

Using English for International Business: A European Case Study

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Abstract

With the continuing globalisation of markets and internationalisation of trade, professionals from a wide range of organisations, from large multinational corporations to small to medium size enterprises, are increasingly coming together to do business in the international workplace, particularly in meetings. Such international events usually bring together people from different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds with the result that a common language of communication is frequently adopted. More often than not this lingua franca is English. While English for International Business (EIB) has an essential function as a lingua franca in multilingual settings, it can also present challenges both linguistically and culturally, particularly as more and more interactions are between speakers whose first language is not English.

This paper reports on preliminary research which forms part of a larger scale study investigating the use of English as a lingua franca in international business meetings. The paper summarises the findings of a questionnaire exploring the use of EIB by a particular European business organisation. It is hoped that the limited findings will help shed light on some of the language issues that may be present in such international contexts and the possible communications difficulties and frustrations that can result. A positive result is that as well as uncovering some of these challenges, the analysis also shows an awareness by many participants of some of the strategies that can be used to overcome them.

Introduction

This extract from an article in the 'New York Times' newspaper, reinforces what is now beyond dispute, regardless of any ideological objections, that the use of English for international business is firmly established in Europe.

...As European banks and corporations burst national boundaries and go global, many are making English the official corporate language.

Two years ago, when France, Germany and Spain merged their aerospace industries into one company, they not only gave it an English name - the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Company, or EADS - they also made English its language.

In Germany, the national postal service, Deutsche Post World Net, increasingly uses English as its working language. Smaller companies are doing likewise. In Finland, the elevator maker Kone adopted English in the 1970's; in Italy, Merloni Elettrodomestici, a midsize home appliance maker, did so in the mid-1990's. Management meetings at big banks like Deutsche Bank in Germany and Credit Suisse in Switzerland are routinely in English....

"I can't give percentages, but now many executives are not Italian - French, English, Danish, Russian and so on," said Andrea Prandi, Merloni's spokesman. "We consider ourselves a European group. For Europe, the official language is English."¹

¹ Extract from "New York Times" article by John Tagliabue, 19th May 2002. Available online from <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/19/international/europe/19ENGL.html>. Retrieved 6th June 2005.

While there are a number of reasons for the current spread of English both internationally and within Europe (Graddol 2000, Crystal 1997), many of these are founded on what Brutt-Griffler terms ‘econcultural’ grounds, ie they are the product of the development of a world market and global developments in the fields of science, technology, culture and media (Brutt-Griffler 2002).

Many languages have been used around the world as contact languages for international trade and communication. Within Europe itself, there have been several lingua francas since Roman times, including Greek, Latin, French, German and English. The latter three are currently widely used in parts of Europe, and make up what Graddol refers to as the ‘Big Languages’ in Europe (Graddol 2000:14) . Nevertheless they are not the only languages used for international communication in Europe with for example Russian being used in the newer Eastern European nations and the pidgin, or hybrid blend of several Scandinavian languages ‘Scandinaviska’, used in several northern European countries (Louhiala-Salminen et al 2005).

Historically the development of any language as a lingua franca or pidgin to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages has often been initiated by international commerce or trade. In fact the word ‘pidgin’ is said to be derived from the Chinese pronunciation of the English word *business* and *Pidgin English* was the name given to a Chinese-English-Portuguese pidgin used for commerce in Canton during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Indeed, in its strictest sense, the term ‘lingua franca’ seems to be equated with a pidgin being a language with no native speakers. The term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is generally used in this way to refer exclusively to the use of English between speakers whose mother tongue is not English (Seidlhofer 2001, Firth 1996). The term BELF (Business ELF) is also used by some (Louhiala-Salminen et al 2005) to refer to the use of English for business purposes between speakers whose mother tongue is not English. However, both of these terms exclude a substantial body of communicative events where English is used as a common language both between ELF speakers and between ELF and English as a Mother Tongue (EMT) speakers. Broader terms such as ‘English as an International Language’ (EIL), along with ‘Global English’ and ‘International English’, seem open to this more flexible and liberal interpretation. Consequently, in this study, the term English for International Business (EIB) is used to refer to the use of English as a common language in business contexts where both EMT and ELF speakers could be present.

This study focuses on one such context, where English is used for international meetings in a particular European professional organization, presenting and discussing some of the communication difficulties reported by the meeting participants. This preliminary study will form part of a broader discourse analytic study investigating the linguistic and sociocultural issues involved in using EIB. The initial study will not only inform this second stage of research but also hopefully make a small contribution to the growing body of knowledge on the use of English in Europe and particularly in European business.

English in Europe

a) The use of English

The complexity of the use of English, as mother tongue, second language and international language in Europe has been recognized (Sprichtinger 2001, Smit 2003, Seidlhofer 2003, Brutt-Griffler 2002, Berns 1995) and suggestions for modifying Kachru's (1992) concentric circles framework of world English use² to accommodate this complexity have been suggested by Berns (1995) and more recently by Fenyö (2003) to take into account the various, dynamic roles of English in different European countries. For instance, Berns (1995) claims that in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, although English is not an official language, it serves various social, commercial, educational and cultural functions which justify categorizing these countries as belonging to both Kachru's 'expanding' and 'outer' circles. It could similarly be argued that Sweden and Denmark could increasingly be seen as straddling these two circles. Furthermore, the recent accession of ten more countries to the EU in 2004 has increased the number of countries in the 'expanding circle'. The mobility of Europe's boundaries and people within them, together with growing opportunities for cross-border trade, adds to the complexity of language use across Europe and doubtless encourages the development of an international language or languages.

² Kachru (1985) described the spread of English in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. In summary the Inner Circle comprises countries which use English primarily as a mother tongue, eg the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia. The Outer Circle includes countries which use English largely as a second language, many of which are former colonies of the UK or the USA, such as Malaysia, Singapore, India and Kenya. The Expanding Circle comprises countries which use English as a foreign language such as China, Egypt, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Berns (1995) later adapted Kachru's model to the specific sociolinguistic situation in Europe.

b) EIB in Europe

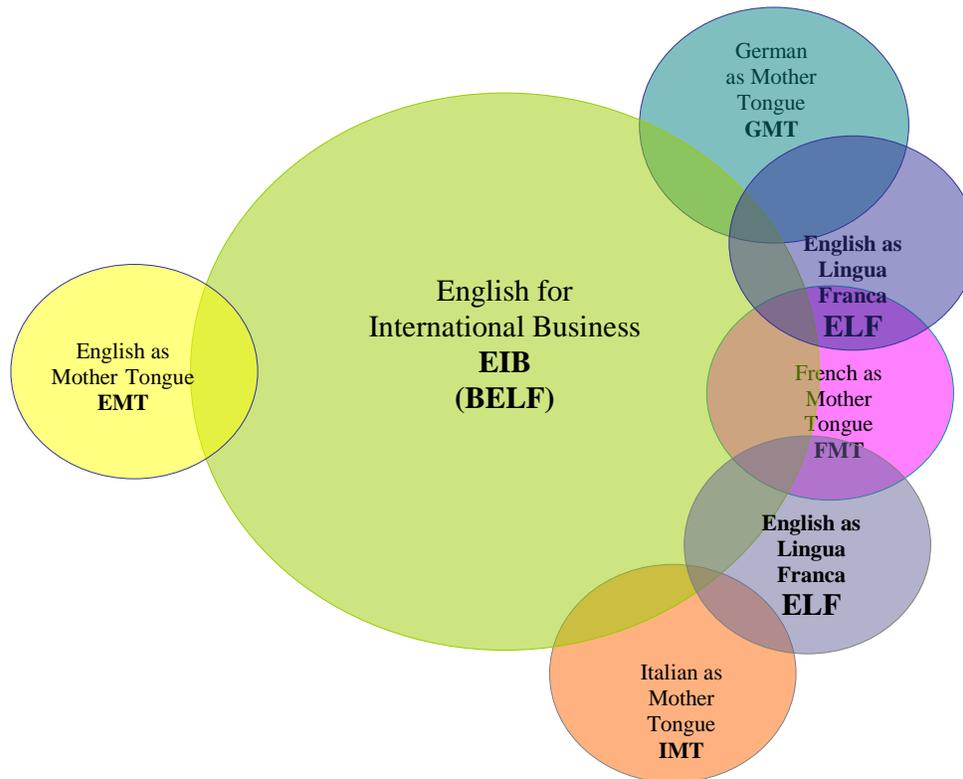
Within Europe, there is growing evidence that English has become the biggest business lingua franca. A study conducted by the Danish Council of Trade and Industry estimated that Danish companies conducted 80% of their international business in English (cited in Firth 1996). Similarly, Crystal (1997) claims that according to a recent yearbook of international organizations 99% of European organizations use English as a working language (cited in Graddol 2000:8). However, while English may well be the most widely used business language in Europe, a survey of language use in European businesses (Hagen 1998) found, for instance, that German is increasingly being used in central and Eastern Europe, especially with the accession of new Eastern European states into the EU. Hagen also claims that in order to do cross-border business successfully, companies need to be able to communicate in all three of Europe's 'big languages', namely English, German and French (Hagen 1998). Although, as Graddol (2000:29) points out, this is a target which many British companies find hard to meet, as illustrate in a further survey of European executives language skills which found that while in the EU as a whole, 70% businesses have executives with foreign language abilities (rising to over 90% in Sweden, Greece, Spain and the Netherlands) only 39% of UK businesses had executives proficient in more than one language. These figures also reflect the findings of similar surveys.² For instance, Labrie and Quell's study of foreign language knowledge across the EU which showed that although British people's knowledge of French and German is increasing, particularly in the younger generation (ie 15-24 year

² Such as the International Business Owners Survey Grant Thornton July 2004 and the British Chamber of Commerce Language Survey 2004.

olds), they still lag behind many European nations in that only 47% can speak any foreign language (Labrie and Quell 1994)

The multifunctional role of English in Europe is not only restricted to its use within specific countries but can also be illustrated within international organizations where it may be used as a mother tongue (EMT) by native English speaking employees but also as a lingua franca (ELF) between non-native English speakers and as an international language between ELF and EMT speakers, as illustrated in Fig 1. In the current study, all three types of users are represented.

Fig 1 Functions of English in European Business Communication



c) A European 'language problem'

The spread of English is commonly seen as a 'language problem' threatening to engulf and replace indigenous European languages, as reflected in European policy statements such as;

If democratic citizenship in Europe is to be internationally based, it is crucial to ensure diversification in language teaching so that citizens in Europe can interact in their own languages, rather than through English as a lingua franca.³

³ From Conference document on 'Diversification and English' organized by Language Policy Division, Strasbourg, 2002 cited in Seidlhofer (2003).

At the same time, Seidlhofer and other researchers are questioning the belief that English is creating a ‘language problem’ in Europe and the assumption that Europeans have to choose between their own native language and English. As Spichtinger argues, ‘one can speak German as one’s national language and English as one’s European language’ (2001:54).

d) ‘Linguistic imperialism’ v ‘functional realism’

Spichtinger (2001) suggests that we can learn from the countries of Kachru’s Outer Circle, ie former British colonies, to appropriate English for our own European purposes. He argues that the plurilingualism of the EU countries bears some similarities with former colonial countries such as India and Nigeria where English was retained not because of post-colonial imperialism, as argued by Phillipson (1992) and others, but because it would fulfil a useful function. Seidlhofer elaborates on this pragmatic motivation for using English as an international language, seeing it both as utilitarian, ie important for international business and idealistic, ie facilitating cross-border communication and mutual understanding (Seidlhofer 2003). This view of the appropriation of English for international communication and trade, rather than as a symbol of national supremacy, is supported increasingly not only by European and North American scholars, such as Jenkins (2000), McKay (2002), Seidlhofer (2001), Brutt-Griffler (2002) but also by researchers in Outer Circle countries, such as Chew in Singapore (1999) and Bisong (1995) in Nigeria. Seidlhofer argues that this shift

represents a new era in studies of the global functions of English where the concept of ‘functional realism’ increasingly seems to be replacing the earlier era of ‘linguistic imperialism’ as posed by Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1998) and Canagarajah (1999).

As Seidlhofer comments:

ELF speakers are ... not primarily concerned with emulating the way native speakers use their mother tongue within their own communities, nor with socio-psychological and ideological issues. Instead, the central concerns for this domain are efficiency, relevance and economy in language learning and language use. The reasons why the linguistic imperialism school has had little impact on mainstream ELT are rather obvious: people need and want to learn English whatever the ideological baggage that comes with it, a fact acknowledge even in Canagarajah’s 1999 *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*’ (Seidlhofer 2000:57)

This pragmatic view is frequently reflected in business and management. For instance, commenting on the choice of English, as corporate language in the multinational engineering and telecoms firm, Siemens AG of Germany, Bernhard Welschke, head of European policy at the Federation of German stated that “*German companies are very pragmatic.... They value a single language for business, even if it is not their own.*”⁴

Similarly, supporting the view that the use of English by businesses is generally pragmatic rather than ideological, Professor Rangan of Insead suggests that the corporate use of English represents “*only shallow integration*’ while providing an essential communication tool, “*much the way we use mathematics and numbers.*”⁵

⁴ quoted in *The Economist* Aug 5th 2004 article ‘After Babel, a new common tongue’

⁵ Extract from “*New York Times*” article by John Tagliabue, 19th May 2002. Available online from <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/19/international/europe/19ENGL.html>. Retrieved 6th June 2005.

The significance of English in European and indeed in international business has long been recognized in the business world and is evidenced in the quantity and expenditure on business English language and culture training. The importance of effective international communication is highlighted in much of the international management literature (Bloch and Starks 1999, Jackson 1995, Hofstede 2001, Mead 1990, Victor 1992). As Victor (1992) suggests:

It is probably better to have mediocre technical skills and excellent international business communication skills than to have excellent technical skills and poor international business communication skills (Victor 1992:246).

Underpinning this concern is a realisation that communication and information flow are central features of organisations and businesses and that there is a fundamental relationship between effective communication and business outcomes:

Good communication creates good relationships, high morale, increased productivity and profit. Bad communication, on the other hand, can lead to inefficiency, waste and loss of profit' (Mead 1990:5).

There has also been some recognition that EIB represents an emerging form or variety of English which is distinct from standard British or American varieties. For instance,

Jussi Itavuori, the Finnish group vice president for human resources at EADS⁶, describes it as: "*It's neither English nor American....It's some sort of operating language. It loses quite a lot of nuance.*"⁷

Within the field of business language training there have also been, albeit limited, attempts to describe and teach some form of 'international English' for business learners. One example of this is 'Offshore English', a term coined by the Canning training company to describe the type of English which they suggest native English speakers need to use to be more readily understandable by non-native English users. Similarly, Hollqvist (1984:93) reports how the Swedish telecoms giant, Ericsson, tried to create its own version of international English, referred to as 'Ericsson English', which aimed to provide a restricted range of vocabulary and language structures without loss of accuracy. There are of course other examples of restricted varieties of English which have been created for very specific international purposes, such as 'Airspeak' (for Air Traffic Control) and 'Polic speak' (for binational police and emergency service cooperation at the Channel Tunnel) but these were created to serve very limited communicative purposes unlike the breadth and flexibility of functions required of a business lingua franca or international language.

Within linguistics, there has also been increasing interest in the role of language and culture in international business communication (Babcock & du-Babcock 2001,

⁶ EADS is the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company.

⁷ Extract from "New York Times" article by John Tagliabue, 19th May 2002. Available online from <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/19/international/europe/19ENGL.html>. Retrieved 6th June

Rogerson-Revell 1999, Spencer-Oatey and Xing 1998, Firth 1996) and specifically in European business (Louhiala-Salminen et al 2005, Nickerson 2005, Planken 2005, Poncini 2003, Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997). However, despite the range of uses of English across Europe and its undisputable spread particular for international business purposes, there seems, as Seidlhofer states (2004), little corpus-based analysis of how English is actually used for international business communication in Europe. Nor is there much information on how business Europeans feel about its use. It is with these issues in mind that the current research study is framed, aiming to shed further light on the use of English as a common language of international business in Europe.

The Study

This paper reports on preliminary research which forms part of a larger scale study to explore further the nature and role of EIB, focusing specifically on its use in international business meetings in Europe. The overall study has both a theoretical and practical goal, on the one hand aiming to build on earlier research in this field (Planken 2005, Poncini 2004, Rogerson-Revell 1999, 1998, Bargiella-Chiappini and Harris 1997, Firth 1996,) and on a practical level, to relay the findings back to the European organization involved, in order to help it improve communications in future international events, and ultimately, to use the findings in the development of training materials to facilitate international professional communication (Charles and Marschan-Piekkari 2002, St John 1996, Rogerson-Revell 2003, 1999).

The initial study aims to provide ‘hard’ data (ie factual, background information such as the demographic makeup of the participants, the frequency of their use of EIB) to support

the second stage of the research. However it also aims to provide ‘soft’ data regarding participants’ perceptions of the use of EIB in such contexts: data which seems relatively scarce in current research.

The rest of this paper then reports on this preliminary study which explores the use of EIB in business meetings within a particular European professional organisation, based on documentary evidence from an internal report together with the findings of an initial questionnaire.

Background to the study

This study was conducted with the co-operation of the Groupe Consultatif Actuariel Europeen (GCAE)⁸. The Groupe has a consultative and advisory function facilitating discussion with European Union institutions on existing and proposed EU legislation which has an impact on the actuarial profession. Thirty-three actuarial associations from thirty European countries are represented in the Groupe. Many Groupe members meet at various European venues at regular intervals to discuss current issues. Some members attend international meetings as frequently as twice a month and are in regular email and telephone contact with colleagues. Consequently, face-to-face meetings are an essential part of their business life. This pattern of communication seems typical in European

⁸ I express my thanks to the Groupe Consultatif Actuariel Europeen for their help in conducting this study and for their permission to publish the research findings.

business, both in my own experiences and those of other researchers, such as Louhiala-Salminen et al (2005), Hagen (1998) and Firth (1996).

Meetings within GCAE

Like most such international organizations, GCAE has a variety of meeting types from small internal and informal gatherings of a few local staff to large formal meetings held externally at different venues across Europe. The questionnaire data for this study were collected during such an external event where the annual, whole GCAE Groupe met to discuss key topics and to review the previous year's business. This event consisted of a series of formal, subgroup meetings (ranging from 8 – 20 participants) culminating in a whole group meeting (approximately 50 participants) on the final afternoon.

Obviously, differences in size, location, purpose and, indeed, interactive mix of participants can have a substantial effect on meeting behaviours and outcomes, as noted in my own and others' research (Poncini 2004, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997, Rogerson-Revell 1999). Indeed, the genre of business meetings itself can be subdivided into several subgenres using various criteria. For instance, whether a meeting is inter or extra-organizational, has a primarily commercial business focus or a professional, consultative brief. Whether a meeting is essentially collaborative and information-sharing in nature, or is fundamentally competitive and results-driven. In theory the meetings at GCAE are inter-organisational, routine events performing an essentially consultative and advisory function within a professional body. Nevertheless, as with most meetings, beneath this public brief there are no doubt several layers of organizational and individual

agendas which contribute to the complexity of these interactions. Some of these issues arose superficially in this study but they will be explored more fully in the second, discourse-analytic stage of the research.

Impetus for the study

The impetus for this research originated from concerns within the organisation itself rather than from my own hypothetical research questions.⁹ The GCAE has for some time been concerned about what they referred to as unequal participation of members in meetings. Some of these concerns are outlined in Fig 2 which shows an extract from an internal report to Groupe members on this issue¹⁰.

Fig 2 Extract from GCAE internal report

⁹ A personal contact within the organization alerted me to these concerns and I was granted permission to carry out research on the understanding that the anonymity of Groupe members would be secured and that any outcomes would be for the benefits of the GCAE and my own personal research purposes.

¹⁰ This report is the outcome of a task force, comprising non-native English speakers, set up after discussions in the Member Services Committee (Stockholm 2004) to consider how to encourage participation of non-native English speakers within the organization.

Report of the Task force on

“How to Encourage More Active Participation of Non-English Speakers Within the IAA”

Members: French, Swedish, Portuguese, Finnish, Japanese, Spanish

“I was sitting in one of the IAA Committee meetings and listening to the discussion. Suddenly I thought that the meeting was missing an essential point and I started to plan an intervention. It took a few minutes to prepare myself, especially to find the right English words etc., and suddenly I realised that the discussion had moved on to another subject.”

“I was in the middle of an intervention talking about that interesting subject when in the middle of a sentence I realised that I had forgotten the correct English word to use.”

These are just two of a number of situations a non-native English (NNE) speaker finds himself in every now and then.

Of course, if you are an intrepid speaker you continue with a homemade translation, but we must admit that a fair number of us would more and more hesitate to speak publicly.

Are there any remedies or solutions to this problem that most probably results in a predominance of the Anglo Saxon views being forwarded?

This report highlights some of the concerns felt by GCAE members and illustrates some of the difficulties and frustrations encountered by non-native English speakers in meetings. The final paragraph suggests an underlying assumption that some of these difficulties result from the dominance of ‘Anglo Saxon’ views in the organization, despite their minority status in terms of numbers of members.

It is interesting to note that some members of the organization had thought about these issues in some depth and come up with their own reasons for such difficulties. These they divided into three subsections, a) ‘cultural b) ‘organization’ and c) ‘language barrier’.

Fig 3 Extract from GCAE internal report – ‘cultural and organisational’ factors

Report of the Task force

Reasons why Non-Native English Speakers do not Play a More Active Part in the IAA

There are a number of reasons why NNE do not play a more active part in the IAA, to mention a few:

1. *Cultural*

There are differences in working styles and many members must be given enough time to consider the issues in question, perhaps to discuss them with colleagues and then to formulate their reply in an actual meeting. Sometimes you are even used to listening to the more senior ones and accept their proposals etc.

2. *Organizational*

In a number of countries the future actuary is educated more or less exclusively at a university, and/or actuarial organizations are more loosely knit organizations compared to the Anglo-Saxon way.

A fair number of the IAA member associations are comparatively small and many of them are NNEs. On top of the language problem, the small associations have the problem of resources. The limited resources explains why the small associations cannot participate so extensively in the IAA work as they might have wanted to, but must concentrate only on issues or committees etc., that are of higher importance to them. Sometimes a better understanding from the “big brothers” towards the small ones would also be helpful.

As can be seen from the extract in Fig 3 relating to the ‘cultural’ issues, reference was made to differences in working styles and the need to give participants an adequate amount of time to respond in meetings, as well as to the tendency to defer to more senior associates. Some of these concerns correspond to issues raised in research into similar EIB contexts (Rogerson-Revell 1998) and it is hoped that the second stage of this research project will enable the further investigation of such cultural issues.

With regard to ‘organisational’ issues, reference was made to differences in the professional background of actuaries educated in the UK and elsewhere, with the comment that ‘In a number of countries the future actuary is educated more or less

exclusively at a university, and/or actuarial organizations are more loosely knit organizations compared to the Anglo-Saxon way.’ A second issue related to the difference between large and small member associations and the relative lack of resources and therefore limited participation of members from smaller organisations, many of whom are non-native speakers of English. This question of the relative isolation of smaller associations or subsidiaries, particularly if predominantly populated by non-native speakers of the organisational lingua franca has been documented elsewhere. For instance, Charles and Marschan-Piekkari’s (2002) study of horizontal communication in the Finnish-based multinational Kone elevators found that communication between the Finnish headquarters and Spanish subsidiaries was restricted because of limited language skills.

The points raised under the ‘language barrier’ topic are shown in Fig 4 below. The significance of the language barrier is highlighted particularly with regard to oral communication. Also, while the value of the diversity of Groupe members is recognised, the difficulty of having a wide range of linguistic competence is also acknowledged.

Fig 4 Extract from GCAE internal report - 'language barrier'

Report of the Task force

Reasons why Non-Native English Speakers do not Play a More Active Part in the IAA

3. *Language Barrier*

This is an evident problem. The knowledge of the English language varies quite a lot from fluent to barely understandable.

To change some of these reasons/causes is of course, if not impossible, but a very long term project and frankly we think that this diversity is important for the development of the IAA as an international organisation.

The language problem is an important one to solve because, if we cannot communicate, then how can we expect to work together?

At the same time, we would all like to improve the situation right now as much as is practically possible.

As far as we can see, it is the **oral** language barrier that we must try to lower as much as possible.

The questionnaire

The GCAE internal report provided a useful starting point for a more detailed data gathering exercise, based on a written questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data about participants' use of EIB (eg frequency of use, language skills needed, perceived proficiency level) and about participants' first language, number of other languages spoken etc. Qualitative data were also gathered, through open-ended questions, regarding participants' views about the use of English in GCAE business

meetings and more generally about any perceived communication issues in such meetings. The questionnaires, which were written in English¹¹, were distributed and returned during the two-day annual GCAE Groupe meeting held in Manchester, England, in October 2004..

Findings

a) Languages spoken

Of the 43 out of 47 participants who returned questionnaires, 34 were *Non-Native English Speakers* (NNES)¹² and 9 were *Native English Speakers* (NES). The NESs came from different parts of the UK, including England, Scotland, the Channel Islands, and from Ireland, while the NNESs represented a range of 20 different nationalities. The largest contingent of NNESs was Spanish (5 participants), followed by German (3 participants) and Dutch (3 participants) and then several pairs or single participants from the remaining countries.

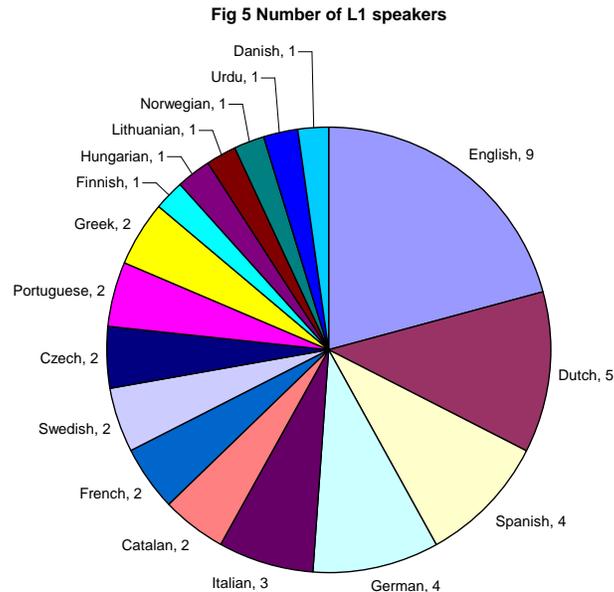
As shown in Fig 5, this widely multinational group included speakers of 17 different first languages, with the biggest group being the British and Irish (9 participants whose first language is English), followed by the Dutch (5), Spanish (4, plus 2 whose first language is Catalan), German (4), Italian (3), Czech (2), French (2), Greek (2), Portuguese (2),

¹¹ The questionnaire was given in English partly because there were practical difficulties in having it translated into many different languages at short notice but also because the official written language of GCAE is English. It is recognised that the use of other languages in the questionnaire might have altered the questionnaire results to some extent.

¹² It is acknowledged that there is considerable debate over the use of the terms Native and Non-Native English Speaker (eg Davies 2003, McKay 2002) but these terms are used here partly because they were used by GCAE members themselves and also because as yet no consensus on alternative terms seems to have been reached.

Swedish (2), Danish (1), Finnish (1) Hungarian (1), Lithuanian (1), Norwegian (1) and Urdu (1).

Fig 5 Number of different L1 speakers



All participants shared a common working language of English and the vast majority had some (and varying degrees of) competence in at least one other foreign language. The most commonly spoken foreign language was French (23 participants), followed by German (15), Spanish (7), Russian (4), Italian (2), Catalan (1), Icelandic (1), Portuguese (1) and Swedish (1). The prevalence of French and German as commonly used foreign languages reflects the findings of other surveys of language use in Europe, although typically German is ranked in second position, after English, and French in third (Graddol 2000, Labrie and Quell 1994).

b) Native English Speaker (NES) data

The majority of the NES participants attend international meetings very often or quite regularly and two thirds of them speak at least some French as a foreign language. Again, this reflects the findings of larger surveys of British business executives language competence which show that French is still the most commonly spoken foreign language (British Chamber of Commerce 2004, Labrie and Quell 1994). One third of the NES participants had experienced using a foreign language (French or Italian) in business contexts, such as meetings and presentations. When asked if they had any difficulties understanding other speakers (NESs and NNESs) in international meetings, most responses suggest that participants had some difficulties occasionally. One or two felt that ‘strong’ or ‘heavy’ accents of NNES could pose particular difficulties but the point was also made that over time these difficulties reduce as participants ‘acclimatise to English as spoken by different nationalities’(NES1)¹³.

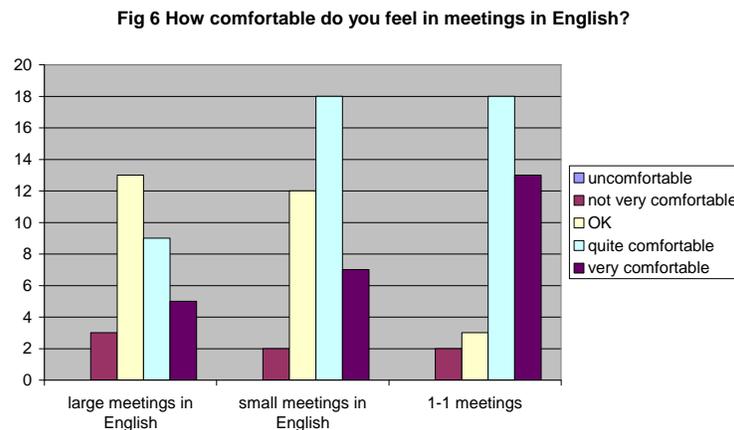
When asked if they thought it was necessary to modify their English in international business contexts, all of the NES respondents expressed concern to try to speak slowly and clearly. Several suggested the need to avoid, if possible, the use of jargon, idioms, metaphors, unusual words or ‘*colloquialisms which might not be familiar to non-native speakers*’ (NES1). The point was made that it can be helpful to ‘*repeat ideas more than once in different ways*’(NES2) and ‘*to relate what you are saying to other people’s culture and situation*’ (NES3).

c) Non Native English Speaker (NNES) data

¹³ Numbers such as NES1, NES2 are used to refer to different speakers anonymously.

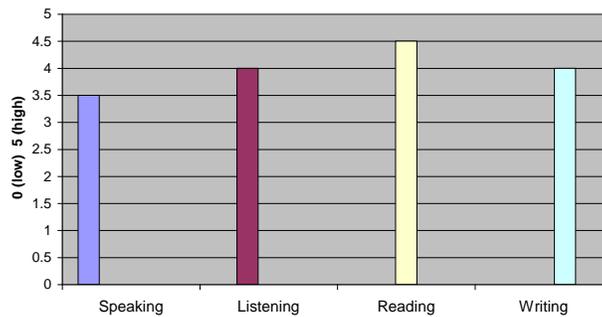
The majority of the NNES participants said they use English either very often or quite regularly and 67% confirmed that they attended meetings in English either very often or quite regularly.

When asked how comfortable they felt in business meetings held in English, there was some variation related to the size of the meetings, as shown in Fig 6 below. Responses suggest that fewer NNES participants felt ‘very comfortable’ in large business meetings than in small meetings and in particular than in one-to-one conversations. However, 56% claimed to feel ‘quite comfortable’ in small meetings or one-to-one conversations, while only 26% felt equally comfortable in large meetings in English. As mentioned earlier, the size of international meetings held in GCAE varied from quite small subgroup meetings to large whole ‘Groupe’ meetings.



The average NNES participant had studied English for six years, usually at school and assessed his/her English proficiency as slightly lower in speaking skills than in listening, writing and, particularly, in reading, as shown in Fig 7 below.

Fig 7 Self-assessment of English proficiency



When asked if they found it generally easier to communicate in English with native or non-native speakers of English, results were inconclusive, with 43% stating that they found NNES and NES equally easy to communicate with, 33% stating a preference for NES and 24% finding NNES easier. When asked to specify which if any accents (either native or non-native speaker) they found particularly easy or difficult when listening to English, there was quite a range of responses, particularly regarding the ‘difficult’ accents.

With regard to the ‘easy’ accents, there was an equal number of respondents who felt that either ‘UK English’ or ‘US English’ were easy to understand (6 responses each) but also several references to other specific accents which individuals found easy to follow, such as Dutch, German, Scandinavian, French. There were also one or two general comments such as ‘*when they (all speakers) don’t speak too fast*’ and ‘*all ‘cultured’ native accents*’.

With regard to the ‘difficult’ accents, 47% of the responses indicated difficulty in understanding some NES accents (with references to London English, Australian, African, Scottish, Irish, Tennessee and New Orleans American) and 36% suggesting some difficulties with NNES accents (including Catalan, French, Japanese, German, Southern European, Far Eastern). There were also some general references to, for example, ‘*heavy regional*’ or ‘*uneducated accents*’, and ‘*non-articulated English*’.

In response to the question, ‘Do you have any particular difficulties communicating in international meetings?’, several participants (7) referred to the general problem of people speaking either too fast or too quietly, for example, ‘*yes, if people speak too quickly or too low*’ (French participant), ‘*difficult to understand speakers who speak in low volume and/or too fast*’ (Greek participant). Others mentioned the problem of finding the right words at the right time, for instance ‘*I have to think about the words to use*’ (Portuguese participant) and ‘*Limitations of the knowledge of a wide vocabulary*’ (Italian participant). Some participants seemed to have difficulties interrupting and finding the appropriate way to express an opinion or viewpoint. For instance, ‘*explaining standpoints in free speech*’ (German participant), ‘*interrupting speakers spontaneously; communicating difficult messages politely; finetuning statements diplomatically*’ (German participant); ‘*interrupting speakers sometimes difficult as is expressing small but important differences in opinion/feeling*’ (Dutch participant).

The frustrations caused by language difficulties is illustrated in responses such as

‘this limitation [of vocabulary] doesn’t prevent me from participating but I feel less efficacy in expressing my thoughts’ (Italian participant) and *‘difficulties in finding adequate words for immediate reaction in a discussion. Then it is easy to be quiet. This is in comparison with discussions in my mother tongue’* (Swedish participant).

Discussion

While it is difficult, and indeed unwise, to make generalisations from these findings, there are one or two issues that would benefit from some further discussion.

1. Understanding different accents

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the NNES responses regarding accents, With reference to the variety of accents exemplified as ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’ to understand, it is necessary to bear in mind the mix of regional and national languages and accents that the participants represent as well as those that they are familiar with. For instance, there is some suggestion from the responses that when exemplifying ‘difficult’ accents, participants refer to accents of those whose language group is quite distant from their own), for example, a Czech participant referring to ‘Far-East and Spanish’ as difficult and northern Europeans referring to southern European accents as difficult. There may also be a tendency to relate specific difficulties experienced with one or two individual speakers, with a particular national or regional accent, to generalisations about the difficulty of whole language groups or accents.

2. *NNES communication difficulties:*

Relating to the specific difficulties in communicating in international meetings outlined by NNES participants, there seems to be a spectrum of issues. These range from comprehension difficulties, ie processing fast or quiet speech, which seems to be problem shared by participants with both high and lower English language proficiency, through difficulties in both comprehension and production, due to vocabulary limitations, which seem to relate to speakers whose self-assessment of their language proficiency (particular in speaking) is relatively low, to difficulties in managing interactions appropriately. This last category appears to relate particularly to participants who rate their own language ability relatively highly but who nevertheless feel they have difficulty in high-speed discussions, particularly trying to interrupt or express a particular viewpoint

3. *NES comments:*

Many of the comments made by NSE respondents suggest an awareness of the difficulties of using a foreign language for business communication, in this case using English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and an appreciation of the effort involved (eg *'They always speak better English than I speak their native language'* (NES4) and *'Since most meetings of international bodies are conducted in English, this almost gives native English speakers an 'unfair advantage'* (NES6). Many also showed an intuitive sensitivity to the needs of NNEs and of how to modify their own NES language use in international contexts. There was also a degree of self-criticism in comments such as *'Too many English speakers do not make allowances in international gatherings'*

(NES5). Indeed, this criticism was independently made by a NNES respondent: *‘Of course I think I should improve my English, especially in international business contexts but I also think that native English speakers should make greater efforts (actually, most of them do none) in order to be properly understood by non-native English speakers.’*

Conclusion

It must be remembered that this analysis is based on a small-scale questionnaire which was seen primarily as a secondary research tool to support further, and more detailed, analysis to be carried out at a later date. Consequently I do not wish to make generalisations beyond the confinements of the actual data analysed. Nevertheless, the data gathered explores, in perhaps more detail than elsewhere, how a particular group of European executives use English for International Business and their views on its use.

It is hoped that these limited findings will help shed light on some of the language issues that may be present in such international gatherings and the possible communications difficulties and frustrations that can result. A positive result is that as well as uncovering some of these communication issues, the analysis also shows an awareness by many participants of some of the strategies that can be used to overcome them. The second stage of the research will involve a discourse analysis of audio and video recordings of GCAE meetings held in Manchester in October 2004. The analysis will hopefully provide specific examples of some of the issues raised here regarding the use of EIB in such contexts.

Meetings are obviously an extremely important part of workplace interaction, both in terms of individual advancement and organisational achievement. There can be considerable scope in meetings not only for overtly legitimate interactions, such as exchanging information or promoting action, but also for the strategic negotiation of rapport and influence (Rogerson-Revell 1998).

While people may well need to ‘speak the same language’ in such multilingual contexts, they may not necessarily ‘speak the same way’, for instance, because of underlying differences in socio-cultural conventions or differences in linguistic competence. In such meetings, different ways of speaking or interacting can lead one party to believe that the other is either intellectually incompetent or deliberately unco-operative or combative.

The difficulty of getting heard in workplace interactions, such as meetings, can severely frustrate an individual’s or an organisation’s representation. Such frustration can be experienced by any individuals who are less tenacious about standing their own ground, do not speak as ‘powerfully’ or do not begin with a high level of credibility, whether as a result of linguistic, ethnic, status, age or gender differences. Similarly, when decisions are made in groups, not everyone has equal access to the decision-making process: for example those who are linguistically less confident or those who are less comfortable with contention are more likely to comply with the demands of others. What is important is to try and make such communicative events as equitable as possible. As one member of the GCAE puts it:

The XXX is an international organization i.e., everybody interested shall be able to participate under acceptable conditions. All delegates are representing their various organizations/countries and must really feel that everything possible is done to ensure that their ideas will be listened to/commented on at its own merit, even if it is not delivered in flawless English. (GCAE Internal Report, October 2004)

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