas the characteristics for BELF reflect its very nature: variation, hybridity, dynamism, context-dependency and individual idiosyncrasies. How can such a chameleonic “language” be taught? How can our findings inform the teaching and learning of English for future business professionals? We argue that the model of Global Communicative Competence (see Figure 1) could serve as a good framework for addressing the pedagogical challenges involved.

The three intertwined layers surrounding the center of GCC should be intertwined in teaching as well. For a future business professional, the outermost layer, business knowhow, is the foundation on which the communicative competence is constructed. This entails that business knowledge and awareness should be imported into the BELF classroom, for example, with the help of case studies, problem-based learning, and different types of simulations. Although there is no denying of the fact that ultimately, the real life practice is the best school for learning BELF, these methods are still able to imitate the real life experience fairly effectively. In this way, the students would learn – not only the key business terminology – but even more importantly, the related concepts, genres, and practices that are typically shared in the business discourse community and

would thus be salient in a particular communicative situation. For instance, these activities imitating authentic business situations would demonstrate when things need to be confirmed in writing, when the situation requires utmost preciseness, and when the approach can be more laid-back. In other words, although it is important to master the English “core” (Jenkins, 2000), it is even more important to be able to use English as a tool to get the work done while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship with communication partners. As such qualities as directness, clarity and politeness could be characterized as “success factors” both in business communication and in BELF communication, they should be used to evaluate student work. For example, they can be further developed into explicit grading criteria or into more detailed and specific rubrics, which would give the student a written account as to how well s/he has performed in relation to each criterion. Interestingly, rubrics like this are the key element of the assurance of learning process of the most prestigious accreditation agencies, for example, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (URL: <http://www.aacsb.edu>) when the learning outcomes of specific business degree programs, courses, and assignments are reviewed. At this point, it must be remembered, however, that being “flexibly competent” (House, 2002) is of utmost importance: students need to be trained so that they are able to analyze a particular situation, including the job at hand, and to act accordingly. Sometimes it may be essential to be direct, whereas other times indirectness may be more impactful in view of the task at hand. Typically, this type of BELF competence calls for more focus on the strategic use of language: being able to accommodate one’s communication to the partner’s knowledge level, to connect on the relational level, to clarify information, to paraphrase, to make questions, and to ask for clarifications. This flexibility would mean that the evaluation criteria in the rubric gain different weightings depending on the situation. Finally, the multicultural competence of students can be enhanced by, first, encouraging them to learn other languages than English and secondly, increasing their knowledge of and respect for other “cultures” including national, ethnic, professional, industry, and corporate cultures. Although the idea is not to emulate the behavior of others, raising awareness of “other ways of doing things” contributes to the global communicative competence.

To conclude, since BELF can be conceptualized as a language that can be learned – at least to some extent – by non-native English speakers, it could

also be learned by native speakers of English. In this way, they would be better equipped to operate in international business contexts, where most of their fellow players today are non-native English speakers using BELF.

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