

BELF Courses and Iranian Learners' Perception Regarding Success in Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study aimed to investigate the role of Business English as Lingua Franca (BELF) courses in learners' success in communication in an Iranian company. In doing so, 25 adult BELF learners were selected from an automotive parts manufacturing company in Tehran, Iran. They were the employees of a company consisting of men and women in the 30 to 45 age group who worked in different departments as bosses, middle managers, top managers, and directors. Their English proficiency levels were elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate. The participants took part in the interviews and answered a 20-item questionnaire. The questionnaire mainly focused on using English in the workplace. The interviews primarily focused on eliciting the respondents' views regarding the benefits of using English at the workplace. The interviews and respondents' answers to the questionnaire showed that BELF courses lead to job performance efficiency, higher self-confidence when communicating, willingness to use more English at the workplace, and fewer misunderstandings. It also could enhance participants' language proficiency level and communication skills. Moreover, participation in BELF courses could facilitate English in the workplace and encourage a professional atmosphere compared to the past.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, in addition to being the dominant language in the academic realm, English has proliferated as a lingua franca in corporate communications and international business (Lustig & Koester, 2013). Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) is used as an additional abbreviation that differentiates English as a lingua franca in business environments from other roles of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Charles, 2007). Böhringer, Hülmäbauer, and Seidlhofer (2008) define BELF as redundant English, where the common goal is to reach a mutual consensus. In this circumstance, the person who sends a message needs to ensure that the receiver has understood it. The idea is to get a verification; the sender applies several communicative strategies to prevent misunderstandings and ensure that the intended meaning has been conveyed (Bjørge, 2010). The three essential international contextual features of BELF discourse are the shared business sphere, the shared professional skills, and the duration of the relationship (Kankaanranta & Plancken, 2010). If people have more language skills than others, they might be given more power and duties to take care of significant business contacts (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999a). According to Hoare (2012), employees' language skills can partly shape their careers, and lack of

appropriate language skills can create a feeling of isolation and social exclusion (Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005).

Harzing and Feely (2008) argue that even if non-native speakers have some common language competency, they may have difficulties communicating effectively. Linguistically skilled employees can act as information gatekeepers, who can, for example, delay, filter, or distort communication flows when it seems useful for them. However, Welch et al. (2005) maintain that regardless of foreign language fluency, attitudes toward a foreign language can have a decisive role in communication with foreigners.

Several studies provide evidence that language has a vital role in successful communication among companies. For example, Louhiala-Salminen (2002) showed that foreign language was seen as the leading cause of communication challenges in a merger between Finnish and Swedish companies. In another study on Finnish and Swedish banks, Piekkari, Vaara, Tienari, and Säntti (2005) reported that people who did not speak the company language fluently felt their professional competence was negatively affected and that they had fewer opportunities for promotion than native speakers have. In a study by Neeley (2013) of a French-based company, about half of the employees who had medium or low English fluency were anxious about their careers because

of their language knowledge and skills. However, the study showed that, in reality, not all the problems that employees faced were as challenging as they seemed since workers underestimated their language skills.

However, the results of the study by Rogerson-Revell (2007) were indefinite when the informants were asked about the ease of communication in English with Native Speakers (NSs) or with Non-Native Speakers (NNSs). In the study, "43% of the respondents stated that they found Non-Native English Speakers (NNES) or (NNSs) and Native English Speakers (NES) or (NSs) equally easy to communicate with, 33% stated a preference for NES, and 24% found NNES easier" (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, p. 115). On the other hand, the informants of Ehrenreich's study (2010) explained the communication with NS as often being more intricate, particularly in situations of dispute. The informants were more doubtful to ask NS to clarify what they meant than NNSs and felt hopeless and unsuccessful in negotiations or disagreements. However, communication with NSs was less problematic when there was no feeling of a forthcoming threat.

Language skills can be considered necessary on an individual level in Multinational Corporations (MNCs) since language skills affect job performance and career development; one of the most critical aspects is their role in company image (Rantanen, 2001). To some extent, a company's international image depends on its language use (Bloch, 1995). Besides the outside image, a company can create a global atmosphere inside the company by introducing a common corporate language (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999b; Thomas, 2007). For instance, a Finnish-based multinational company, Nokia, attracted global attention by the mid-1990s (Steinbock, 2001) when it changed its language policy and introduced English as the corporate language. Usually, when a company selects a common corporate language, most meetings, reports, and company documents are in the common corporate language (Thomas, 2007). Even when English is the company's official language, employees' mother tongue plays a vital role in inter-unit communication (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999a). However, while having a common corporate language is often necessary for an MNC, it is not sufficient. Successful international management requires other factors such as employees with language skills, corporate training, international rotation of employees, and using multinational teams and expatriates (Piekkari & Zander, 2005).

The employment of different language policies is dependent on companies' home countries. For example, MNCs from Nordic countries often use various languages within their company Headquarter and other departments. In their study, Harzing and Pudelko (2013) found that none of the Nordic-based MNCs used their home country language as the common corporate language. Also, in Asian countries, companies rarely used English as the medium of communication, and only 16 percent selected English as a corporate language. In the study, while 47 percent of companies headquartered in Asian countries had not specified a corporate language, only 23 percent of MNCs based in Anglophone countries and 12 percent of MNCs headquartered in Nordic countries had no corporate language.

Globalization and cultural issues have broad effects on careers in today's organizations (Bloch, 1995). Since multiculturalism is growing in our societies, our understanding of 'the multicultural future of career' (Leong & Hartung, 2000, p.213) will develop, too. Career development occurs in a multicultural context, where different values, decision-making styles, time perspectives, communication styles, and languages are involved. At the company level, globalization affects work conditions and how work is organized in today's companies. Rantanen (2001) argues that work is one of the critical areas of global change. Also, Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) believe that local and global needs have a vital role in designing competitive organizations, workplaces, and careers. Demographic changes in the global workforce, new technologies, and the need for new competencies and employees' skills affect enterprise structures (Rantanen, 2001).

Languages can create possibilities and barriers for organizations (Welch et al., 2005). For instance, companies can differentiate themselves and gain a competitive advantage of language capabilities (Bloch, 1995). Luo and Shenkar (2006) assert that a well-designed language strategy that suits the company structure would contribute to effective communication, coordination, and knowledge sharing. However, languages can sometimes create a barrier for companies to enter countries where a different language is spoken. Nowadays, the number of people who speak English as a foreign language is more than native speakers in the business world. At the workplace, people from different backgrounds bring their cultural and conversational styles when they speak English, and to a large extent, affect individuals and company levels (Charles, 2007). Thus, it is essential to consider the role and quality of BELF courses and their role in a company's success.

Many studies have shown that most of the problems in English for a Specific Purpose (ESP) courses derive from learners, such as problems of heterogeneity in language proficiency, low levels of general proficiency, lack of motivation, and passive learning style (Boniadi, Ghajazadeh, & Rahmatvand, 2013; Moattarian & Tahririan 2014; Rashtchi & Porkar, 2020). Therefore, in designing an ESP course, needs analysis is an indispensable step, and it can be achieved by investigating the participants' expectations, perceptions, and needs.

Iranians who use BELF in their workplace encounter various problems communicating with their business counterparts, as English is not the corporate or official language in their companies. One reason is that they are not competent enough to communicate successfully in English, which leads to failure in their business and loss of the opportunity to work in international markets. This study aimed to investigate how Iranian learners perceived BELF courses' role regarding their success in communicating with their business contacts. The present study could extend our understanding of ESP courses. The study might help BELF teachers to understand the Iranian learners' needs and goals. By choosing appropriate materials, suitable techniques, and strategies, the learners can improve their ability to communicate more effectively with their business counterparts and seize the chance to

compete in emerging markets nationally and internationally. This qualitative study was conducted in the summer of 2019. It aimed to describe the participants' perceptions regarding the use of English in the workplace. Hence, the researchers raised the following question to evaluate the role of BELF courses in Iranian companies.

RQ: How do Iranian learners perceive BELF courses' role in their success in communicating with their business contacts?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 35 Iranian adults learning BELF at an automotive parts manufacturing company in Tehran. They were both men ($n=27$) and women ($n=8$) in the 30 to 45 age group who worked in different departments as bosses, middle managers, top managers, and directors. Three of the respondents worked in the company for more than 15 years, eighteen participants for 10 years, and four between 5 and 9 years. Fourteen, eleven, and ten participants attended the Elementary, Pre-intermediate, and Intermediate courses, respectively. Twenty-five of the participants answered the questionnaire before and after attending the BELF course. To triangulate the data, ten employees whose English level was the highest among others took part in the interview sessions. They had not participated in any BELF courses. Fluency and accuracy were necessary for the participants, as the interviews were performed in English.

Instrumentation

The researchers employed a questionnaire as the primary source of data collection. The questionnaire adopted from Ojanpera (2014) had 20 items in eight sections (Appendix A). Questions asked about the participant's experiences, the company they worked for, and Iranian companies in general. The questionnaire was piloted with 12 respondents similar in characteristics to the study participants to ensure that all items were understandable.

Another instrument the researchers used for data collection was a semi-structured interview (Ojanpera, 2014). The researchers formulated the questions before the interview sessions. Each interview had 20 questions and consisted of seven sections, taking from 10 minutes up to half an hour (Appendix B). The participants asserted that anonymity would be the only choice that would allow them to express their opinions freely. Therefore, the researchers did not mention the names of the participants or the company. For a comprehensive analysis, the interviews were voice recorded and transcribed after the interviews. The researchers used literal transcription as the basis for analyzing the answers. The interviews took 10 minutes up to half an hour.

Materials

The present study employed the Market Leader series (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2012) as BELF course materials.

The first three units of elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate books were taught to the participants. For each level, the first three units of the Market Leader series were taught. The elementary level lesson topics were *Introducing yourself*, *Discussing what people want from work*, *Problems at work*. The lesson topics of the pre-intermediate level were *Career plans*, *Talking about companies*, and *Shopping habits*. The intermediate level lesson topics were *Your favorite brands*, *Your travel experiences*, and *How to change our attitudes in general and at work*.

Procedure

The study was conducted in an automotive company located in Tehran. Twenty-five participants took part in BELF courses for 15 sessions. Before and after the instruction, they answered a questionnaire to provide the researchers with a comprehensive understanding of BELF courses' perceptions. The participants practiced all four primary skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) in each unit. The majority of the exercises were done as pair work or group work in the classroom. Every unit's target is to master useful language phrases at the end of the lesson employing role-play situations. It is worth mentioning that there was a case study at the end of each unit to improve the participants' speaking skills in different role-play situations. The classes were student-centered, and the teacher, who was one of the researchers, was a helper and provider most of the time. The participants were not allowed to use their L1 (Persian) in the classes.

To teach vocabulary items for the reading passages, the teacher pre-taught the main new words by elicitation, showing pictures, and giving examples or definitions. Then, the participants repeated the words chorally and individually, practicing correct pronunciation. The teacher wrote down the words on the board with their parts of speech.

For reading practice, the participants read the comprehension questions before reading the passage. After reading, they answered the questions individually. As the next step, they checked their answers with their partner, and finally, the teacher confirmed the correct answer. They were also taught scanning and skimming techniques for answering the reading passage questions.

The teacher asked the participants different questions and tried to cultivate interaction in the classroom to improve their listening and speaking skills. For example, in one session at the elementary level, the students were asked: '*What can business people do to entertain a group of visitors?*' The teacher divided the students into groups and asked them to think and write as many ideas as possible. Then they were supposed to check other groups' ideas and compare.

Afterward, they listened to a track about the two managers discussing how to entertain a group of important foreign visitors. Then, they had to decide whether the statements were true or false and were expected to correct the false ones. They were asked to check their answers with their partner, and finally, the teacher confirmed the correct answers. As the next practice, they were given seven extracts with blanks to complete them by listening to the track.

In another activity, the participants practiced giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, and making suggestions. Then they worked in pairs and tried to find examples of such functions in an activity. Role-playing was another activity that helped the learners practice language. The teacher divided the class into three groups and handed out three slips of paper to each group. The group members had to read their roles (e.g., managers, visitors, etc.) from the paper and get involved in discussions. The teacher helped them and corrected their errors where necessary.

RESULTS

Three phases of data analysis, including descriptive analysis, categorization, and linking the results, were used. First, data were described taking contextual factors into account. This phase helped the researchers understand the situation. Then, the data were categorized around the themes. Finally, the data results were combined. The final stage aimed to view the situation from a variety of perspectives.

Answers to the Questionnaire

Situations in which English is used: The respondents ($n=25$) were using English every day at work. As there were no non-Iranian speakers, everybody spoke Persian. Before attending the BELF course, all respondents stated that they had to use English only in sending emails, talking on the phone with foreigners, going on business trips to foreign countries, talking face to face and having online meetings with foreigners, reading documents in English and writing documents or reports in English; however, it was not always satisfactory nor successful. After attending the BELF course, all the participants stated that they used English more satisfactorily and successfully in all the abovementioned situations. Before attending the course, all respondents indicated two significant reasons for using English. The first reason was communicating with foreigners who did not speak Persian, and second, to help the company create an image of a global company. After the course, all participants stated the abovementioned reasons, and 13 added that the BELF course was an excellent opportunity to improve English skills.

English and my company: All respondents stated that they used English more after attending BELF courses because the company was making joint ventures with European companies. Thus, for them, it was obligatory to use English more before attending the BELF course. Before the course, 23 respondents believed it was necessary to use English only in Research and Development (R&D), engineering, and Exporting departments. However, after the course, ten participants also added IT and the Sales and marketing departments. Before the course, seven participants stated that the best policy would be to have English as one of the company's official languages. However, the number of participants who held this view increased to 14 after the course.

Before attending the course, five respondents mentioned that English was the best choice of an official language. However, the participants' responses to the questionnaire

indicated that the number increased to nine after participating in the BELF course. Two of the respondents believed that English should be the only official language of some departments after the classes.

Before the course, only ten participants regarded that using English is crucial for the company's future. Interestingly, the number of participants showed a drastic change ($n=22$) after attending the course. Fifteen of the respondents selected 'somewhat encouraging' to show their attitude toward English in their company before the BELF course. Two of them described it as 'very encouraging,' and eight were 'indifferent.' However, after the course, 14 respondents stated that the atmosphere was 'very encouraging,' and 11 persons maintained that the atmosphere was 'somewhat encouraging.' This finding shows that offering the BELF course created an encouraging atmosphere for the employees.

My experience of using English: Before the BELF course, all 25 respondents stated that language skills could increase their self-confidence. Twenty respondents reported that if employees could speak English, they could have the opportunity to get assigned to different kinds of work tasks. Seventeen respondents reported that language skills could offer them opportunities to go abroad. Ten respondents mentioned that it was possible to gain other employees' respect if they could speak English. One respondent added that ability to speak English made it easier to apply for better jobs. After the BELF course, all participants confirmed that language skills had boosted their self-confidence. Twenty respondents also mentioned that they received more respect from other employees than before, which led to higher self-esteem.

Before the BELF course, 20, and after the class, 15 respondents reported that using English slowed down the communication process. The participants' number who believed that using English caused misunderstanding reduced from 17 to 10 after taking part in the course. Before the course, participating in conversations during meetings and frustration due to self-expression were among the challenges all respondents encountered—the number of participants who have the complaints after the course reduced to five. Additionally, writing official English documents were considered problematic by five people and did not show any change after the classes. Two mentioned their tendency to avoid situations in which English was the medium of communication before and after the courses. After the classes, five respondents stated that they had difficulties participating in conversations during meetings and were frustrated because they could not express themselves.

Most of the participants' answers to the questionnaire ($n=20$) before attending the classes indicated that using English could cause problems. First, they felt that they were not competent enough in verbal communication. Second, they thought it was difficult to understand others. Third, different accents and dialects were hard to understand, and finally, making others understand them was laborious. However, after the BELF course, only two participants maintained their position, indicating that the classes were useful. Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned that using

English was problematic because English communication was different from their L1, although this was one option. Eight respondents asserted that their communication skills had improved, and they did not have any problems understanding their interlocutors.

Having English as the official language: When the participants were asked about their attitudes towards using English in the workplace before the course, 18 respondents reported that they felt anxious. However, it was a chance to improve their language skills and a necessary part of their job. Five people felt positive, and only two respondents felt neutral. On the other hand, after the BELF course, the participants' replies were different, and 23 respondents felt positive. Only two persons were anxious, and three people were neutral towards using English in the workplace. Eighteen respondents believed that using English in the workplace was a necessary part of their job, a chance to improve their language skills and their career. These results signify that the course could help them overcome their anxiety in using English in the workplace.

Regarding the respondents' attitudes toward communicating with their Iranian colleagues in a language other than Persian, before the BELF course, 12 respondents believed it was an excellent practice to improve language skills. Seven stated that it was necessary for a global company. Three people commented that it had both benefits and disadvantages. Three persons mentioned it made communication difficult, and two persons stated that there was no point in speaking in a language other than Persian with Iranian colleagues. After the course, 19 people mentioned that it was an excellent practice to improve language skills, and 12 stated that it was necessary for a global company. Three individuals said that it had both advantages and disadvantages. Remarkably, two respondents mentioned that communicating with an Iranian colleague in English was a mutual advantage for both parties. Thirteen respondents stated that they were "*somewhat willing*" to use English at work, and 12 persons indicated that they were "*very willing*" to use English before the BELF course started. However, when the course ended, 23 respondents were "*very willing*" to use English. This finding shows that the course motivated them to use English, albeit it was short.

The respondents were asked what kind of things would be vital if their company wished to use more English. Before attending the BELF course, all respondents stated that it was necessary to create an atmosphere that supported them to use English, and 21 emphasized the importance of language training courses. Moreover, 14 respondents mentioned that the company's language policy could support using English if set as the official language or as one of the official languages. Two persons noted that establishing a minimum criterion, for example, an English-test such as TOEIC for new employees entering the company, would be beneficial if the company wanted to use more English. Three people also mentioned that hiring more foreign staff who can speak English is helpful. After the BELF course, all respondents stated that creating an atmosphere that supported people to use English and offering language training courses by the

company were the top two crucial factors —having English as the official language or one of the official languages of the company was also considered essential for 20 respondents. Nine persons mentioned that setting a minimum requirement for new employees entering the company as a necessary factor. Three respondents also noted that hiring more foreign staff who can speak English is helpful.

Iranian companies and English: Regarding the necessity of speaking English by the company employees, before the BELF course, 22 respondents answered affirmatively, and three respondents stated that everyone should speak good English. However, 17 respondents indicated that everyone should speak good English after the classes, and eight persons maintained that everyone should speak at least some English. This finding shows that the BELF course positively influenced the participants' belief about the importance of speaking English at work.

The last question asked how the respondents have developed the language skills that they need at work. Eighteen persons stated that they had learned English at private language schools, and 13 respondents had studied on their own. Moreover, four respondents had developed their language skills during overseas work experience, one of whom mentioned it as the only means of developing his language skills.

Interviews

Starting questions and company policy: Ten individuals who had not attended any BELF courses were interviewed. Firstly, the interviewees were asked about the current situation of using English in their company. The interviewees explained that English is required when communicating face to face with business contacts, sending emails to foreigners, talking on the phone with their business contacts. Moreover, if the company aims to become global and create a global talent pool, English has to be used. On an ideological level, the company is promoting using more English in Iran. Since the company has the willingness to go global, all interviewees stated that it would be good to have English as one of the company's official languages. However, all the interviewees mentioned no system or specific policy that would force people to speak English. Employees get extra points for promotion if their English skills are high enough.

Effects of using English: All interviewees stated that English language skills are essential because English is a global language, and in global-oriented positions, people have to use English. However, there were domestic jobs in which English language skills might not be needed. Therefore, everyone in the company did not need to speak English – it depended on the department and the job.

All of the interviewees mentioned that there were different kinds of views about the best way of using English in the company. Eight interviewees saw it essential to use more English, and only two thought that the Persian language should be used in an Iranian company. On the other hand, using English caused some challenges for the company. Nine interviewees mentioned that lack of language skills brought about misunderstandings, stress, loss of time, and frustration. They added that many people in the company could

read English very well, but they hesitated to speak because they felt that their language skills were not adequate, causing misunderstandings. Seven interviewees mentioned the lack of self-confidence to prevent individuals from getting involved in English communication.

Iranian companies and English: The interviewees mentioned that using English was both necessary and beneficial. It created cross-cultural mobility for the company, and for individuals, it helped them get promotion and find the opportunity to participate in overseas assignments or business trips. All of the interviewees mentioned that if employees could speak English, they would have opportunities to learn more, broaden their minds, make new business contacts and suppliers, get new experiences, and get information from different sources. On the company level, using English made it possible to communicate with foreign affiliates. On the individual level, English language skills could bring employees more responsibility.

For three interviewees, lack of sufficient competence in the English language skills was a source of frustration as it could be an obstacle for getting a promotion. They stated that if people were sent overseas assignments without proper language training courses such as BELF, they would put the company into a dilemma. In other words, while some young workers with excellent language skills do not have enough experience, other workers could bring value to the company but do not have the appropriate level of language skills.

Remaining issues and suggestions: All the interviewees believed that their poor conversational skills were due to Iranian schools' English language teaching conditions. They mostly complained about the lack of vocabulary knowledge, writing emails and reports, and speaking fluency. In addition to the necessity of a change in English language education, the interviewees believed that language training courses such as the BELF could be useful. They thought that the company should pay for language education and encourage the employees to use English effectively in the workplace. Six interviewees suggested that the company's responsibility was to set objectives for departments and involve everyone in achieving common goals for improving language skills.

Moreover, some specific criteria for language skills should be introduced when hiring people. All of the interviewees felt that English was used more than before in their company. Five interviewees suggested that experience in foreign countries would contribute to learning the language. The interviewees stated that Iranian culture influenced communication with foreigners. As Iran is a high-context cul-

ture, not everything is spoken. Moreover, it is hard for the Iranian people to say 'no' as a reply, causing misunderstandings. They suggested adding cultural information to BELF courses.

DISCUSSION

Language skills can directly affect how successfully people perform the work tasks in which English is needed. With excellent English skills, Iranian individuals can participate more efficiently in communicating with their business contacts, perform new kinds of work tasks, get assigned overseas, and have better chances to promote. Poor language skills can hinder job performance, most commonly by causing misunderstandings and slowing down communication, a conclusion that finds support from Takino (2017). Regarding the influence of cultural influence on communication styles, Americans and Iranians tend to have debates while the Japanese are not keen on having discussions. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) assert that Finns seem to be more direct and issue-oriented than the discussion-oriented Swedes.

BELF course seemed to influence the majority of the participants positively. It could help them overcome their anxiety in using English in the workplace, which contradicted Japanese companies in which language training courses were not considered significant (Ojanpera, 2014). BELF courses, as Ojanpera (2014) reported, created an encouraging atmosphere for the employees. Moreover, the courses could change the participants' perceptions regarding learning the English language for vocational purposes and enhance their self-confidence and motivation.

It can be argued that ELF/BELF research could expand and contribute to research in business subjects such as international business and management, in which language-sensitive research has developed awareness about language issues in multinational companies (Piekka & Tietze, 2011). Table 1, which first appeared in a keynote presentation by Charles in the ELF Forum – the First International Conference of English as a Lingua Franca held in Helsinki in 2008, was modified by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) to demonstrate the distinct differences between EFL and BELF approaches. EFL seems to have a specific set of features that define favorable learning outcomes (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2007). In contrast, the characteristics of BELF reflect its very innate nature; that is, variation, hybridity, dynamism, context-dependency, and individual idiosyncra-

Table 1. Comparison between EFL and BELF approaches

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

sies. As can be seen, there are main differences between the two models addressing some chief criteria related to communication and language use, which unquestionably affect teaching and research. The researchers of the current study believe that the model of global communicative competence (Figure 1) could act as an excellent framework for addressing the pedagogical challenges concerned.

The three intertwined layers surrounding the center of Global Communicative Competence (GCC) should be interwoven in the teaching. For a future business professional, business know-how is the fundamental layer on which communicative competence is built, which requires business knowledge and awareness to be brought into the BELF classroom, for example, with the aid of case studies, problem-based learning, and various types of simulations. Although the real-life practice is the best method for learning BELF, these methods are still capable of effectively creating real-life situations. In this way, the learners would learn – not only the primary business terminology – but, even more importantly, the related concepts, genres, and practices that are typically applied in the business discourse community and would thus be crucially significant in a particular communicative situation. In other words, although it is necessary to master the English "core" (Jenkins, 2000), it is even more essential to be able to use English as an instrument to get the work done while maintaining a good relationship with communicators concurrently. Qualities such as directness, clarity, and politeness are success elements in business and BELF communications; they should assess learners' work. However, at this point, it is worth mentioning that being flexibly competent (House, 2002) is a high priority: learners need to be educated to analyze a particular situation, including the job at hand, and to act appropriately. Sometimes it may be a necessity to be direct, whereas other times, indirectness may be more meaningful because of the task at hand. Typically, this type of BELF competence requires more focus on the strategic use of language: being able to clarify information, to paraphrase, to make questions, and to ask for clarifications to avoid misunderstanding or ambiguity. Finally, encourag-

ing individuals to learn other languages than English and expanding knowledge of and respect for different "cultures," including national, ethnic, professional, industry, and corporate cultures, can improve learners' multicultural competence. Although it does not mean to imitate others' behavior, raising awareness of different ways of doing things leads to a thriving global communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

The current study showed that the topic of communication was of high relevance for the Iranian company. There was a direct link between participation in the BELF course and effective job performance. The course could promote the participants' views of language learning and help them realize the importance of knowing another language and how it could affect their viewpoints. Since BELF can be considered as a language that can be learned – at least to some degree – by non-native English speakers, it could also be learned by native speakers of English. In this way, they would be better prepared to act or work in international business contexts, where most of their counterparts and partners today are non-native English speakers using BELF.

The inherent differences between L1 and L2 are highly attractive from the BELF perspective since they may positively or negatively impact the intended message and, consequently, the success of the interactions. The researchers of the current study explored business professionals' perceptions regarding BELF communication at work. The analysis focused on the reported experiences and opinions of the respondents. This study focused on describing the situation in an automotive parts manufacturing company. Because of the limited domain, the results cannot be generalized. More research is required to examine the influences of languages in business communication in other industries and countries. Moreover, studies in a broader perspective are necessary.

Furthermore, this study attempted to portray a better understanding of effective cross-cultural communication. The focus was on an Iranian company located in Iran. However, many issues, such as language and knowledge conveyance, expatriation, and level of independence, require both case studies and extensive studies. The link between language skills, job performance, and job promotion needs to be studied from a broader perspective to clarify which factors contribute to effective cross-cultural business communication. The research findings and methodologies propose two other areas on which teaching and training should focus. First, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness of the different English varieties used in the business world and their impact on speakers of other languages. Second, and perhaps more importantly, teachers and trainers need to make students aware of cultural effects on communication. Part of the language learning should be devoted to teaching cultural aspects that might facilitate mutual understanding in business contacts.

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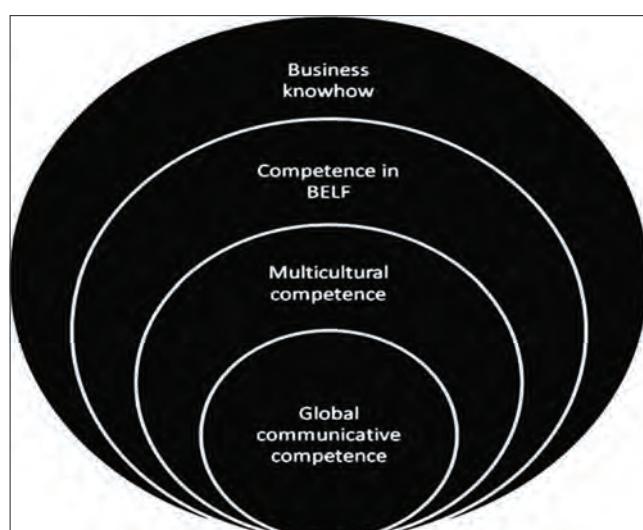


Figure 1. Global communicative competence model (adopted from Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011, p. 258)

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Appendices A and B are Adopted from Miina Ojanpera (2014)

Appendix A Using English at Workplace Questionnaire

Following is a survey about using English at the workplace in your company. The study aims to understand the effects of using English in Iranian companies. Please answer according to your personal opinion. Your name, position, company name, or personal information will not be mentioned in the study.

Background information

Please write here the name of your current company, department, and position.

Family name, first name _____

E-mail address: _____

Gender

Male Female

1. What is your native language?

Persian English Other: _____

2. How long have you worked in the company where you work now?

- 0–2 years
- 2–5 years
- 5–10 years
- 10–20 years
- more than 20 years

Situations in which English is used

3. In your current job, how often do you usually use English at work?

- almost all the time
- every day
- a few times a week
- a few times a month
- it varies a lot, sometimes very often, sometimes not at all
- not at all

4. In what kinds of situations do you use English at work? (several answers okay)

- talking face-to-face with foreigners
- talking on phone with foreigners
- sending e-mail to foreigners
- meetings (in Iran)
- online meetings with foreigners
- business trips to foreign countries
- writing documents/reports
- reading documents written in English
- Other: _____

5. Why is English used in these situations (several answers okay)

- communicating with foreigners who do not speak Persian
- company regulations require using English
- good practice to improve English skills

- the company is aiming at creating an image of a global company
- Other: _____

6. How many non-Iranian speakers are there in your department/everyday workplace? (Your own estimation is okay.)

- Everybody speaks Persian in my department
- 1 or 2 people are non-Persian speakers
- less than 10 % are non-Persian speakers
- 10–20 % are non-Persian speakers
- 20–50 % are non-Persian speakers
- 50–80 % are non-Persian speakers
- 80–100 % are non-Persian speakers

English and my company

7. Do you feel that English is now used more in your company than before?

- much more than before
- a little more than before
- it has not changed much
- less than before
- I haven't worked for the company very long, so I don't know

8. In which departments does it seem important to use English? (several answers okay)

- production
- engineering
- sales and marketing
- logistics
- exporting
- IT
- research and development
- human resources
- financial
- headquarters
- all departments

9. What do you think is the best policy for your company to use English?

- English as the only official language of the company
- English as one of the official languages of the company (e.g., English and Persian)
- English as the only official language of some departments
- English as one of the official languages of some departments
- no need to specify the role of the English language

10. How important for the future of your company is it to use English?

- one of the most important things
- important but not among the priorities
- not very important
- not important at all

11. How would you describe the attitude towards English in your company?

- very encouraging
- somewhat encouraging

- indifferent
- discouraging
- Other: _____

My experience of using English

12. What kinds of benefits does it bring for you in your company if you can speak English? (several answers okay)
- opportunities to go abroad
 - opportunities to get assigned for different kinds of work tasks
 - promotion
 - respect from other employees
 - self-confidence
 - Other: _____
13. What kinds of difficulties have you faced when communicating in English? (several answers okay)
- difficulties in understanding each other
 - not possible to understand each other
 - misunderstandings
 - communication becomes slow
 - trying to avoid situations in which English is used
 - frustration because I cannot express what I would like to
 - difficulties to participate in conversations during meetings
 - difficulties in writing official documents
 - difficulties in reading official documents
 - Other: _____
14. When you face difficulties, why do these situations feel difficult? (several answers okay)
- I have difficulties in understanding other people
 - It is difficult to make other people understand me
 - I feel my verbal language skills are not good enough
 - I feel my written language skills are not good enough
 - I am not familiar with the vocabulary related to the topic
 - Other people's language skills are not very high
 - People's accents and dialects are difficult to understand
 - Communication style in English is different than in my own language
 - Other: _____
- Having English as the official language**
- Please imagine a situation in which English is set as one of the official languages of your company.
15. How do you feel if you are required to use English in the workplace?
(several answers okay)
- positive
 - anxious
 - neutral
 - negative
 - a necessary part of my job
 - a chance to improve my language skills
 - a chance to improve my career
 - Other: _____

16. How do you feel when communicating with your Iranian colleagues in another language apart from Persian? (several answers okay)

- it is necessary in a global company
- good practice to improve language skills
- it has both benefits and disadvantages
- it makes communication difficult
- there is no point in speaking other language than Persian with Iranian colleagues
- Other: _____

17. Are you willing to use English in your workplace?

- Yes, I am very willing to use English
- Yes, I am somewhat willing to use English
- I prefer not to, but I have to use English
- No, I do not want to use English

18. If your company wants to use more English, what kinds of things would be important? (several answers okay)

- language training offered by the company
- hiring more foreign staff who speak English in an Iranian company in Iran
- having English as the official language or one of the official languages of the company
- creating an atmosphere that supports people to use English
- setting a minimum requirement (e.g., English language test such as TOEIC) for new employees entering the company
- Other: _____

Iranian companies and English

19. Do you think it is important for everyone in an Iranian company to speak English?
- Yes, everyone should speak good English
 - Yes, everyone should speak at least some English
 - No, only people who communicate with foreigners should speak English
 - No, no one needs to be able to speak English English skills at the workplace

20. How have you developed the English skills that you need at work? (several answers okay)

- school (primary school, junior high school, high school, university)
- student exchange
- language training offered by the company
- private language school
- studying on my own
- working experience abroad
- Other: _____

Thank you for your time. If you have any other comments, please write here.

Appendix B
Interview Questions
Using English at the workplace

1. Introduction to the research topic

2. Starting questions and company policy

To start with, could you please tell briefly who you are and what kind of work you do? Just for background information.

In what kinds of situations do you use English at work? Why is English used in these situations instead of Persian or another language?

Does your company have some rules about when you have to use English? (company policy of using English) Does your company offer language training? For whom? Are people encouraged to participate?

3. Effects of using English

Do you think it brings benefits to you in your company if you can speak English? If yes, what kind of?

What has helped you to develop the English skills that you need at work?

Have you faced some difficulties when using English? If yes, what kind of difficulties? Please give examples.

What kinds of situations feel most difficult? What do you do in these situations?

How do these difficulties affect doing business? Do you have some examples?

Do you feel using English changes the way of communication? If yes, in what way?

4. Iranian companies and English

In your company, do you feel that English is currently used more than before? Is the situation changing?

Do you think using English brings some benefits to the company?

Does the company encourage people to use English?

What are the biggest challenges for Iranian companies when introducing English?

Do you think there are some special characteristics when introducing English in Iranian companies than elsewhere in the world?

Do you think English is used effectively in [your company]? If there is something to improve, how would you improve the situation?

Do you think it is important for your company to use English? Why or why not?

Do you feel it is important to use English in Iranian companies in general? Why or why not?

5. Summary

benefits for companies and individuals

challenges for companies and individuals

company policy

the situation in Iranian companies

6. Possibility to discuss remaining issues

7. Closing the interview