

Business English as a ‘Lingua Franca’ (BELF): Focusing on Cross-Cultural E-mail Communication

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Abstract

Business English as a ‘Lingua Franca’ – BELF – has been getting more and more international attention recently in the field of TESOL because global business has become common and normal by now. The article focuses on aspects relevant to English business e-mail as it is the cornerstone of international business communication. It is often assumed that writing English e-mail messages is in the first place a question of vocabulary and grammar, but experience is pointing to a much more important aspect that Japanese students and teachers tend to overlook: paragraph writing. The article offers insights into the reasons why paragraph writing is so important for Japanese students. Among others it will be pointed out that the different styles of logical thinking that are pervasive in various cultures ("cultural thought patterns") influence how arguments are built up in each language. In order to be able to write an understandable English business e-mail message, Japanese students need to realize this and learn how to apply English logic.

Keywords: BELF, Business English, Lingua Franca, E-Mail, Cultural Thought Patterns, Paragraph Writing,

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Introduction

BELF, or Business English as a ‘Lingua Franca,’ has been getting more and more attention in the TESOL field. What is the definition of “Lingua Franca” then? According to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, it is explained as “a shared language of communication used between people whose main languages are different” with an example sentence as “English has become a lingua franca in many parts of the world.” Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) traced back the origin of the concept of “lingua franca,” by citing Knapp and Meierkord, that it was a language variety used in the Mediterranean between the 15th and 19th century which enabled trade between people who did not share the native language.

Regarding the English language as a lingua franca, Crystal (2003) pointed out, in his work “English as a Global Language,” that the consciousness of “a strong need for a lingua franca for the whole world emerged only in the twentieth century, in the 1950s in particular (p. 12). As more and more nations began joining global bodies such as the United Nations (since 1945), the World Bank (also 1945), UNESCO and UNICEF (both 1946), the World Health Organization (1948) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (1957). Furthermore, at a more restricted level, multinational and political organizations such as the Commonwealth and the European Union needed a single lingua franca for mutual understanding and communication.

As the need for more global communication in diverse fields, the English language has become the major language of the world. In Crystal’s description (p. 13), it is getting quite normal that we can imagine a situation where a Japanese company director arranges interpreters and a venue to meet his German and Saudi Arabian contacts in Singapore to plan a multi-national deal. Or you could also imagine that they are going to just plug in to a 3-way online support system from where they respectively are. However, the most comfortable and least complicated alternative is to make use of just one language, English. Not only Crystal (2003) but also McKay (2002) pointed out that the need for a global language, a lingua franca, is particularly appreciated by the international academic and business communities. On the other hand, Kankaanranta and Planken referred to the ambiguity in studying of this specific field, explaining there has been relatively little systematic research that has focused on “how and why it matters” (p.3).

In any case, the English language teaching (ELT) business has become one of the major growth industries around the world (Crystal, p.112). From that perspective, Nishikawa-Van Eester and Van Eester researched BELF focusing on actual cross-cultural business scenes in Japan with an intention to report some pedagogical implications in realistic teaching/learning contexts (2021). This is to be discussed later in this article.

World Englishes and Cultural Thought Patterns

As seen in the previous section, English is not only the language of English-speaking countries such as the USA and the UK anymore; the dominance of English has penetrated nearly all global economic activities so that, as a factor for successful business development, it is absolutely necessary to consider and strategize how each individual’s actual and practical English proficiency could be optimized (Kankaanranta and Planken, p.9).

Kachru categorized that there are basically three groups in the world from the perspective of the status of English use (see the graphic below), which he named 1) ‘the inner circle,’ 2) ‘the

outer/extended circle,’ and 3) ‘the expanding/extending circle’ (Crystal, pp. 60-61). He defined these three circles as following: 1) refers to the countries where English is the primary language; 2) involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country’s chief institutions, and it plays an important ‘second language (ESL)’ role in a multilingual setting, and 3) involves the nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language though they do not have a history of colonization by members of 1), nor have given English any special administrative status. In this group, English is taught as a ‘foreign language (EFL); There are some seventy-five territories in which English has held or continues to hold a special place, as a member of either 1) or 2).

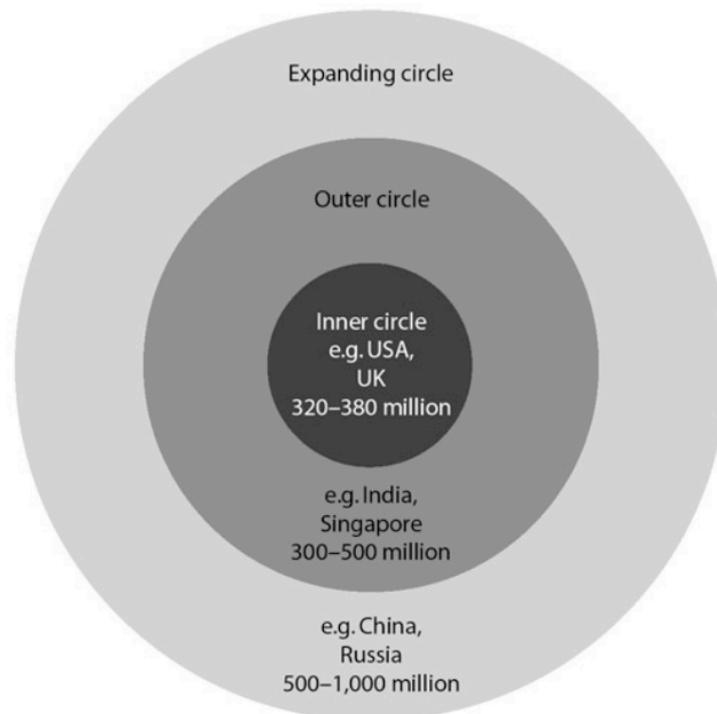


Figure 1: ‘Three Circles of English’ by Kachru’ from “English as a Global Language” by Crystal (2003, p.61)

According to Saraceni (2015), the notion of ‘World Englishes (WE)’ has made us realize the emergence of different varieties of English as a consequence of the language having spread all over the world (p. 79). He also noted that the field of WE is a descriptive, empirical study of ‘nativized’ varieties of English in Kachru’s ‘Outer Circle’ (p. 5).

Thus, a large, non-English-native population, everywhere in the world, has to learn and use English. However, there is a lot of variety in these “Englishes.” As shown in Kachru’s categorization, different groups from diverse cultural, historical, geographical, and linguistic backgrounds use English in order to communicate with the rest of the world.

Kaplan stated (1966) that we think in a specific thought pattern, linked to the language that we use as our first language. He also described the thought patterns inherent in different language groups (see the graphic below).

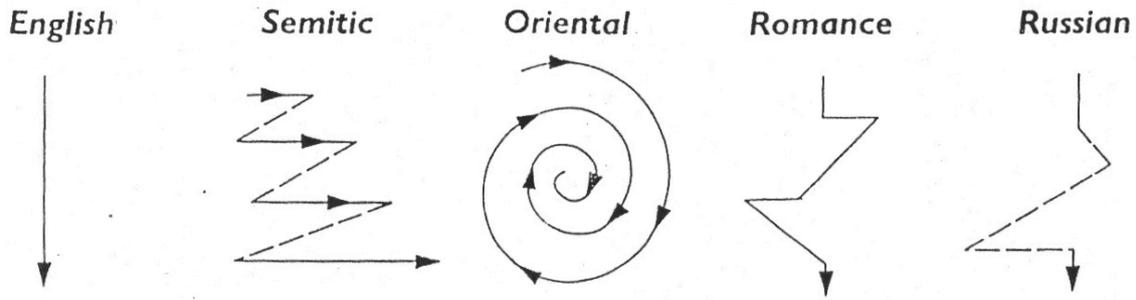


Figure 2: Kaplan, 1966

Presumably, a number of professional English teachers (especially those with ESL experience) have experienced Kaplan's findings for themselves. Now, based on this analysis by Kaplan, we can imagine what could happen if a Japanese native speaker with little training of doing so in English writes a business e-mail or gives a presentation. The reaction by a native or near-native speaker of English would be "What's the point?" or "Can you please explain it again?" Due to the nature of the Japanese way of thinking that avoids being linear and straight, the English (near-)native speaker gets confused. In order to overcome this shortcoming, it is effective to implement trainings to write based on the concept of paragraph writing.

Paragraph Writing

A number of English-speaking universities worldwide have their own institutions such as "Writing Center" and "Writing Tutorial Services" at which they guide and coach their students how to write papers in classes as "Academic Writing"¹ by using the method of Paragraph Writing. They all explain repeatedly the importance of Paragraph Writing when writing in English. This benefits the non-native speakers of English because they can learn, in its framework, how English logic flows and functions.

Regarding Japanese native speakers' writing in English, Okada's study pointed out that there are two major problems. One is their tendency to explain things randomly and focus on their emotional reactions, and the other is that they tend to express things ambiguously without presenting detailed facts or reasons due to a Japanese cultural tendency to avoid conflict (2018). Citing Hirose (2003) in her article, Okada described a phenomenon that the Japanese rarely practice expository or argumentative writing while they usually write about their personal experiences or impressions.

As presented in the graphic earlier in this article, this is a rhetorical feature of Japanese (Oriental languages). In order to avoid conflict, they are not logical or critical in their writing even when in English (Okada, p. 74). Okada further argued that this could be improved by explicitly teaching the English rhetoric to the Japanese students.

Paragraph writing techniques are of crucial importance in business e-mails, a critical component of the BELF environment. A sound logic flow in English e-mails is crucial for creating an equal and trusted long-distance business relationship.

¹ Indiana University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Technology Sydney, and University of Toronto.

E-mail Communication in BELF

According to the study of Van Horen (2009), numerous researchers have been reporting American and Japanese business partners exchanging correspondences in English. From the cross-cultural perspective, he introduced Stanlaw's detailed documentation in 2004, concerning the strategic way English is used in the Japanese advertising industry. In this way, the use of English has become a target of analyses to TESOL/BELF researchers.

Nishikawa-Van Eester and Van Eester stated that BELF is at the core of the daily practice in their business operations and management, and that most of the communication between mainly European companies and their Japanese counterparts is done by English (2021). They pointed out that, contrary to other fields of WE, the correctness of the English language itself is not necessarily of importance in a BELF setting. Instead, what matters most is that the communication is correctly understood. They insist that, in BELF contexts, the English language is not a 'goal,' but just a 'tool' to use in order to achieve holistic and smooth interactions for mutual benefit.

From that viewpoint, Nishikawa-Van Eester and Van Eester argued how English should be taught, by presenting actual examples. The goal is again not to learn English itself but to acquire the ability to use English, optimized for fluent communications in BELF.

Discussion

Here are two e-mail message interactions used as example by Nishikawa-Van Eester and Van Eester.

Example 1

A. (European non-English native speaker, company X):

I am XXXXX XXXXXXXX, working for X here in Tokyo. I got your mail via XXXXXXXX. Sorry for writing this mail in English, my written Japanese is not as good as my spoken Japanese.

We are interested in following up further on your request, but we would like to understand better what you need.

The easiest would be for me to come to your office so we can talk about this.

I can make myself available any of the remaining working days of the year except for Th 12/18 and Fri 12/19.

If you are interested, please let me know which date/time suits you best and which XXXXXXXX office you are located at.

B. (Japanese native speaker, company Y):

Thank you for sending an email to me.

I didn't know X is in Tokyo.

And I please to hear your schedule this week.

I share your information with engineering side. And I have checked their schedule.

It is better to set a meeting 10am-12am December 19 XXXXXXXX

However I couldn't check all attendance's schedule. So the limited attends will join To the meeting.

Anyway we expect to meet you next Friday. If you can send any information in advance, We read it, and we prepare any questions to you.

*Have you ever been XXXXXXXX I attached the file of guide to XXXXXXXX
I look forward to meeting you.*

Example 2

A. (European non-English native speaker, company X):
*We would like to do the call on Friday January 9 at 17:00 JST (9:00 CET).
If that date/time is OK for you, I will come to your office and we can do the call together.*

C. (Japanese native speaker, company Z):
*I agree with your proposal.
I will reconfirm with you this conference call, in new year.*

In the first example, it is obvious that something went wrong. There is a major misunderstanding between these two businesspeople. A suggested to meet each other for further business opportunities by giving actual dates. He told explicitly that he would not be available on December 19, however, B scheduled the meeting for that day. It was obvious that B's English proficiency was not high enough to understand the meaning of 'except for,' on the other hand, A should/could have used much simpler expressions, by realizing the possible language limitations of Japanese English-users.

The second example is a good one as far as the aspect of BELF is concerned. Although English is not always correctly used in this situation, the meaning is perfectly clear. The 'errors' observed in the context do not hinder the communicators' interactions probably because all expressions are straightforward, and the flow and communication are established as a whole.

BELF is a genre that has not been studied and explored deeply and widely enough. We need to deliberately think what we should teach in BELF classes and how we should teach them in Japan. One certain point is that BELF should be regarded as one of ESP, or English for Specific Purposes, and the target students should learn BELF in the class of Business English, not Literature nor English Grammar.

Naturally and consequently, the teaching material for them have to cover appropriate business scenes and manners. The students need to acquire proper way of behaviors in multicultural contexts, and thus, the teaching materials need to be basically authentic reflecting the reality in cross-cultural business scenes. The students also need to learn more than just the English language. They are required to understand the situation itself in which they are supposed to react and interact in an appropriate manner taking the language-capabilities and cultural context of the counterpart into consideration.

Conclusion

It is interesting to see that, in BELF contexts, it sometimes does not matter if the language usage itself is correct. For instance, lexical or syntactical correctness might be merely a secondary issue. Therefore, teaching learners to be able to operate in BELF situations requires a different approach from teaching English for the sake of English.

That might be the crucial and determining aspect in the Japanese educational system because, as reported by Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009), Japan is a country where English is in the

first place considered to be one of the most important school subjects, instead of being regarded a communicative tool in the real world.

It would be beneficial for Japanese learners of BELF if the classroom is an actual site where a holistic approach can take place as the entire milieu itself provides people with more authentic examples in daily life.

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