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Published in the USA

European Journal of Contemporary Education

E-ISSN 2305-6746

2026. 15(1): 50-65

DOI: 10.13187/ejced.2026.1.50

<https://ejce.cherkasgu.press>

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**European Journal of
Contemporary Education**



ELECTRONIC JOURNAL

Practical Use of Language in the Workplace Environment. Flexible vs. Inflexible Delivery

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Abstract

A business environment is regarded as a space where people usually engage in intercultural communication where diverse linguistic and/or cultural interactions take place. That gave rise to the interest and research in “English as a Business Lingua Franca” and it has become a well-established phenomenon worldwide, but it has just recently become a topic of interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, this study aims to investigate BELF as a neutral communication code, in addition to building rapport, managing cultural and linguistic differences, and identifying business and linguistic skills that affect the day-to-day IT work environment. The qualitative research method was used to collect data through 11 interviews from IT companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina using a snowball sampling method. The results indicate that BELF is used as a neutral communication code without which business would be impossible to conduct, and also as a medium for various intercultural interactions, considering the limitations of the study. Even though it is difficult to make generalizations, and additional either quantitative or mixed research has to be done, the findings of this study can be beneficial to IT companies, educators, and intercultural researchers, especially in terms of maintaining effective communication, providing high-quality feedback, and building rapport.

Keywords: BELF, multicultural background, intercultural communication, IT context, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Introduction

Globalization has reshaped the perception of English, transitioning it from a foreign language to a lingua franca, emphasizing its pragmatic features over traditional fluency (Jenkins et al., 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF originated from Larry Smith's (1983) work on English in diverse global contexts and Knapp's (1987) coining of the term 'English as an international lingua franca'. ELF

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challenges the idea of native-like proficiency as the only standard, and highlights the role of non-native speakers as the sole standard and emphasizes the role of non-native speakers in shaping global English varieties (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins, 2014). It is perceived as either a communication tool for people from different linguistic backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2011), or the language of choice (Jenkins, 2009: 200). These interactions nurture diverse discursive structures, including common topics, cooperative overlap, and code-switching, reflecting the dynamic use of language (Meierkord, 2002; Cogo, 2009; Jenkins, 2015). The growing interest in contextualized learning strategies and negotiation in communication has led to specific adaptations of ELF, such as BELF (Canagarajah, 2007).

BELF, as opposed to ELF, is used by diverse speakers for business purposes. It does not require a standardized use of language. Professional knowledge, cultural background, level of proficiency, ability to express thoughts, organizational skills, and interpersonal relationships affect BELF interactions (Chen, 2021). In BELF interactions, conveying information takes precedence over linguistic proficiency, underscoring the focus on communicative effectiveness (Chen, 2021). Nevertheless, achieving communicative goals and establishing mutual understanding are just two defining principles. BELF also envelops both rapport and conflict management (Knapp, 2011). BELF functions as a shared code for business, emphasizing its hybrid, adaptable nature and importance in the global market (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Ammon, 2008). It is a neutral communication code in a pool of different cultural and linguistic experiences (Dedović-Atilla, Dubravac, 2022). That being said, no one can take ownership of English, and it should not be attached to a single culture. Neither native nor non-native speakers dominate its language use, but every speaker is an equal user adapting their communication styles to match the styles of the interlocutors (Dedović-Atilla, Dubravac, 2022), ultimately achieving effective communication. It is essential in any workplace, but it is particularly important in the IT industry, where technical language is commonly used in addition to BELF, and sometimes being more important than technical skills (Boyatzis, McKee, 2005; Thanky, 2012). Research (Ammon, 2008a; Boyatzis, McKee, 2005; Holmes, Marra, 2004; Langley, 2013; Thanky, 2012) has shown that poor communication can lead to missed deadlines and decreased job satisfaction among employees, causing project delays and failures. To avoid that, language use should reflect one's goal to find the common ground or intercultural space (Kecskes, 2014). Kecskes (2014) corroborates that pragmatic purposes are worth exploring, encompassing the elements of success and failure.

Based on this research, the study aims to investigate several features of BELF and their application in the IT business to provide insight into the use of language, building rapport, development of business and language skills in a culturally and linguistically diverse setting, potentially affecting the educational practices and policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They correspond to the hypotheses posed for the research:

H1: BELF is regarded as a neutral communication tool in the IT context.

H2: BELF is used to help build rapport with the employees, facilitating day-to-day interaction.

H3: BELF proves that getting the message across is more important than having proficient language skills.

H4: BELF allows employees from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to use English to communicate with each other in an IT context.

2. Literature review

In the IT industry, there is a need to solve complex issues employing both innovative and already existing strategies. Some of them include BELF strategies since they facilitate communication between workers and provide clarity and understanding, build trust, value diversity among team members, and promote productivity and efficiency (Gudykunst, 2017; Oh et al., 2021). Defining features, like BELF being a neutral communication code, building rapport, linguistic and business skills, and intercultural exposure, will be explored in order to realize in what ways they foster collaboration, promote innovation, and affect success factors.

Investigating the use of BELF as a neutral communication code and the use of English, studies done in Sweden and Finland (Charles, Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Mauranen, 2012), Germany (Ehrenreich, 2010), and many other countries have indicated that both native and non-native speakers face communication issues in the international business environment. BELF principles were investigated and incorporated in

the context. It was indicated that English is an integral part of international business, a neutral shared code, and not a separate entity. The proper use of English should not be the ultimate goal, but the successful completion of tasks. Research indicates that prolonged use of simplified language may lead to disempowerment and stagnation for individuals (Takino, 2017). Nevertheless, as a code, BELF appears to be a hybrid and simple communication system without which international business would be almost impossible to conduct (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Overall, the most important thing is making sure everyone understands what is being said (Ran, Yang, 2015), since it directly affects and facilitates communication among international team members. Many of these studies (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011) offer suggestions to promote BELF use through training sessions. Also, establishing and maintaining business relationships within the business community poses additional challenges.

In order to understand the challenges and the ways they can be overcome within the BELF IT context, several principles were investigated through various studies, for instance, Firth (1996), Komori-Glatz (2017), Nikko (2009), Poncini (2007), Pullin (2010), and others. Introducing the “let-it-pass” and corporate “we” is found to promote supportive use of language, encouraging collaboration from employees (Firth, 1996; Poncini, 2007). Teamwork and active communication are expected to help BELF speakers handle challenging tasks (Nikko, 2009). Including small talk in the everyday work environment is said to build relationships and strengthen trust among colleagues, developing a sense of solidarity in spite of differences in languages and cultures, and also playing a major role in repairing and maintaining relationships (Pullin, 2010). The research (Komori-Glatz, 2017; Nikko, 2009; Pullin, 2010) suggests that it is far more important to be understood in a shared BELF space through the strategies that promote effective communication, building rapport, and small-talk-supported work-related discussions. Incorporating these principles is believed to improve the overall efficacy, understanding and productivity during and after working hours; and BELF users cannot apply these principles without language and business skills. However, there is a significant concern that this approach may marginalize employees, particularly those who prefer to articulate their ideas using a more sophisticated or nuanced language (Gunnarsson et al., 2014).

The language and business skills are specific in BELF interactions. Looking into the studies (Birlik, Kaur, 2020; Chen, 2021; Cogo, House, 2018; House, 2013; Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Mauranen, 2012; Murray, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011), there are several interesting findings worth mentioning. In the business environment, there are either task-oriented or content-oriented interactions (Chen, 2021), allowing their users to co-construct the information (House, 2013). BELF has an important purpose; it serves as a bridge between the user’s skills and business demands. Of course, there is a higher risk of conflict if these demands are not met, and international companies are advised to use explicit strategies to clarify what is being said and done (Cogo, House, 2018; Murray, 2012). Mauranen (2012) explained that employees should resort to using simplified forms of English, focusing more on solutions. Understanding non-verbal cues is said to be one of the many integral business skills (Birlik, Kaur, 2020; Räisänen, 2020), others being problem-solving skills, collaboration, and empathy (House, 2013; Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Mauranen, 2012; Murray, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Limited access to high-quality English language instruction and resources may put individuals at a disadvantage in terms of career progression (Gunnarsson et al., 2014). Ultimately, success factors depend on maintaining effective communication (Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011), and they include both business and language skills, increasing the chance of doing business professionally, effectively, and profitably in a culturally diverse environment.

It is evident that in trying to conduct international business, people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds will come in contact with each other. Exploration of the linguistic and cultural milieu in the BELF context was done through several studies (Chen, 2021; Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Kankaanranta, Lu, 2013; Kecskes, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011). It is confirmed that BELF is either a communication tool for people from different linguistic backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2011) or the language of choice (Jenkins, 2009: 200). The multicultural challenges and interactions occur in cultural and social situations (Kankaanranta, Lu, 2013). When exposed to them, both parties strive to achieve a win-win outcome (Kecskes, 2014). Accents may pose major challenges (Chen, 2021). If successful interaction is the goal, one should show empathy, create a shared space, and exude openness to solve problems (Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Additionally, several studies have explored various aspects of the business environment and BELF in Bosnia and Herzegovina and neighboring countries, for instance, Dedović-Atilla and Dubravac (2022), Palalić et al. (2016), Petričević and Danis (2007), and Travica et al. (2007), leading to several noteworthy conclusions. The first is the importance of understanding political, social, and economic factors that are closely tied to the target country, as these shape business legacies (Petričević, Danis, 2007). The second is that BELF-related research can be influenced by entrepreneurial conditions and educational limitations (Palalić et al., 2016; Travica et al., 2007). The third highlights the recognition that English holds equal importance to the local mother tongue(s) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, being flexibly adapted across different professional environments (Dedović-Atilla, Dubravac, 2022). These studies provide valuable insight into conducting business, the use of BELF, and making informed decisions. However, there is a clear gap in the regional IT context, which can provide valuable insights. Therefore, four research questions are posed to be answered:

1. Can BELF be regarded as a neutral communication tool in IT context?
2. Is BELF used to help build rapport with the employees facilitating day-to-day interaction?
3. What business and language skills are essential to conduct business?
4. How do employees from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use English to communicate effectively in an IT business context?

3. Methodology

Participants

To collect data, the interviews were conducted in English using an online platform, more specifically Google Meet. The meetings were scheduled by including the participants' emails. The interviews were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed and coded for the analysis. The answers were contextualized. The participants provided their contact information in case the scholar needed additional answers. Beforehand, the participants signed the consent form, and provided verbal confirmation at the beginning of the interview. This ensured that ethical considerations were met, and the participants were fully informed of the research objectives and how their responses would be used. Eleven participants were included in the research through the snowball sampling method. Four participants were found on LinkedIn after which they were contacted in order to schedule meetings. During the interviews they mentioned other people that are a good fit and shared their contact information. The scholar contacted them and the process was repeated in the same manner. Snowball sampling was chosen due to its effectiveness in reaching a diverse range of participants within the Bosnian IT industry, particularly those with specific roles and experiences that are otherwise hard to access. Alternative sampling methods were not feasible due to the difficulty of identifying and accessing a sufficiently targeted population within this specific industry context. However, it is important to note that snowball sampling may introduce bias, as participants tend to refer to individuals within their own networks, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives.

The participants were selected based on a variety of criteria including assigned roles and years of experience, allowing the researcher to gather a diverse range of perspectives and effectively address the research questions at hand.

Data Analysis

The research questions were identified and the qualitative methodology was chosen as it allowed conducting an in-depth analysis and exploring participants' experiences. This research is valuable as it offers detailed and contextualized subjective experiences related to key aspects of English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF). These insights will aid scholars in identifying motivators, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the IT context, including software development, digital communication, and network infrastructure. The instrument of the research is the interview, and it was constructed on the basis of the research done by Dedović-Atilla and Dubravac (2022). The informants were given the interview protocol in advance. There were three groups of questions in the instrument. The first part consisted of general questions that provided rich and detailed background information about the participants. The second part consisted of open-ended questions, from background learning experience, level of English required to do tasks, evaluation process, important language and business skills, language(s) used in the process, problems and solutions. And the final part was an opportunity for the participants to add any

additional comments, suggestions and remarks. Additionally, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a deductive theory-based approach (Braun, Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen because the study aimed to examine participants' experiences in contrast to predefined BELF constructs, i.e. BELF as a neutral communication code, rapport building, communicative effectiveness and intercultural adaptability (Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011; Dedović-Atilla, Dubravac, 2022). The interviews were transcribed, coded by identifying units relevant to the research questions. The codes were grouped into broader themes corresponding to the theoretical framework.

4. Results

Detailed information about the participants is presented in Tables 1, 2, Table 1 containing general information about the participants, and Table 2 information about the experience, self-assessment and context of learning English.

Table 1. General information

	Position	Gender	Age	Citizenship	Level of education	Nature of business
Participant 1	Supervisor	Female	30-39	Bosnian	BA	Manufacturing Services Trading Finance Other: PM
Participant 2	Employee	Male	30-39	Bosnian	MA	QA
Participant 3	Supervisor	Female	18-29	Bosnian	BA	Manufacturing Services Trading Finance Other: HR
Participant 4	Supervisor	Male	30-39	Bosnian	BA	Senior Web Developer, Tech Lead
Participant 5	Employee	Female	30-39	Bosnian	MA	Frontend Developer
Participant 6	Employee	Female	30-39	Bosnian	MA	Tutor
Participant 7	Supervisor	Male	30-39	Bosnian	High School	Senior Devops Engineer, Tech Lead
Participant 8	Supervisor	Male	40-49	Bosnian	High School	Developer, Manager, HR – Head
Participant 9	Employee	Female	18-29	Bosnian	BA	QA
Participant 10	Supervisor	Male	30-39	Bosnian	BA	Studio Manager, Technical Director
Participant 11	Employee	Female	30-39	Bosnian	MA	Software Developer

Table 2. Experience

	Total years of experience	How would you assess your knowledge of English?	Where did you learn English (more than one answer is possible)?	Do you own an official English certificate/diploma paper?
Participant 1	6	Very good	School Self-study Other: job	NO

	Total years of experience	How would you assess your knowledge of English?	Where did you learn English (more than one answer is possible)?	Do you own an official English certificate/diploma paper?
Participant 2	8	Very good or good	School English course	NO
Participant 3	4	Good	School Media Other: Faculty or job	NO
Participant 4	8	Very good	School English course Media Self-study Other: games and podcasts	YES B1 B2
Participant 5	8	Very good	School	NO
Participant 6	6	Excellent	School English course Media Self-study	NO
Participant 7	13	Excellent	School Media Other: software and gaming	NO
Participant 8	20	Excellent	School English course Media Self-study Other: movies, books and podcasts	NO
Participant 9	3	Good	School English Course Meda Other: books and music	YES A1 A2
Participant 10	11	Excellent	Media Other: video games, movies, TV and online communication	NO
Participant 11	7	Good	Media Other: TV shows, podcasts, videos	YES B1

Table 3. Categories, subcategories, and illustrative excerpts from the interviews

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statement
BELF as a neutral communication code	Communicative effectiveness over accuracy	<i>“Language skills help you UNDERSTAND each other, (2.0) but you have to know the SIMPLE vocabulary.”</i> (Participant 11)
	Conversational English as BELF	<i>“***I would say I use English more often than Bosnian. The official language at company is English. (1.0) Every message I write, every document, whatever,</i>

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statement
		<i>every email, day-to-day communication is always English. It's always in English. Only, at the office, when you talk to colleagues, then you will use our native language.</i> (Participant 4)
Rapport building	Active listening and feedback	<i>"Sometimes people just listen to answer the questions. (5.0) And in this line of work, it is not enough. The perception influences how the message is understood. It can create lots of misunderstandings."</i> (Participant 6)
	Psychological safety	<i>"*** You need to know how to approach the candidate and make them feel safe. You don't want them to be nervous, threatened and all of that. *** You don't leave anything to chance."</i> (Participant 5)
Business and language skills	Role-dependent language demands	<i>"*** It depends on the position and how important English is. For instance, (3.0) developers or QAs are not people who need proficient skills. They need me to be clear. (2.0) As opposed to the PM, who is a shield between the client and the developer, they have to have PROFICIENT language skills."</i> (Participant 9)
	Soft skills as core competencies	<i>"Well, like I said, it depends on the role. For basic, engineer role, OKAY I mean, you are looking for people who are good teammates. (2.0) You have to think about whether they will be insulted with certain things, improve their knowledge and raise lots of conflicts in the company itself. For client facing and managerial role, I would say you need to be a psychologist. You really need to know what to expect from the people and how do you approach them and how do you communicate certain things which are not necessarily positive, how big of an impact will that be and what you can expect in return and all of that. I would say soft skills definitely, but also you need to have a different understanding of human psychology."</i> (Participant 5)
Intercultural communication	Accent accomodation	<i>"Some accents (4.0), like THE INDIAN ACCENT, are DIFFICULT to understand. You have to ask to repeat or in some cases to write it down. Yeah! (4.0)"</i> (Participant 11)
	Adaptation strategies	<i>"*** Things are international and regional. Like, (2.0) you have people from Macedonia and Serbian, Bosnian. Usually, we are talking in Bosnian because everybody understand it. But there are certain situations where, so sorry if I am going away from the topic, so lets say people in Macedonia, they do understand Bosnian and some of them can answer in Bosnian and it would sound okay. (2.0) But ((verbal filler)) some of them will answer in Macedonian, sometimes it is okay and you can talk in Bosnian and sometimes you really need them to switch to English if you really want the details there. Mostly, we do catch the concepts and what they are really trying to say but sometimes we get lost in translation. In other teams, we do have companies that are working from Romania and obviously in that situation, even if it is an internal meeting you would be talking in English."</i> (Participant 5)

The data was analyzed as non-numerical information, focusing on the experiences of the participants. After recording and transcribing the interviews, the data was organized and coded to identify key themes and concepts using a deductive approach. The conclusions were interpreted in relation to the research questions, providing insights into the existing phenomenon.

Can BELF be regarded as a neutral communication tool in IT context?

The results showed that all the participants, regardless of their age, gender, or position, emphasized the importance of using English as a neutral code promoting understanding and effective communication, and indicated that, while language proficiency is good to have, the primary goal is to ensure clear communication and successful exchange of information. It is consistent with prior research findings that suggest English is not isolated, but rather serves as a common language essential for business operations (Charles, Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Mauranen, 2012), including in Germany (Ehrenreich, 2010).

One of the participants said:

“Language skills help you UNDERSTAND each other, (2.0) but you have to know the SIMPLE vocabulary.” (Participant 11)

English is used as a primary mode of communication, additionally labeled under the umbrella term of language skills:

“To be honest ((higher pitch)), I think it is essential to have good language skills. Even though we don’t know business-specific vocabulary, we can explain it in terms we do know if we have language skills.” (Participant 7)

Achieving success in a diverse work environment relies on effectively applying intercultural communication skills; and, by prioritizing tasks and employing a blend of business and neutral language, individuals can enhance the efficacy and success of their professional interactions (Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011). Similarly, this part of the research highlights the importance of prioritizing task completion over striving for native-like proficiency:

“(5.0) If you own your own company, of course ENGLISH is important. In some cases, (1.0) you can hire a person to conduct business for you. But (5.0) for you personally, (1.0) you have to remember that not even our clients are proficient.” (Participant 11)

The results also indicate that being able to comprehend, interpret, and express language in a specific context is what matters. Without English, business would be impossible to conduct:

*“***I cannot IMAGINE ANY team member WHO can work effectively without conversational English skills.”* (Participant 2)

The goal is not to be grammatically correct because most of the employees are not familiar with grammar points, even in their own native language(s). The BELF use is linked to conversational English. English is sometimes used more often than native language(s):

*“***I would say I use English more often than Bosnian. The official language at company is English. (1.0) Every message I write, every document, whatever, every email, day-to-day communication is always English. It’s always in English. Only, at the office, when you talk to colleagues, then you will use our native language.”* (Participant 4)

To answer the first research question, BELF can be regarded as a neutral communication tool based on the results that all the participants recognized the importance of its use, emphasizing the primary objective — ensuring clear communication and successful exchange of information. Being grammatically correct is not as important as being understood. Only the participants in leadership positions believe that fluency holds greater significance. The study also established a connection between BELF use and conversational English. These contributions enhance our comprehension of the practical uses of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) and its impact on intercultural communication within organizational settings.

Is BELF used to help build rapport with the employees facilitating day-to-day interaction?

The results show that all the participants recognize the value in maintaining good relationships with their clients and colleagues. Having good communication skills is what enables them to express themselves and ensure they maintain a healthy and mutual understanding. All the team members have to be familiar with the projects and requirements, and that essentially builds rapport. Active listening was highlighted as a crucial skill, as Participant 6 explained:

“Sometimes people just listen to answer the questions. (5.0) And in this line of work, it is not enough. The perception influences how the message is understood. It can create lots of misunderstandings.” (Participant 6)

The participants indicate that the role and responsibilities within the team structure contribute to building and maintaining rapport. Some even stress that they need to be familiar with the human psyche in order to recognize when and how to approach someone. One participant explained it in detail:

*“Well, like I said, it depends on the role. For basic, engineer role, OKAY I mean, you are looking for people who are good teammates. (2.0) You have to think about whether they will be insulted with certain things, improve their knowledge and raise lots of conflicts in the company itself. For client facing and managerial role, I would say you need to be a psychologist. You really need to know what to expect from the people and how do you approach them and how do you communicate certain things which are not necessarily positive, how big of an impact will that be and what you can expect in return and all of that. I would say soft skills definitely, but also you need to have a different understanding of human psychology. *** You need to know how to approach the candidate and make them feel safe. You don't want them to be nervous, threatened and all of that. *** You don't leave anything to chance.”* (Participant 5)

In IT companies, both the employees and supervisors receive feedback at least twice a year, because the results indicate that it helps them foster strong relationships. Many participants explain that receiving feedback is a challenge in itself since it is not an easy thing to process. The HR workers are expected to do their due diligence and design a step-by-step process while dealing with some misunderstandings:

*“What we do is sit down. The best solution is to actually sit down with that person, communicate transparently give and receive feedback and listen. And try to find the common ground with that person and try to improve that. ***”* (Participant 4)

The results also indicate that showing appreciation strengthens relationships, creating a positive work environment. Overall, the study found that all the participants recognized the importance of maintaining good relationships. Effective communication, familiarity with the project requirements, understanding roles and responsibilities, providing feedback, and showing appreciation help build rapport. Since English is used daily, BELF serves as a communication tool that helps them achieve these goals.

What business and language skills are essential to conduct business?

The results indicate that business skills are conditioned by the job description. For developers and QAs, business skills are intertwined with technical skills. For PMs, management skills are essential for overseeing the successful execution of projects, including planning, organizing, and overseeing. For HR workers, business skills are linked to both managerial and soft skills. For tutors, business skills are encompassed with the language and soft skills:

*“*** It depends on the position and how important English is. For instance, (3.0) developers or QAs are not people who need proficient skills. They need me to be clear. (2.0) As opposed to the PM, who is a shield between the client and the developer, they have to have PROFICIENT language skills.”* (Participant 9)

All of them agree that soft skills are essential for every role, which include communication skills, collaboration, adaptability, flexibility, time management, problem solving, conflict resolution, active listening, and emotional intelligence:

“REALLY, communication skills. The most important soft skills. Especially in IT.” (Participant 5)

Lots of issues happen because of the lack of these skills and individual experiences:

“THE PERCEPTION influences how the message is understood. It can create lots of misunderstandings.” (Participant 6)

Personality types can also create issues within the IT context, as indicated in the following example:

“(2.0) I would like to mention one example[↑], one of my colleagues. He is always quiet at the meetings[↑], even when directly asked. (4.0) Last time, our PM asked him something and he dropped the call. (4.0) At first, I thought he was afraid to talk in English. It seems he is afraid to speak in some cases. (4.0) I had a chance to hear him and his English is excellent. I was very surprised when I heard how fluent he is. We have the same role, when someone asks him something directly, he keeps quiet. I have answered for him. When I heard him I was confused

because his English is much better than mine. (2.0) I am not sure what the PROBLEM IS. It is not always English that is the problem but soft skills.” (Participant 1)

On the language skills spectrum, the results indicate that all the participants agree they have to be familiar with the job requirements, including the language expectations. Technical knowledge for some roles, like developers, is crucial for understanding products and services. Communication skills can be divided into written and spoken language. The participants explain that they have to maintain formal language while writing emails, whereas when they use Slack, they are more likely to be informal. It is easier for them to express themselves in written form since they use many tools and apps to make sure they get the messages across:

“At first, I TRY TO SUMMARIZE IT t in our language and then I put them in Google Translate. As you know, (5.0) it is not 100 % correct, and then I modify the content. And if some phrases sound strange, (2.0) I google them and figure out what they mean. Lately, as there are lots of apps available, I write to them to have it write it more PROFESSIONALLY. But in some cases it sounds too professional.” (Participant 1)

Expressing themselves in speech, e.g., meetings, presentations, workshops, and the company's parties, is far more challenging because they rely on their competencies and subjective and/or objective factors. Participant 11 shared that she experiences language anxiety when asked to express herself, even during brief meetings, affecting both her business and language skills.

Additionally, both in written and spoken form, native-like proficiency is valued, but the primary aim is to ensure clear communication and successful exchange of information:

“HAVING GOOD LANGUAGE SKILLS, because, (5.0) for me, (3.0) the most important thing is to have them in order to think and talk in that language not only in business context but also privately.” (Participant 1)

The results show that what they mean by speaking skills is communication skills, active listening, and using understandable language. When asked what is more important, either to know the technical terms or to get the message across, all of them agreed that the latter one is far more important, even if it means adapting one's language skills to the level of proficiency of the interlocutors. The participants tend to be informal while communicating with other employees. However, they are expected to be formal with the supervisors. When issues happen, open communication and asking to clarify the message helps. All in all, the study found that business skills vary depending on the job description. Soft skills are essential for all roles. Personality traits may affect performance within the IT context. Language skills are important, and they reflect their business skills. Formal language is expected in more formal situations, while informal language is more common when communicating with colleagues. The results indicate that both language and business skills are important to conduct business successfully.

How do employees from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use English to communicate effectively in an IT business context?

The results indicate that IT workers are expected to be exposed to people from different backgrounds:

*“*** It is implied. ***” (Participant 2)*

They report using two languages:

“(2.0) In my group, we are all from Bosnia and we talk in OUR MOTHER TONGUE. OR if we have any daily or monthly conversations from our colleagues from Cyprus, (2.0) we communicate in English. (2.0) Yeah.” (Participant 10)

However, that does not have to be the case since they cooperate with colleagues internationally:

*“*** Things are international and regional. Like, (2.0) you have people from Macedonia and Serbian, Bosnian. Usually, we are talking in Bosnian because everybody understand it. But there are certain situations where, so sorry if I am going away from the topic, so let's say people in Macedonia, they do understand Bosnian and some of them can answer in Bosnian and it would sound okay. (2.0) But ((verbal filler)) some of them will answer in Macedonian, sometimes it is okay and you can talk in Bosnian and sometimes you really need them to switch to English if you really want the details there. Mostly, we do catch the concepts and what they are really trying to say but sometimes we get lost in translation. In other teams, we do have companies that are working from Romania and obviously in that situation, even if it is an internal meeting you would be talking in English.” (Participant 5)*

They are exposed to wide variety of accents:

“Some accents (4.0), like THE INDIAN ACCENT, are DIFFICULT to understand. You have to ask to repeat or in some cases to write it down. Yeah! (4.0)” (Participant 11)

BELF allows them to adapt their language needs to the needs of the interlocutors, using simplified terms and avoiding idiomatic expressions. What is essential is to be goal-oriented, one of the many strategies that helps them achieve a win-win situation. BELF helps them express openness and empathy when dealing with different linguistic and cultural challenges. Based on the results, it is clear that IT workers are exposed to people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They may not be required to possess native-like proficiency. The primary goal is effective and clear communication. BELF helps them adapt to different linguistic needs and challenges. They need to be flexible in the choice of their communication style in this line of work.

5. Discussion

The research indicated that BELF serves as a neutral communication tool within the IT context, except for participants in managerial roles. Looking into the studies (Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta, 2012), similar results were indicated. BELF was most frequently used as a hybrid and simplified tool in meetings and in emails, to achieve communicative goals based on specific linguistic requirements, ultimately reaching an international audience (Kankaanranta, Planken, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta, 2012).

The study indicated that building rapport is essential for doing business, fostering healthy and mutually beneficial relationships, and sustaining high levels of productivity. Similar conclusions were reached in the studies (Biedenbach et al., 2011; Gabbert et al., 2021; Jenner, Myers, 2019), emphasizing that both role ambiguity and workload can have negative effects on rapport and equity, and that positive interaction is maintained through genuine rapport (Biedenbach et al., 2011; Gabbert et al., 2021; Jenner, Myers, 2019).

The study revealed that communication skills, active listening, and the ability to adapt language use are essential in the IT context. Similar conclusions and consequences were found in several studies (Chiswick, Miller, 2002; Mazer et al., 2007), indicating that the lack of these skills may result in diminished confidence, difficulty understanding interlocutors, and reluctance to speak up in meetings. Studies (Benner, Tushman, 2003; Ceci et al., 2014; Goel, Kathuria, 2010) confirmed the findings that effective communication skills are critical in conducting successful business, and that using clear and concise language promotes productivity and competitiveness in the IT job market (Deardorff, 2006; Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Royle, Laing, 2014b). Improving soft skills can help individuals overcome the language barrier, ensure clarity in information transmission, and lead to better relationships with colleagues and clients (Mazer et al., 2007; Royle, Laing, 2014b; Shah et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2023).

The study showed that the use of BELF helps participants meet their communication needs by using simple terms and avoiding complex and idiomatic structures in multicultural settings, allowing them to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Studies (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Giles, Watson, 2013; Jenkins, 2011; Sampson, 2021) confirmed that intercultural awareness and being open to adapt to different communication styles are key factors in maintaining BELF interactions in business settings.

6. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, there are several conclusions to be pointed out. BELF is widely used in IT companies in Bosnia. The employees use the language daily in order to achieve both communicative and business goals, regardless of their native language(s). The study also found a connection between conversational English and BELF use, emphasizing that being understood is more important than being grammatically correct. The participants recognized the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships through effective communication, understanding roles and responsibilities, providing feedback, and showing appreciation. It also highlights that business skills vary depending on the job description, while soft skills are essential for all roles. Formal language is expected to be used in formal contexts, whereas informal language is used in everyday speech. The study emphasized the importance of effective communication and the ability to adapt to different cultural and linguistic situations. The choice of the communication style affects the success rate.

Limitations of the study should be taken into consideration. They include the inability to generalize conclusions, time constraints, the focus on only one country, and a small number of participants in one business sector. An additional limitation of this study includes the validity of the instrument. Although the interview procedure was constructed based on the research by Dedović-Atilla and Dubravac (2022) and was aligned with the theoretical framework, the instrument was not independently validated through pilot testing or formal reliability procedures. Although the research questions were theoretically grounded, the results could be affected as consistency and construct validity of the interview questions were not empirically verified. The recommendations for further research are to conduct either quantitative or mixed-method research to see the extent to which these features occur and the outcomes of these occurrences on a larger scale.

7. Acknowledgments

Acknowledgements, funding information, and declaration of competing interests have been removed for blind review.

8. Conflict of interests

The author declares that there were no financial interests or personal relationships that have influenced the research process presented in this paper.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General questions

1. Position: Supervisor /employee
2. Gender:
3. Age: 18-29 30-39 40-49 50 and more
4. Citizenship:
5. Level of education:
6. Nature of business:
7. Total years of experience:
8. How would you assess your knowledge of English:
excellent very good good fair poor
9. Where did you learn English (more than one answer is possible):
School English course media self-study other: _____
10. Do you own an official English certificate/diploma paper: YES NO

If yes, which level: A1 A2 B1 B2 C1 C2

Interview questions

1. Describe your experience in learning English, from schooling until employment.
2. What level of English do employers require for tasks at work? (writing emails, delivering presentations, participating in meetings, reading reports)
3. What do employers think is the most important language skill? (reading, listening, speaking, writing)
4. Are you planning to improve your English skills in future?
5. What English language evaluation methods do employers often use when recruiting new staff? (interview in English, internal/external evaluation)
6. Did your educational background help you with the employment process?
7. What kinds of skills and knowledge does satisfactory English language proficiency imply at your workplace?
8. At your workplace, which language(s) do you use to communicate with your colleagues?
9. What kinds of English skills do you feel you and your colleagues at work lack?
10. What kind of challenges do you and other colleagues face when communicating in English among yourselves or with clients?
11. Is it important to be proficient in the English Language at your workplace?
12. Which one is more important at your workplace to conduct business successfully and why: knowledge of business-specific vocabulary or good language skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening)?
13. Which one is more important at your workplace to conduct business successfully and why: accuracy of language or accuracy of content? (I.e. Is it more important to have English competence like a native speaker or to get the message across?)
14. In your view, what kind of English is it important to use at your workplace?
15. How important is it to be proficient in the English Language in order to get a promotion at your workplace?
16. How often is English used at your workplace?
17. In your view, what is the best way to master English in order to successfully fit in the Bosnian business market? Was the course that the company provided beneficial for your professional progress? / (Does your workplace offer any kind of training or course for perfecting employees' English skills? If the answer is positive, could you provide more details?)
18. When encountering a problem at your workplace related to English, where do you find help?
19. In your opinion, what kind of textbooks should one use for learning English before entering your workplace?
20. According to your experience, how should English business courses be designed in order to best prepare future business professionals to enter Bosnian business market? Why?
21. Do you have any suggestions, comments or questions?