

Frendo, E. (2022). Teaching English as a workplace lingua franca. In S. Feher-Lehmer, C. Prewet-Schrempf, A. Pullen, L. Slattery & M. Urmston (Eds.), *In the Classroom and Beyond: Teaching and Learning in ESP Higher Education. Conference Proceedings from 10th Austrian UAS Language Instructors' Conference* (pp. 4-9). FHWien der WKW.

Abstract

Many ESP instructors in higher education still operate in traditional classrooms where much of the focus is unrelated to the real-world communication challenges their students will meet. This talk considers insights and perspectives from recent BELF and ESP research, as well as the speaker's own experience in corporate language training, and discusses an approach which melds these different viewpoints into something which might be called teaching English as a workplace lingua franca.

In contrast to corporate language training, where ESP tends to be focused on real world needs, ESP instructors in academic contexts rarely have the chance to really focus on the language and communication skills their students might need in the future. One of the key reasons for this is the expectations of the students themselves. As Jeong (2021) points out, “When I think of my own students taking basic-level university courses in Sweden, many of them start with strong convictions about ‘correct’ forms of English and with a traditionalist mindset.” (p. 198). She goes on to explain that this mindset includes a belief that “Successful interactions in English require native speaker language skills”, “native speakers own ‘their’ language”, and “culture relates to the ‘national cultures of [native speakers]”.

There may be other reasons too. Some instructors are required to teach students how to write academic papers, which is very different to teaching them to correspond with clients and co-workers, something they might be much more likely to have to do in the workplace. Some instructors teach students how to talk about engineering, rather the language of doing engineering, which again is a very different focus. Some instructors worry about teaching technical vocabulary and grammar but leave out the essential accommodation skills which might allow their students to communicate with people whose English is not as good as theirs. Perhaps worst of all, few instructors have the opportunity to analyse and become familiar with the types of communities of practice that their students will need to operate in, a central tenet of course design in corporate language training.

Researchers in ESP, workplace discourse, English as a business lingua franca (BELF), and other related disciplines, as well as many practitioners, have been discussing these issues for years. Yet the fact remains that many ESP instructors in higher education still operate in classrooms where much of the focus is unrelated to the real-world communication challenges their students will meet.

In some ways this is surprising. After all, most ESP literature tends to focus on the importance of the needs analysis. Hutchinson and Waters (1987), for example, emphasize that “ESP should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning.” (p.19). This seems a relatively simple concept to grasp, but the reality, as already discussed above, may be very different. Belcher (2009) sums it up by stating that “.. while the goal of ESP—specific-learner-centered language instruction—may appear straightforward enough, how best to meet the goal may be less obvious.” (pp. 1-2). Needs analysis is fundamental to ESP but is very difficult to do if the instructor does not have real access to the discourse community / community of practice that the student will be operating in.

Even when access is good the challenges remain. A recent course specifically designed to train South Korean Vessel Traffic Service Operators (VTSO’s) exemplifies the issues. (A VTS provides a service similar to air traffic control, but for shipping, and can be found in every harbour in the world. Vessels can come from anywhere, and their crews will often use English to talk to the VTS). A corpus containing 360 such radio conversations was recorded and transcribed, and the subsequent analysis provided a great number of insights into how language was really used in the target discourse community. Taking the word “anchor” as an example, a concordance search yields utterances like:

1. Could you please give me anchor position?
2. Please give me anchor position
3. Please give me position somewhere in E3
4. I request drop anchor area
5. Please give me anchorage ok?
6. Please give us anchor position, over
7. I want to confirm my anchor position

These all seem to follow what might be described as standard English, and indeed do not seem to cause any communication issues. However, the corpus also contained many examples which might not be classified as standard English, but nevertheless allow the professionals to do their job successfully.

1. We are dropped anchor because bad weather
2. Good morning where drop anchor?
3. My drop anchor time 2050LT
4. I'd like to heave up my anchor and reposition my anchor because now my anchor is stretching
5. I finally anchor aweigh over

The issue, of course, is what to focus on in a training course. Should the instructor worry about issues like standard grammar, or should such “non-standard” utterances be included in training materials? After all, it is highly likely that the VTSO’s would meet similar phrases themselves in future, even if they do not produce such phrases themselves.

A second example comes from a close examination of the word “copy”, which does not appear in guidelines issued by the International Maritime Organisation, but which is nevertheless a high frequency item in the corpus. In the ideal world VTSO’s and their interactants aboard a vessel would not use this word, and just a few examples show how confusing such use can be.

Example 1

VTS	Your cargo is crap. That is correct? Crap?
Vessel	Scrap. Sierra Charlie Romeo Alpha Papa.
VTS	Ah scrap <u>copy</u> your message.
Vessel	Thank you your cooperation.

In this conversation “copy” seems to mean “I understand”.

Example 2

VTS	I give you anchor position over.
Vessel	You give a anchor position.
VTS	Yeah that’s correct.
Vessel	Are you ready to <u>copy</u> over?
VTS	Yeah you give anchor position I will write it.

In example 2 “copy” means “write”.

Example 3

VTS	Yes this is XXX VTS.
Vessel	<u>Copy</u> .
VTS	I will give you anchor position. Let it <u>copy</u> .
Vessel	Anchor position.
VTS	Yes correct.

Example 4

VTS	XXX VTS [SN], go ahead.
Vessel	VTS, I will give you anchor position and <u>copy</u> .
VTS	<u>Copy copy</u> .

In examples 3 and 4 the meaning of “copy” is not clear at all.

Similar confusion can be caused by the use of place names, which might be unfamiliar to incoming vessels. Take for example the case of the Hwaamchu lighthouse, a landmark well known to VTSO’s in the Ulsan area.

Vessel	Could you please give me anchor position? Give me anchor position, over.
VTS	Ok, I'll give you anchoring position. [SN]* please ready to write down.
Vessel	Yes, I'm ready. I'm ready.
VTS	Hwaamchu lighthouse bearing 195 degrees distance 1 nautical mile.
Vessel	Pardon? Pardon?
VTS	[SN]*, standby, I'll call you back.

Vessel	Standby.
VTS	Yes standby standby.

*[SN] = ship's name

Training of South Korean VTSO's has traditionally been built around the learning and practice of internationally agreed phraseology, standard grammar, and lots of simulated radio conversations, but there is clearly a need to deal not only with non-standard lexical items, but also the communication strategies needed for successful communication. Practicing for emergencies or unique complex situations is even more challenging, because VTSO's cannot simply "learn" standard practice, or be exposed to recordings of real conversations. In the training course under discussion the instructor solves this problem by inviting experienced VTSO's to visit the class and discuss the technical aspects of past emergencies (in Korean), after which the VTSO's (both trainee and experienced) and the instructor compose possible radio conversations in English.

The VTS courses so far described are one example of the complexity of real workplace language use, but the real world is far more complex. Staying in the maritime industry context, the reality onboard a typical cargo vessel might be as follows:

Registration - USA

Owner – Japan

Management – South Korea

Officers - Norway

Crew – Indonesia / Philippines

Insurance – UK

Cargo - China / India / Singapore

Many employees working in such contexts never have the chance to get the English training the VTSO's receive. Not everybody is university educated, and not everyone has good English competence. Yet they are still expected to be able to communicate with each other in often demanding workplace situations, and often at short notice. This workplace reality is far away from the relatively stable context of the typical university language classroom, where everyone is well educated and grouped with people sharing roughly the same language ability, perhaps even sharing the same L1. This problem is not restricted to the maritime industry, of course. Many other industries are faced with similar challenges, and many university students will be expected to function, and perhaps lead, in such contexts. Key communication skills such as relationship-building across cultures, small talk, storytelling, and impression management will be used frequently. The point is that real workplace communication entails far more skills than many ESP courses in university contexts are able to target. There is never enough time, there are too many possible target situations, and most importantly, there is limited access to the communities of practice to do the job properly.

The maritime example discussed above is a good example of English being used as a lingua franca, which Seidlhofer (2011) defines as: "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (p. 7).

This is not the place to discuss ELF research in any great depth, and indeed it is assumed that the reader will be familiar with the basic tenet. However, it is worth remembering that

ELF research is continuously evolving, and much of what may have once have been taken for granted is now being revisited or extended. Jenkins (2015) outlines three phases so far:

1. "Focus on forms ... the possibility of identifying and maybe codifying ELF varieties"
2. "Variability ... ELF use transcends boundaries"
3. "Multilingualism ... English as one among many other languages"

She also emphasizes how ELF research is currently a "major departure from the monolingual bias of most (non-critical) SLA, ELT and even Applied Linguistics" (p. 78).

When we look at BELF, research has shown that experienced users of English in the real business world often have quite different approaches to that of many traditional English instructors. Ehrenreich (2010), for example, quotes such users as saying things like "conformity with standard English is seen as a fairly irrelevant concept" and "I don't actually care whether something is correct or incorrect. As long as the meaning is not distorted" (p. 418).

Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011)'s model of global communicative competence has been particularly influential in helping us understand how language is used in the workplace, arguing that BELF competence must include three key elements: an English 'core', knowledge of business-specific genres, and communication strategies focusing on clarity, brevity, directness and politeness.

Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen (2015) describe the problem well when they write that "BELF is perceived as an enabling resource to get the work done. Since it is highly context-bound and situation-specific, it is a moving target defying detailed linguistic description." (p. 129). Yet this "detailed linguistic description" is precisely what ESP practitioners have traditionally endeavoured to do. As we have seen in the VTS example above, a detailed linguistic description might not be enough to prepare students for what they will have to face. The reality is much more complex.

Komori-Glatz's (2018) definition of BELF emphasizes how context specific real language use is. "BELF is the use of English as the medium of communication among speakers of different first languages in an emergent, variable and hybrid manner that is appropriate to the demands and (multilingual) resources of the specific business context." Cogo and Yanaprasat add to this with their emphasis on culture: "BELF communication is intrinsically intercultural, and for that business professionals need to be able to deal not only with multiple backgrounds and identities, but also with different ways of operating or acting in multiple business cultures" (p.100).

This challenge carries on into other realms of ESP instruction. Consider testing and assessment, for example. Jenkins' (2020) makes the assertion that "ELF communication is so diverse and variable that it makes no sense to focus on any specific forms. In other words, the only thing that is testable is the outcome." (p.476). Others have criticized standard testing in a workplace context. Im and Cheng (2019), discussing TOEIC, possibly one of the most well-known international tests for workplace English, argue how "An ongoing challenge is that there is a growing need to expand TOEIC constructs to fit the real-world language demands of international workplace contexts."

Translanguaging, "the language practice whereby bilinguals and multilinguals spontaneously or consciously use multiple languages to complete communication." (Sun, Qiu and Zhang (2021)), is also a common feature of workplace talk around the world. Sun, Qiu and Zhang, in their study of multilingual workplaces, find that "Although the MNC in the study adopts English as its common corporate language, the local employees tended to mix languages to establish a linguistic space to accommodate their working needs." (p. 39). Their quote from a participant in the study emphasizes the challenge:

"I can't recall [the translanguaging practice]. I think I didn't change my language on purpose. I'm just uttering the words that come to my mind. For example, I might say '我们 team 在 localization 上做得蛮好的' (Our team is doing great in localization). I don't mean to use English words on purpose. I'm just used to it. That's how everyone talks." (Interview, Daniel, 04/08/2019)." (p.37)

Ehreneich (2010) comments on what taking BELF research into account might mean for language learning: "Learning ... seems to happen most effectively in business "communities of practice" rather than in traditional English training." Takino (2019), studying how business professionals become competent BELF users, makes similar observations: "I illustrated how heavily their learning was sourced from their own experience of using English at work, rather than from a systematic study of English."

Finally, a word about the research which informs our practice. Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) point out how WEIRD much of the research is, with WIIRD standing for Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. They argue that "The findings suggest that members of WEIRD societies ... are among the least representative populations one could find for generalizing about humans." The implication here is that much more work needs to be done before we can make key decisions about how to prepare students for the international workplace: we simply have not yet done the research.

And the problem of research into practice also directly affects anyone working in business English and ESP contexts. Frendo (2021) points out that "Most published research comes from people in the academic community, and largely ignores the thousands of practitioners working in BE. Those practitioners, denied access and representation, largely ignore the academic research. A classic silo mentality which helps no-one." Not only do we need to go beyond WEIRD research, but we also need to pay attention to the practitioners who are working with professionals in the workplace everyday, and who are basically ignored.

In conclusion, this talk challenges the idea that traditional ESP instruction meets the needs of many students around the world, and suggests that ELF and BELF research provide a number of insights which might help us do a better job. Amongst these is the need to have much more interaction between instructors and target communities of practice (not just disciplines), to consider languaging as well as language (i.e. language as process as well as product), to increase the learning of communication strategies, to develop systems of testing and assessment based on outcomes, not linguistic form, and finally, to help students understand that much of what they need to know will be learned in their future workplace, rather than in the classroom, and that part of the ESP instructors' task is to give them the techniques and tools to do so successfully.

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