Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

Business English as a Lingua Franca: Pedagogical Implications

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2016

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ABSTRACT

English as a Lingua Franca has contributed to the breaching of international language barriers, affecting almost every aspect of our life. Business is not an exception, thus its users have also take advantage of the use of English to create a common bond among the business community. It resulted in the coinage of the term BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca), which as any other ESP, encompasses certain types of vocabulary or communication strategies that are shared by BELF users. However, what is of utmost relevance is the called "business know-how", an indispensable requisite any successful BELF user must be in possession of. For this reason, BELF users demand a type of English teaching that cannot be fulfilled merely with the traditional general English teaching. Therefore, teachers need to look for more specific and useful ways to teach the kind of English BELF users will encounter within their environment and thus, need to master. This paper explores some possibilities that could be suitable when designing a BELF-oriented lesson.

1 INTRODUCTION

The world has undergone a great globalization in the last few years, the English language having one of the major roles in the process, since it has made international communication possible and is gradually helping to the elimination of some language barriers. Originally there was no questioning that English belonged to the countries where it is the mother tongue, especially Great Britain and United States; therefore, they were the sole reference to follow and imitate. However, with the increasing number of speakers of English as a Second or Foreign language, the non-native speakers by far outnumber native ones, thus creating a debate on who owns the language nowadays.

When the English language is employed in interactions between persons who share neither a common language nor a linguistic background, it is given the name of "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF), which has been defined by Seidlhofer (2004) as a "contact language". The range of domains where we can find ELF is wide, since its dimensions reach almost every aspect of life. However, we can highlight the main contexts for ELF research, which include school settings, tourism, academia, business and the Internet. English is also the lingua franca of international business, which has led to the coinage of the term "Business English as a Lingua Franca" (BELF). Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) define BELF as follows:

English is used as a 'neutral' and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not 'non-native speakers' or 'learners' (2005: 403-4).

In this work I focus on the role of ELF in international business contexts and on the competences that users of ELF in these contexts need to develop in order to achieve successful communication. The purpose of the study is to derive pedagogical implication for BELF-oriented teaching.

I will first discuss briefly some issues related to English as a Lingua Franca, mainly the competences of successful users of ELF, research projects carried out and the ELF model based on awareness-raising, identity and content rather than form. I will then explain the main features of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) and its environments; thirdly, I will talk about the skills and strategies its users should possess, and also the problems they usually face. In the fourth part, I will deal with how the teaching of BELF could be oriented, the possible materials to use and the role of teachers. Finally, I will present an example of lesson plan that I developed based on all the research carried out in the process of making this essay.

2 ELF AND ELF USERS

Despite what the majority of people may think, ELF is not a variety of English. It is defined by its function, which consists in acting as the medium of communication for speakers of different languages who make use of English within international and multilingual environments. As Hülmbauer, Böhringer, and Seidlhofer (2008) state, ELF is "defined functionally by its intercultural communication rather than formally by its reference to native-speakers norms" (p. 27). This means that even though most non-native users of English tend to strictly follow traditional native norms within an ELF context, these norms are not essential for intelligibility since ELF users are expected to possess enough resources to create communication.

Regarding what competent users of ELF are, we could define them as "highly skilled communicators who make use of their multilingual resources […] and prioritize successful communication over narrow notions of correctness" (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011, p. 284). In other words, the traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner who aimed at the imitation of native models has lost relevance in favour of becoming an independent user of English, who possesses the appropriate communication strategies that allow intercultural communication to happen. Obviously, they recur to the native norms, especially in terms of grammar, even though that is not the main objective of ELF. This is what Seidlhofer (2004) called a process of "destandardization" (p. 212), meaning that users of English do not always control grammar rules, or their pronunciation does not conform to any recognized norm, although they are able communicate without causing misunderstandings, which is essentially the main goal of ELF. Later on I will discuss in more detail the communication strategies and accommodation skills that successful users of ELF employ.

Brutt-Griffer (1998) regards ELF users as "agents of language change", taking the role always assigned to native speakers as norm-providers. In spite of this, concerning the teaching of English, the traditional model provided by native-speakers has reached such a prestige among both teachers and learners that it seems truly complicated to picture a framework where the basic assumption of ELF-oriented teaching, i.e. the rejection of native models or the focus on content instead of grammar rules, could be accepted easily. A great number of people still perceive ELF as a "deviation from ENL norms and described in terms of error or fossilization" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 213), considering it as an "everything-goes" variation or a simplified version of the language without any official recognition, due to the lack of corrections towards what has always been considered correct according to native models.

Because of the low recognition ELF had, Seidlhofer (2004) asserted that research done on this issue would lead to a better understanding and acceptance of ELF, referring to the projects ELFA (English as a Lingua Franca in Academia) and VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English). Both of them are mainly based on spoken data taken from English users coming from several countries, and whose aim is to capture the "negotiation of meaning in the production and reception of utterances, thus facilitating observations regarding mutual intelligibility among interlocutors" (p. 215). Thanks to them, it has been proved that neither grammar nor pronunciation mistakes lead to the loss of intelligibility. Jenkins (2000) presented the features, mainly of pronunciation, that she gathered from interactions between users of ELF: the "Lingua Franca Core". This LFC is based on which errors actually lead to misunderstandings or miscommunication, and which ones did not cause such problems. Among other conclusions, it is worth highlighting that the mastery of typical English sounds or features[1] has proven to be unnecessary for successful communication, for it is usually one of the main and particularly difficult objectives when learning English as a Foreign Language. The reason why the "Lingua Franca Core" was developed was not to impose a pronunciation model for ELF but, instead, as a set of guidelines important for intelligibility and the degree of accommodation required. After all, the development of a variation of English that can be accepted worldwide as the new reference is, without any doubt, a delicate and complicated task, since there is usually not an agreement on what Standard English is.

ELF researches look for the "used forms that differ from inner circle forms without causing communication problems" (Jenkins 2006, p. 161): they believe a monolithic variety of English does not exist, but rather that any person who takes part in international

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[1] "Typical English" sounds are considered, among others, the th-sounds /θ/ and /ð/ and the dark l allophone [ɫ]. Concerning features, we could name vowel quality, pitch direction, stress-timing or weak forms.

communication ought to be familiarized with certain forms that are widely used and understood across several groups and backgrounds. Therefore we must question the hegemony of native-speakers norms and start emphasizing the legitimacy of every variation arriving from the outer and even expanding circles[2]. For this purpose we have to highlight the necessity for awareness-raising, something that Jenkins (2006) proposed to carry out through the exposure to a wide range of varieties, the discussion of the reasons why English spread, the development of diverse standards and the relationship between language and identity; thus, conducting learners towards a pluricentric model that allows each one to "reflect his or her own sociolinguistic reality" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 173) where every variety or accent is as valid as the rest. In addition, Sifakis (2008) defended that English should be used as "a neutral and non-threatening medium of self-expression" (p. 233) since the methodology of ELF respects the identity of tis users and does not impose native models as the only valid ones. It is also possible that ELF users find it difficult to identify with native models, and even more, some of them could feel discouraged for not being able to reach the imitation of native speaker models.

3 BUSINESS ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (BELF)

BELF is used among people who do not share a common mother tongue within business environments. Therefore, it acquires a certain complexity since it is composed by factors such as "interpersonal relations, choice of media and channels of communication, and patterns of organizing messages" (Zhang, 2007, p. 406) that only belong this area.

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[2] According to Kachru's circles theory, 'inner circles' refer to those countries where English is the mother tongue (UK, USA,..); 'outer circles', those in which it is the second language (India, Singapore,…); and 'expanding circles' countries, where English is merely studied as foreign language.

Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) disassociate BELF and native norms when they state that there should be "no more benchmarking to native speakers but rather to an effective business communicator no matter what his/her native tongue" (p. 22), meaning that any BELF user can become a successful businessperson when communicating in English. Furthermore, Nickerson (2005) considered English as "an intrinsic part of communication in multinational settings and a fact of life for many business people" (pp. 367-368) due to the process of internationalization business is going through. Regarding particularly business settings we could mention some such as international events, face-to-face meetings, interactions via telephone and email, or even interpersonal relations within a company. As for the most common relations found in these environments, Zhang (2007) highlighted the following three: business–customer, business–business, and those between different departments of the same company.

Going back to the conceptualization of BELF, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) say that "the "B" is of utmost importance" (p. 205), since it acts as the factor all users of BELF have in common, implying certain roles, jobs, issues and genres; not forgetting about the buying-selling negotiation as the main goal of communication in the majority of cases. We can also assert that BELF content-oriented and requires domain knowledge: due to this reason BELF should be an integral part of business knowledge, based on accommodation practices and communication skills, where native-like correctness is not regarded as indispensable. Therefore, as Louhiala-Salminen already affirmed back in 1996,"business communication" should be treated as a professional skill in itself, for its relevance nowadays is as great as any other due to its use for transmitting a corporate image that increases the prestige of the company.

Similarly to ELF, BELF is also characterized by its focus on content rather than form, although this conceptualisation of the English to be used in international business

context was different years ago: native-speakers were seen as the reference to imitate. But with the passing of time and the progressive internationalization of business, BELF made a shift to content and native-like competence became no longer the desired goal. In fact, many BELF users have reported that natives cause the more misunderstandings due to their strong accents or varieties, and metaphors or colloquialisms they tend to use, which are usually not understood by non-natives speakers (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011); not only that, it was also proposed that native speakers should be trained urgently in accommodation skills to allow more fluent communication with them.

Seidlhofer (2004) wrote that proficiency "only accounts for part of the success or failure of communication" (p. 222); therefore, as long as the message is transmitted correctly, following the native norms is not essential. Indeed, communication is considered successful when all participants are able to understand and make themselves understood, demonstrating they control the essential strategies and skills of any BELF user, that I will explain in the next paragraph; or in words of Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010), "success" makes reference "to the extent to which the goals of a particular communicative event are achieved" (p. 205).

On account of some facts above mentioned (i.e. the particular environments of business, the accommodation skills and communication strategies needed by BELF users and the existing distance from the native norms), we may conclude that BELF is defined in a more precise way as "highly situation-specific, dynamic, idiosyncratic and consequently, inherently tolerant of different varieties" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2013, p. 28).

4   USERS OF BELF

In section 2 I have briefly discussed the features of effective users of ELF, but even though the basic characteristics of BELF users are the same, we should now pay attention to the specific features of users of ELF in business contexts. Due to the tasks BELF users have to carry out in their daily work, what is highly relevant is efficiency in communication to assure that the message is understood. It has been shown that the kind of language used does not necessary involve full native speaker grammatical competence for functioning appropriately within these environments. For instance, Jenkins (2000) found that features such as weak forms, connected speech, word stress, stress-timed rhythm and intonation, are not crucial for intelligibility and do not cause misunderstandings. Cavalheiro (2012) also asserted that "non-conformity to form does not impede functional effectiveness, it can actually enhance it" (p. 10). That is, most of the times 'nativeness' is not desirable, since it does not assure mutual intelligibility and moreover, freedom from the native forms allows the users to follow other type of strategies that lead to effectivity. For this reason, BELF users should become skilled in communication strategies, in other words, they have to be "English-knowing bilinguals" and "learn internationally acceptable English" (Ur, 2009, pp. 4-5). Thus the relevance of grammar, although still present, is not considered the main goal of BELF users.

In addition, BELF users should have the capacity to "compensate for their weakness in one area with the knowledge or skill in another" (Cavalheiro, 2012, p. 16). We must not forget that English is a way of communication among international users, and the fact that a user does not have native mastery of English does not mean that he/she cannot carry out and complete the job.

In the next section I will explain the essential elements of BELF: business know-how, communication strategies, and accommodation skills. Furthermore, I will discuss

the main problems and difficulties that BELF users face. This section is based on previous research on BELF, e.g. Edwards (2000), Zhu (2004), Jenkins (2006), Zhang (2007), Kankaaranranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2009, 2010, 2013), Zagan-Zelter and Zagan-Zelter (2010), and Cavalheiro (2012).

4.1 BUSINESS KNOW-HOW

An exclusive feature of BELF users that all of them should own and be aware of is "business know-how". "Business know-how" is a competence within business knowledge that includes not only knowledge of the particular domain of use, but also the wide range of goals and strategies shared by the community of this area. BELF is goal-driven, its users employ English as a way to achieve their goals, conditioned by the jobs they have, which are most likely buyer or seller. The type of buying-selling relationships implicitly includes the ability to persuade, which every BELF user needs to master if they want to succeed in communication; on account of this, the type of language that effective BELF speakers use, according to Kankaanranta (2009), is characterised by directness, politeness, explicitness and especially clarity, in an attempt to achieve efficiency. Rather than native-like accuracy, what is important is a less formal, more straight-forward language that allows better understanding among the participants.

"Business know-how" also encompasses the ability "to build networks", and "proactively consider future risks and challenges" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, p. 205). Firstly, relational networks are highly complex because its participants tend to be unequal in terms of market positions, power relations and access to knowledge, as said by Zhang (2007); thus BELF users must pay close attention and discover which role they must assume, so they can not only participate in the communication, but also achieve their goals within it by accommodating their language in the most appropriate way depending on the situation.

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Furthermore, users of BELF have to deal constantly with information of different nature and sources, either written or spoken, so they must possess the ability to interpret, integrate and summarize it, especially when gathering information through interviews, surveys, data bases, etc. When it comes to written messages, users also need to extract relevant information, often in order to write reports related to the information received.

Another usual scenario in business are meetings. When in a meeting or reunion, users need the ability of communicating effectively, but they also need to identify which attitudes and opinions each participant has, in order to know which position to adopt. In other cases, users have to contribute to team effort by analysing information "to identify major factors contributing to a problem or identify the sub-issues surrounding a main issue and their relationships" (Zhu, 2004, p. 128) so best results and solutions are achieved. On account of this, they need the ability to evaluate solutions and procedures; support decisions and opinions with evidence, for example, presenting research done or conclusions from previous experiences; and propose strategies that could be useful to reach success.

4.2 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Communication strategies (e.g. asking for clarifications, repeating utterances, paraphrasing, supportive listening and confirmation) are frequently used in ELF contexts. They all have the objective of creating a comfortable environment for all participants in the communication and also verify that its goals are achieved. Focusing on business-specific skills, Zagan-Zelter and Zagan-Zelter (2010) mention three strategies as essential to become BELF users: presentation, negotiation and meeting skills. Firstly, presentation skills are the one used when introducing new projects to the company, products to clients, exposition of results and company performance, or similar situations.

The second specific skills are the ones related to negotiation, which involves the language used to persuade the other part and achieve one's objective. As mentioned above, the features that are associated with persuasion are directness, politeness, explicitness, brevity and clarity (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2009; 2010; 2013). All of them are considered as crucial for reaching effectiveness, because they help the message to be more accessible for all participants, for example, by using a simpler language and avoiding metaphors or colloquialisms that may not be understood by everyone; the message, therefore, is expressed as explicitly and directly as possible so the interlocutors can get the ideas regardless of their level of proficiency. As for politeness, there is no need to be extremely polite but rather, this concept refers to the diversity of power relationships and backgrounds that are usually found within business environments, thus meaning that every person has to be treated as equal.

Finally, meeting skills and participation strategies are also essential for BELF users. When users have to attend international or company meetings, they will not only need to listen and understand what is happening around them, but also must know how to participate in those conversations to express their opinions, points of view and ideas. Users should also work on their self-confidence to avoid being underestimated or just not participating at all. Meetings have specific mechanics, which is the reason why the turn-taking strategy must be assimilated by BELF users, which refers to knowing when it is the right time to intervene; it also "has the potential of subverting the relative power of the institutional participants" (Zhang, 2007, p. 404), meaning that participants are able to change the situation to their advantage by using turn-taking correctly.

4.3 ACCOMMODATION SKILLS

This competence implies several issues: users must be able to identify the situation in which they are in every moment so they can adapt their speech to the level of the other

users, also taking into account factors such as cultural differences. Due to globalisation, the great majority of business interactions take place among people with different cultural backgrounds; this also leads us to understand BELF as a language that has no cultural basis, as Louhiala-Salminen (1996) state, used to express only the content and subject matters. Kankaanranta (2009) also emphasised the cultural neutrality needed, claiming that BELF users should focus on their shared business background to facilitate developing cultural sensitivity, respect and tolerance, not only towards different costumes or cultural features, but also towards local varieties and accents, which according to Jenkins (2006) should be encouraged. On account of this, we can affirm that BELF users need to be aware of the amount of varieties and accept them as equally valid, and create communication in a comfortable environment.

Even though nowadays the many different varieties and accents are widely accepted in BELF contexts, its users have to be aware of the accommodation skills needed in order to create successful communication. Users are most likely to differ in several aspects such as status, market position, level of English or knowledge of other cultural backgrounds. Therefore BELF users must identify which linguistic choices they have to make in every situation depending on the relationship between the meeting participants and their positions. Due to the fact that practices of business do not belong to a specific cultural community, there should be a greater emphasis on abilities of adaptation to other variants, negotiation of meaning and communication mediation. That is, BELF users need to develop "Multicultural Competence": "the knowledge and skills in managing communicative situations with representatives of different national, organizational, and professional cultures" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2013, p. 28).

Those skills are related to a strategy that Takatsuka (2008) called "convergence", consisting in adjusting the speech to make it similar to the one of interlocutors.

"Convergence" is based on two types of accommodation: productive, concerning the ability to adjust the pronunciation and grammatical structures used to facilitate understanding, together with the avoidance of certain native speaker forms (idioms, metaphors, etc) that could not be understood by the majority of the audience. The second type refers to receptive accommodation, based on the respect and tolerance that users of BELF have to develop and show towards varieties and accent differences. Users do not only have to be aware and accept different varieties, but also develop the ability to comprehend them, disregarding possible inaccuracies and errors by their interlocutors.

Those speakers who are less proficient in English could feel discouraged by the ones they consider more proficient. As a consequence, regardless of their level of proficiency, all BELF users must be aware of the strategies available to help mutual intelligibility. Jenkins (2000) mentions, among others, the following important strategies for mutual intelligibility: (i) speaker's strategies: gauging interlocutors' linguistic repertoires in order to adapt one's speech as much as possible to the one shared and understood among the audience; paraphrasing and self-repair, which consists in transmitting the same content using different expressions or words, usually simpler than the ones previously employed; repetition: if the interlocutors demonstrate or report lack of comprehension, users can repeat what they have just said including a slower velocity in speech; (ii) listeners' accommodation skills: signalling non-comprehension, in other words, asking for repetition in a polite manner so the speaker does not feel uncomfortable, waiting for the appropriate time to so in order to avoiding interruptions. Users also need to make use of supportive listening, to report understanding throughout the meeting in order to increase users' confidence.

4.4 PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Even though users of BELF are usually aware of which skills and strategies they need to possess and utilise, when it comes to real life situations there is a high chance of facing difficulties. There is a great amount of BELF users who at some point have reported to feel frustrated due to several causes, which include limitation of language competence, not enough adequate words and the feeling of lower efficacy in communication. In terms of communication difficulties, they could be categorised into three types: comprehension, the most commonly reported especially when communication with native speakers or with users that speak with a less familiar variety; production, due to vocabulary limitations and lack of self-confidence; and management of interaction, when trying to take the floor or express a point of view appropriately.

Rogerson-Revell (2007) wrote about the problems most often reported by users of BELF in their work environments, and created a classification that differs from the one mentioned above; it consists of three types of problems: organisational, language barrier, cultural barrier. Organisational difficulties are those that users face due to a limited range of resources, which leads to less and unequal participation. Users who are most prone to having this type of difficulties are those less familiarised with essential communication strategies. Language barrier is related to a lack of vocabulary, plus the "difficulty of having a wide range of linguistic competence" (p. 112) since it requires time and experience until users are more used to employing and understanding a great amount of vocabulary and varieties. The last type has to do with culture and the differences in working style that are usually found in international events. Each user of BELF is used to a certain manner of carrying out a job and has behaviours that are mostly found in his/her usual environment. Therefore, when encountering someone who does not share that same

style, there is a lack of awareness which in the worst cases could lead to unpleasant misunderstandings.

Another cause of communication breakdown discussed by ELF researchers is "unilateral idiomacity". It appears in situations where "not being familiar with certain vocabulary items can give rise to problems, particularly when speakers lack paraphrasing skills" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 220). The most frequent cases are of "unilateral idiomacity" are the ones related to idioms or metaphors which non-native speakers tend to translate literally to English, leading to the creation of an expression without any meaning at least for those who do not share the same background as the speaker; moreover, and most importantly, poorly translated items could cause misunderstandings if they are interpreted in wrong ways.

5   PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BELF

In this last section I discuss the pedagogical implications of BELF, how it could be taken to the classroom in order to create successful learners and future users of BELF. As any other type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), BELF is composed of particular elements that should be taken into account when it comes to teaching. Thus, I will discuss some of these elements: needs analysis, syllabus design, type of communication, materials selection and development, (Zagan-Zelter et al., 2010), and the role of teachers. Finally, I will present two lesson plans (part of a unit plan) that I have designed taking into account the research done for this paper.

5.1   NEEDS ANALYSIS AND SYLLABUS DESIGN

The first aspect to consider when designing a BELF course is what learners require and expect from the course. Thus, the syllabus has to be adapted to the students' needs, paying attention to their necessities, lacks, wants and learning needs. For that reason

"student input is crucial to the successful design of an ESP course" (Edwards, 2000, p. 292). A BELF course should focus on the following aspects: business knowledge, such as meetings skills, strategies for negotiation and decision-making processes, plus the improvement of speaking confidence. These skills are of special relevance in business "in terms of individual advancement and organisational achievement" (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, p. 118). The second focus deals with the rejection of the native speaker models and awareness-raising for different cultures and accents, which is important due to the huge internationalisation of business nowadays. In this case, deviations from native models have to be considered as innovations or possible options. Takatsuka (2008) concludes that BELF learners must aim for "realistic and attainable" intelligibility among non-native speakers, thus, he suggests a more relaxed core focused on what is crucial for mutual intelligibility. Kankaanranta also suggests that "BELF speakers might well benefit from training in each other's specific discourse practices" (2009, p. 7), meaning that it is not necessary to learn only within the classroom, but BELF users can improve their skills through observation and imitation of other users, whether they are native speakers or not. Thirdly, the syllabus should include the teaching of formal grammar, although in a more relaxed way, plus the introduction of both specialist and general vocabulary so that BELF users are able to deal with the main aspects of business, as presented by Edwards (2000), which are: written skills and reading comprehension, when it comes to composing and reading emails or reports; and listening, whether users are found in professional environments such as international events or meetings, or simply for 'small talk' among workmates.

Some researchers have encountered a huge mismatch between what is taught in class and what BELF users use in real life, which leads to the need to redesign the syllabus (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; Nickerson, 2005; Zagan-Zelter et al., 2010). When English

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started to get relevance in terms of international communication, the most frequently used means of communication among business people was the fax. At that time, the syllabus of Business English courses was based on written correspondence of sample letters, translation and set phrases "instead of focusing on improving students' writing as a process" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996, p. 39). Thus when users of Business English faced real life situations they were unable to deal with them. However, with the passing of time, faxes may have gotten obsolete, but many Business English courses continue to focus on teaching what has little use in real life. Another relevant issue, pointed out by Zagan-Zelter (2010) is the vocabulary that needs to be taught. They realised that business students were taught with an "emphasis on specific vocabulary related to their major study area" (2010, p. 248) in their respective Business English courses. However, there is a huge percentage of business students that end up working in a different field to the one they have a major in. Therefore, Business English courses should not be so field-centred and make an attempt of covering all possible areas of business so BELF users can face any future challenge.

As happens with any other ELF course, evaluation is a delicate issue since correctness and grammatical accuracy is not the main goal of learning. Therefore, when it comes to deciding whether students have become successful BELF users or not, a more flexible type of evaluation is needed. During the experiment carried out by Edwards (2000), he employed two types of evaluation: the first one consisted in an oral explanation and discussion of issue of certain complexity, related to the business area, which is a useful way to verify the level of efficiency in communication. The second type consisted of a combination of tests and written reports, which helps to gather information not only about the written proficiency of students, but also serves as feedback to the course: through reports learners can discuss if the course fulfilled their expectations and what

they would include or change. In addition, specific rubrics could be created based on which 'success factors' are used to evaluate BELF users; moreover, thanks to the rubrics, students will have access to a written account of their performance during the course (Kankaanranta et al., 2013).

5.2 TYPE OF COMMUNICATION

The next element of discussion concerns the type of communication Business English courses should focus on. Overall, it is based on the idea of flexible and content-focused language, plus the development of specific communication strategies and self-confidence. The most widespread objective of English courses is to get specific language certificates (Cambridge, TOELF,…), for which examinations boards require correctness, thus leading to English courses being based on setting "unrealistic notions of achieving perfect communication through 'native-like' proficiency" (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 228) instead of focusing on intelligibility. By contrast, BELF-oriented courses ought to adopt a teaching approach that favours more relaxed, non-format, simpler and straight-forward language, since this is the way business people usually communicate, both in written and spoken environments. As Takatsuka (2008) asserted, ELF users (thus also BELF users) do not require full native speaker grammatical competence (phonological, lexical, syntactical) to function appropriately within international contexts. What should be the main focus regarding language is to create a shared and non-threatening language among the increasing multilingual and multicultural business community that reinforces the communicatively efficient use of English (Sikafis, 2008).

How to achieve efficient communication then? There is one main issue that is seen as essential for this achievement: the development of communication strategies. Since "communication strategies are tightly intertwined with proficiency in English" (Kankaanranta et al., 2010, p. 204), the focus within the classroom has to be oriented

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towards how formal grammar actually functions and which should be their applications in communication "rather than insisting on imposed forms" (Cavalheiro, 2012, p. 15). This means that without following the formal grammar rules there would be no communication due to the inconsistency of sentences, although it is not necessary to learn the huge existing amount of rules, but rather, pay careful attention to the most often employed techniques that have greater relevance on account of communication. Regarding specific strategies, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) discuss two interesting issues: BELF users have to be "flexibly competent", meaning they must be capable of analysing the situations they are found within, or will have to face in the future, and act accordingly to them; the second is related to the strategic use of language, which has to do with accommodation skills in terms of adapting to the others' knowledge level. In addition to this two, Nickerson (2005) discussed the importance of raising students' awareness, which can be done by teaching how to build solidarity and common ground through the use of language choices.

Another point to take into account is the improvement of self-confidence, as was suggested by Edwards (2000) and Zagan-Zelter et al. (2010). It was detected that many BELF users, regardless of their level of English proficiency, are unable to engage in conversations due to their fear of committing grammatical mistakes, thus losing the opportunity to participate.

5.3 MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

The choice of materials should be more flexible than in the traditional models. When searching for useful materials, teachers should pay attention to two features that will make them more suitable for a Business English classroom: neutrality of culture and accents and authenticity of texts. It has been already said that Business English does not belong to any culture except the one of business itself, thus, it seems almost obvious that

no specific culture should be taught within the classroom. Seidlhofer (2004) claimed that the cross-cultural nature of English and its varieties had to be recognized as equal, which is an issue that should be included in the syllabus. For doing so, the materials chosen ought to be oriented towards creating a distance from the native ones, so that learners can feel more identified with the type of language they are learning and will have to employ in their daily life as BELF users; moreover, this kind of non-native material also favours the development of their own identity as competent BELF users, thus avoiding the possible demotivation for not reaching 'nativeness' (Jenkins et al., 2011)

The approach adopted in BELF classes has to be pluricentric: the use of different varieties has to be encouraged since it helps students to "project their identities and protect their language rights in international communication" (Takatsuka, 2008, p. 82). Many researchers have realised that native varieties like British or American English are not promotors of international understanding (Edwards, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2004; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Takatsuka, 2008; Kankaanranta et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2011), thus materials should not be based solely on them as main reference or norm-providers. This is the case of textbooks, which do not usually include any variety apart from these two; for this reason, Business English courses are more prone towards the rejection of textbooks in favour of authentic texts from international journals or newspapers of several origins. Furthermore, it is interesting to give the students some freedom when it comes to choosing texts for the classroom, as suggested by Edwards (2000): learners can select those texts they find of interest so they can be presented in the classroom, which will lead to an increase in motivation.

As for activities, a large range of options is available, so teachers will have to decide which ones will be more beneficial for the students or give them the chance to choose through a needs and expectations analysis. Some of the following techniques

(Edwards, 2000; Zagan-Zelter et al., 2010) are based on the use of authentic material, that learners are given so they can put into practice skimming and detailed comprehension, identification of new vocabulary and guessing its meaning in contexts, plus the search of most used structures. Other type of exercises include the involvement of the student in a simulated real-life scenario, which are activities that also help to foster the students' confidence, as for example case studies (Almagro and Perez, 2004), role-plays, problem-based learning and simulations (Kankaanranta et al., 2013). Thanks to these activities BELF users can not only improve their self-confidence, but also have the chance to practice and enhance communication skills, such as critical listening, inferencing and synthesis, use and learn specific vocabulary and become more active, responsible and independent users. Apart from this, teachers must not forget to expose BELF users to contextualized examples, either written or spoken, among users that are able to communicate efficiently within multicultural and multilingual environments (Sifakis, 2008).

Zhang (2007) proposed that courses should be composed by three elements: lectures, seminars and computer-assisted learning. Lectures are indispensable for transmitting basic information and present topics of interest related to the course; for Business English courses, it could be interesting to deal with awareness-raising topics, for example, discussions about the reasons for the spread of English, or the relationship between language and identity (Jenkins, 2006). The next step is carried out in seminars sessions, when students are given the opportunity to manifest their understanding and awareness over the topics discussed previously in lectures; in order to complement them, it would be interesting to invite business professionals and experts, who are also BELF users, so that they can provide their points of view, explain their job practices and share personal experiences. Thanks to this, students will feel more encouraged to continue with

the course. The last part has to do with computer-assisted learning, which briefly consists in helping the students to understand more schematic business procedures that are difficult to deal with during lectures.

5.4 THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Teachers also need a mindset shift to teach Business English courses. It is of utmost importance that teachers demonstrate their willingness to engage in BELF teaching, knowing that there is not much research done in the field and they will have the responsibility to make new attempts at integrating it; in other words, they are required to possess an optimistic attitude (Sifakis, 2008), due to the many problems they may face, not only concerning the methodology of the courses itself, but also those coming from students, who might still be sceptical. As said by Seidlhofer (2004), teachers have to interiorize a "more comprehensive education which enables them to judge the implications of the ELF phenomenon […] and to adapt their teaching to the particular requirements of their learners" (p. 228)

In addition, teachers also have the aim of clarifying misunderstandings, whether they are related to the classroom itself or the whole phenomenon of BELF. Cavalheiro (2012) suggested that teachers have to deal with two aspects: theoretical issues, such as language awareness, communication strategies, intercultural communication and the diversity of language use; the second one is more of a micro-level, which has to do with how the language can be incorporated in a framework of communication, and support the creative potential of students.

Furthermore, in Business English courses we encounter another dilemma: "how much knowledge of economics does an English teacher need in order to be able to teach such a course?" (Zagan-Zelter et al., 2010, p. 247). After all, Business English courses do

not merely aim at achieving proficiency in the English language itself, but rather at getting used to the whole business know-how and the communicative strategies needed so BELF users become successful in terms of work related business issues. Therefore, the level of disciplinary knowledge of teachers is a relevant aspect to take into account, because teachers must be versatile professionals who also "should be familiar with the specialized area of their students" (Almagro et al., 2004) so they can be of better help for the learners; thus, it would be interesting to offer BELF teachers a specific training in business contexts, if possible, in order to assure a better understanding of the area in which BELF users are found.

5.5 BELF: Two illustrating lesson plans

To illustrate the pedagogical implications, I have designed two lesson plans, which could be part of a unit titled "Work Environment and Well-being". The topic chosen is an issue of interest of any business person and with which they should be familiarised. For each lesson, I will present first the lesson plan and then the activities. This material can be found in Appendix I.

6 Conclusion

The globalisation of business has brought about the use of English as a Lingua Franca in business contexts. ELF breaches the existing language barriers between countries when it comes to international commerce. The term given to the language used in this area is known as Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF).

BELF relies on the idea that when using the English language for international communication in business contexts grammatical accuracy is not the most necessary feature that a non-native speaker needs in order to communicate effectively during work. Rather, what users of BELF need is to be able to use communication strategies and

accommodation skills that help to achieve mutual intelligibility. In addition to them, other specific skills are also of great relevance for these users, such as the competence of 'business know-how', skills in presentation and persuasion, a language based on directness, politeness, explicitness and clarity, and also being able to identify other participants' attitudes or contribute to team effort.

This has important implications for the teaching of Business English. As any other ESP course, a BELF course requires a needs analysis and specific syllabus design based on what BELF users expect to learn and the skills they are required to have in order to carry out their job. Some of the proposals made for syllabus design are neutrality of culture and accents, use of authentic texts taken form journals, the Internet, or other authentic contexts, sometimes chosen by the students, development of communication strategies and specific skills that BELF users will have to employ in their daily work, and specially, focus on content rather than form. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is to make the students aware of the acceptability of non-native forms, as long as they do not cause communication breakdown, and also try to adapt the language and the strategies that are taught to those that are really used and needed in business contexts. Whether teachers should be familiar with the area they teach or not, in this case business, is still a debate.

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APPENDIX I

Unit: Work Environment and Well-being

Lesson 1: Let's talk about workplaces

Level: **B1-B2. Business English class**   **Time & Duration: 60 mins.**

Main aims:

- Raise students' awareness of the use of non-standard forms of English in international business communication
- Increase students' tolerance of non-native accents in international business communication
- Develop students' ability to define words
- Develop students' ability to give and defend their opinions

Stage	Stage aim	Procedure	Interaction	Time
Lead in	Set the context for the lesson	- Brainstorming - Teacher monitors the questions - Students present briefly their anwers to the class	Teacher-Students	10 mins
Listening - Speaking	Raise awareness of non-standard forms	- Students watch a video where ELF is used - Students answer questions about the video and the topic it is related to, then discuss their answers in pairs - Students look at non-standard forms and discuss their relevance towards communication	Individual work and in pairs	15 mins
Reading - Speaking	Work with daily, real-life vocabulary in authentic texts	- Students try to give a definition for new words related to the topic of the lesson - Students answer questions about the text and relate it to their jobs - Students have to persuade others about their opinion	In pairs	20 mins
Speaking	Talk about own experiences	- Students exchange experiences about their workplace environments	In pairs	10 mins

Lesson 1: Let's talk about workplaces

1. PRE-LISTENING ACTIVITY TO RAISE INTEREST: BRAINSTORMING

Pre-listening tasks are intended to increase the interest of students in the topic that is going to be dealt with during the lesson. With this activity, students reflect on English as a Lingua Franca and its use within business environments.

Think about these topics and discuss your opinions with the class.

- How would you describe the English language spoken in business environments?
- Is it similar to the English spoken by native speakers, or do you think that it will be different in some way?
- Is native-like accuracy essential for mutual understanding?
- Which are your experiences about speaking English within your work environment?

2. LISTENING ACTIVITY: ELF VIDEO ABOUT HEALTH CONSULTANCY

The speaker in this video is an ELF user, which will give students a real example of ELF. Thus, they will be able to recognise the non-standard forms and realise that they do not lead to communication breakdown.

Source: http://webapps.ael.uni-tuebingen.de/backbone-search/faces/search.jsp

In this video, we are going to listen to Richard, who will talk about his job in Health Consultancy. Pay attention, answer the following questions, and then discuss your answers in pairs.

- Where do you think the speaker is from? Do you think that he is a native speaker of English? Why?
- How would you describe Richard's speech?
- Could you identify non-standard forms in his speech? Despite them, was he able to communicate?
- What does his job consist in?

Look at this transcribed fragment from the video and identify the non-standard forms that Richard used. Do they lead to breakdown in communication?

/[...] and my education, first I was at the middle school, I don't know the exactly name, middle school, then make education for profession like electronic, and then I go studying...sport education and geology for – to – to become or to get teacher, but I don't – I didn't go teaching in this profession [...]/

3. READING ACTIVITY

The main aim of this reading is to put students in contact with authentic texts related to their discipline, instead of those found in coursebooks. Authentic texts are not adapted to the level of students, so it will help them realise that even if they do not understand the text completely, they are able to get the main ideas. Also it prepares them for the texts they will have to encounter within business and their jobs.

Furthermore in this activity, students will have to give reasons to defend their opinions, so they become prepared for the speaking activity at the end of the class.

Well-being at work is good for business

Companies that put effort into ensuring their employees stay healthy find themselves reaping significant rewards in terms of greater productivity

When it comes to health in the workplace, there are multiple reasons why looking after employees is a good thing – and we're not just talking about moral and ethical responsibility or the feel-good factor. "Employee welfare isn't just a 'nice idea' any more" says Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University Management School. "It's a bottom-line issue. There are fewer people doing more work and longer hours. The only way they can work productively is if employers look after their health."

According to Shaun Subel, the director of strategy at VitalityHealth, this clear association is borne out by its survey for Britain's Healthiest Company. "We found a very strong relationship between the culture of a company and its productivity," he says. "And what's important is the employees' perception of the company culture, not what the employer says it is doing."

To assess a company's ethos, employees were asked if, for example, they felt that their managers cared about health and well-being, whether there was training on staff health available, and whether referrals were available for employees with health problems. The survey then looked at productivity for each company, using a standard scale known as WPAI (work productivity and activity impairment), that looks at self-reported absence and self-reported presenteeism (where an employee is at their desk but not necessarily working productively). "The average cost of lost productivity for participants in Britain's

Healthiest Company was 7.85 per cent of the wage bill," Subel says. "But we found companies with the most supportive cultures had the lowest productivity losses. In fact those with the strongest health and well-being cultures had a 45 per cent lower cost of lost productivity compared with those that had the worst cultures. "Lost productivity for the most supportive companies measured 5.9 per cent of the wage bill, compared with 10.7 per cent for those with the worst ethos."

According to Subel, there's also a very clear relationship between culture and investment. "The more a company invests in health provision and promotion, the healthier the employees perceive themselves to be and, in most cases, the healthier they are. The healthier they are, the more productive they are." According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, 131 million days were lost to sickness absence in the UK in 2013. The top three reasons for absence were back and neck pain (31 million days off), minor illnesses such as coughs and colds (27 million days), and stress, anxiety and depression (15 million days.) So perhaps it is little surprise to learn companies that focus on preventing these types of illnesses have scored so highly.

Take Johnson & Johnson, which offers ergonomic workstation assessments to help ensure employees are correctly positioned at their desks, thus minimising the risk of repetitive strain injury and injuries caused by poor posture. It also – like adidas (UK) and Microsoft – has on-site physiotherapy services that mean minor problems can be diagnosed and treated before they escalate into issues that can mean someone is signed off sick for weeks. And while you can't stop workers picking up coughs and colds, encouraging healthy eating to boost immunity by offering free fruit, as Lindt, Johnson & Johnson and Sanofi Pasteur MSD do, is a start, as is offering flu vaccinations.

When it comes to mental health, minimising work stress by having an environment in which stress can be managed, and issues such as anxiety freely discussed with management, is crucial. But beyond that, mental healthcare can take many forms. Johnson & Johnson offers access to massage therapists as part of its stress management programme, while Old Mutual offers counselling – whether the issue is work-related stress or personal, such as bereavement or relationship problems. Adidas, meanwhile, gives employees access to life coaches and specialists trained in CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), a form of treatment that helps people change their thinking on certain subjects.

Ultimately, if it's good for the employee, it's good for the business.

Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/business/britains-healthiest-company/11848801/wellbeing-good-for-business.html

Read this article and complete the tasks.

1. Look for vocabulary related to well-being and write it down. Work in pairs and ask each other a definition for new unfamiliar words.
2. Answer these questions:
- Did you find it interesting? Is the topic familiar to you?
- How would you describe 'supportive culture'?
- Out of every measure mentioned in the text, which one is, in your opinion, the most efficient? Give reasons. Discuss with your classmates.

4. SPEAKING ACTIVITY

Students have to discuss their experiences within their workplace. It will help them to increase self-confidence, gain spoken fluency and realise again that the use of ELF and non-standard forms does not necessarily prevent mutual intelligibility.

In pairs, discuss the following issues about your company:

- How do you find your workplace environment?
- What measures would you introduce to improve workers' well-being?
- Has your company introduced any health initiative? Was it successful?

Unit: Work Environment and Well-being

Lesson 2: Changes for a better well-being at work

Level: **B1-B2. Business English class**   **Time & Duration: 60 mins.**

Main aims:

- Develop students' ability to give their opinions while in a spoken debate
- Be able to defend own arguments and refute others in a polite way
- Increase students' self-confidence while speaking in public

Stage	Stage aim	Procedure	Interaction	Time
Lexis	Learn new vocabulary useful for the debate	- Students match words related to the topic of the lesson with their definition - Students match words to form phrases and write sentences with them	Individual work	10 mins
Lead in	Raise awareness over take-turning	- Students read the points of turn-taking written in the handout - Teacher explains in more detail how turn-taking functions and answers doubts	Teacher-student	5 mins
Speaking - Debate	Express opinions and defend them Refute others' arguments Politeness	- Teacher acts as moderator of the debate. - Students divide in two groups and debate over a topic of interest about companies - Students defend and refute arguments in a polite way	Group work	20 mins
Speaking – Role-play	Simulation of real-life scenario Presentation of ideas	- Students prepare arguments based on personal opinions - Students present their arguments to the class	Whole class	20 mins

Lesson 2: Changes for a better well-being at work

1. VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES

These vocabulary activities are focused on making students familiar with the new vocabulary they will have to use later on in speaking activities, and which they may also encounter sometimes within their workplaces.

1. Match the verbs on the left with the nouns on the right to form phrases, and write a sentence with at least three of them.

Reduce	A challenge
Improve	A charity
Introduce	Absenteeism
Resist	An initiative
Relieve	Stress
Undertake	Temptation
Support	Well-being

2. Match the following words to their correct definition. Are these words new to you?

1. Absenteeism	A. A long walk for pleasure or exercise, usually in the countryside or mountains
2. Well-being	B. An organisation which provides money or help to people in need
3. Charity	C. The state of feeling healthy and happy
4. Temptation	D. The substances that influence your health, which you take into your body as food
5. Hike	E. The way in which a person stands, sits or walks
6. Eyestrain	F. Tired or painful eyes as a result of too much reading, looking at a computer Screen, etc.
7. Nutrition	G. Wanting to have something that you know you should not have
8. Posture	H. When employees are not at work when they should be

Source http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/1607/160702-sleep.html

2. TURN-TAKING AWARENESS

Developing awareness about turn-taking rules is of utmost importance for BELF users, since they will have to make use of turn-taking in many business communicative event, i.e. meetings and socialising in international events.

1. Turn taking is based on the 'one at a time' principle, which means, when someone is talking we have to respect his/her turn. When can we take the floor in the conversation? Pay attention to these points and follow them in the next speaking activities as much as you can:
   - Listen carefully while someone is talking and think about how you could contribute to his/her speech
   - If you are responding to another participant, either in favour or against, make reference to what he/she already said; that shows you paid attention to the speech
   - In case there is silence, feel free to start talking and exposing your ideas
   - You can 'interrupt' a participant in a polite way, as long as he/she has already presented all his/her arguments

3. SPEAKING ACTIVITY ROLE-PLAY:

These speaking activities are focused on giving students the chance to demonstrate what they have learned throughout the lesson. However, it also helps them to put into practice their skills in presentation, turn-taking, support and refutation of arguments in a simulation of a real-life situation.

Sources: http://www.nhfireland.ie/Sectors/NHF/WWC.nsf/vPages/NHF_blog~10-workplace-wellbeing-day-ideas-to-get-you-started-24-11-2014!OpenDocument ; http://www.businessballs.com/workplace-wellbeing.htm

1. Debate about the topic 'Sleeping Benefits for Productivity'. Divide in two groups based on each's personal opinion and briefly prepare your arguments individually.

The debate will be monitored by the teacher and will be based on these following questions:

- Should everyone be paid to sleep longer?
- Why is it difficult for people to get 7 hours of sleep?
- What are the benefits of sleeping regarding productivity?
- What can companies do to make sure workers sleep well?

During the debate, each group will have to express their agreement or disagreement with other participants. Remember to be polite when doing so.

2. You have been called for a company meeting that will deal with 'How to improve well-being in the workplace'. Think about three measures you find relevant and be prepared to give a small presentation about them. Here are <u>some ideas</u> you can use:

- Nutrition: fresh fruit bowls around the workplace, healthy options on canteen menus and vending machines
- Exercise and relaxation: lunchtime walks and runs, promotion of the cycle to work scheme, existence of a relaxation room
- Create a more positive environment: development of tolerance and empathy, politeness with workmates, bonding and making friendships
- Bring in experts for wellbeing talks

Sources for <u>these ideas</u>: http://www.nhfireland.ie/Sectors/NHF/WWC.nsf/vPages/NHF_blog~10-workplace-wellbeing-day-ideas-to-get-you-started-24-11-2014!OpenDocument ; http://www.businessballs.com/workplace-wellbeing.htm