

OVERVIEWING RESEARCH ON BELF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

From professional practice to ELT materials

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Abstract – The present paper focuses on the use of English in BELF contexts, bearing in mind both teaching and practice in the professional field. After an overview of the state of the art in ELF and BELF research over the last twenty years, the topic is tackled from three different perspectives, which mirror the studies carried out by the unit of the University of Verona in a three-year-long nationally funded research. Firstly, we will address BELF in professional settings, to shed light on what facilitates success in online interactions, with a special focus on e-mail exchanges. Secondly, still addressing e-mail exchanges, we will suggest a broadening of the notion of BELF communication strategies that goes beyond sheer successful, mutual understanding in the professional field. Finally, bearing the first two steps of our research in mind, we will turn to the teaching environment, overviewing if and to what extent international business ELT coursebooks deal with BELF communication strategies at different levels of competence, so as to provide hints and suggestions for more effective materials in this field.

Keywords: BELF; communication strategies; ELT coursebooks; online interactions; business e-mails.

1. ELF and BELF: Twenty years on

The present paper is intended as a theoretical introduction to three successive papers in this issue, authored respectively by Poppi, Caleffi, and Vettorel and Franceschi; these papers are interconnected in so far as each of them contributes to the study of BELF communication strategies from a different perspective, thus mirroring the research carried out by the unit of the University of Verona in a three-year-long nationally funded project on ELF and particularly BELF, with special reference to professional practice(s), ELT materials and training activities.

ELF studies have been a thriving area of research over the last two decades, investigating processes connected to the increasing spread of English as a language of global communication, with BELF focusing specifically on aspects pertaining to successful communication in the

business workplace. Indeed, while *lingua francas* have existed throughout history, the scale of the English phenomenon is unprecedented; English is no longer used only by its native speakers: the majority of uses of English nowadays involve speakers from contexts where the language has either established as a result of Anglo-American colonialism, or where it is increasingly present in the environment and studied as a foreign language. English can be extensively found in the Linguistic Landscape and in the media also in territories where it is neither a first nor a second language, and it is the most common language of cross-cultural communication on the Internet (Sangiamchit 2018; Vettorel 2014; Vettorel, Franceschi 2016). In addition, its importance as the language of business and higher education has grown significantly over the past decades, becoming unrivaled.

As a consequence, it is no longer possible to conceive English as a monolithic entity: the language exists in multiple varieties, each of which possesses its own distinctive features: in international contexts involving speakers from multiple linguacultural backgrounds, we move past the notion of codified, self-contained varieties of English, and we talk of Global Englishes, an umbrella term that includes both World Englishes, nativized varieties, and English in its *Lingua Franca* function (Galloway, Rose 2015).

Research pertaining to ELF has examined multiple aspects related to the international use of English, including phonetics and phonology (Jenkins 2000), lexico-grammar (Seidlhofer 2004, 2011), idiomaticity (Franceschi 2013; Pitzl 2012), phraseology (Mauranen 2009; Vetchinnikova 2014), and linguistic creativity at various levels (Hülmbauer 2013). In addition to looking at the phenomenon from a linguistic point of view, the specificities of different contexts of use have similarly been investigated, especially those where English has become the *de facto* language of communication, namely, academia and business.

ELF studies also analyse communication in English from a variety of sociolinguistic perspectives, placing a special focus on the accommodation and meaning-negotiation strategies speakers utilize when communicating in international contexts. In ELF interactions, speakers may not necessarily adhere to native-speaker norms, but rather employ the linguistic and non-linguistic resources (Birlik, Kaur 2020) at their disposal, engaging in language accommodation practices in order to achieve successful communication. In ELF communication, speakers from multiple linguacultural backgrounds need to negotiate meaning as well as pragmatics and social relationships to ensure the success of the communicative event. ELF talk has therefore been associated with dynamicity and fluidity as well as linguistic creativity, as speakers adapt and tweak all the language resources at their disposal, orienting to the listener to maintain mutual intelligibility and to negotiate meaning in a given communicative situation.

Findings from ELF research have raised the interests of scholars also in relation to the implications of English used as a lingua franca for English Language Teaching (ELT). It is now agreed upon in many sociolinguistic (Blommaert 2010) and ELF-oriented studies that ELT traditional tenets, based on native-speaker norms and proposing near-native competence as a target, are no longer appropriate for speakers who need to be able to function in a variety of contexts in a globalized society. Furthermore, it has been argued that well-attested notions – among others that of Communicative Competence (Widdowson 2003) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (Baker 2015) – need to be revisited in the light of the complex reality outlined above. While in traditional ELT models the main focus is placed on language forms and accuracy, in ELF conversations it is the communicative function expressed by the speakers that plays a preeminent role, which may be fulfilled through strategies and/or marked linguistic choices, including language alternation or translanguaging practices (Cogo 2012; Hülbauer 2013). In Kankaanranta and Lohuiala-Salminen’s words, “a grammatically and lexically ‘correct’ message doesn’t necessarily do the job, but a message with many mistakes may do so” (2007, p. 56). Furthermore, the role that Communication Strategies (henceforth CS) play in such interactions is fundamental to effective interaction and meaning negotiation (Cogo, Dewey 2012; Seidlhofer 2011). Thus, a shift in perspective that acknowledges the importance of ELF-aware pedagogic approaches, materials, and ELF-informed teacher education has been called for over the last few years, resulting in several publications (e.g. papers in Bowles, Cogo 2015; Lopriore, Grazzi 2016; Sifakis, Tsantila 2018) as well as pedagogic and teacher education proposals (Grazzi 2017; Matsuda 2017; Vettorel 2016, 2017).

Against this background, scholars have focused more and more on the study of ELF in the business setting, coining the term BELF (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* 2005) – English as a Business Lingua Franca. The specificity of BELF lies in the contexts where it is used, which require not only linguistic competence but also domain-specific knowledge and vocabulary, which is the common code through which corporate goals are fulfilled (Poppi 2012b). English is widely used in communication with partner firms and companies, but, as noted by Galloway and Rose (2015, p. 127) and shown in Cogo’s empirical research (2012, 2016), it is increasingly used as the in-house language and as the language to promote companies internationally (Poppi 2012a, 2012b, 2016), too. In the globalized market, corporate communication no longer occurs exclusively during face-to-face or telephone meetings: computer-mediated communication and digital media also play an important role both in communication among employees and in corporate websites, which are “the visual on-line external representation of a

company”, and therefore of paramount importance in providing potential customers with information about the company (Poppi 2012a, p. 42). All these uses of English reflect the reality of how the language is employed – with its lingua franca characteristics – in order to sell a locally-based product, or service, in the global market; in these contexts, clarity, both in face-to-face and digital communication and in corporate websites, “is of paramount importance” (Poppi 2012a, p. 49), with the accuracy of content information being prioritized over linguistic correctness.

Flexibility and dynamicity in the use of all the linguistic resources as well as co-operation among speakers are characteristics of ELF that cross over into BELF, together with a focus on communicative and pragmatic strategies rather than on conformity to native-speaker norms. However, in its specificity, BELF combines the knowledge of specialized vocabulary and jargon with a heightened linguistic and intercultural awareness that also contributes to the success of business transactions in cross-cultural contexts.

Cultural and intercultural awareness, alongside pragmatic competence and knowledge of CSs (Cogo 2012, p. 104) are identifiable as essential skills for successful international interactions in the workplace. Although international business communication is sometimes regarded as being culture-neutral, actually, the speakers’ linguacultures play a relevant role, particularly in BELF communication: “not only do BELF speakers bring into business interaction their own culture-bound views of how encounters should be conducted but also discourse practices stemming from their respective mother tongues” (Louhiala-Salminen *et al.* 2005, p. 404).

Thus, in order to communicate successfully in the workplace at a global level, three different though interweaving elements of “global communicative competence” come into play. The model theorized by Louhiala-Salminen and Kaakanranta (2011, cf. also Kaakanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013) stresses in the first place the importance of multicultural awareness, that is, “knowledge and skills in managing communicative situations with representatives of different national, organizational and professional cultures” (Kaakanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013, p. 28). The other two layers are respectively BELF competence and business knowledge; the former requires competence in the language as used in BELF contexts, including CSs pertaining to “clarity, brevity, directedness and politeness” (Kaakanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013), while the latter represents business-specific knowledge and practices.

The issue of mutual intelligibility in English communication in the workplace – or lack thereof – has been repeatedly highlighted outside academia as well (cf. Galloway, Rose 2015 for a brief account); however, it has recently been pointed out that “to date, little systematic attention appears to have been paid to (B)ELF research in curriculum design” (Pullin 2015, p.

33), except for a small number of studies (Kankaanranta *et al.* 2015; Pullin 2013). The same can be said for business-oriented ELT course-books and materials proposals specifically oriented at BELF-aware teaching/training (Caleffi, Poppi 2019); this is therefore a still largely unexplored research area.

Bearing in mind the need for more in-depth BELF-related empirical research both on CSs and on ELT materials, the English language unit of the University of Verona has carried out a set of studies in this field, based also on corpora compiled thanks to the help of Italian enterprises whose business activities and communicative practices are internationally oriented; this has further contributed to shed light on BELF communication practices and on what working professionals consider to be essential elements of successful – or problematic – BELF communication. Three successive papers in this issue, authored respectively by Poppi, Caleffi, and Vettorel and Franceschi, will illustrate in-depth each of the topics of analysis theoretically overviewed in this paper. Hence, in the following sections, first we will address BELF in professional settings, to shed light on what facilitates success in online interactions, with special focus on e-mail exchanges. Secondly, still drawing on e-mail exchanges, we will suggest a broadening of the notion of BELF CSs that goes beyond sheer mutual understanding. Finally, we will turn to the teaching environment, overviewing if and to what extent international business ELT coursebooks deal with BELF CSs at different levels of competence, with the final aim of providing hints and suggestions for more effective materials in this field.

2. BELF in the professional setting: The case of e-mails

During the past decades the world has become incredibly smaller and far more interconnected than it was 30 years ago. This is basically a consequence of ‘globalization’,¹ a phenomenon which has created new needs for the world population, also in terms of communication. In fact, in the past, language was seen as a system that had to be studied and learned by a reduced number of experts, as only few people had contacts across borders (globalization stage 1.0); the actual turning point was represented by the globalization of companies, which occurred in stage 2.0. This was in fact characterized by a real need to ‘communicate’ in English, in order to reach out to stakeholders in

¹ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to talk about the benefits and drawbacks of globalization, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning that Friedman (2005) distinguished three fundamental stages: stage 1.0 at the end of the 15th century, referred to as the ‘globalization of countries’; stage 2.0 from 1800 to 2000, or the ‘globalization of companies’; and finally stage 3.0 from 2000 to the present, or the ‘globalization of individuals’.

different parts of the world. Finally, nowadays with stage 3.0 and the subsequent globalization of the individual, supported and driven by new powerful technologies, the need for another approach to language has emerged (Poppi 2012a, 2012b). Indeed, business professionals are faced with the challenge to adopt a common working language which best caters for the need of increasingly hybrid and dynamic business settings (Caleffi, Poppi 2019).

It goes without saying, therefore, that the awareness of the importance of linguistic and communicative skills is gradually increasing, as the perception of new communication needs has reached both big, small-and medium-sized enterprises. In fact, the relationship between language, trade and economic performance has indirect but discernible effects on business practices, to the extent that economists have established that development is based on specialization and trade and that trade is facilitated by a common means of communication, in other words, the use of a lingua franca (Incelli 2007).

Current reconceptualisations of English, as suggested by the ELF paradigm, testify to the conceptual broadening of the very notion of language, conceiving it as a (virtual) resource characterized by plurality, fluidity and community-based interaction. Indeed, the new plurilithic conceptualization of the English language has been a source of inspiration and strong appeal also to the Business English research community, where practitioners “are no longer confined to any nationality or locality” (Caleffi, Poppi 2019, p. 93) and need to get the job done (Kankaanranta, Planken 2010) by resorting to any possible language repertoire they have at their disposal. In fact, the adopted language is continuously internationally negotiated, because the priority of both native and non-native speakers is mutual understanding and intelligibility. As a consequence, one of the biggest challenges for business professionals is to become global communicators (Kaankanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013; Louhiala-Salminen, Kaankanranta 2011), namely to be at the same time both aware of and able to opt for what is possible, feasible and probable in terms of grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse and strategy use (Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta 2011, p. 250). A global communicator is, therefore, well equipped to tackle intercultural and multilingual BELF interactions (Vettorel 2019a), which are carried out both face-to face, and also at a distance.

2.1. What to bear in mind when exchanging e-mails

Thanks to the rapid growth of Internet systems all over the world, there is more and more e-mail communication speedily taking place, eliminating any geographical distance. A survey in 2002 reported that already eighteen years ago approximately 80% of business communication was conducted via e-mail

(Davis *et al.* 2009). For businesses purposes, e-mail exchanges have become one of the most popular media in the enterprise (Sumecki *et al.* 2011), a ubiquitous tool utilized so predominantly that it has substituted traditional communication methods such as letter, fax, and telephone (Lightfoot 2006).

However, on the one hand e-mails are such valuable assets in all modern, internet-based business enterprises that no one can underestimate their revolutionary influence upon business operations as well as employees (Hewitt 2006); on the other hand, it must be borne in mind that the lack of contextual cues in e-mails may pose a barrier to effective communication (Caleffi, Poppi 2019) and therefore people run the risk of being misinterpreted or regarded as being cold, detached, or even impolite.

It is true that e-mails are often more informal than other written forms in business settings, especially because of the frequent presence of abbreviations and short forms, in that they partake of the characteristics of both spoken and written language (Baron 2001; Incelli 2013). Moreover, as initiations of and replies to e-mails are usually quicker than with other means of written communication, there is usually less time available for consideration, and more misspellings and other typing errors may therefore occur (Crystal 2006).

In addition, e-mailing in business contexts is inherently intercultural and is inevitably influenced by the perception people have of themselves and of their interlocutors, as well as the different cultures operating in the business environment. This is actually the rub, in that when interacting with individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds, the sometimes extreme cultural diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and assumptions resident in communicators has the potential to make intercultural communication very difficult. It is therefore of paramount importance to be aware of possible cultural differences and to be prepared to accommodate and reach out to one's interlocutors, in the knowledge that the same person may, at different stages of his or her life, or even simultaneously, be part of more than one culture. First of all there is in fact corporate culture, which is embedded in a particular sector, and derives from the general business culture, which in turn draws upon the national culture of a certain area or population; finally, there is individual culture (cf. Beamer, Varner 2008). Accordingly, given the challenging character of e-mailing in business contexts, it is extremely important to carefully tackle risk management, which is usually associated also with other communication forms, by establishing and maintaining common ground and good relations, so as to compensate the absence of the physical presence (Nadler, Shestowsky 2006)

This can be accomplished by deploying, for instance, CSs, which represent the means by which ELF speakers proactively work towards the anticipation of interactional disorder (Björkman 2014, p. 124). In fact, given

the distance separating the sender and the addressee in e-mail exchanges, which is both physical and more often than not also cultural, CSs can prove particularly useful, especially when it comes to mitigating the directness of potentially face-threatening acts like requests and directives.

3. CSs in BELF: Beyond successful communication

It is undeniable that the increasing escalation of business globalization has been accompanied by an exponential growth in the number of international mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships. Such a growth has generated a worldwide network of business professionals whose working language is no longer their own mother tongue, but, instead, English, the language that has contributed to “connect the world linguistically” (Galloway, Rose 2015, p. 11). In turn, the heterogeneity of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of global-business professionals has resulted in heightened pressure for them to develop cross-cultural communication competence to cope with the overwhelming challenges posed by an extremely dynamic environment (e.g. Ayoko *et al.* 2004). Indeed, the dynamism of global business arouses not only from the crossing of languages and cultures, but also from “the constant development in technologies that allow a rapidly expanding number of messages to be exchanged within a short span of time and across large geographical distances” (Ayoko *et al.* 2004, p. 157). In this highly-technological borderless context, where face-to-face contacts are mostly replaced by digital interaction, “[c]ommunication skills that bridge cultural boundaries are [...] critical to both employee and organizational effectiveness” (Ayoko *et al.* 2004, p. 157).

For scholars in the area of language and communication, such a significant change in the world of business has arisen great interest in organizational communication, both internal (i.e. communication amongst the company’s staff members) and external (i.e. communication with the company’s suppliers, customers, and their external partners in general). Particularly, research in the use of English as a lingua franca has expanded to the world of work, and scholars in the field have started to investigate not only the role of English in global-business contexts (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2007; Kankaanranta *et al.* 2015; Ehrenreich 2016), but also the pragmatics of global-business interaction conducted in ELF (Cogo 2012; Cogo, Pitzl 2016; Kankaanranta, Planken 2010). Thus, CSs have become a focus of investigation in BELF research, with a gradual (though still limited) expansion from the analysis of oral interactions (Franceschi 2019) to the exploration of interactions in digital written contexts (Ren 2018).

However, as highlighted in Caleffi’s contribution to this volume, CSs

have mainly been analyzed from a merely linguistic point of view, with scant attention to the fact that business relationships are undoubtedly part of a company's asset, and that CSs, therefore, may also be used to build relationships (Zhu *et al.* 2006). In other words, CSs are worth being observed with aims other than that of describing how users resolve or pre-empt problems of (mis)understanding. Indeed, CSs may also have a rapport-building function which goes beyond the achievement of mutual intelligibility. This implies an approach to the analysis of BELF CSs that is rooted on a broadening of the very notion of 'communication strategy' *per se*. Such broadening should include the attainment of interpersonal goals amongst the purposes that lie behind the use of certain strategies, bearing in mind that in BELF contexts successful communication may mean more than getting the message through. In fact, the success of business is highly dependent on mutual trust between business partners, and this can be achieved through the establishment and maintenance of smooth interpersonal relations as a core value.

Rapport-building can be even more demanding when interaction between business partners occurs via digital media like e-mails, where the use of non-verbal tools of communication may be constrained by the medium itself. Still, establishing and maintaining smooth relationships is crucial in business, given the high stakes involved. This requires global-business professionals not only to be able to quickly perform the task at hand in the extremely dynamic context of digital communication, but also and foremost to be increasingly aware of the challenges posed by a cross-cultural setting, where business practices may be, and indeed are, extremely heterogeneous. Interpersonal CSs need to be used with the utmost care for the business partner's (business) culture, both in the initiating and in the maintaining phase (Zhu *et al.* 2006), and this can be far more demanding when interaction can rely neither on the sharing of the same mother tongue, nor on the possibility to exploit non-verbal semiotic modes, which, instead, may be helpful to cope with the complexity of intercultural communication.

The findings of the analyses carried out by the Verona team on a corpus of real-life business e-mail exchanges seem to suggest that users themselves do feel the responsibility of getting the job done fast and smoothly even when operating in constraining contexts like that of digital interaction. This sense of responsibility is a driving factor for them to use all the resources they can count on, including their pragmatic competence in dealing with the most diverse (business) cultures. This is a type of competence that certainly develops 'in the field', and through practice. Still, the design of tailored training materials that focus not only on language issues, but also and foremost on a conscious use of CSs may be helpful for them, especially if the design of these materials is supported by solid

research. Which is why the Verona team has deemed it crucial to investigate the state-of-art also in this respect.

4. BELF in ELT materials

Pedagogical issues have been discussed since the early days of ELF, and this area has come to the forefront as a major research topic in ELF studies, as testified by the numerous recent publications related to pedagogy and classroom practices (e.g. papers in Bowles, Cogo 2015; Matsuda 2017; Sifakis, Tsantila 2018). However, a specific focus on teaching business English, above all with proposals of activities and materials, has not yet been fully taken into account from an English as a Lingua Franca perspective, and the work carried out by the Verona team aims at providing a significant contribution in this area, also in terms of the relevance CSs have in teaching materials and practices.

CSs have recently started being investigated in BELF, from two main different approaches: analysis of naturally-occurring BELF data, such as meetings and e-mails, and user perceptions. The first has highlighted the widespread use of pragmatic strategies to both prevent and solve communication problems in BELF interactions (Caleffi 2019, forthcoming; Franceschi 2019; Ren 2018), whereas the second has underlined the weight professionals involved in international business put on the need for clarity and accuracy in information exchanges (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013; Franceschi forthcoming). A third line of research also looks at the use of languages other than English as additional resources for meaning negotiation and relationship management (Cogo 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Franceschi 2017; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta 2011). Data output has shown that BELF users make tactical use of CSs in order to avoid communication breakdowns and solve any misunderstanding – real or perceived – that may have negative consequences in terms of company money and resources spent: requests for repetition, clarification and confirmation, as well as comprehension checks and rephrasing/paraphrase emerge as important tools for effective communication in business domains, both face-to-face and digital. It should also be noted that CSs appear to be used deliberately, too, with attention to face-saving – both the speaker's and the hearer's faces (Franceschi 2019). CSs are integral part of the 'Competence in BELF' layer of the Global Communicative Competence model (GCC, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta 2011), which comprises the three interrelated layers of Multicultural Competence, Competence in BELF and Business Knowledge, thus further testifying to their relevance in BELF communication. Indeed, strategic competence is a fundamental skill in communication, especially so

when combined with cooperative behavior and active listening.

In BELF, skillful use of CSs goes hand in hand with knowledge of relevant business practices and of specialized registers in English, as different business cultures may exploit different vocabulary. Making sure that meaning nuances are shared among the participants to a given interaction is paramount to the success of a business transaction.

These findings from BELF research have significant implications both for business-related language curricula and for ELT materials, in order to adequately prepare (future) professionals to effectively communicate in international business contexts. Recent investigations on business ELT materials, however, show that a BELF perspective on CSs is not consistently adopted, and the importance these pragmatic tools retain in BELF communication is not addressed; when present, in the greatest majority of cases it is not accompanied by awareness-raising activities, or connected to active practice in freer, authenticated (BELF) communication contexts (Caleffi, Poppi 2019; Franceschi 2018; Vettorel 2019b). Furthermore, despite the inclusion of work on some strategies in the ELT materials examined, other CSs that have been found to be used in VOICE business-related data and/or in digital communication via e-mail, or in both areas, are not presented. On a more positive note, these materials include aspects related to the Global Communicative Competence model, with a variety of accents in listening activities, and attention to the multicultural competence layer, particularly as to differences in cultural and business cultural practices, or ways of doing business. CSs in BELF appear to intertwine closely with other crucial aspects of BELF interactions, acting in multiple ways and with varying purposes, and for these reasons they should be addressed more explicitly in textbooks.

The need to take into account BELF findings in pedagogic contexts has recently been tackled (Kankaanranta *et al.* 2015; Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen 2013; Pullin 2015; Vettorel forthcoming), together with the need to include authentic, real-work BELF data (Bremner 2010; Faltzi, Sougari 2018; Nickerson 2002; Planken *et al.* 2004; Poncini 2013). Either starting from exemplifications, when present, in ELT business materials, or implementing the coursebook with additional tasks and activities, examples of actual language usage from (B)ELF corpora would for instance provide important opportunities to raise awareness through noticing tasks, discussing how they are used in actual business interactions and how they are closely interweaved with know-how of business registers and practices. Such examples could then function as a springboard for active practice in business-related contexts and through localized task-based projects (Pullin 2010, 2015). Similarly, tasks can be created to practice relevant CSs first in class, and then in a realistic work environment for an EPP course, where an activity on CSs included

noticing tasks, a reflection task and a production task in a simulated encounter

Within an English as a Multilingua Franca viewpoint, literature has amply shown that the use of languages other than English in BELF is a widespread accommodation and identity practice (Cogo 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Franceschi 2017). Therefore, opportunities to reflect upon such practices as to BELF speakers' multilingual repertoires should also be accounted for in pedagogic materials. Indeed, CSs are to be considered as part of 'normal pragmatic practice' (Widdowson 2003) in any language; rather than 'perfect communication', it is negotiation of meaning through CSs and accommodation that can lead to effective communication, and overt reflection and practice – drawing on BELF corpora, too - including languages part of the trainees' repertoires ought to be integral part in business-oriented ELT.

Orientation to the hearer and active listening are also a crucial aspect to communicative success that has been included in some of the textbooks analyzed: providing actual, real-life examples of its use can highlight to students the importance of active co-operation from both parties involved in the exchange.

To conclude, given the relevant role CSs have been shown to play in effective communication, particularly in BELF settings, they should be included in ELT materials and classroom practices if we aim at preparing students and professionals to effectively communicate in business international contexts. BELF-related corpora can certainly represent valuable data to reflect upon, and exemplify, how CSs are used in real contexts, giving way to activities aimed at practicing such tools for effective communication through simulations and/or real work settings.

5. Conclusions

As interest in BELF has been increasing over the last few years, this paper has aimed at contributing to this area of research both in terms of description of the state of the art in this research field and in terms of the implications for the teaching and the practice of Business English. Special attention has been paid to CSs in digital environments and in textbooks.

With reference to digital communication, the analysis of real-life business e-mail exchanges can be revealing for an understanding of how and to what purposes CSs are actually employed by business professionals when performing their communicative tasks by means of digital tools. E-mails are easy to store, retrieve and forward whenever need be, and are increasingly used as an official method of communication in organizations and

institutions. However, using e-mails effectively in interaction requires knowledge on how to structure this interaction at a distance in an effective way, as it is not possible to refer to structural characteristics and style of language alone. In fact, given the close relationship between language and economic performance, it is particularly important for language professionals to accommodate to their addressees and make sure that their communicative purpose and messages prove intelligible enough and are not misunderstood. And of course this can only be done by deploying a series of CSs.

Indeed, CSs are becoming increasingly globalized in BELF contexts, and more and more dependent not only on the linguistic resources of the interlocutors involved in interaction, but also on their awareness of culture-bound business practices. These need to be taken into account for the consolidation of smooth business relationships, which are an asset in the world of work. Companies are progressively becoming aware that, as global competition intensifies, the establishment of strong intercultural relationships is becoming crucial. CSs play a major role in the development of such relationships, whose effectiveness largely depends on the ability of business professionals to understand and improve their global intercultural communication skills. Communication with multilingual and multicultural partners (whether colleagues, customers or suppliers) having their own organizational business practices may be extremely demanding, especially when interaction occurs via digital media, particularly those where the use of non-verbal semiotic modes is hindered, as is the case of e-mailing. A focus on the multiple functions and purposes of CSs in the workplace seems therefore to be recommended, both in the area of BELF research and in that of Business English materials development for the training of business professionals.

Moreover, we advocate the integration of actual examples of BELF in pedagogic materials as a way to increase the attention to CSs in education and training of future and already active professionals using English in international settings. This would allow trainees to experience real-life instances of successful (and unsuccessful) CS use, raising awareness as to their use and fostering reflection on the trainees' part about their own linguistic and strategic practices as well as the development and fine-tuning of their strategic abilities through production activities and simulations. Studying existing courses and materials as well as developing – and testing – more BELF-informed courses may contribute to the education of increasingly successful internationally-oriented professionals operating in today's global markets.

All in all, although competence in business intercultural communication certainly develops 'in the field', scholarly investigation of naturally occurring (digital) data may largely contribute to a redefinition of

the theoretical framework within which communication strategies are described, analyzed and classified in the world of work.

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