Freeside Europe Online Academic Journal, Issue 13, 2022, pp 1-24, www.freesideeurope.com

DOI 10.51313/Freeside-2022-06 Article no.: 2022-13-06

What business students really need: Pragmatic strategies used by young business professionals in a multilingual environment

Eszter Sándor
Budapest Business School

Abstract

When fresh business graduates enter the world of business, they often work in a multicultural and multilingual environment where the shared language is English, that is, they use Business English as a lingua franca (BELF). In such work environments they are expected to function as professionals in English as well as in their mother tongue. However, being able to collaborate with other non-native speakers (NNS) of English and to work effectively with them requires the use of pragmatic strategies that help achieve mutual understanding. The aim of the present paper is to report on the findings of a qualitative piece of research which pursued the goal of exploring how young business professionals communicate in English at work, the pragmatic strategies they employ and the challenges they face when they communicate with people from all over the world. The findings of the interview study confirm research findings reported in literature that language users in BELF contexts use several pragmatic strategies to overcome linguacultural differences, such as paraphrasing, repetition and striving to use clear and simple language. The research has also shown that learning to communicate in an appropriate way is a gradual process that novice members of the international business community go through, and that the more experienced members are more aware of the need to develop their pragmatic competence. The paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of what Business English (BE) courses need to focus on to help future business professionals cope with BELF communicative situations at work.

Key Words: Business English as a Lingua Franca, pragmatic strategies, mutual understanding, Business English courses, international business community

Introduction

Globalisation and the widespread use of the internet have brought about communicative situations where English is used as a lingua franca (ELF). It means that English is commonly used as the shared linguistic resource when people with different native languages communicate (Jenkins 2009: 200). Communicative situations when speakers from different linguacultural backgrounds are present are especially common in business life due to the spread of multinational companies and the emergence global supply chains. As a result, English has become the language of both company internal and external communication, that is, the language of work (Ehrenreich 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010). Such communicative situations where English is the language used in business life are referred to as Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). It is important to note that ELF and BELF are not language varieties but language use contexts, in which native speakers may or may not be present (Jenkins et al. 2011). The defining feature of such contexts is that English is the shared linguistic resource, and the native languages of the interactants are different.

Since English has become the lingua franca in business, Higher Education (HE) institutions must prepare business students for BELF communication. It entails the development of skills that help young professionals communicate effectively in situations where speakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are present. Without such skills, young business professionals will not be able to do their daily tasks when they enter the world of business (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that besides educating students in their chosen professional field, HE institutions also improve their students' employability and chances of professional success by preparing them for functioning in multilingual and multicultural environments.

Preparing language learners for using English in professional settings has been the task of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) branch of English Language Teaching (ELT); within ESP, it is Business English (BE) professionals who fulfil that role in business schools. What differentiates ESP from teaching General English (GE) is that ESP, as well as BE, draws heavily on needs analysis when designing courses. In fact, some experts claim that needs analysis is identical with course design (Basturkmen, 2010). However, recent needs analysis studies conducted in Hungary focus on the tasks that business professionals have to do in English (Major 2000) or the skills that employers expect them to have (Loch 2017; Szabó & Mátó 2015; Szabó & Balázs 2020). None of them inquire into what strategies Hungarian speakers of English use when they engage in meaning making and what they do to avoid or repair misunderstandings when they occur. This study is designed to fill this niche: it aims to inquire into the practices and difficulties young business professionals encounter in multilingual environments in order to inform teaching practices in Business English (BE) courses in Hungarian HE institutions. It is hoped that the findings of this interview study will help HE institutions prepare students better for dealing with the challenges that working in international environments poses.

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)

Since effective communication in business is of key importance a huge body of literature has dealt with the characteristics of ELF use in international business communication, that is, with the features of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Charles, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005, Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta 2012; Pullin, 2013). Similarly to ELF, BELF communication is also fluid and emergent in nature. Communication partners in each interaction need to "negotiate their shared discourse practices in situ" (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010: 402) and cooperate in meaning making. Doing so, they employ skills such as code-switching, non-standard use of linguistic resources, and by seeking to express meaning explicitly by means of paraphrasing, repetition and explanation (Dewey 2014). Success in that depends on the interlocutors' capability of accommodating to their interlocutor's level of English and their skills in focusing partly on their interlocutor's national culture but, more importantly, on his/her individual cultural identity – "the sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that impart knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and ways of life" (Jameson 2007: 200) – and organisational role (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010). As communicative success depends on negotiation of meaning in situ, personal relationships are highly valued. Therefore, business partners make efforts to create rapport and engage in small talk (Ehrenreich 2010; Kaankanranta, et al. 2015; Kaankanranta & Planken 2010; Meierkord 2000; Pullin 2010; Ranta 2010).

While interlocutors in BELF communication may only have a small set of shared knowledge as regards the other person's cultural background, what they can certainly rely on is a shared knowledge of how business is conducted by the members of the international business community (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). The area of shared knowledge comprises of knowledge of “certain roles for the language users (e.g. buyer, seller, manager), the kind of jobs they do (e.g. negotiate deals, manage projects, lead people), the issues they discuss (e.g. prices, recruiting, finance), and the genres they use (e.g. business email, intranet, meetings)” (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010: 205).

The measure of communicative success in BELF is the extent to which the common goal of conducting business is fulfilled (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2013). In order to achieve this goal, interlocutors have to convey information accurately, clearly and in such a way that makes the communication partner “feel good” (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010: 397). In order to achieve that, business professionals need to analyse the audience, gauge their professional and linguistic knowledge, and adjust the message accordingly. Clarity is achieved by using simple language, being concise and often direct (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010). However, the extent of directness in communication might be difficult to predict and may lead to potential problems: indirectness may lead to ambiguity, while too much directness may be interpreted by the communication partner as rudeness (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010). Making the communication partner feel good involves communicating information which is “useful or usable to the recipient, and in a manner appropriate to the context and in line with the expectations of the recipient” (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010: 397).

The model of Global Communicative Competence

The competence that is required from business professionals in multilingual environments is summarized by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) in the model of Global Communicative competence.

Figure 1: The model of Global Communicative Competence, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011)

The model shows that for business professionals to have GCC, they need all the three layers of competence in the model. They need business knowledge without which no business professional can be considered competent and which is a prerequisite of mutual understanding as it creates the context in which all utterances (written or spoken) are interpreted. This knowhow can be considered a point of reference, providing a solid background to the two other layers. The layer of multicultural competence represents the ability of speakers to flexibly adjust to unpredictable and constantly changing linguistic environments in order to achieve mutual understanding. It includes skills such as accommodation skills and the ability to notice, respect, tolerate and handle cultural differences and different ways of doing things. BELF competence means the ability to work in English with people from different linguacultural backgrounds. This competence refers to the ability to create rapport and maintain a good working relationship with the partner, the ability to use business genres, and to express oneself clearly, concisely and politely.

Communities of Practice in international business

When young business professionals enter a workplace, they become members in a Community of Practice (CofP) (Seidlehofer 2009; Jenkins 2015). CofPs are defined as

> [A]n aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464)

It is easy to see that the international business community can be considered a CofP. When its members interact, they share a common goal (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010; Pullin 2013), they have a mutual understanding of the practices of doing business and the genres of the community, and they have a shared repertoire of specialist vocabulary (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken 2010; Pullin 2013). As they learn the specifics of the job and also the ways of communicating through participation in the activities of the community, the novice members move from the periphery towards the centre of the community (Lave & Wenger 1991). In other words, they are socialised into the ways professionals go about their daily tasks, communicate and act as a member of the wider professional community.

Pragmatic competence – adjusting to the situation

One can communicate effectively and successfully if they are able to express themselves in a way that is appropriate to the particular communicative situation. Language users can do so, if they are pragmatically competent, that is, they are able to decide "how-to-say-what-to-whom-when" (Bardovi-Harlig 2013: 68). Pragmatic competence is defined as "an understanding of the relationship between form and context that enables us, accurately and appropriately, to express and interpret intended meaning" (Murray 2010: 293).

A language user can be flexibly competent if they have developed the skills to comprehend intended meaning, recognize pragmatic forms and the way they fulfil specific functions in a given context, that is, they are able to recognize "form-function-context mappings" (Taguchi 2012: 54), and if they can formulate utterances and convey meaning which are appropriate to the given communicative situation (Taguchi 2012). Pragmatic comprehension and recognition are receptive skills, and do not require "precise linguistic analysis" from speakers to understand implied meaning, as it can sometimes be inferred from contextual clues (Taguchi 2012: 42). Pragmatic production, however, requires linguistic knowledge to express pragmatic functions.

Pragmatic comprehension, involves two processes: understanding literal meaning as well as the speaker's intention. The hearer infers the speaker's intended meaning by noticing the mismatch between the literal meaning of the utterance and its force (Taguchi 2012). Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) (1975) explains the rules governing this inferential process. The process is 'cooperative' in that speakers assume and apply reason in talk exchanges (Davis 2000). They assume that the utterances are "intended to be meaningful" (Davis 1997, as cited by Davis 2000: 18), and they recognize the purpose and direction of the talk (Grice 1975). The four maxims of the CP are (Grice 1975:45-46):

- Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purpose of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Relation: Be relevant.
- Manner: Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

When speakers notice that an utterance does not have a conventional meaning because it does not conform to a maxim, they will look for alternative meanings, and this is when implicature, an implied meaning is created. It is important to note that the maxims are not rules (Davis 2000). Instead, they can be used to explain the difference between what is said and what is meant, and to understand how "hearers recognise the speaker's intention when speakers use *implicit* [emphasis original] language" (Davis 2000: 6).

The principle that communication partners assume that utterances are relevant in the talk exchange is important in two ways: it motivates the listener to look for alternatives when there is a mismatch between contextual cues and literal meaning, but it is also important for the speaker as they "must make assumptions about the hearer's cognitive abilities and contextual resources, which will necessarily be reflected in the way she communicates, and in particular in what she chooses to make explicit and what she chooses to leave implicit" (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 218) in order to facilitate meaning making. In Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory, context is more than what can be inferred from the situation, it is a "subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" (Sperber & Wilson 1996: 15), therefore, speakers strive to formulate their message in a way that keys in with the hearer's ways of knowing the world (Widdowson 2003), including their beliefs, expectations and cultural assumptions (Sperber & Wilson 1996).

Although speakers may understand utterances with the help of contextual cues, in lingua franca situations pragmatic comprehension is made more difficult due to the fact that the same contextual cues might be interpreted differently by interactants because they come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Grundy 2007). As they can rely on a lesser degree of shared cultural and linguistic knowledge, interlocutors need "to constantly remind themselves that other interlocutors may not share the same schema, category or metaphor that

I am drawing on as a frame of reference in my production and comprehension" (Sharifian 2009: 247). The smaller is the area of shared knowledge about the world, the more negotiation of meaning is necessary. What follows is that interlocutors have to negotiate meaning and the norms of the interaction during communication (Illés 2011), and that they strive to be as explicit as possible (Grundy 2007).

Pragmatic strategies – Accommodation

As has been noted, ELF/BELF situations are fluid and emergent, which means that instead of aligning communicative behaviour to outside norms, speakers have to negotiate the norms of the interaction on the spot (Illés 2011). The negotiation process is enabled by the use of accommodation strategies. Accommodation is "the process by which speakers adjust their communicative behaviour to that of their interlocutors in order to facilitate communication" (Cogo 2009: 254). As well as facilitating communicative efficiency, accommodation strategies are used to signal listenership, agreement, and solidarity (Cogo 2009). Several accommodation strategies are used by ELF and BELF speakers, such as repetition, paraphrasing and code-switching (Cogo 2009).

Repetition can take different forms, such as self-repetition, other repetition and paraphrase. When speakers repeat themselves or the interlocutor, they can do so by partially or fully replicating the utterance. Paraphrase is a strategy that is used "when only the original concept is repeated" (Cogo 2009: 260). Repetition is said to be used as a cooperative strategy with the help of which speakers show that they have understood the utterance, they prevent breakdowns and pauses, and express solidarity and alignment with the partner (Cogo 2009).

Method

The aim of this study is to explore how Hungarian business graduates use English in multilingual and multicultural environments and to conduct a piece of research that can inform teaching practices in Business English courses in HE institutions so that students are better prepared for working in international environments. More specifically, the study aims to explore the strategies young business professionals use to facilitate mutual understanding, the

ISSN 1786-7967

difficulties they face during communication in English at work and how they solve those difficulties.

Participants

The participants were selected with purposive sampling in order to ensure that the sample "possesses certain characteristics relevant to the study" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993: 383). The sample was selected to meet two criteria: first, participants should have completed their BE courses at university in the last 1-3 years. This criterion was set to ensure that the participants still have memories of the BE courses. The second criterion was that they should be working in positions where they need to communicate and work in English. The participants were both male (4) and female (5), they were between 21 and 27 years old and have been working in positions that require daily communication in English, regardless of the national affiliation of the companies they work for. Most of them speak English at C1 level although not all of them have a C1 language certificate (indicated in square brackets). At the time the interviews were conducted, all of them had been working in their respective position for over 6 months, with the exception of Botond who had had this job for only 2 months. As the table shows, the participants work for companies of all sizes and in various industries and positions. In order to ensure anonymity, they were given pseudo-names. The following table summarizes the biographical data of the participants:

Table 1: The participants' biographical data

Name	Age	Level of English	Position	Company size and ownership	Industry
Kata	21	C1	intern	medium-sized, Hungarian	software development
Virág	21	C1	junior project manager	large, multinational	banking
Zoé	23	[C1]	project planner & HR generalist	large, multinational	construction
Anikó	21	C1	intern	large, multinational	telecom

Lili	27	C1	accountant	medium-sized, multinational	sportswear
Bence	21	C1	customer service	small, Hungarian	airline
Máté	23	C1	business analyst	large, Hungarian	energy
Dávid	21	C1	invoice management	large, multinational	technology
Botond	21	B2	receptionist	large, multinational	tourism

As the table shows, they represent a fairly wide spectrum of company types and industries. What all of them have in common is the fact that they are all employees (or student workers) at the lowest level of the hierarchy, therefore, they take instructions and perform tasks, but they are not in the position to instruct others to do things for them. Therefore, they are dependent on others to provide them with data and information, while it is imperative that they understand instructions so as to be able to do what is expected of them, and to avoid doing double work.

The data from the interviews show that English is used as the main working language even in companies which cannot be considered multinational from an ownership perspective. However, the companies where the participants of the study work recruit professionals with specialised expertise from all over the world in order to meet human resources needs and to provide the best service for their clients and business partners. That is why the companies in Hungarian ownership, be they large, small or medium size, employ professionals who can work in at least two (Hungarian and English), and sometimes three languages (adding German to the portfolio). The foreign colleagues are sometimes physically present in the Hungarian office (as it is the case with the companies where Zoé, Maté, Kata, Botond, Bence, and Anikó work), or they help the team from their native countries and communication with them is exclusively online (as it is done in the companies where Dávid, Lili, and Virág work). Therefore, we can say that regardless of nationality, all the companies in the study are multicultural and multilingual.

Data collection and analysis

Since it was not possible for me to observe the ways in which young business professionals communicate at the workplace, I decided to investigate their explicit pragmatic knowledge by conducting semi-structured interviews. I collected data from three sources: literature, the researcher’s journal, and the interviews with the participants. I followed McCracken’s (1988) 4-step model to prepare the interview guide which was validated in two steps: first it was sent to experts for comments and suggestions, then, it was piloted with three interviewees. In order to ensure dependability of the findings, the verbatim transcript of the interviews were sent to the participants for member checking (Lincoln & Guba 1985): they were asked to provide comments or make clarifications where they felt it was needed. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian, and, due to the COVID pandemic, online in Microsoft Office Teams, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes.

As the aim of the study is to gain an emic perspective of young business professionals’ experiences in BELF communication, a method of data collection was used that yielded qualitative data. It must be noted that qualitative data analysis is an interpretative process which necessarily involves “the researcher’s own *positionality*” [emphasis original], or subjectivity, is always present” (Lazaraton 2003: 3). Data analysis was carried out with the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse 1994) and the emerging themes were compared to findings in literature.

Results and discussion

The description of the way the participants cope with the challenges of BELF communication and what they perceive to be benefitting BE students in HE in Hungary can be organized in themes which emerged from the interviews. The participants mentioned the appropriate use of English as an expression of professionalism, the importance of expressing themselves clearly and in a simple way to avoid ambiguity, paraphrasing, diplomacy and assertiveness, and the distinction between speaking good English as opposed to being a good communicator. The excerpts from the interviews to illustrate the points made are presented in the researcher’s translation.

Appropriate use of English contributes to image and professionalism

Although all of the participants emphasized that the English they use at work is a kind of “broken English” (Máté & Dávid), and that even their bosses do not speak ‘perfect’ English, they all agreed that being able to work in English is a basic requirement without which they would not have been employed in their positions. On the other hand, the fact that they have to communicate with NNSs of English does not mean that being able to express themselves in a sophisticated way is not important, because a high level of language use contributes to their image as professionals.

> If, for example, I want to write an email to one of my bosses that a system or process does not work well, and I want to suggest a better way of doing it, this email should be one that when someone reads it, it should not end up in the recycle bin as one that makes no sense; but when someone reads it, it should have an effect on the reader. (Bence)

The results confirm Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2011) model of Global Communicative Competence: it is not enough to be able to speak good English, business professionals need to be able to show professional expertise through the use of English. According to the participants' report, they need to be able to adjust to the communicative situation, especially when they have to write an email to a person higher up in the hierarchy. In such situations, the email must be written in a formal and polite way, must not contain spelling mistakes, and must be written using the right terminology, otherwise they are not listened to, not taken seriously, or given the help they ask for, or their suggestions are disregarded. Thus, being appropriately formal is a means to making an effect on the other person, which is regarded as a necessary requirement of professionalism.

The need for clarity and simplicity

All participants mentioned that clear and simple communication is crucial in making themselves understood, which is in line with research findings (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010). In the company Máté works for, there is an unwritten rule that those who speak high level English must make every effort to express themselves in a simple way so as to be understandable for those whose level of English is not so high.

It transpires from the participants' accounts that using simple language often comes about as a reaction to their interactant's lack of understanding. When they realize that the partner does not understand the utterance, they rephrase it in a simple way: using simple words, short and simple sentences, or even examples. Therefore, simplification is the outcome of accommodating to the partner (Cogo 2009), and sometimes to their interactant's lack of professional knowledge. Moreover, participants also mentioned, that very often there is no time for expressing themselves elaborately, therefore simplicity does not only facilitate mutual understanding but also contributes to efficiency in saying the most important pieces of information in the least amount of time.

Clarity and simplicity are also considered to be the best strategy to avoid misunderstandings. Dávid learnt it the hard way that not being appropriately clear and simple may lead to a problem being escalated to top management. Such an escalation may cause a huge damage to one's professional image, and in extreme cases to losing the job. Although losing his job did not happen to him, the misunderstanding is still a bad memory, as, according to him, in his position, 'no one wants top management to learn their names'. The misunderstanding was caused by Dávid when he used inappropriately sophisticated language that was misinterpreted by the other party so much so that they accused Dávid of incompetence and unwillingness to cooperate, which was not true. Dávid drew the conclusion that expressing himself in a simple way is the best strategy, especially when a problem must be solved:

> I wrote down the problem in nice, beautiful sentences, and I think this is when things got out of hand and the problem got escalated. …. I may have expressed the problem in the wrong way, or maybe my style was not appropriate… But I wrote a beautifully composed letter, as it should be written, and even so it became an issue. …. Now I know that short and simple sentences are the best. No sophisticated language, because there is no time for that, besides, the other party will probably not understand it. (Dávid)

Using unambiguous language is reported to be crucial in business communication (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010), but it is difficult for young professionals, especially for those who like showing off their high level of English knowledge. Using inappropriately sophisticated language violates two of the CP maxims: those of quality and manner therefore, the utterance creates an implicature which may threaten the other party's professional competence. As a result, it is likely that the communication will hinder rather than facilitate the process of working out a solution.

Preventing non-understanding

Given that the participants need to cooperate closely with colleagues from diverse linguistic backgrounds, they go to great lengths to prevent non-understanding. Confirming earlier research findings, all of them agreed that misunderstandings rarely happen (Jenkins et al. 2011), although they admitted that it often happens that they do not understand what the other person says. However, they did not think it was due to a deficiency in language knowledge, they mentioned lack of information or professional knowledge, unusual accent and mispronunciation of words as potential causes of non-understanding. Virág experienced the extreme case during project meetings where her colleagues, both Hungarian and foreign, discuss the issues of the project they are working on. To her surprise, they understand each other, although the Hungarian colleagues' level of English is quite low, at least where their general English knowledge is concerned. They have a very good knowledge of technical terms and due to the specific context, they manage to achieve mutual understanding:

> There are the older colleagues, aged 50+, who have been in the profession for a long time, they know the technical part but understand only the specialised terminology, and often lack the everyday words, therefore, they have difficulties in expressing themselves. … if they don't understand it for the first time, they paraphrase it, but as the topic is so specific, it is hard not to understand. If they understand 80% of the sentence, the rest they can guess. I do not think there is misunderstanding… rather, there is non-understanding. If they understand something of it, they understand the whole. (Virág)

It is clear that the participants expect non-understanding to happen, therefore, they use several strategies to prevent it. Some of the participants use overt techniques such as comprehension checking questions (Máté), others report the use of techniques mentioned in literature, such as showing solidarity with the means of providing an explanation and paraphrasing (Cogo 2009). The following excerpt is a good example of solidarity and empathy which is believed to facilitate communication:

> If they ask me, I am happy to repeat what I said or paraphrase it, because it is natural that we do not use the language in the same way, we do not use the same words. It is natural. And we do not have the expectation that we understand only what is perfectly said. I try to guess what it can possibly mean … I try to be empathetic, and, I think, it is true for both parties. (Lili)

ISSN 1786-7967

Paraphrasing

The most common strategy that the participants use to facilitate understanding and to avoid non-understanding is through paraphrased questions. When they feel there is a mismatch between the literal meaning of the utterance and what would be logical to infer from it under the given circumstances, that is, they are unsure of the intended meaning, they paraphrase the utterance and then phrase it as a question to get confirmation from the speaker as to whether their understanding matches the speaker's intention.

Paraphrasing serves multiple functions (Cogo 2009). Lili mentions that she uses this strategy to show that she paid attention, while Zoé and Kata use it to signal to the other person what they think the other person means and also the areas that are not fully clear to them. They gave exactly the same explanation of how they use this strategy:

> I say it in my own words what I think the person meant and then I put it to them as a question and wait and see how they react. This is usually what I do. They start speaking to me, I don't understand every word, therefore I don't know what they want exactly, so I say: So regarding this, you want so and so? If they say 'yes', then it's great, if I didn't understand it correctly, they explain it to me. (Zoé)

Paraphrasing is such a key strategy for them that Máté felt it important to make a distinction between asking for a repetition from the speaker and paraphrasing. He said that he only resorts to asking for repetition when he understands so little of what is being said that paraphrasing becomes impossible. He went as far as to claim that asking for repetition 'is the worst thing one can do'.

Speaking good English versus being a good communicator in English

There is a difference among the participants regarding their views on what it takes to be able to communicate effectively. For Lili, Anikó, Virág, it is important that the English they speak should be close to the way NSs use the language. Virág is especially worried about her pronunciation and ability to use either the British or the American variety. Lili expressed her desire to approximate RP, she dislikes American English and gets irritated when she hears Hungarians speak English with a heavy Hungarian accent. On the other hand, Máté, Dávid, Bence, Zoé and Kata do not care so much about their accent or whether their English is close

ISSN 1786-7967

to NS English. They approach effectiveness from the perspective of achieving mutual understanding. As Máté put it:

> I am convinced that the function of a foreign language is that I understand people whom I cannot address in their mother tongue. Since English fulfils this function perfectly, for me it does not matter how well people speak; as long as we understand each other, there is no problem. (Máté)

In fact, Máté does not consider himself a person with a high level of English, but he thinks he is a good communicator. The evidence he gives to prove this claim is the strategies, or tricks as he calls them, to prevent all kinds of troubles in communication. He uses paraphrase questions, and if the topic is more complex, he mentions examples or draws parallels. In his words: 'I always try to speak in a way that the communication partner can follow my line of thought.' Being aware of the fact that communication may go in directions not intended by the speaker, he tries to prevent communication breakdowns:

> The reason why it is important for me is that there are words, points or even sentences in communication which can lead the other person in two directions. It might be due to professional or language reasons, and if that happens, I may misunderstand what the task is. That is why I need to check by asking what it is that is expected of me. …. I really make a huge effort to understand at least some of the things so that I can paraphrase them as a question. (Máté)

Listener focus is apparent in Zoe's strategy too. As an HR professional, she meets new employees first when they start work for the company. Her task is to give general information about the company to new colleagues and to introduce them to the team in which they are going to work. Besides completing the compulsory task of introducing the company, she spares no effort to gauge the new employees' level of English. She does it in the following way:

> First, I assess the new colleagues' level of English. I start talking to them, because I want to find out how communicative and open they are, how wide their vocabulary is, what they are trying to say about themselves…. It depends on the personality how communicative they are, then we go in the direction of where they are from, what jobs they have had so far, … or we may go into some more everyday topics….I always ask

> them about their journey here, what they think about the place, and this way a conversation may develop, and I see from this and from the number of questions they ask if they would like to talk or not. The way they talk I can guess how good their English is or how much they would like to have a conversation. (Zoé)

Interestingly, another aspect of good communication surfaced from the interviews. Bence, Anikó, Virág and Kata mentioned that in their experience they were successful in communicating in English when they were not translating their Hungarian ideas into English but when they managed to think in English in the first place.

> I think the main point is that when I speak English I do not translate my thoughts word for word from Hungarian into English but I set my mind in English mode and then it does not happen that I cannot formulate an idea in a way that I could in Hungarian and then I struggle, but I formulate the idea right away in English. (Bence)

In connection with what she learnt in the BE course, Anikó highlighted the development of the ability to think in English which she regularly needs in her job. She says that being able to take in and process large amounts of information in English is a must in her position. Moreover, it is also imperative that she should react on the spot; to be able to do so, she has no time to translate between the two languages.

Diplomacy and assertiveness

The themes of assertiveness and diplomacy emerged in relation to the difficulties that the participants face in BELF situations. In their view, the two are overlapping concepts, but to some extent they capture slightly different strategies. Both are necessary, however, to create and maintain good working relationships (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010), to preserve one's self-image as a competent professional, and a means to avoid a problem which could escalate into a conflict.

Being diplomatic was mentioned by Lili as a means to prevent conflicts, especially, when she spots a mistake in a colleague's work and she has to ask the person to correct it. According to her, it is very important to be able to express herself in a less direct way so as not to cause the other person to feel attacked: "too much directness (i.e. straightforwardness bordering on bluntness) can overwhelm the other party" (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010: 397).

ISSN 1786-7967

For her, being appropriately direct is a difficult matter: she puts is down to her being raised in a family where direct communication was the norm, and adds that

> I think we Hungarians express ourselves more directly than others… how to say this…. we may not use the most appropriate version or shade of meaning when we use English. We sometimes opt for the simpler version, although there might be a more sophisticated phrase that would not be so strong. (Lili)

In her view, diplomacy also means being able to stand up for her opinion and to argue for it in professional discussions. It involves communicating disagreement in a non-offensive way. She admitted that it took her some time to learn how to express herself in a way that is perceived as kind, although she never thought she was being unkind. She got feedback from colleagues that she needs to be more diplomatic, and to use politeness formulas more extensively. On the other hand, she admitted that the extent to which communication is direct depends on the company culture:

> I used to work for a company where a colleague of mine asked a third colleague 'Who are you to ask such questions?' or in another case a manager retorted to another manager saying 'Why didn't you contact me through your manager?' So, there are sometimes this kind of rank-related things. (Lili)

For Dávid, assertiveness is directly linked to projecting the image of a competent professional. Therefore, it is important for him to find the right balance between being aggressive and subservient in a conflict situation. If the other party perceives the utterance as aggressive, they will feel as being blamed for the mistake, and, to save their act, they will escalate the matter to management. Dávid's strategy to avoid such situations is that he tries to be neutral and show that he is willing to take his share of responsibility, but also not pulling all the blame on himself to preserve his professional image. He achieves neutrality by focussing on the problem and avoiding ambiguity by expressing himself clearly. Although he finds pleasure in showing off his language abilities, his experience taught him that it can easily lead to miscommunication. The source of trouble is when, due to sophisticated language use, the other party does not understand the intended meaning, and suspects that behind the sophisticated language the intention of the writer is to clean his name and to blame them. This is the lesson he learnt:

ISSN 1786-7967

> I think a style is normal when we focus on the problem, not on that it must be solved immediately. When someone writes in an inappropriate style, it means for me that there is a kind of ambiguity in it, implying that 'it is your fault, so you solve it at once!' Not like: here is a problem, let's solve it together. I always make sure that I do not exclude myself from the problem, because probably I have a part in it as well. (Dávid)

Acquiring pragmatic competence

For novice business professionals, learning to use appropriate language is a process of trial and error during which they consciously reflect on what worked and what did not. Kata formulates it in the following way: "if a method worked once because the person understood it, I use it again with them. If I speak to the person for the first time, I use a method that worked with others and I see what happens". From the reports of more experienced speakers it transpires that they pay more attention to pragmatic strategies and meaning negotiation. Dávid, for instance, has developed a sensitivity to noticing discrepancies in the tone of the email he writes and that of the one he receives as a reply. He learnt from experience that if the tone of the reply is not in line with the original email, something went astray, and instant corrective action needs to be taken.

> People knowledge is something one learns on the job: to be able to judge people in an instant, so that one says something and from the feedback he gets he sees whether the message and the reply are aligned in tone. If they are not, it may cause problems and result in escalation. (Dávid)

If we examine the accounts about how the participants in this study learn to use English appropriately, that is, in a way that best fits the particular context and the purpose of the talk, we will see what Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation is like for the young professionals in the study. The findings show that with experience the participants become more conscious of the importance of acquiring the appropriate ways of communication. While Anikó, Botond and Virág as novices strive to achieve accuracy measured in NS norms, the more experienced professionals, Lili, Dávid, Máté and Zoé, do not care so much about how NS would express themselves: Their most important goal is to arrive at a mutual understanding and get their job done as it is required from them. As a novice member of the community, Kata, learns through trial and error, while the more experienced Dávid and

Lili learn from feedback and through observing how other people communicate. They select those colleagues whom they consider competent both professionally and in English and try to imitate the way they communicate. Dávid also reads all the newsletters and other official communication from top management to see how they use the language.

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative exploratory piece of research show that young business professionals face several challenges when they have to use English to do their job. They need to adjust to different communication partners, understand and carry out instructions to do their tasks, but most importantly, they need to assert themselves as competent business professionals in a community in which they are novices. During the process of learning how more experienced members of the CofP go about their daily tasks and communicate, they use several pragmatic strategies to negotiate meaning and achieve mutual understanding. It is important for them to be able to express themselves appropriately in English, but this does not mean to conform to NS norms, rather, it means to be able to adjust to the communicative situation and their communication partner, and to be able to use sophisticated language when it is needed. Such situations arise when they need to talk or write to their bosses or when they need to communicate with professionals outside the company. In such situations sophisticated language use shows professionalism and expertise.

The strategies young business professionals use in a multilingual and multicultural environment are those that prevent non-understanding, thus facilitate meaning negotiation, and those that help them build good relationships with their colleagues. Among the strategies to negotiate meaning the most frequently reported one is paraphrasing. This strategy is considered to be the most effective as it provides a means to constantly check mutual understanding, as well as to create the norms of the interaction between the two (or more) parties. Together with readiness to provide explanations, paraphrasing is used to show solidarity, empathy and understanding of the difficulties the other party faces during interaction. Moreover, being able to be assertive but at the same time diplomatic allows speakers to communicate about problems and prevent the escalation of problems into conflicts.

From an ESP/BE perspective it can be concluded that successful communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts requires an awareness of the universal rules of communication, such as Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Relevance theory so as to be able to notice and comprehend pragmatic meaning and to be able to learn how the established members of the particular CofP communicate. While it is impossible for HE institutions to prepare students for specific jobs or workplaces, BE professionals in HE may sensitize students to differences in formulating messages in different communicative situations and to recognize the mismatch between the way an utterance is formulated and the speaker's intended meaning, that is, to help them understand pragmatic meaning. The results show that young business professionals acquire this pragmatic competence during their working career, but BE courses in HE could spare them a great deal of effort and stress if they were prepared for such challenges. The present research aims to take one step in this direction.

References

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen (2013). "Developing L2 pragmatics." *Language Learning* 63 (1): 68–86. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00738.x

Basturkmen, Helen (2010). *Developing courses in English for Specific Purposes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charles, Mirjaliisa (2007). "Language matters in global communication." *Journal of Business Communication* 44 (3): 260–282. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021943607302477

Cogo, Alessia (2009). "Accommodating difference in ELF conversations: A study of pragmatic strategies." *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and findings*, edited by Anna Mauranen and Elina Ranta. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 254–273.

Davis, Bethan (2000). "Grice's Cooperative Principle: Getting the meaning across." *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics,* edited by Diane Nelson and Paul Foulkes. Leeds, UK: University of Leeds: 1–26.

Dewey, Martin (2014). "Pedagogic criticality and English as a lingua franca." *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish association of Anglo-American studies* 36 (2): 11–30. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486658 [retrieved: 14/05/2019]

Eckert, Penelope – McConnell-Ginet, Sally (1992). "Think practically and look locally: Language and gender community-based practice." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21: 461–490. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.21.100192.002333

Ehrenreich, Susanne (2010). "English as a business lingua franca in a German multinational corporation: Meeting the challenge." *Journal of Business Communication* 47 (4): 408–431. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021943610377303

Fraenkel, Jack R. – Wallen, Norman E. (1993). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (2nd ed). Boston, USA: McGraw-Hill.

Grice, Paul H. (1975). "Logic and conversation." *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts,* edited by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York, NY: Academic Press: 41–58.

Grundy, Peter (2007). "Language evolution, pragmatic inference, and the use of English as a lingua franca." *Explorations in Pragmatics: Linguistic, Cognitive and Intercultural Aspects*, edited by Istvan Kecskes and Laurence L. Horn. Berlin & New York: Mouton De Gruyter: 219–256.

Illés, Éva (2011). "Communicative language teaching and English as a lingua franca." *Vienna English Working Papers* 20 (1): 3–16.

Jameson, Daphne A. (2007). "Reconceptualizing cultural identity and its role in intercultural business communication." *Journal of Business Communication* 44 (3): 199–235.

Jenkins, Jennifer (2009). *World Englishes: A resource book for students* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

Jenkins, Jennifer (2015). "Repositioning English and multilingualism in English as a Lingua Franca." *Englishes in Practice* 2 (3): 49–85. https://doi.org/10.1515/eip-2015-0003

Jenkins, Jennifer – Cogo, Alessia – Dewey, Martin (2011). "Review of development in research into English as a lingua franca, State-of-the Art Article". *Language Teaching* 44: 281–315. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000115

Kankaanranta, Anne – Louhiala-Salminen, Leena (2010). "'English? – oh, it's just work!': A study of BELF users' perceptions." *English for Specific Purposes*. 29 (3): 204–209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2009.06.004

Kankaanranta, Anne – Louhiala-Salminen, Leena (2013). "What language does global business speak?" – The concept and development of BELF. *Ibérica* 26: 17–34.

Kankaanranta, Anne – Planken, Brigitte (2010). "BELF competence as business knowledge of internationally operating business professionals." *Journal of Business Communication* 47 (4): 380–407. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021943610377301

Kankaanranta, Anne, – Louhiala-Salminen, Leena – Karhunen, Päivi (2015). "English in multinational companies: implications for teaching 'English' at an international business school." *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* 4 (1): 125–148. https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2015-0010

Lave, Jean & Wenger, Etienne (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Lazaraton, Anne 2003. "Evaluative criteria for qualitative research in applied linguistics: Whose criteria and whose research?" *The Modern Language Journal* 87 (1): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00175

Lincoln, Yvonna S. – Guba, Egon G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Loch, Ágnes (2017). "Interkulturális kompetencia a munkaerőpiac és az oktatás szemszögéből." [Intercultural competence: The ideas of employers and educators.] *Porta Lingua 2017 Szaknyelvhasználat: a tudomány és a szakma nyelvének alkalmazása*, edited by Besznyák Rita. Budapest: SZOKOE: 33–45.

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena, Charles, Mirjaliisa & Kankaanranta, Anne. (2005). "English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies." *English for Specific Purposes* 24: 401–421. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.02.003

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena – Kankaanranta, Anne (2011). "Professional communication in a global Business context: The notion of global communicative competence." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Special issue on Professional Communication in Global Contexts* 54: 244–262.

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena – Kankaanranta, Anne (2012). "Language as an issue in international communication: English or local language? If English, what English?" *Public Relations Review* 38: 262–269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.12.021

Major, Éva (2000). "Milyenfajta angol nyelvtudásra van szükség a nyelvigényes munkakörökben? Vizsgálat a munkaadók elvárásainak felmérésére." [What kind of English language knowledge is needed in language-intensive jobs? An investigation of employer expectations.] *Modern nyelvoktatás* 6 (1): 33–50.

Maykut, Pamela – Morehouse, Richard (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London, UK: The Falmer Press.

McCracken, Grant (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park: SAGE

Meierkord, Christiane (2000). "Interpreting successful lingua franca interaction: An analysis of non-native-/non-native small talk conversations in English." *Linguistik Online* 5 (1). https://bop.unibe.ch/linguistik-online/article/view/1013/1673 [retrieved: 06/06/2017]

Murray, Neil (2010). "Pragmatics, awareness raising, and the Coopertive Principle." *ELT Journal* 64 (3): 293–301. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccp056

Pullin, Patricia (2010). "Small talk, rapport, and international communicative competence: Lessons to learn from BELF." *Journal of Business Communication* 47 (4):455–476. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021943610377307

Pullin, Patricia (2013). “Achieving ‘comity’: The role of linguistic stance in business English as a lingua franca (BELF) meetings.” *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* 2 (1): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2013-0001

Ranta, Elina (2010). “English in the real world vs. English at school: Finnish English teachers’ and students’ views.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 20 (2): 156–177. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2009.00235.x

Seidlhofer, Barbara (2009). “Common ground and different realities: World Englishes and English as a lingua franca.” *World Englishes* 28 (2): 236–245. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2009.01592.x

Sharifian, Farzad (2009). “Cultural conceptualizations in English as an international language.” *English as an International Language*, edited by Farzad Sharifian. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters: 242–253.

Sperber, Dan – Wilson, Deirdre (1996). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell.

Szabó, Csilla Marianna – Mátó, Flóra (2015). “A munkaerőpiac elvárása: idegennyelv-tudás.” [Requirements of the labour market: foreign language knowledge.] *Nyelvi terek*, edited by István András, Mónika Rajcsányi-Molnár, and István Németh. Dunaújváros: DUF Press: 9–28.

Szabó, Csilla Marianna, – Balázs, László (2020). “Examination of employers’ expectations towards career entrants from learning outcomes point of view.” *Journal of Applied Technical and Educational Sciences* 10 (1):, 3-18. https://doi.org/10.24368/jates.v10i1.158

Taguchi, Naoko (2012). *Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Competence*. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Widdowson, Henry G. (2003). *Defining issues in English language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eszter Sándor holds a position as Assistant Lecturer at Budapest Business School and is the author of articles focusing on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) research. Her research interests concern the implications of ELF and BELF reseach on the methodology of teaching Business English in Higher Education. sandor.eszter@uni-bge.hu

Received: June 30, 2022 Final version accepted: November 1, 2022