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# What research can tell us about how best to prepare business students for the multilingual workplace

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**Abstract.** Due to the internationalisation of companies resulting in the increased mobility of workers, a large number of employees interact on a daily basis with colleagues with whom they do not share a mother tongue and often even work in geographically dispersed multilingual teams. In Europe the language which is mostly chosen as the common or corporate language in business is English. But even though English may have been established as a corporate language, the employees' daily activity is reflected in the language choice for work purposes and negotiated between the interactants in everyday interactions in the workplace.

Drawing upon interviews with employees in international companies in South-Eastern Europe, this paper explores language choice in multilingual workplaces and which communicative challenges employees face when working in a foreign language. The findings show that English and other languages are used in very specific communicative situations and employees face particular linguistic challenges. In addition, using local languages rather than English in various communicative workplace situations results in specific but not general competence in English. Based on these findings, implications for teaching Business English to (future) employees in multilingual workplaces will be discussed.

**Keywords.** Communicative challenges, English as international language, language practices, multilingual workplaces, teaching business English.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the nature of (business) workplaces has changed in many ways. The trend of companies transcending national borders for business as well as technological novelties have led to an increase in the number of workplaces that are situated in multinational companies. These changes have resulted in different kinds of tasks and, above all, skills which are demanded and expected from employees in these workplaces.

Among these skills which have gained importance are the linguistic skills of employees. In particular, in multinational companies whose staff comprises people from various backgrounds and with differing mother tongues, employees need to be fluent in more than one language. Language skills or the lack thereof may function as gatekeepers to these kinds of jobs (see e.g. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999, Cheng & Curtis 2010, Moore 2007, for research on language as gatekeepers in various sectors). Depending on the region, different languages are drawn upon to facilitate communication, and taking Europe into consideration (which is the locus of this paper), it is English which has become the most prominent language (or lingua franca) used in business (Rogerson-Revell 2007).

As many companies have adopted English as their corporate language to enable communication between their subsidiaries in various countries, it is language skills, or even more importantly, communication skills in English which are essential to have and be able to apply in every day work life. And it is exactly this language interface, which makes research of what happens linguistically in the workplaces, more important than ever. The questions arise what really happens regarding language use in these workplaces, which communicative skills are necessary to master and, consequently, should be taught to business students. To take it one step further, research on language and communication practices can help make lecturers in business English

be aware of what their students will need and, consequently, how to adapt their curricula to workplaces in the real world.

The changing nature of workplaces and teaching was already addressed by Warschauer (2000) and even earlier with the advent of email by Louhiala-Salminen (1996). There is numerous research on what language/communicative skills business students need and what the nature of English classes in tertiary education should be like (e.g. Kassim & Ali 2010, Crosling & Ward 2002, Zhang 2013, Belcher 2004, Zagan-Zelter & Zagan-Zelter 2010). This paper contributes to this line of research by adding research data from a less researched area in Europe, i.e. South-Eastern Europe. The research results reveal the language ecology in multinational companies in this region and, in a second step, which suggestions can be drawn from it for teaching English to business students which prepares them most appropriately for the real-world of business workplaces.

The next section gives a short overview of English as an international language in business settings followed by an introduction to the data and methodology used. The third and fourth sections address the employees' perceptions of language use in workplaces. The discussion section will outline the suggestions drawn from the results and also refer to whether selected course books for business English touch upon these aspects.

### 2. English as the international language in European business settings

Europe is by no means a homogeneous area and therefore, depending on the region within Europe, French, German, Spanish and Russian may be used to facilitate communication between employees with different mother tongues. Over the last decades English has become the most widely spoken *foreign* language in Europe as well as the most-widely used *working* language in Europe. The Eurobarometer, which was published in 2006 by the European Union, reports that 25% of the respondents use English daily at work and English was also regarded as the most useful language for one's personal career (Eurobarometer 43 2006: 12). It is thus not surprising that English has become firmly established as the language/*lingua franca* for (international) business in Europe. The prevalence and importance of English has not been ignored by researchers (e.g. Seidlhofer et al 2006, House 2002, Meierkord 1998). Since the mid-1990s research has taken on momentum and stretched its feelers to many subjects in the field (see e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken 2013 for an excellent overview of the numerous studies addressing various aspects connected with language in business). Seminal and general studies dealing with language/English used in business are, e.g. the special editions on English as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts (Nickerson 2005) and the two special editions on language matters in the Journal of Business Communication (Louhiala-Salminen & Rogerson-Revell 2010 a and 2010 b).

Research that is most relevant for this paper addresses the aspect of languages other than English used in the workplaces. Poncini (2002) analyses business meetings with multicultural participation and focuses on how language is being used to construct business relationships and corporate culture. Gunnarsson (2006) and Angouri (2008) explore the language practices and multilingualism in international companies in Europe. Another set of studies have analysed the employees' perception of working in English and their experience. Thimm et al. (2003) report on communication experiences and expectations of men and women in different work settings as well as gender differences in communication situations. Rogerson-Revell's (2007) valuable study addresses language issues such as participation and language challenges of non-native speakers in multilingual meetings. Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2010) and Angouri & Miglbauer (2012, *fc*) present research results on the perception of employees concerning the use of English and other languages as well as the challenges of working in English.

This paper is situated in this strand of research and presents the perception of employees on the use of English and what results can be drawn for teaching business English in tertiary education. Before these results are outlined, the data and the methodology are presented in the next section.

### 3. Methodology

This paper draws on interview data with employees of 5 companies and 1 NGO in Zagreb, Croatia and Belgrade, Serbia. The companies operate in the area of telecommunications, finance and manufacturing and have English as their official company language. The interviewees were between the age of 23 and 45 years but the majority of them were in their late 20s and early 30s. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes, whereas the majority lasted around 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English and were digitally recorded on the companies' premises. The reason not to use either Croatian or Serbian, despite the fact that the local language and mother tongue is the language of the people's private lives and private experience (Levy & Hollan 1998: 338), is a very simple one: The interviewer's command of either of these two languages does not go beyond simple communication and the interviewees' command of English was at a very high level.

This data is taken from a larger project on work characteristics in multinational companies in Croatia and Serbia. This region was chosen due to historical reasons and the relatively new phenomenon of multinational companies operating in this region (see Miglbauer 2010 for more details). The employees were interviewed about their workday, work routines, communication, work with expatriates, status of their workplaces, to name but a few topics addressed.

The data was coded according to the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967, adapted and revised by Strauss & Corbin 1998). No pre-conceived conceptions were applied as "the data speaks for itself". Thus open coding was used, which means that according to the topics that appeared in the interviews, corresponding codes were applied to the data by doing a "microanalysis which consists of analysing data word-by-word" (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 65). The codes have been put into more specific categories and the ones relevant for this paper are the role of English, the role of local languages and challenges of using English. The analysis of these categories is presented in more detail in the next two sections.

### 4. Employees' perceptions on the use of English and other languages

- (1) [English] plays a very eh (.) big role (..) I think eh (.) it's obviously widely spoken (.) in the business community (.) [...] obviously the job is such that eh you communicate with eh (.) a very wide range of people in terms of geography in terms of background (.) so it's really great communication tool

Working in a company where English is the corporate and working language results in English being very prominent in everyday work life. It is uncontested that English has become the language to use when doing business and it is the accepted language to use when communicating with members of the business community when there is not a shared L1. English functions as a tool, as a means to facilitate contact and build relationships which may be essential for the company's daily business. It is the linguistically heterogeneity of a group of employees which impacts both employees and the companies. Some research has shown how diversity among the staff influences their performance (see e.g. Lattimer 1998, Kochan et al. 2003). Taking the language aspect into consideration, it means that employees need to be skilled in successfully communicating with people of many different backgrounds, with different accents, different levels of English and differing communicative norms.

Talking about communicative norms, when English serves as the company language, official communication occurs in English, as this interviewee points out:

- (2) I mean all eh our written documents are in English (.) reports eh website contracts eh applications so (.) even our internal communication between ourselves when it's eh official it's in English so it's (.) English all the time.

All the documents that are disseminated to a wider audience are written in the corporate language, such as texts that are used for branding purposes on the internet. Internally, English is

used for HR affairs, such as work contracts as well as technical programmes/applications, as the interviewee points out. Official internal communication, such as meetings and communication with other subsidiaries (e.g. by phone and email), is also conducted in the official corporate language. However, this quote also points to the use of local languages in the workplace. By saying ‘even our internal communication between ourselves’ the interviewee reveals that the employees share the same mother tongue but use English when/because the communicative situation demands it.

According to Vollstedt (2001: 103), “[t]he more employees are involved in the international communication, the more English is used”, and adds that whereas English is used in most contacts between employees with different mother tongues, not all communication takes place exclusively in English. Similarly, Fredriksson et al. (2006: 406) draw from their research the fact that introducing English does not automatically mean its adoption, “nor does it make it ‘shared’ throughout the organization.” And Nickerson concludes that “[c]ommunicative events are considerably more complex than the label English as a *lingua franca* would suggest.” (2005: 371; italics in original).

So, what does this all mean when taking a closer look at the complexity of language use in multinational and multilingual workplaces? If English is neither the ‘exclusive language’ nor ‘shared throughout the organization’, why is it not used and what happens then to facilitate communication? Research shows that as soon as it is not necessary to use English for communication with each other because the interlocutors share L1, the communication occurs in L1 (see e.g. Angouri 2008).

- (3) I mean we don’t (.) speak English you know here in the office because we’re all Croatians so
- (4) well we’re not like trying to speak English whenever possible you know only when there is the need

Despite English being the official language, there is no need to speak English if there are employees working in the same office who share L1. This also means that the local language, which is the easiest language option, has an interpersonal function of showing solidarity. Small talk and talk not necessarily connected with the job are carried out in the mother tongue. Yet, as one interviewee adds, it does not matter how big the group of people is, if there is one person who does not share L1, then English is used (however, see Ailon-Souday & Kunda’s study (2005) about how the local language is intentionally used to exclude the non-local employees). Nevertheless, the communicative events are getting more complex – to borrow Nickerson’s phrase – when the communication leaves the office and moves to communication between subsidiaries as the next quote shows:

- (5) we don’t speak English between us but (.) with all of our offices except for the Belgrade one Slovenian one (.) eh we speak English so Czech office (.) Polish office Austrian office Russian office Bulgarian Romanian whatever (.) we speak English

Whereas English is used to communicate with colleagues in other subsidiaries all over Europe, the situation with offices in the region (in this case the Western Balkans) is slightly different. Interviewees who commented on the communication in the region refer to the fact that they all use a “regional language” when talking to each other: “*when we work (.) I mean together with Belgrade or Slovenian office we communicate in (.) ((laughs)) we call it REGIONAL language (.) they talk in Serbian we in Croatian but we understand each other*”. Depending on the history and the proximity of languages, regional or “mixed” languages replace English as the *lingua franca*, such as in the Yugoslavian successor states (Miglbauer 2010) and in Scandinavia (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005).

Having set the field about language use in multilingual workplaces, the question arises what the perceived challenges of employees are when working not in L1 but L2 or L3. This will be addressed in the next section.



## 5. Challenges of using English in the workplace

Despite a high standard of English, the interviewees have voiced challenges connected with working in English. These challenges are in the areas of vocabulary, phonology and the use of English for specific functions. The need to speak in a foreign language is indeed a challenge in itself.

- (6) Of course it's not ehm (.) comfortable for us (.) to switch to English all the time because we cannot express ourselves in English as we in eh (.) our mother language but (.) it's not a problem because I understand that eh I imagine if I (.) would be in that situation I would like (.) or I would appreciate very much that others are speaking the language that I can understand so it's (.) minimum respect to others

No matter how high the command of English is, there is always a difference between speaking L1 and L2. Obviously it is not a problem but it is uncomfortable, at least sometimes. However, this interviewee also shows that using L2 as a working language is simply the reality in today's multinational workplaces, and, in order to enable access to communication for everyone, English is the language to be used.

Another challenge reported is the 'fear' of talking to native speakers of English, particularly at the beginning of employment in a multilingual workplace.

- (7) Well I guess all the people have a barrier (.) at the start (.) when (.) they are talking to a native speaker (.) yeah they think oh he's gonna (..) you know track my mistakes :and: ((laughing)) you know they test me because of them

Most communication in English in international business in Europe occurs between non-native speakers of English or speakers who use English as L2 or L3 (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2010: 205). Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2010: 207) report in their study that whereas communication with native speakers was considered hierarchical with the roles of teacher-student because people with English as their L1 can "exploit [...] their mother tongue to the full", in non-native speaker conversations, everybody felt they were on the same footing. My data confirms their research result. The example above already points to the (wrong?) impression that native speakers assess non-native speakers' command of English. It also hints that not being able to speak English like a native speaker may be disadvantageous. Some interviewees claim that speaking to non-native speakers is, indeed, different to and more comfortable than speaking to native speakers. Interestingly, they also add that native speakers sometimes have problems in understanding non-native speakers' English (see e.g. Miglbauer 2010), which underlines Briguglio's claim that the "responsibility for developing the skills for English as a global language falls on all students, be they first or second language speakers of English" (Briguglio 2012: 123).

Interviewees also encountered challenges in the area of vocabulary. And as examples 8 and 9 show, it is both in the areas of general as well as special terminology.

- (8) I was very fearful at the beginning in my first year I really was trying to prepare :thoroughfully and to think thoroughly: ((laughing)) about what am I gonna say especially in terms of that terminology and I was using that black legal dictionary
- (9) for me it's relatively easy to speak about my core eh job my core business and expressions within that [...] but if we have to expand our conversation to some private things to (.) things around us I am faced with some difficulties

Specific terminology can be acquired with the help of dictionaries and specialised books relatively quickly and easily. Talking about business-related topics is not reported as challenging. However, some of the interviewees admitted to having difficulties in extending their communicative skills to small talk and private-related topics. This aspect has also been reported by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005).

Different non-native speaker accents in English also sometimes pose difficulties in enabling or having successful communication.

- (10) there is some kind of various accents various people from the various offices talk (.) some of them talks very strange English :for me: ((laughing)) with (.) ((xxx)) from (.) Polish colleagues then from you know from Czech Republic (.) they have a specific accent

In contrast to Rogerson-Revell (2007) who covers perception and difficulties with native speaker accents, the interviewees in my data do rather talk about non-native speaker than native speaker accents. Most interestingly, even though they are all native speakers of a South-slavic language, they mostly mention “funny” accents in other Slavic language speakers’ English or the inability of Austrian German speakers to pronounce plosives: *“On a daily basis I had to communicate with [company’s name] or [company’s name] or whoever (.) and ehm (.) and there is one guy who speaks funny English language actually he doesn’t speak English good and eh this guy mixes eh “b”s and “p”s”*.

So to summarize, challenges occur on the language and on the communicative level. Based on the research results, the discussion in the next section will provide suggestions of which aspects of language teaching should be included in instruction and how selected course books take up these aspects.

## 6. Discussion or how best to prepare business students for a complex linguistic reality

The reality in multilingual workplaces varies depending on the company, the location and the background of the staff members. However, language and communicative skills in L2 have become essential for multinational companies and their success (e.g. Fredriksson et al. 2006, Feely & Harzing 2003, Charles 2007).

Research (e.g. Gunnarsson 2006, Angouri & Miglbauer 2012, Nickerson 2005) has revealed that English is the common sense language to use to communicate with people, no matter whether it is the company language or not. However, as soon as it is possible to communicate in one’s mother tongue, then it is L1 which is used for communication. There is also a difference in language use regarding function – whereas English is rather used for official written and oral communication, it is the local language that is used for small talk or “office talk”. Challenges when using English as a foreign language are numerous, be it the fear of speaking to native speakers or the difficulty in comprehending different non-native speaker accents in English.

So what are the suggestions for lecturers of business English which can be drawn from research? Which skills are necessary for business students to have in order to stand the test of working in a multinational company?

Based on my research, I would like to highlight four broad areas, which seem to be most vital: diversity, written skills, general business terminology and interpersonal communication skills.

As most communication in business occurs between non-native speakers, the aspect of diversity in accents in and varieties of English cannot be neglected any longer (see also Briguglio 2012). This is not to say that grammatically incorrect English should be taught, but English which is regarded as correct but spoken by speakers with non-native accents should be used in audios. Depending on the region in Europe, a focus could be put on non-native speaker accents which students may most likely be confronted with. For instance, due to the geographical location and the fact that many Austrian companies have subsidiaries in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, Austrian graduates of business studies are most likely to work with colleagues in subsidiaries in Eastern- and South-Eastern Europe and exposed to Slavic accents in English. Coursebooks (e.g. MacKenzie 2011, Duckworth & Turner 2008, and Cotton et al. 2011) have included non-native speakers in their audio files in order to portray the linguistic reality of present day workplaces.

Additionally, it may be worthwhile to refer to L1 interferences in the most relevant languages

so that graduates are aware of typical peculiarities in other people's English (see example about the difficulty of pronouncing plosives above). Swan & Smith (2001) are a valuable exception as they have included an overview of L1 interferences of quite a few languages in English in their teachers' book.

Regarding written skills, business correspondence in the form of different types of emails is undoubtedly highly relevant. Being able to have written fluency in a broad area of different contexts (e.g. dealing with orders and complaints, writing sales emails and internal emails) is essential for today's employees and coursebooks usually address different aspects of writing. Briguglio (2012) found out in her case study that reports for internal use are mostly informal. Nevertheless, different types of business emails demand a particular level of formality, therefore teaching different registers is still of utmost importance. The more so the more diverse the clients and colleagues are.

Admittedly, what I have named 'general business terminology' may be a bit of a contested area. Employees report that specific terminology is acquired very quickly and fast on the job. However, having acquired basic vocabulary of the most important areas in business during one's university studies is undeniably advantageous and essential. Obviously, it is debatable about where to draw the line about what counts as specific and general business terminology. One way to deal with this aspect is to decide how specific the terminology needs to be in a class based on the individual students and their needs.

Having a high level of fluency in oral communication has been stated as the most essential skill by quite a few studies (e.g. Kassim & Ali 2010, Briguglio 2012, Crosling & Ward 2002, de Beaugrande 2000). And it is both work-related oral communication (such as in meetings, negotiations, presentations, telephoning) as well as more private-related communication (small talk in the office, networking). Most coursebooks deal with work-related aspects of oral communication in various details such as pre-meeting small talk, negotiations, presentations, dining out (e.g. Handford et al. 2011). Yet what most coursebooks lack is specifically addressing interpersonal communication by teaching communicative strategies. Such strategies are, for example, how to enter and exit conversations, how to be negative diplomatically, how to make small talk with colleagues in the office, how to listen actively, how to exchange contact details and do networking, how to deal with communication breakdowns (see Duckworth & Turner 2008) but also the benefits of being able to ask questions to facilitate communication, for instance (see Cotton et al. 2011, Handford et al 2011). Technological advancement also increases the numerous options for communication. Kassim & Ali (2010) mention participating in teleconferencing as an important skill necessary and Duckworth & Turner (2008) have incorporated teleconferencing in their coursebook. The technicalities of applying a language in various communicative situations seem to be one of the most essential skills required by employees nowadays.

Like Crosling & Ward (2002) have already pointed out by saying that oral communication is significant and most of this oral communication is informal in nature, the most important suggestion that I bring forward is that oral communicative skills for work-related formal and informal conversations are highly important skills to acquire and consequently need to be focused on in teaching.

As a last point, I would like to highlight which impact the fact that communication in English is most likely to occur between non-native speakers of English may have on teaching English in the future. One of the interviewees in my data says

- (11) When you speak to somebody who's a native speaker (.) then it's difficult for you to understand him and eh for him to understand you [...] but (.) you know when you speak between yourself you know like people from this region or Central Eastern Europe then you can understand yourself

The interviewee unfortunately does not give any reason why it is difficult for both native speakers and non-native speakers of English to understand each other. However, what is of more



importance is the reference to non-native speakers forming their own group, who ‘can understand each other’ both linguistically but also by familiar and similar kinds of communicative behavior. Native speakers of English are increasingly ‘othered’ by non-native speakers as they do not belong to the largest group of employees in international companies. They use English as their L1, whereas the others find themselves in the same boat when struggling with language. So, the question arises what this may mean for teaching English to business students and employees in the future and what kind of English should/will be taught in the future. Will it be some ‘Euro-English’? Seidlhofer propagated this idea already in 2001 but this question can only be answered by the future.

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