

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EMAIL COMMUNICATION: A MATTER OF STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN BELF

*Comunicación internacional vía correo electrónico:
una cuestión de estructura y competencia comunicativa
en inglés comercial como lengua franca (BELF)*

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Abstract

Email correspondence has become one of the most useful ways for global communication, and more precisely for international business communication. Diverse studies of global communication in English have been carried out concerning ELF (English as lingua franca) and BELF (Business English as lingua franca). The purpose of this research is to bring to the forth the latest variation patterns in business email communication in English. The study aims to analyze an authentic corpus of 90 emails written in English by business managers of different chemical companies set up in 14 different countries around the world, including native and non-native speakers of English who use this language as a lingua franca for commercial and distribution purposes. The central research targets are to observe: (i) The main communicative strategies used by business practitioners to achieve the required communicative competence in BELF (e.g. politeness strategies or a shared core vocabulary); (ii) the generic move structure variation from the standard organization of, for instance, business letters to a more relaxed pattern. Several linguistic, generic and pragmatic aspects reveal an inclination towards a more informal, co-operative and goal-oriented international business email communication.

Keywords: Business communication, ELF, BELF, structural moves variation, communicative competence

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Resumen

La correspondencia vía correo electrónico se ha convertido en una de las formas más útiles para establecer nexos de comunicación a escala global, y de manera más precisa, para realizar transacciones comerciales a nivel internacional. Numerosos estudios sobre comunicación global se han llevado a cabo considerando el inglés como lengua franca (ELF), y específicamente el inglés comercial como lengua franca (BELF). El objetivo de este estudio es mostrar los patrones más recientes de variación en correos electrónicos comerciales escritos en ELF. En este estudio se analiza un corpus compuesto por 90 emails, escritos en inglés por agentes comerciales de empresas internacionales asentadas en 14 países distintos, incluyendo hablantes nativos y no nativos de dicha lengua que usan el inglés como lengua franca con fines comerciales y de distribución de productos. Los objetivos centrales de este estudio son observar, en primer lugar, las estrategias comunicativas principales empleadas por estos profesionales del comercio internacional para conseguir comunicarse de manera efectiva en inglés comercial como lengua franca (BELF) (ej. Estrategias de cortesía o léxico específico en común); Y en segundo lugar, la variación de los patrones estándar de organización de este género hacia una estructura menos convencional, teniendo en cuenta géneros similares, como son las cartas comerciales. Diversos aspectos lingüísticos, genéricos y pragmáticos revelan una inclinación hacia un tipo de correo comercial a nivel internacional con un enfoque más informal, cooperativo y orientado a conseguir objetivos concretos.

Palabras clave: Comunicación empresarial, inglés como lengua franca (ELF), inglés comercial como lengua franca (BELF), variación estructural, competencia comunicativa

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years globalization phenomenon has undergone a significant development and as a consequence many international business transactions are carried out by agents with different first languages and from different countries, therefore, in most cases English is chosen as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) to communicate rather than a foreign language to communicate. ELF is defined as a way to communicate in English among speakers who have different first languages including native English speakers but, in most cases, it is a contact language between people who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture, and for whom English is an additional language (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer et al. 2006; Dewey 2007; Seidlhofer 2011; Mauranen 2012, 2014). ELF is understood as a communication tool used routinely and successfully by millions of speakers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their professional, academic and personal lives. As

Facchinetti et al (2010) see it, the circumstances that have activated this adaptive process of an emergent ELF are often referred collectively as *globalization*. As a consequence, «the networks of activity, interaction and power» need for a common language or a lingua franca which naturally gets transformed accordingly, transforming the very concept of community in the process. Focusing this issue on the business realm, 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 partners of communication also changed (see for instance Crystal, 2003; Dor, 2004). According to Kankaaranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013: 19), «operations were international, and for these, specific professional qualifications were needed, including proficiency in the languages in question, which in most cases meant English.»

Such relevance does English have in the business sphere that in recent years the concept of BELF has been developed. It is an abbreviation to refer to «English as Business Lingua Franca». The concept of BELF originates from two large research projects conducted at the Aalto University School of Business from 2000 to 2009 with the aim of exploring the language and communication practices of internationally operating business professionals. This concept is developed by Kankaaranta and Louhiala-Salminen in their joined research entitled as *The Knowhow Project* (2006-2009), consisting of several subprojects in which they analyse professionals' need to know what, why, how and when to communicate when they are building business networks. Finally, this idea is related to Fishman's (1971: 232) view of «Speech community» that he defines as «one all of whose members share at least one single speech variety and the norms for its appropriate use» and Wenger's (1998: 76) concept of «Community of practice», which explains that «there are three dimensions characterising a community of practise: mutual engagement, a joint negotiable enterprise and a share repertoire of negotiable resources».

Among others, such as business letters (see Suau, 2010) or business faxes (see Zhu, 2013), today the most useful written mode of communication to engage within the international business world is electronic or email correspondence. Since the business community needs a way to communicate and close the distance gap, email has become the most important Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for business professionals to work together in virtual locations and 'virtual communities of practice' (Herring, 2004). The main reason for its success among

business professionals is that, even though it is delivered to the recipient personally, email technology does not invade the recipient's personal space. Furthermore, since the technology is independent of time constraints, business matters can be dealt with at any time of the day without imposing on the recipients. (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). In addition, other features, such as social definitions of media appropriateness, email's compatibility to job tasks, functionality, and ease of use have been found to be influential in media choice. (Kankaanranta, 2005). Diverse analyses of emails written in English by cross-borders senders and recipients have been carried out. For instance, Giménez-Moreno and Skorczynska (2013) have done a contrastive analysis of British, Spanish and Polish email writing and their results indicate that even though there is a tendency to standardize email correspondence at an European level there are certain variation patterns that may help ELF users of the language to conform their message depending on the recipient's culture in terms of formulaic features, text length or detailed information provided; Carrió-Pastor and Muñoz-Calderón (2013) have analysed the variation of English business emails in Asian countries and they concluded that the influence of the mother tongue of the speakers of ELF is changing the use of English in Asian countries given that speakers clearly show their linguistic background when they communicate; and Kankaanranta (2005) has based her PhD dissertation on international email communication in Lingua Franca by multinational companies and in her study she differentiates three different email genres, which are a response to the various situations arising in a corporate context (noticeboard, dialogue and postman).

The present study aims to analyze international business emails in terms of the linguistic and international communicative competence in BELF of their senders and recipients and the organizational variation patterns of this genre towards a rather informal, co-operative and goal-oriented nature. However, the main research question is in which aspects is this variation more noticeable. For this purpose 90 emails written in English as lingua franca by business managers from multinational chemical companies from different countries around the world have been analyzed. It has to be considered that this genre is an essential component in a business professional's daily work therefore, although this particular study is not concerned with the teaching practice, the implications for teaching business communication are obvious. Genre knowledge as well as communicative competence in BELF are essential requirements for a business practitioner's professional success through this type of electronic communication.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Bhatia (2004) and Swales (2004), a genre is organized in a series of discriminative structural elements or moves, which distinguish one genre from another and which are necessary for genre recognition. In the same way as each genre has a communicative purpose that it tends to serve, each move also serves a typical communicative intention or function which contributes in some way to the fulfillment of the overall communicative purpose of the genre. In this particular case the main and only communicative purpose of the email writers, and more precisely the Spanish company, is to obtain information about other companies in order to advertise their products and distribute them. Referring to the email genre Kankaanranta (2005) distinguishes nine main categories of moves according to the classification established in her PhD dissertation and for the purpose of the present study this classification is going to be used as reference.

Electronic correspondence has its own discourse peculiarities which affect the text's purpose, structure and writing process. Crystal (2001) as well as Herring (2004) regards the language of email as something genuinely different in kind consisting of 'speech + writing + electronically mediated properties'. Thus, they suggest that a fourth medium, i.e. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) or *Netspeak*, has to be added to the three mediums of spoken language, written language, and sign language. However, according to Kankaanranta (2005), one of the fundamental differences between speaking and writing is that speakers interact with their audiences, writers do not. Chafe (1982) uses the notion of *involvement* to describe the relationship that the speaker typically has with his/her audience in contrast to *detachment*, which characterizes a writer's relationship to the reader. Interestingly, modern communication media seems to encourage involvement to the transfer of oral language features into the written mode. This notion of 'involvement' is going to be analyzed throughout the different moves in the corpus in the light of Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory given that, according politeness can be regarded as a social value in human interaction, including business, and its universal principles are reflected in language use. However, Kankaanranta (2005: 110) argues that although «all societies show these principles at work, what counts as polite may differ from group to group.»

The Politeness Theory is based on the notion of face (Brown & Levinson 1987). Face is the public self-image, which is mutually granted in

a communicative event. The components of face are defined as negative face, the want of every member of society to be unimpeded by others, and as positive face, the want of every member to be accepted and to 'belong'. Brown & Levinson (1987: 74) argue that three factors affect the degree to which an act can threaten one's positive or negative face: (1) «social distance, familiarity between the speaker and the addressee»; (2) «relative power of the speaker and the addressee»; and (3) «ranking of the imposition in a particular culture». The greater the seriousness of the face-threatening act (FTA), the more likely an individual will be to use politeness strategies to minimize the threat to the addressee, in particular if the individual has less power than the addressee, or if their social distance is great. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), positive politeness is directed toward the positive face of the addressee, in other words his want to have a good image and to be liked. Positive-politeness utterances are used to imply, for example, common ground, familiarity, cooperation, or sharing of wants. One of the strategies to achieve this is to use in-group identity markers, such as specific address forms or names. Negative politeness, in contrast, is oriented toward the negative face of the addressee, that is, his want to have his freedom of action unhindered. It is specific and focused on the particular imposition that an FTA, such as a request, effects. The strategies used to give the addressee a face-saving line of escape include, for example, hedging, apologizing, and impersonalization.

3. METHOD

The present study consist in the analysis of a written corpus comprised by 90 emails written in English by business managers of different chemical companies set up in 14 different countries from the five continents (See *Table I*). Among the participants are included native and non-native speakers of English who use this language as lingua franca for commercial and distribution purposes, however, no information was obtained concerning the proficiency level in English of the email writers. In this case, it is the Spanish company which is establishing commercial relations with the other 13 multinational companies all around the world. All the Spanish emails are drafted by the same person while there are different referees from each multinational company. The emails in the corpus are both different companies' responses to emails sent by the Spanish company and email responses by the Spanish corporation to other multinational companies' previous correspondence. The topic of the emails largely concerned potential business information, feedback from the companies'

customers, orders and updating information about products. Moreover, some emails were deemed preliminary contact among companies. It has to be considered that it is an up-to-date textual analysis given that all the emails were sent from November of 2013 to January of 2014. Emails were compiled on a random basis including available emails from all the multinational companies (disregarding the amount from each country) which were in contact with the Spanish company at the moment in which the corpus compilation took place (January 2014). The emails compiled for this dataset included a total of 10.285 words.

Table 1.
Number of Emails and Countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>N. of Emails</i>
Canada	2
Spain	43
China	4
Germany	5
England	1
Malaysia	1
Australia	2
Rumania	3
Israel	4
Russia	3
South Africa	5
Switzerland	5
Vietnam	5
Thailand	7
	N = 90

The study aims to analyze the variation patterns of international business emails towards a more informal, co-operative and goal-oriented nature of business emails written and sent around the world in terms of:

Analysis of the different communicative strategies used in BELF.

Structural moves variation analysis: salutation, providing information, requesting, pre-closing, closing and signature moves.

Referring to the methodology of the study, this textual analysis does not consider commercial and cultural differences, but it is a linguistic textual research project based on a grounded theory approach, by which the study emerges through a close and careful analysis of the data collected. The research has been approached from background assumptions and through a rather extensive literature review in the domain (Lingard *et al.*, 2008). Once relevant literature was revised, a categorization of the main email moves was devised drawing on Kankaaranta's (2005: 273) classification of nine main categories of moves in order to study BELF users' development of communicative competence features and generic organizational patterns that arose from the analysis of the previously mentioned corpus. This classification was used as reference for the types of moves identified in the corpus, which generally coincide. The distinction of moves established by Kankaaranta in her study is the following (see *Table 2*):

Table 2.
Initial Classification of Moves
Following Kankaaranta (2005: 273)

<i>Moves</i>
Move I: Identifying subject
Move II: Salutation
Move III: Referring to previous contact
Move IV: Indicating enclosure
Move V: Providing information
Move VI : Requesting
Move VII: Pre-closing
Move VIII: Closing
Move IX: Signature

The study is focused on the moves which have been identified to have greater relevance for the study in terms of data provided, considering the space constrains, and those which have been found to be present on the great majority of the emails in the corpus. These six moves are: *Move II: salutation; Move V: providing information; Move VI: requesting; Move VII: pre-closing; Move VIII: closing; Move IX: Signature*. Data has been interpreted both in qualitative and quantitative terms, however, since it is a rather small-sized corpus, it could reveal tendencies, that although not generalisable, could illustrate points and provide significant insights to

contribute to further research on ELF and more precisely, on BELF language use. Consequently, the criterion to include any feature as relevant has been to observe whether it occurs in the corpus systematically and frequently. The analysis of these moves is also done in the light of Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Move II: Salutation

The second move, salutation, was found in 93% of the messages. As it could be observed in the table below, several forms of salutation have been found, including forms of salutation of conventional business correspondence such as *Dear Marketing Manager of Laboratorios A.*, *Dear Mr./Ms. (surname)* or similarly, *Dear (first name + surname)*. However, the use of first names versus surnames in this move is the dominant pattern and is more sensible to the context of the messages. In this sense, 49% of the messages include *Dear + (first name)*. The level of formality declines by the use of less conventional forms of correspondence salutation such as *Hi + (first name)* which is the case of 32% of the emails. Other instances of salutation found in the corpus can be seen in the table below (See *Table 3*).

Table 3.
Move II: Salutation

<i>Salutation</i>	%
Dear (first name)	49
Hi (first name)	32
Dear (first name + surname)	8
Dear Mr./Ms. + (surname)	3
No salutation	3
Dear Marketing Manager of Laboratorios A.	1
Hi (name), hi friend	1
Happy new year (first name)	1
Hello + (first name)	1
Good day	1

Naming practices in organizations are closely related to both positive and negative politeness. For example, Morand (1996) investigates naming in American companies in the light of Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory since it is considered a salient interpersonal event. The selection of an address form with title (Mr., Mrs., Ms) and surname shows negative politeness, a ritual of avoidance or deference, whereas an address with the first name comprises a positive ritual which signals a bond and interpersonal closeness. Reciprocal first-naming is thus seen to foster more egalitarian and collegial interpersonal relations (Kankaanranta, 2005).

This change from traditional formal business correspondence to more informal message exchange has increased the use of first names in the salutations of email messages, replacing titles and surnames which were traditionally employed in those of business letter discourse. Therefore, what can be perceived in the corpus samples is a new tendency towards the use of positive politeness in business correspondence naming practices accused by the main use of reciprocal first-naming, which implies an interpersonal closeness among the writers of the present emails. Finally, this may be due to some lack of register mastery in a language which is not their L1 or to the fact that many cultures with their own politeness principles have been interrelated and the writers of these emails tend to draw on their international business partners' written discourse features and apply them to their own writing.

4.2. Moves V and VI: Providing information and requesting

Move V (Providing information) and move VI (Requesting) are central in the furtherance of the company's activities. These two moves contain the most relevant information about the international business communication established among the writers of the emails in the corpus. In this sense among the 90 emails studied, 39% of the emails only include the providing information move, 8% of the emails just contain the requesting move and 49% of the emails contain both moves in combination as the central part of the email. The remaining 4% corresponds to emails in which neither move V, nor VI appear (they are for instance thanking emails).

The main aspect to be studied in these two central moves of the business emails is the use of BELF as a necessary tool for international business communication. The business-specific knowledge is said to be combined with some communicative strategies of international business shared by the business community. This «domain of use» is referred by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen as «The knowhow» (see The Knowhow Project

2006-2009) based on the notion of «global communicative competence» of international operating business professionals (GCC). (See *Figure 1*)



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

According to Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013), 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). It requires competence in the English «core», business-specific genres and communication strategies focusing on clarity, brevity, directness and politeness. In this case this study is going to draw on these writers approach to analyze competence in BELF and therefore strategies such as clarity, brevity, directness and politeness are going to be analyzed and exemplified drawing on the corpus compiled and also a list of English «core» vocabulary will be included.

First of all, this section is going to focus on a core vocabulary and phrases which appear in the central and most informative moves of the emails and which are frequently used when writing business letters or emails in English (see Emerson, 2004). Some of the most used business words and collocations in English among the emails in the corpus (see *Table 4*) have been extracted because they have been considered to have a high extent of use. All of them appeared on a frequency rate of the 3% throughout the 87% of the emails in the analyzed corpus.

Table 4.
Core Vocabulary Extracted from the Analyzed Corpus

<i>Single Words</i>	<i>Collocations</i>
Customer	Pro-forma invoice
Update	Summary report
Quot	To receive your order
Quotation	Pro-forma invoice
Catalogue	To place an order
Business	Potential business
Project	Manufacturing process
Requirements	To increase our cooperation
Client	Business manager
Feedback	Product brochure
Market	To request information
Benefits	To start sales
Supplier	To increase cooperation
Company	Delivery address
Sample	Arrange meetings
Demand	Payment conditions
Assistance	Product list
promote	Market research
Market	Technical information
Feedback	Business strategy
Distribution	Comment on
Price	To have feedback

This core vocabulary and phrases shared among the email writers shows that there is a tendency to use standardized or native vocabulary also by BELF users which enables the writers to be successful in these international encounters. According to Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013: 27) «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». Given that the email writers work for multinational companies where international transactions are ordinary dealings some «core» or pre-established shared vocabulary and structures are needed. Among this vocabulary some generic specialized terms such as «proforma invoice» or «quotation» and some verb collocations such as «to place an order» are also common in the Business English as Lingua Franca domain.

Secondly, among the *providing information moves* (move V) in the emails of the corpus several repeated structures have been observed. If we talk about clarity and brevity, short and simple structures, prescinding from subordination both in active and passive voice, have been found to be the tendency in all the emails, for instance: «I will give you a summary report in next week about silver products» (Rum3) / «Your order is planned to be sent this week via FedEx» (Sp-Rum). However, it has to be mentioned that the majority of the email writers used active voice in their emails which also signals a tendency towards a spoken discourse even though it is a written genre. Referring to directness, some sentences using imperative have been found, although the directness is reduced by the use of hedging (i.e.: «please»). For instance: «Please, start your production» (Ch7) / «Please quot me the minimum quantity of silver and gold colloidal powder» (Switz6). Finally, talking about politeness the use of negative politeness strategies such as the use of modal verbs, which are mostly used for suggestions of improvement, requirements to the business partner in order to minimize the threat or impersonalization talking about the whole company rather than the writer in particular not to personalize the threat, have been found present. As examples of these strategies we can observe the following: «We would like to place a new order of 1L silver citrate solution.» (South Africa6) / «Can you please shortly confirm that this will be possible and OK for you as well?»(Rus4). However, some instances of positive politeness strategies were used by the writers of the emails: Offer and promise: «I haven't heard of this company but rest assured I will find out what's happening.» (Eng2) / Exaggerate: «Perfect. I wish all customers were so organized as you are giving us time to prepare the orders.» (Isr6) / Be optimistic: «I imagine there is no problem from your side». (Ch2)

Finally, among the *Requesting moves* (move VI) of the emails in the corpus several examples of these business communication strategies have been found. Clarity, brevity and directness have been found to be quite important in the messages. This sense of directness is due to the use of positive politeness among the writers of the emails. Some examples of these features are the following: «Do you also deal with vet & medical device? If not, do you have any contact with these fields?»(Sp-Isr4) / «Do you have any new?» (Sp-Aust5) / «Any idea about price» (Sp-Isr5) Nevertheless, the writers of the present emails also use basic strategies of negative politeness, as they are: Be conventionally indirect: «I would like to ask you about feedback from your customers»; «It would be great to have your comments on this order to supply right on time». (Vietnam-Spain 4) / Hedging: «It is possible to have *kind* of activity report to see potential and projects»;

«please give us update quotation with delivery time» (China-Sp3) / Apologize: «I am not an expert on this. It is possible that you give me your opinion?»; «Sorry if I am not quick minded today.» (Sp-Switz3)

To conclude, BELF is important as a tool to get the work done while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship with business partners. Therefore, 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 or clarify information seem necessary for successful communication (Cogo & Dewey, 2006). These strategies are always done in the light of some politeness principles to apply in everyday individual's professional communication. Positive politeness is used to imply cooperation and sharing wants among the multinational business companies. However, this genre needs for some negative politeness strategies in order to minimize the imposition upon the business colleagues and assured common ground. In general terms, it has been noticed a major number of negative strategies given that negative politeness have been found present on a greater extent than positive politeness throughout the emails in the corpus. Negative politeness strategies were mostly observed on the requesting moves and where the imposition on the addressee was higher. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), «requests represent FTAs as they run contrary to the negative face wants of the addressee. Any rational individual will seek to avoid these FTAs, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat.» Finally, some cultural differences have been found depending on the writers' and addressees' backgrounds, being those emails exchanged with Asian partners the most standardized emails and those which show a bigger interpersonal distance.

4. 3. Moves VII and VIII: Closing and pre-closing

What is noticeable of this part of the analysis is the great variety of closing forms found in the corpus of emails which can be observed in the table below (see *Table 5*). As it can be seen in the table, 90% of the emails include move VIII, closing, as a relevant part of the message. However, the most striking aspect to highlight is the inclination to unconventional phrases which are far away from the conventional and rather formal phrases usually found in business letters or faxes such as «Yours sincerely or Yours faithfully.» By contrast, the closing phrases «Regards» (30%) and «Kind regards» (23%) are the most common forms of closing found in the corpus. Moreover, instead of «Yours sincerely» and «looking forward to

hearing from you soon», which would be the pre-established phrases, the variations «Sincerely yours» and «looking forward to hear from you soon» have been observed. These variable or unconventional phrases in the closing moves are a clear evidence of the linguistic variation of the moves towards more relaxed or less conventional English in business emails. Nevertheless, it could also be an intrinsic feature of BELF in the sense that given the stated background diversity of ELF users, more varied forms of expression are used (See *Table 5*).

Table 5.
Moves VII and VIII: Closing and Pre-closing Moves

<i>Closing</i>	%
Regards	30
Best regards	23
Thanks and regards	10
No closing	9
Thanks & Best regards	7
Sincerely yours	3
Kind regards	2
Have a nice evening	2
Thank you. Best regards	2
Thanks in advance and best regards	1
Looking forward to hear from you soon	1
Thanks for your reply. Regards	1
Thanks for your comments	1
Thanks for your helpful attitude	1
Thank you in advance for your prompt reaction	1
Thank you very much for your kind attention and support,	
Mr. (first name). Hope to have good news from you ASAP	1
Once again thank you very much	1
Hasta pronto. Feliz anio nuevo	1
Spasiba	1
Thanks again	1
I hope to have been of help. Regards	1

There are other instances of variation such as the use of a previous move before the closing move: *move VII: pre-closing* (Kankaanranta, 2005). Nevertheless, the examples below show that some pre-closings and closings phrases have merged to become just one, the closing of the message, fading in this way move VII in the 22% of the emails in the

corpus. This variation may happen because it is the pre-closing phrase which is missing (e.g.: «looking forward to hearing from you soon») or because it just merges with the closing part as for instance: «thanks & best regards» (7%). Nickerson (2000) suggests that the inclusion of the Pre-closing move is related to corporate politeness determined by the corporate distance between the participants and by the measure of compliance required from the receiver. In other words, the bigger the distance the more likely the writer is to use a pre-close; similarly, the more cooperation from the recipient is needed, the more likely it is that a pre-close is used. Therefore, the conclusion we can obtain from this pre-closing move elicitation in many of the emails in the corpus is that the corporate distance among the participants in this email communication is short, or in other words, there is a rather confident and close business relation among them.

Furthermore, this move is related to Kankaanranta's move III, Referring to previous contact (reference to an event in which the participants of the message had been involved) since one of the most common realizations of Move III were expressions of thanks for the preceding message or the information provided. The 31% of the closing phrases in the email corpus include an expression of thanks such «as thanks and regards» or «thanks for your helpful attitude.» According to Fairclough (1992), this type of manifest intertextuality which makes explicit references to previous (or future) communication, was most frequently used in Move III, although it also appeared in other moves. The move and the intertextuality it realized offered evidence of the ongoing connections between events and texts in the company. Nevertheless, since there is a repetition in the content of moves III (referring to previous contact) and VIII (closing), the participants in the email correspondence seem to avoid this repetition of the expression of thanks, probably considering it redundant and unnecessary and leaving it to the closing move in the 77% of the instances of the corpus. Among the remaining 23% of the emails we can find this repetition of the expression of thanks in both moves (moves III and VIII) in some emails and some other examples of emails whose unique function is to thank the recipient for his/her previous action or collaboration. The effect of this repetition on the thanking expressions seems to be a clear overuse of a positive politeness strategy by which the sender of the email tries to minimize the previous established imposition or requirements and it also acknowledges the lack of familiarity between those speakers and addressees if they are to be compared to those who omit this redundant move.

Finally, some instances of expressions written in other languages different from English or international code-switching have been found. For example, an Israeli sender's closing move was written in the language of the recipient who happened to be Spanish («Hasta pronto, Feliz año nuevo»). On the contrary, a Spanish email's closing move which was sent to a Russian colleague was written in Russian («Spasiba»). Furthermore, some instances have been found among German emails in which the closing moves were written both in German and English «Mit freundlichen Grüßen / Kind regards» and the same happens with Russian signatures «ЛЮБОВЬ ФИАЛКИНА / Lubov Fialkina» (see *Table 5*). The use of different languages in the emails, despite the fact that all the participants use English as lingua franca for multinational business purposes, shows the awareness of the diversity of communities, cultures and the individual cultural backgrounds. In other words, some participants make clear their awareness of the addressee's mother tongue which is different from English. In addition, other participants want to stress in some way their own mother tongue as a way of specifying their own linguistic and cultural background. In any case, the writers of the emails seem to be sure on the general understanding of the code-switched expression either because they are well-known greeting forms in different languages and they take their intelligibility for granted or because the precise phrasing has also been translated to the shared language, in this case English. However, it is obvious that there is a pragmatic intention in the use of English language, in the sense that it is perceived as a neutral and equal alternative, and what is possible most relevant, the only alternative to be mutually intelligible.

4.4. Move IX: Signature

In reference to move IX, it can be said that it is still an important and fixed move in this among the emails in the corpus, since this move has been found present in 81% of the messages in the corpus. This move makes also clear the previously mentioned dynamic of first name versus full name usage, as it has been illustrated in the salutation move. As it can be observed in the table below, in this case, 65% of the email messages were signed with the full name (name + surname) of the participants, with the curiosity in two messages written by Russian participants that are signed both in English and in Russian (see *Table 6*). 10% of the signature moves in the email corpus include the first name and the surname's initial (i.e.: Milly N.) or the two surname's initials and the first name following a colon (i.e.: K,R, Radi). What is noticeable from the analysis results is that 3% percent

of the messages were signed just with the first name (i.e.: Roni). According to Kankaaranta (2005: 295) «the reason for the frequent use of salutations and closings, with first names in particular, might be the writers' desire to contribute to cordial relations between the employees». Finally, in some messages the signature is present by means of the use of a preprogrammed signature. Therefore, as it has been present on the great majority of emails even in the shorter ones

Table 6.
Move VI: Signature

Signature	%
Name + surname: «A***** Cabria»	63
First name: «Roni»	13
Name + surname initial: «Milly N.»	10
No signature	9
Surname initial, first name: «KR, Radi»	3
Name + surname in English and in his/her mother tongue: «Любовь Фиалкина / L***** Fialkina»	2

The frequent application of the Salutation and Signatures moves seems also somehow repetitious but they still seem to have a specific function, which prevent the email writers from prescind of them (As was pointed before, these moves, with the use of first names in particular, contribute to the relational orientation in the messages. (Kankaaranta, 2005). In this sense, the email examples in the corpus show that the introductory and the last moves in the emails depend on the relationship of sender and recipient. If the participants involved have a longer co-operative relationship, which means that previous emails have been sent and their business relation seem to be consolidated in the business, their salutation and closing moves are going to be less conventional and informal, thus becoming more cordial with the other person. By contrast, if the participants in the email communication have an incipient business relationship or this is the first contact between them their introductory and ending moves are going to be more formal and conventional, therefore keeping a more distant relationship. This point was also illustrated by Kankaaranta (2005) who pointed out regarding her data that given the absence of any guidance on the email structure for the email writers to follow, the reason for the

frequent use of salutations and signatures, with first names in particular, might be the writers' desire to contribute to amicable relations. Finally, this would show that BELF users seem to be in general aware of register issues when using English for commercial purposes and that pragmatic competence is necessary for BELF communication to be effective.

5. CONCLUSION

Given that the purpose of this analysis was to study the variation patterns of international business emails written in English as a lingua franca towards a more informal, co-operative and goal-oriented nature in terms of the different communicative strategies used and their structural moves variation, some conclusions have been reached. A pragmatic view of the language choice characterized by a high degree of cooperativeness and a consensual style can be noticed in the interactions. Conversational and unconventional style are some of the most visible features to describe the emails in the corpus. In this sense, personalization, involvement and good rapport among the email ELF writers can be noticed.

Furthermore, the email technological advances have also contributed to modifying the discursive practices from a «formal» register to an «informal» message exchange, thanks to this fast computer-based communicative medium. For the same reason, in terms of structure, even in most cases the emails are framed around 5 essential moves, the email writers seem to avoid reiterations or repetitive moves such the *pre-closing move* proposed by Kankaanranta (2005). Therefore, the emails lean to be short in extension since the information is direct, brief and condensed and this may be due both to the channel of communication and because of the consensual features used by BELF users. Brevity and directness are communicative strategies that can be observed in the central core of the emails, the requesting and providing information moves, among two other communicative strategies proposed by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) in their study about «Competence in BELF»: an English core vocabulary frequently used by BELF users and diverse politeness principles (as proposed by Brown and Levinson, 1987). What can be highlighted from the politeness strategy used in BELF business communication is a direct-issue oriented discourse based on a rather cordial relationship among sender and recipient to abridge the physical distance and possible cultural differences, while never discarding negative politeness strategies to lessen the imposition upon the business colleague.

This need for communicative competence in BELF is essential to be successful in international business encounters among multinational companies, given that English language is the main instrument to get the work done while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship. To achieve so, the managers in charge of commercial relations tend to show *involvement* when writing emails to international business partners which contrast with the notion of *detachment* which typically characterize a writer's relationship to the reader (Chafe, 1982).

To conclude, English as lingua franca used in business emails is highly situation-specific, dynamic, idiosyncratic and tolerant of different variations and it has been proved to be a neutral and pragmatic language among both native English speakers and non-native speakers. Accordingly, it has been shown that even though there is a tendency to follow standardized email correspondence, there are certain variation patterns that may help BELF users to conform their message depending on the recipient's culture and interpersonal relation in terms of formulaic features, text length or politeness strategies used and these results seem to be similar to the ones obtained by Giménez-Moreno and Skorczynska (2013) in their study. Furthermore, BELF users do not neglect the diversity of communities, cultures and different backgrounds among International business workers, as it has been proved by the use of different mother languages in the emails apart from English. Finally, all these aspects can be considered as essential requirements for a business practitioner's professional success when involved in international business email communication in English.

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