Addressing linguacultural competencies in business English pedagogy

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Internationally operating business professionals communicate using English as a business lingua franca (BELF). As BELF communication crosses national borders and includes multiple languages and cultural groups, linguacultural competence is a critical aspect of successful BELF communication. In this study, we derived specific linguacultural competencies (LCCs) required for such communication from the literature and double-checked them with twelve business professionals and two business English teachers. The LCCs were then used to develop a questionnaire to gather the perceptions of ninety business professionals. The results of the survey revealed that all the identified LCCs were deemed essential, with no significant differences between region-based subgroups of respondents. Further, the study highlighted the importance of three components of LCC (knowledge, skill/strategies, and attitudes) to both real-world communication and pedagogy. These findings have important pedagogical implications for developing the LCCs of business professionals and creating a more connected, empathetic, and understanding international business environment.

Key words: English as a business lingua franca, BELF, linguaculture, business English, transcultural communication

Introduction

English as a business lingua franca (BELF) is English used for business purposes by speakers with different L1s. A distinction must be made between the traditional conception of business English (BE) and BELF: whereas BE refers to the language required to function in the workplace, BELF underscores that this English usage is not a static, codified body of knowledge. Rather, BELF is constantly evolving and negotiated in real time between interactants in different contexts (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013; Si 2020).

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BELF communication is inherently transnational and transcultural (Pullin 2015). Accordingly, BELF communicators require linguacultural competence (LCC), defined as the ability to communicate successfully with people from a variety of languages and cultural backgrounds (Peltonen and Hu 2024). BELF LCC builds on existing models in its characterization of culture as being manifested in fluid, negotiated, and liminal communication rather than being a static entity (Baker 2022, 2024) and in its conceptualization of LCC as consisting of knowledge, skills/strategies, and attitudes (Byram 2021). However, the specific LCCs that constitute BELF LCC are more contextually bound, as they target professional communicative necessities in the workplace. They are also practical in that their relevance, usefulness, and credibility can be enhanced by job-experienced professionals and their operational definitions facilitate pedagogical implementation.

BELF communication could involve an infinite number of permutations, for example, 'a Finnish company merging with a German company [placing] some of their operations in Portugal and some in India, and the unit responsible for corporate accounting would need to keep in touch with all these locations' (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013: 19). Further, professionals interact with 'a range of scales from the local, to the national, and the global' (Baker 2024: 212), which in professional contexts could be regional, corporate, and team or departmental cultures. Examples of how people from different linguacultural backgrounds communicate, including miscommunications and gaps in cultural understanding, abound (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013). Such communication breakdowns highlight the fact that people from different linguacultures communicate uniquely, even within the seemingly standardized conventions of BE. Importantly, the linguacultures involved in BELF communication span far beyond the British and American linguacultures prevalent in current ELT pedagogy (Si 2020; Peltonen and Hu 2024).

In the Chinese context, cultural competence has been identified as one of the most important aspects of business communication, as self-reported by Chinese business professionals. Accordingly, this competence has become a central aspect of the BE curriculum in mainland China, though its implementation and efficacy have been inconsistent (Du 2021). The key question becomes how to address LCC pedagogically (Liao and Li 2023). To answer this question, it is necessary to determine what, exactly, BELF LCC entails, in light of the relevant scholarship.

BELF competencies and pedagogy

BELF is a useful lens for viewing contemporary professional communication, as it gives due attention to the contexts and characteristics of such communication. (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013) identified the foundational competencies required of BELF communicators in their Global Communicative Competence (GCC) framework. These competencies include 'business knowhow', 'competence in BELF', and what they label 'multicultural competence' (p. 28). Notably, rather than 'multicultural competence', subsequent BELF research has espoused the concept of linguaculture as the lens through which to view transcultural professional communication (Peltonen and Hu 2024). As described above, LCC comprises knowledge, skills/strategies, and attitudes (Camerer and Mader 2012; Byram 2021).

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There have been BELF-informed investigations of cultural competencies. For example, an examination of a popular BE textbook, *Market Leader*, for its global orientation and cultural treatment revealed that the textbook was more focussed on linguistic accuracy than communicative competence and had a native-speaker orientation (Si 2020.). Further, the textbook gave little attention to Chinese home culture. For curriculum development, Pullin (2015) outlined BELF-informed design principles that include developing intercultural competence based on the aforementioned GCC framework, within a task-based approach. Finally, there have been BELF-informed studies on intercultural communication, such as Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013), illustrating that what one group of interlocutors considers appropriate and friendly, another group may consider verbose and time-wasting. While the above studies addressed aspects of cultural orientations or competencies in general, specific LCCs have remained undefined. Thus, while LCC has been regarded as a tenet of BELF communication, there have been few attempts to identify specific LCCs that should be addressed in materials development, teaching practice, and assessment (Peltonen and Hu 2024.).

Job-experienced professionals' perspectives

Given the importance of LCC for BELF communication, it is crucial to gather the perspectives of job-experienced professionals. This study focuses on Chinese professionals, a population that has a need for improved LCC (Peltonen and Hu 2024.) and has been under-researched (Rose, McKinley, and Galloway 2021: 183). The perceived importance of cultural competence has led to 'intercultural communication' being established as one of the three divisions of study in the national BE curriculum at the university level in mainland China (Du 2021; Liu and Fang 2022). Cultural issues have been perceived to be the second most difficult area for Chinese BELF users (after accent), but graduates have reported that culture-related courses in Chinese BE programs were deemphasized or partially ignored in ignorance of the 'reality of business communication in China' (Du 2021: 156). As a result, job-experienced professionals and the organizations they work for have sought further BE training, often in private training centres or employing BE teachers directly to provide in-house instruction. There is very little extant research on how cultural issues are addressed in those contexts (Du 2021). In other words, researchers do not know what LCCs job-experienced professionals find important. Job-experienced professionals' perspectives are crucial because their real-world tasks and experiences can identify competencies that are directly applicable to their workplaces. Further, their input can inform how these competencies could be taught and provide insight into how to address them with pre-experienced learners who have not yet developed experience-informed perspectives.

Research questions

Given the above contextual information and research gaps, this study aims to address the following questions:

1   What LCCs are likely to be involved in BELF?
2   Do job-experienced business professionals find these competencies important in their business communication?

Research design and participants

To answer the research questions, we first examined the relevant literature to identify and formulate candidate LCCs. In addition to surveying extant intercultural models (*e.g.*, Byram 2021; Baker 2022), we reviewed the literature in other areas such as professional lingua franca communication (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013) and validated instruments, including the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Language and Culture (Candelier *et al.* 2012). For the finalized list of LCCs and the literature underpinning them, see Peltonen and Hu (op.cit.).

Next, we double-checked the resultant LCCs in interviews with fourteen job-experienced professionals in mainland China, including twelve business professionals and two BE teachers. The professionals worked in twelve different industries and were located in eight cities in mainland China. The two BE teachers were included for a pedagogical perspective. The goal of the interviews was to gauge support for the LCCs derived from the literature and identify any new competencies that might emerge. We analysed the interviews thematically to identify four new competencies. They were added to the list of literature-based competencies, and a questionnaire was developed to cover the nineteen LCCs. Specifically, a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important, 5 = extremely important) question was written for each competency to elicit its perceived importance. The questionnaire was piloted and underwent validation. For space constraints, the technical details are not reported here.

Subsequently, snowball sampling was adopted to recruit ninety participants who had to use English at work to complete the questionnaire. These respondents were professionals working in twenty-six industries across thirteen cities, with seventy-five different job titles. Sixty-two of them were from mainland China, eighteen were from Hong Kong, Macau, or other places, and ten did not indicate their location. They reported a wide range of experience levels, company structures, and company sizes.

Findings

As part of the validation of the questionnaire, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the responses to determine if the LCCs organized into clusters. The PCA revealed that the nineteen LCCs fell into the following three groups:

Group 1: Knowledge of general cultural issues, home cultural expression, corporate culture, and religion and how they affect professional com-munication.

Group 2: Skills and strategies for adapting language for functions such as transactional or interpersonal communication, establishing identity, or adjusting to the local culture.

Group 3: Attitudes of empathy for and acceptance of other groups, commu-nication styles, and language varieties and avoiding stereotypes.

Table 1 presents the LCCs in these groups.

To assess the perceived importance of each LCC, the respondents' scores were averaged. Following conventional practice, it was decided that if an LCC received a mean score above 3 on the 5-point scale, it was viewed by the respondents as necessary and important. Table 1 reports the mean scores (*M*), together with the standard deviations (*SD*), for the nineteen LCCs. All the mean scores were well above 3, the lowest being 3.38

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Group	No.	Competency	M	SD
1	LCC8	Professionals know that there are different orientations of culture (home, target, and universal) and communicate accordingly.	3.67	0.88
1	LCC14	Professionals recognize and can express the enormous cultural diversity within their home culture.	3.55	0.97
1	LCC15	Professionals understand religion in terms of holiday schedule, food, and beliefs and interact accordingly.	3.38	1.07
1	LCC11	Professionals know that frames (bridges of understanding) can be built from the top-down or bottom-up to improve transcultural understanding and overcome 'rich points' (misunderstandings).	3.49	1.05
1	LCC7	Professionals know that there are distinct levels of culture in business (i.e., regional, corporate, team, and individual conceptions of culture) and communicate accordingly.	3.49	1.08
1	LCC3	Professionals grasp the pluralistic nature of linguaculture and refrain from being biased toward any linguaculture, including cultures of native English speakers.	3.55	1.02
1	LCC6	Professionals understand that different cultural concepts of power and management practices exist in the workplace and may affect communication.	3.49	0.97
1	LCC2	Professionals understand that corporate culture reflects the business function and industry standards in which it functions.	3.65	0.94
1	LCC10	Professionals are aware of visible culture (external) and deep culture (internal values, norms, and hidden assumptions) and can discuss or express both.	3.67	0.87
2	LCC17	Professionals are able to employ different genres, including their moves and stages, as typified patterns arising from the culture in which they function.	4.10	0.87
2	LCC12	Professionals can harness linguacultural expression to indicate their position and establish their identity.	3.93	0.88
2	LCC18	Professionals can function within transactional genres for direct business interactions.	4.07	0.83
2	LCC16	Professionals are able to adopt the 'When in Rome...' perspective for overseas travel or assignments.	4.07	0.87
2	LCC19	Professionals can function within interpersonal genres for building rapport and making 'small talk' for business purposes.	4.00	0.86
3	LCC 13	Professionals accept and respect that specific behaviours are likely attributable to linguaculture.	3.93	0.79
3	LCC1	Professionals appreciate cultural differences as illustrated by cultural dimensions and their benefit to linguacultural competence.	3.78	0.89
3	LCC4	Professionals are sensitive to stereotypes and acknowledge the dangers of stereotyping in transcultural communication.	3.83	0.90
3	LCC9	Professionals empathize with members of different linguacultures when communicating with them.	4.01	0.84
3	LCC5	Professionals accept and respect World Englishes, which represent different linguacultures.	3.72	1.03

TABLE 1
Ratings of the LCCs

(Competency 15) and the highest being 4.10 (Competency 17). Further, quantitative analyses (*t*-tests and Rasch) revealed no significant differences between the responses of mainland Chinese participants and those outside mainland China, indicating that the respondents, regardless of their location, perceived the nineteen LCCs to be important to internationally functioning professional communication.

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When examined across the three groups presented above, the LCCs in Group 2 received, on average, the highest mean scores, ranging from 3.93 to 4.10 (average = 4.05). Those in Group 3 received the second highest mean scores, ranging from 3.72 to 4.01 (average = 3.85). The LCCs in Group 1 had the lowest mean scores, ranging from 3.38 to 3.67 (average = 3.55). These score patterns indicated that the respondents viewed skills/strategies-related LCCs and attitudes-based LCCs as more important than knowledge-based LCCs in successful real-world business communication.

Discussion

A total of nineteen LCCs have been derived from the extant scholarship and interviews with job-experienced professionals. These LCCs address BELF scholars' identified need for business professionals' LCC (Peltonen and Hu 2024). They were validated by a diversity of job-experienced professionals in the survey. While these professionals deemed each of the LCCs important to their business communication, there was crucial nuance to their answers. The skills/strategies-related LCCs were rated the most important, followed by the attitudes-grounded LCCs and the knowledge-based ones. These results supported the aforementioned literature that has conceptualized cultural competence in terms of skills/strategies, attitudes, and knowledge (Candelier *et al.* 2012; Byram 2021). The LCCs formulated in this study pave the way for bridging the research-practice gap (Rose, McKinley, and Galloway 2021) by specifying competencies that are immediately applicable to materials development, classroom practice, and assessment for different contexts and populations. Table 2 outlines how the LCCs can be addressed pedagogically.

Examples of how each group of LCCs could be addressed are provided below. These examples are based on the points raised by three interviewees in this study: Kim, Tina, and Steven.

Knowledge-based LCCs

The challenge of developing the knowledge-based LCCs is to provide structure while also inculcating a productive use of that knowledge in sensitivity to the context. For example, Competency 15 raises several important issues. When discussing religion in the interview, Kim shared that 'you can't say "Merry Christmas" to a Muslim'. She learnt this lesson in a phone call with a colleague in Egypt, who, after she wished him a merry Christmas, patiently explained to her that he was a Muslim and did not celebrate Christmas. Kim realized that she lacked knowledge of religion, and set out to understand different faiths' holiday schedules, beliefs, and customs. It must be noted that religion is considered a 'taboo' topic from the Western perspective: it is one of the PARSNIPS (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, -isms, and pork) and is generally avoided in ELT (Peltonen and Hu 2024). However, Kim's experience underlined the importance of gaining an understanding of religion to fulfil business tasks and communications. The topic must be addressed in an organized and structured way in the safety of the classroom. At the same time, because the topic is so sensitive, pedagogical treatment must be unbiased, avoid oversimplification, and exemplify nuanced understanding of different groups' orientations to religion and how that might impact professional communication.

In terms of materials development, a knowledge-based LCCs such as the one concerning religion can be addressed through specifically designing

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Group	Pedagogy	Activity
Knowledge	Materials development	Textbook analysis for adaptations
		Select/create readings
	Classroom practice	Student research reports/presentations
		Examining critical incidents—discussion
	Assessment	Short answer quizzes
		Multiple-choice tests
		Critical incident analysis
Attitudes	Materials development	Case study design
		Student materials: emails, anecdotes
	Classroom practice	Case studies (of the impact of attitudes)
		Self-reflections
	Assessment	Self-report questionnaires
		Personal essays
Skills/Strategies	Materials development	Strategy charts to structure actions
		Case study design
	Classroom practice	Task-based language teaching
		Role plays and simulations
	Assessment	Performance assessments
		Rubric-based assessments

TABLE 2
Addressing the
LCCs pedagogically

or finding existing readings about religious issues such as belief systems, work schedules, and how that might affect professional communication (Peltonen and Hu 2024). For classroom practice, one approach would be to use a critical incident—an example of a puzzling cultural miscommunication such as what Kim experienced—to lead a discussion about the nature of the miscommunication and what knowledge could have prevented it from happening. Assessments could include multiple-choice tests or short answer questions targeting the declarative knowledge. It must be noted that despite the desirability of assessing declarative knowledge, there should also be a focus on how such knowledge can be utilized in practical skills, critical thinking, and real-world applications, such as case studies concerning critical incidents (Camerer and Mader 2012).

Attitude-grounded LCCs

The difficulty of addressing attitude-grounded LCCs pedagogically is that attitudes are less tangible than knowledge, highly personal, and internal. Furthermore, there exists 'very little research in literature on teaching the affective component of intercultural competence' (Liao and Li 2023: 1304). One such LCC, Competency #9, popped up in the interview with Tina. Tina shared that one of her primary management duties was to enable understanding and agreement between two polarized linguacultural groups:

> ... they have different opinions about how to handle a thing in the same way. So, the way for me to handle it is to talk to both sides and just try to let each other know, like, why would they think doing in this way is better and try to help them to balance and also try to help them to agree to a certain extent that both sides can do it....

The lack of attitudinal openness and empathetic stance in the two groups caused enormous friction in her organization, which well illustrates the

necessity for linguacultural groups to understand each other's different ways of doing things by developing empathy and acceptance.

For materials development, a case study approach could be adopted to demonstrate 'the significance of being tolerant to different worldviews, and open-mindedness to challenge one's cultural assumptions' (Liao and Li 2023: 1310), illustrating either problems due to poor attitudes, such as in Tina's organization, or the impact of positive attitudes on business communication (Pullin 2015). For classroom practice, self-reflection activities could be employed to give students the chance to think about their own biases, beliefs, and attitudes in specific situations and how these might affect communication in the workplace (Liao and Li 2023.). For assessment, self-report questionnaires and personal essays could be used to gauge attitude changes, or lack thereof, in the course of study (Camerer and Mader 2012).

Skills/strategies-related LCCs

The challenge of developing skills/strategies-related LCCs is that such skills and strategies must be practiced. For example, Competency 16 concerns the strategy of adapting to local beliefs, customs, and ways of communicating (as opposed to one's own) when on a business trip or stationed overseas. Steven illustrated this competency in his interview when he said:

> ... for me, as a sales representative in the country, but not a visitor, I need to keep on learning and following about that and based on that, maybe I can be a friend of them because they were very glad that you will know and respect their rules and culture.

While adapting to the local culture in a respectful way benefitted Steven's business function and communication, such a strategy needs to be constantly and consciously practiced until it becomes ingrained for its maximal effectiveness. Learners must have the opportunity to workshop different scenarios, experiment with different approaches, and reflect on what worked and what did not work during the classroom practice sessions.

In terms of pedagogical treatment, materials development could include strategy charts to provide structure but also flexibility in guiding communication. For example, a strategy chart could delineate ways of gathering information about the host culture with specific avenues of approach depending on the conversation partner's responses. These strategies could be practiced in role plays and simulations in the classroom (Frendo 2005) to develop fluency and flexibility in applying them. Mastery of these skills/strategies, as reflected in simulation activities, could then be assessed according to a well-designed rubric (Camerer and Mader 2012).

Conclusion

This study has identified a set of specific LCCs crucial to successful BELF communication. Each LCC was perceived by job-experienced professionals, regardless of their locations and industries, to be important in transnational and transcultural business communication. These LCCs are grounded in knowledge, skills/strategies, and attitudes, and provide specificity to help structure pedagogical approaches. The results of this study not only add to our theoretical knowledge about BELF LCCs but can also inform practical pedagogical treatment in materials development, classroom practice, and assessment, thus having great potential to bridge the theory-practice

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divide identified by researchers ([Galloway and Rose 2018](); [Liu and Fang 2022]()). Improved LCC for professionals will hopefully lead to fewer culturally based miscommunications, which should result in more efficient business functions. Such improvements will ideally spark success and prosperity in the societies in which these professionals operate. That said, a limitation of this study is that it contained a relatively homogeneous mix of respondents from the greater China region. Examining BELF LCC using large samples from different populations would be an important future direction to explore the 'diverse constellations' of BELF communicators ([Pullin 2015](): 31). Another important line of inquiry would be to consider individual BELF communicators' multilingualism and transcultural perspectives in line with recent work on transcultural communication, English as a multilingua franca, and non-essentialist views on culture.

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