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THE TRAINING OF BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS IN ELT MATERIALS: A FOCUS ON EMAIL WRITING

1. Introduction

Nowadays, business organizations are faced with the challenge to operate in a global, informational, and highly networked context, where professionals' communication needs are rapidly changing. Not only is a common working language required which best caters for the needs of increasingly hybrid and dynamic business settings, but there is also the necessity for business professionals to acquire the communicative competence that will enable them to communicate efficiently, effectively, and rapidly.

As for the language, Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta introduced the term 'Business English Lingua Franca' (BELF) in 2005, enriching Johnson and Bartlett's (1999) concept of 'International English for Business Purposes' (IBE) with insights from the ELF school of thought. Even though this was a step forward in the direction of the fluidity characterizing the new business environment, it was soon clear that a more encompassing conceptualization of the language of business was needed. A first attempt was made by redefining the meaning of BELF "emphasiz[ing] the domain of use rather than the type of English" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013, 17). A shift from 'Business English' to the more comprehensive 'Business Lingua Franca' seemed to better cater for the 'super-diversity' (Cogo 2012) of today's business contexts, where English is the main, but not the only component of a 'continuum' of linguistic manifestations (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen 2015).

On the communicative competence side, professionals need to acquire the ability to quickly adjust to the immediacy of the communicative event and to the dynamic nature of intercultural negotiations. This requires a vast array of pragmatic and intercultural/interactional skills. Aspects of ELF communication relating to pragmatic awareness and communicative strategies have mainly been investigated in spoken interactions (e.g. Björkman 2011, 2014). However, less has been done with reference to business contexts (e.g. Pullin 2010; Franceschi 2017), and to business transactions conducted via non-face-to-face media (Lipiäinen, Karjaluoto and Nevalainen 2014) such as emailing (Ren 2018), where the lack of contextual cues may pose a barrier to effective communication (Soucek and Moser 2010). Finally, very few studies (e.g. Lario de Oñate and Vázquez Amador 2013; Vettorel, this issue) have investigated whether Business-English materials for the training of professionals are being redesigned to realistically reflect the nature of a highly networked, 'super-diverse' business context.

The diachronic study presented in this paper intends to contribute to this (still poorly investigated) research area by focussing on (i) the need for a re-conceptualization of 'English' as *the* language of business (the 'E' of BELF); (ii) the need for training materials that can effectively help business professionals develop the "capability" (Widdowson 2003, 173)¹ required to operate in an extremely fluid and context-dependent business

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¹"[T]he ability to exploit the virtual language, and the readiness to adjust to the conventions of actual encodings as and when required." (Widdowson 2003, 173)



scenario. The study consists in the analysis of a set of Business-English writing coursebooks and handbooks published between 2000 and 2016, and focuses on the tasks and guidelines provided for the development of email writing skills. By drawing on studies in the area of BELF (e.g. Gerristen and Nickerson 2009; Björkman 2016; Ehrenreich 2016; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2007, 2013, 2018) and on Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2011) notion of 'Global Communicative Competence' (GCC), the analysis tries to establish (1) whether there has been a move from a static ('Business English') to a fluid ('Business Lingua Franca') representation of the type of language needed in business emailing; (2) whether ELT materials for the training of business professionals do show an increased awareness of the more comprehensive communicative competence required of business professionals by making provisions for the development of pragmatic and interactional skills.

2. The language issue in 'global multilingual business'

Over the last decades the issue of the homogeneity of 'English' has been the subject of wide-ranging discussions which have informed a proliferation of terms and numerous attempts to provide precise definitions. This is also true for the term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), whose very definition is still being debated (Komori-Glatz 2018), and even more so for the acronym BELF, which originally referred to "English used as a 'neutral' and shared communication code" (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta 2005, 403-404), and was later reconceptualised as "English as Business Lingua Franca" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013, 17). On the one hand, the former seems to include a discrete entity, 'Business English' (BE), which can become the lingua franca of ELF interactions in the business domain. Yet, what exactly is meant by 'Business English' is not perfectly clear, if only because 'business' is itself an umbrella term, as is reflected in the gradual diversification of materials for the teaching of 'Business English' into specific areas of business (e.g. English for tourism). On the other hand, 'English as Business Lingua Franca' is more encompassing, diversified and dynamic, and focuses more on the domain of use (business) than it does on the 'type' of English.

The expansion of ELF studies into the domain of business, alongside a "discursive turn in the work of many researchers investigating English in business contexts" (Nickerson 2005, 369), has helped to understand the complex nature of the business world, showing that

the international business community is characterised by a multinational workforce continually moving and communicating across borders, leading to numerous situations in which English is used by first, second and foreign language speakers simultaneously, sometimes in co-existence with one or more other languages. (Nickerson 2005, 376-377)

In this globalized environment, the centrality of 'the language issue' has been highlighted by many (e.g. Piekkari and Titze 2011). Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012, 267) maintain that "[t]he ever-intensifying globalization in all societal sectors requires language issues to be acknowledged and investigated" and that "it is [...] imperative that the role of the language used in [...] [international] communication is acknowledged, problematized and discussed", moving away from a static and monolithic view of (allegedly) highly predictable business communication settings.

Indeed, empirical research has helped to become aware of the "super-diversity" that reflects "the variability, fluidity, and complexity of today's global contexts", and, in particular, of "the multilingual nature of super-diverse communicative events" (Cogo 2012, 289). The 'E' in BELF is therefore just a component (though the dominant one) of the "linguistic masala" (Meierkord 2002) alongside a number of other languages "so deeply intertwined and focused into each other that the level of fluidity renders it difficult to determine any boundaries that may indicate that there are different languages involved" (Makoni and Pennycook 2012, 447). In line with this view, Janssens and Steyaert (2014) have theorized the 'multilingual franca' perspective in international business studies: the use of language(s) is seen as highly context-dependent, variable and dynamic, the specific features of interaction in any particular (business) context being shaped by (and at the same time shaping) the specific demands of the context itself. That the 'identity' of the 'E' of 'BELF' is becoming increasingly difficult to define appears to be confirmed by Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen's (2015) conceptualization of a 'continuum' of the linguistic manifestations of English in international business. This



ranges from “official English” – the English “mostly taken from granted in international management and corporate communication” (typically, ENL) – to “working language BELF” – “intertwined with business knowhow and multicultural competence” (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, and Karhunen 2015, 139). This perspective highlights the fluidity characterizing the business domain. Indeed, thinking of ‘the English of business’ in terms of a discrete linguistic system seems to be at odds with the complexity of global business, which includes both “official English”, that “cannot bend to individual needs”, as well as “working language”, “related to one’s immediate work and expertise” (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, and Karhunen 2015, 140). However, pinning down what “official English” exactly is does not appear to be a straightforward process. As Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen (2015, 143) claim, there is the need for more research into “English”.

3. Communicative competence

Professional communication has experienced dramatic changes due to a combination of globalization, significant advances in communication technologies and the development of new business structures. Since interaction is fundamental for the success of international encounters, it is essential that employees working “in a business context which is no longer national, but rather international and intercultural” (Poppi 2012, 127) acquire the ability and promptness to adjust to the requirements of the context. This “capability” (Widdowson 2003) has been conceptualized by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) as ‘Global Communicative Competence’ (GCC), which includes not only competence in BELF, but also multicultural competence and business knowledge (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011, 257).

As the two scholars claim, competence in BELF should help professionals “to be flexibly competent and to understand that no rigid norm exists in lingua franca communication” (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2007, 56). Indeed, “BELF is the code for conducting business, and, therefore, the point of reference for competence should be the language of a ‘business professional’, not that of a ‘native speaker” (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011, 248). Hence, in the first place, BELF competence “calls for clarity and accuracy of content (rather than linguistic correctness)” (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010, 392). Accordingly, BELF speakers need to comprehend different ‘Englishes’, and show tolerance towards ‘creative’ communication styles and conventions. In practice, they have to deploy accommodation skills (e.g. Cogo 2009), as well as strategic skills, such as the capability to ask for clarifications and confirmations, use more communication channels, paraphrase and provide explanations (Mauranen 2006).

Multicultural competence refers to the ability to interact with representatives of different national, organizational and professional cultures (e.g. Kaur 2011). This implies respect and sensitivity towards different ways of carrying out business by different business community cultures, as well as appreciation of the role of the interlocutor, that is, mutual awareness of the other.

To better conceptualize the notion of business knowledge shared among internationally operating professionals, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2018, 310) apply Wenger’s (1998) notion of community of practice, drawing on its three dimensions of ‘mutual engagement’, ‘shared repertoire’ and ‘joint enterprise’ (2018, 310). ‘Mutual engagement’ can help to develop “dense relationships” (Kalocsai 2013, 13), which are a crucial element of any effective business relationship. Indeed, international business would not be possible without mutual engagement (Holden 2016). For instance, companies could not engage in any business arrangements across the globe, “if they could not rely on being mutually engaged with practitioners with whom they have not had interactions before” (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2018, 317). Accordingly, since communication takes place among interlocutors who have different authority and undertake different roles, the relational orientation and the importance of building rapport are of the utmost importance, and lay the foundations for the construction of a ‘shared repertoire’, which consists of “linguistic routines, ways of talking, stories, jokes, concepts, physical artifacts, instruments and costumes” (Kalocsai 2013, 13). This shared repertoire is necessary in each professional community, because interactions are inevitably affected by the speakers’ expertise, language proficiency, accent and discourse practices of their mother tongues. Finally, the ‘joint enterprise’ of business interactions refers both to “the drive for efficient use of such resources as time and money, and an aspiration for win-win scenarios among business partners” (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010, 381) and also to the achievement of mutual understanding.



4. Training materials for business professionals

In her overview of research focussing on the use of ELF in international business contexts, Nickerson (2005, 370) mentions the “mismatch between the language taught [...] and the language used”. Similarly, analyses of BE materials like that of Flinders (2005) advocate for a closer link between pedagogy and research findings, there being “little evidence that [...] [writers] are using research findings which tell them what international (as opposed to British or American) business people actually do” (Flinders 2005, 174). Referring to the survey of published materials in BE and business communication carried out by Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken (2007), Chan confirms the mismatch and concludes that “with only a handful of exceptions, the materials do not draw on empirical research” (2009, 125). Indeed, almost all teaching materials labelled as ‘Business English’ seem to have traditionally been conceived with learners in mind rather than ‘real business people’ using English in their daily life at work. This approach appears to lack the “principled frame of authenticity” (Trabelsi 2010, 119), which would be necessary to establish a connection with reality. In fact, materials for English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) courses are supposed to be targeted also, if not primarily, to job-experienced learners (Ellis and Johnson 1994), and therefore, to business professionals. Unlike pre-experienced learners, professionals seeking for specific training in ESBP already have theoretical knowledge of the subject matter (the ‘business competence’ of the GCC model), and also some practical experience in using English as a foreign language (EFL) in business life. What they need to gain (or consolidate) is the skills that are necessary to become “operationally effective” (Ellis and Johnson 1994, 35), and, specifically, to be able to communicate internationally in the new business arena (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011). As suggested by the GCC model, such skills should include accommodation skills and the ability “to adapt to the forms and norms of the language required in each business situation” (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011, 259). As Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta remark, this ability to ‘accommodate’ the language may imply, on the one hand, the use of “very basic English with plenty of ‘language errors’”; on the other hand, conformity to the rules of ‘standard English’ depending on the “discourse competences of the particular communicators in other languages”. In fact, it may sometimes happen that a “grammatically and lexically ‘correct message doesn’t necessarily do the job, but a message with many mistakes may do so” (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2007, 56).

In this context, it appears of the utmost importance for any materials aimed at training business professionals to differentiate themselves from the traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) paradigm, so as to have “books which look more like business books and less like EFL books” (Flinders 2005, 175). As Chan points out, BE teachers have often had to “rely on [BE]materials which contain inauthentic or inappropriate language and skills”, with BE researchers having “limited ways to channel their findings to pedagogical practice”, and the findings being “rarely brought together for easy access by business English practitioners” (2009, 126).

In his review of new Business-English publications between 2008 and early 2011, Reed (2011, 326) claims to have noticed “some significant developments” in BE printed materials compared to his previous (2007) survey review, amongst which a growing tendency for BE publications to address “an international audience, which embraces non-native speakers as equals”. Still, when referring to ‘Case studies in Business English courses’, the author remarks that the publications “have been extensively piloted and reviewed by practitioners”, at the same time maintaining that when it comes to “input material in ELT cases [...] a compromise has to be made between a reflection of the real business world and the design of materials for practical purposes” (Reed 2011, 339). This may be at odds with the author’s assumption that the ultimate recipients of the publications’ input, that is, “the learners” are not only “young adults looking forward to working in business or the profession” but also “mature people who know exactly why and where they need to use English in their careers” (Reed 2011, 327). If these “mature people” are to be thought of as job-experienced professionals, then training materials should cater for “the complex linguistic environment in which [...] [professionals] need to get their job done” (Ehrenreich 2010, 426) and take into account the fact that the dominance of English may in reality imply “a relative position in the linguistic repertoires of individuals and organizations” (Ehrenreich 2010, 409). As Ilie, Nickerson and Planken (2019, 14) maintain,

business people should learn how to use the language to carry out their work objectives, often in tandem with their own first language, rather than spending time working towards the



pronunciation, grammar, or other language features that are specifically associated with one of the first language English speaking cultures.

Instead, what emerges from Reed's (2011) review is that BE materials are conceived (and evaluated) with the traditional 'EFL course' in mind. As Reed highlights, the publications examined in his review are "packed" with exercises ranging "from gap-fills to match-the-phrases, from multiple choice to true/false, from repeat-after-me to correcting mistakes – which represent a large part of the ELT industry, in Business English as elsewhere" (2011, 326).

Promotional materials for BE courses have been proliferating over the last decades, with publishers "accentuat[ing] the relevance of their materials to the 'real world' of business and the 'authenticity' of the input and activities they provide" (Evans 2013, 281). Moreover, besides traditional coursebooks and handbooks, there has been an ever-expanding array of BE publications focussing on what St. John (1996) has classified as 'Business Communication Skills' relating to specific business interactions, such as telephoning, negotiating, socializing, emailing, or report writing. Here, the lack of credibility and authenticity is further emphasized by the fact that language is often presented in the form of short or incomplete utterances, without a context which could help users select the most appropriate solutions for a given situation, and use them as part of a larger discourse (Chan 2009). With reference to email writing, Evans (2013) points out that "emails are not the one-off, memo style messages that tend to appear as models or exercises in textbooks, but rather are chains of pithy, purposeful messages that connect and expedite flows of business activities" (Evans 2013, 288). If, on the one hand, materials focussing on specific business communication skills are supposed to be designed to provide professionals with specialized competence in the relevant business task, on the other hand they tend to neglect the interrelation amongst business activities, and the fluidity and unpredictability of the "what-why-how-and-when" which characterize business and BELF communication in the real-world. It is the ability to cope with the "super-diversity" of global communication that business professionals are more likely to need training in. And if professionals are to be trained to operate in a "super-diverse" context, it seems that pragmatic and interactional skills would be more useful than merely de-contextualized linguistic instruction.

5. The study: scope and aim

The present study analyzes the tasks and guidelines provided for the development of business writing, with a focus on email writing skills, emailing being a popular means of communication in the business world, "used widely as a convenient measure to communicate beyond space limitation in intercultural communication" (Ren 2018, 969). As shown by Tables 1 and 2 below, the analysis explores five handbooks for self-study (including a handbook for BE teachers) and four BE email writing coursebooks.

Most texts were written by English native speakers, the authors being either ELT professionals (coursebooks) or business consultants (handbooks). The texts were chosen based on either the specificity of the business-writing training provided (coursebooks) and/or on the kind of approach the title seemed to suggest, for example by the inclusion of terms like 'global' or 'effective' (handbooks). The choice of the time span (2000 to 2016) is linked to the desire to focus on the changes in the business environment brought about by the third wave of globalization (2000-onwards) (Friedman 2005), with the widespread diffusion of technological innovations further reducing displacement times and increasing the availability of new means of communication.

The aim of this diachronic study was two-fold: firstly, to detect any (possible) changes over the last two decades in the way in which business English is presented; secondly, to establish whether or not, and to what extent, the analyzed training materials show awareness of the kind of communicative competence required of professionals in today's business arena by making provisions for the development of relevant pragmatic and intercultural/interactional skills.

5.1 Handbooks

The analyzed handbooks include one text designed for BE teachers (*Teach Business English*) and four texts targeted to business professionals aiming at improving their writing skills (*Writing that works. How to Communicate Effectively in Business; Improve your Global Business English. The Essential Toolkit for Writing and Communicating across Borders; A Practical Guide to English Writing. Writing in English for Non-Native Speakers; How to Write Effective Business English. Excel at E-mail, Social Media and All Professional*



Communications). The teacher-targeted handbook was selected to include an authoritative guide published at the turn of the 21st century. Our aim was to see how BE was presented, and if it reflected the radical changes in the business arena following globalization. The section devoted to how to teach email writing was also analyzed. The other four books, mainly guides for self-study, were selected based on the high expectations raised by their titles. These included expressions like ‘communicate effectively’, ‘communicating across borders’, ‘global business English’, all suggesting a certain degree of awareness of the different components in the GCC model, and the pragmatic and intercultural skills that are necessary to operate globally.

What emerges from the analysis of all texts is that BE is still presented as a discrete entity, British and American English still representing the target model for business professionals. In *Teach Business English* (Donna 2000), the author insists on the concepts of ‘appropriateness’ and ‘correctness’ for the language of business to produce effective communication. These concepts are constantly associated with the use of ‘appropriate’ and ‘correct’ English, so that teachers are encouraged to “coax students away from intonation patterns which they use in their own language towards patterns that sound more typically English” since “conspicuously non-English intonation patterns can be confusing, distracting or insulting to people from other places” (98). Also in *Writing that works* (Roman and Raphaelson 2000), when insisting on the notion of ‘clarity’ as a means to achieve effective communication, the authors advise professionals to “stick to standard English usage and to observe the conventions of spelling and punctuation” as “new usage offends many ears; established usage offends nobody” (4). The authors of *Improve your Global Business English* (Talbot and Bhattacharjee 2012) are aware that “the number of native English speakers using English worldwide is eclipsed by the number of non-native speakers using it” (xi), and also of the importance of enabling readers to understand the message they receive both on a linguistic and cultural level. The authors of the handbook also seem to be aware that “global business English is a mixture of global and local varieties (glocal)” (21). Unfortunately, however, the handbook appears to be oblivious to the differences between the World Englishes and ELF paradigm, and seems to fall back on the traditions of British or US orientation, subscribing to the idea that it is the native speakers, after all, who are the ‘custodians’ of the language. As the authors claim, barriers to understanding often occur “because non-native speakers use English in unconventional ways” (20). *A Practical Guide to Business Writing* (Al Maskari 2013) sounds quite promising from the very subtitle (*Writing in English for Non-Native Speakers*), in that it specifically addresses non-native speakers, creating expectations as to the multilingual nature of global business. However, the English of business is presented as a collection of ‘useful’ de-contextualized phrases that writers can exploit to make their writing effective. The ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’, and ‘when’ are not referred to any specific context, and no mention is made of the multilingual and multicultural nature of global business and BELF, and the type of competence it may require. Unlike the other handbooks, *How to Write Effective Business English* (Talbot 2016) appears to be concerned with the changes that have occurred in business communication. The language issue is tackled in that English is said to be “certainly no longer the preserve of the nation that gives the language its name [...] [acting instead] as a bridge across borders and cultures” (59-60). At the same time, however, it is claimed that for business professionals to get the right messages out (and receive the right answers) the use of “some norms of commonly accepted ‘standard’ English” (60) seems to be particularly helpful, whereby ‘standard English’ is defined as “the English routinely described in mainstream English dictionaries and grammar books”. More than that, it is claimed that “quirky use of English can slow down business results simply because it attempts to redefine a standard meaning – and confuses the wider, global audience” (64).

As for practical advice concerning the writing of business e-mails, all the books devote just few pages to the topic. Tips and examples are very general and de-contextualized, basically limited to providing lists of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ solutions. In *Writing that Works* (Roman and Raphaelson 2000) professionals are encouraged to prefer short words to long ones; the active to the passive; precise to vague adjectives; ‘down-to-earth’ English to buzzwords. The type of advice provided consists in a set of general tips like “get to the essence”, “keep it short and sweet”, “don’t use abbreviations”, “avoid e-mail tag”, “start things on the right foot”, or “make it easy to read”. In *Improve your Global English* (Talbot and Bhattacharjee 2012), the authors state that “defining style for business e-mail is quite a tricky area” (81) as emails are a hybrid genre. Interestingly, some reflection on pragmatic issues is present in the handbook: readers are encouraged to think about pragmatic appropriateness, for example because some forms (like ‘Why haven’t you done what I asked you yesterday’, 82) may appear too direct or even unfriendly to certain cultures. Professionals are also advised to check tone,



politeness, use the 'right' vocabulary, and to refrain from using English idioms, nuances or irony that are not appropriate for emails and could be misunderstood by the addressees. A general and de-contextualized four-step check-list to use in email writing is also provided: (1) be correct for purpose; (2) be clear and comprehensible; (3) make the right impact; (4) focus on your readers (p. 115). In *A Practical Guide to Business Writing* (Al Maskari 2013), the chapter devoted to business emailing begins with a list of "e-mail techniques that are aimed at helping [...] [professionals] communicate more effectively in the workplace" (57). Five of the twelve tips provided are technical instructions concerning the use of the 'cc button, or the 'out-of-office' message. The remaining tips do contain some suggestions of a more pragmatic nature (like 'keep-your-message-short' or 'use-courteous-language'). A look at what these tips specifically suggest doing shows that the book simply provides de-contextualized examples of 'original' vs 'revised' samples. Also *How to Write Effective Business English* (Talbot 2016) devotes few pages to email writing. In particular, the handbook warns against multi-lingual threads as "they can lead to confusion" (86) and could cause "alienation" (88) for some of the participants in the thread. English is proposed as the most helpful solution – for example by using it to summarize the main facts of the message thread – and functions as a bridge between different languages. Again, there are no contextualized examples of e-mail exchanges concretely highlighting the kind of problems that might come up. It must be said that the author of this handbook acknowledges that what effective writers need to have today is the ability to "grab attention for the right reason, influence, persuade, reflect brand and values and enhance reputation [...], sell messages, values, products and services, and create a following and brand reputation based on trust" (xii). These are said to be key communicative skills, for the achievement of which one may even need to "unlearn some things [...] learnt at school" (xiii) and to adopt "a whole new mind-set and integrated approach to work" (2). Talbot also remarks that "[b]usiness writing is in a state of flux" and, that "business writing in English is becoming increasingly diverse in style" (7). In this context, "[s]ome companies still use stilted, old-fashioned English [...] [although] we live in a world where customers increasingly expect to feel the personal touch" (14). In *Teach Business English* (Donna 2000) e-mails are dealt with in the same section as faxes and memos. Only a couple of de-contextualized samples are provided and the only activity proposed is for students to spot the hidden message in "seeming gobbledygook" (237).

5.2 Coursebooks

The analyzed coursebooks were *English for Emails* (Chapman 2007); *Email English* (Emmerson 2004, 2013); *Writing* (Brieger 2011) and *Writing for Impact* (Banks 2012). The former two were analyzed in their entirety, while in the other two, only those sections dealing with email writing were considered, due to the more general and comprehensive character of the coursebooks.

As said, business professionals need to know "what, why, how and when to communicate" (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013, 17). In the first place, business professionals must know 'what' is being communicated. It is in fact necessary to develop a 'shared repertoire', which consists of technical vocabulary and subject-specific genres, but also an increased number of pragmatic strategies, in order to accommodate with different 'Englishes' and styles and conventions that may sound unusual. The reason 'why' business interactants decide to communicate is influenced also by their 'joint enterprise', namely the drive for efficient use of time and money, mutual understanding and the awareness of the need to create rapport. The way people communicate ('how') is connected with the ability to interact with representatives of different professional cultures. It implies respect and sensitivity towards different ways of doing things. Finally the timing of the communicative act ('when') refers once again to the concepts of 'shared repertoire', 'mutual orientation' and 'joint enterprise'. Drawing on these different aspects four major criteria were developed for our analysis, which should be met to help learners develop specific workplace communication skills: (1) knowledge of technical vocabulary; (2) knowledge of subject-specific genres; (3) accommodating skills; (4) creating-rapport skills.

Most of the analyzed coursebooks stress the need for clarity and accuracy, as well as knowledge of business-specific vocabulary, but not much attention is devoted to the ability to connect on the relational level and to accommodate to one's interlocutors. *English for Emails* (Chapman 2007) provides quite a few practical activities which might contribute to increasing the learner's knowledge of technical vocabulary and subject-specific genres. In general, the examples provided tend to stimulate the readers' awareness of the situated nature of business exchanges and the need to create rapport, as in: "Did you have trouble answering number



9? That's because Julia's subject lines don't always give enough information about the contents of her mails. Look at the following excerpts from emails and write appropriate subject lines" (Chapman 2007, 8). The model answers are endowed with a relatively authentic quality, as shown by the following email example (Chapman 2007, 57)

Example 1

Hi John
Hope you had a good holiday!
To keep you updated: Still nothing from Izumi about the Appleton account, but the Gantor Brooks account has finally been approved. If you can fit it in, I suggest a meeting with the two of us and Paul and Izumi next week. How about Thursday at 9.00? Let me know.

However, in the 'fill-in exercises' section learners are requested to use only the words that have been suggested (in the case in point, only the ones which had been used for a previous activity). No attention is devoted to (multi)cultural competence and there is a certain insistence on formal correctness.

In addition to knowledge of technical vocabulary and subject-specific genres, *Writing* (Brieger 2011) also provides 'cultural notes', i.e. boxes with information which aims to sensitise readers towards multicultural competence and the need to accommodate to the communicative situation at hand: "It is important, therefore, to put your writing into the cultural context of your readers so that you can choose the appropriate technical level. Too complex and your writing may remain unread because it is too difficult; too simple and your writing may be ignored because it is not demanding enough" (Brieger 2011, 11). Moreover, the coursebook devotes one entire section to 'tone', which is not about right and wrong language, but about choosing the most appropriate way of expressing oneself. This emphasis on the concept of appropriateness is in line with Philipps's (2000, 212) definition of communicative competence as "a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to [...] generate adaptive communication performances". In other words there is a certain focus on flexibility and adaptation rather than on fixed norms and patterns. Emails are only dealt with from page 68 to page 71, and the author simply provides emailing tips and basically tries to get the readers to reflect and evaluate their own writing, without actually involving them in any practical activities.

In *Writing for Impact* (Banks 2012) the author states that written business communication is about more than just good language, in that, to be effective, business professionals will need to write clearly and concisely, and make their message relevant to the people who read it. The concept of 'relevance' is an interesting one, in that it seems to acknowledge the situated nature of business exchanges and the need for adaptation and accommodation. However, the author does not elaborate on this concept and limits himself to suggesting that adherence to a clear and polite style, not very formal or very informal (Banks 2012, 27) can be a sort of panacea for all evils. In other words, even though readers are told that it is important to make sure that the style is culturally appropriate, no activities are provided which could raise the readers' awareness of the influence of the relationship between sender and receiver, the subject, the local and the company's culture, not to mention variations across national and corporate cultures. Indeed, there is a certain insistence on patterns and regularity, clearly observable in the model answers provided for in the 'Extended reading tasks' section, which clearly show their artificial and stereotypical character. Only pages 48 to 51 are devoted to emails: therefore the information provided is so limited that it cannot be said to actually contribute to increasing the learner's knowledge of email writing.

In the second edition of *Email English* (Emmerson 2013), the author remarks the importance of "getting the tone right" (4) and informs us that the book is based on hundreds of real examples, dealing systematically with the key language for emails and social media. Both editions (2004, 2013) include a phrase bank of useful expressions arranged into sections: basics, arrangements, writing styles, commercial, complaints and apologies, personal reports. Communicative competence is treated as a discrete entity that can be mastered once it has been broken into 'digestible' chunks. To make this happen the author provides precise instructions on dos and don'ts.

Findings from our analysis have hence shown that the four criteria which had been singled out do not appear to have consistently informed the design of all the coursebooks examined, as summarized in Table 1 below:



	Knowledge of technical vocabulary	Knowledge of subject-specific genres	Accommodation skills	Creating-rapport skills
<i>English for Emails</i> (Chapman 2007)	√	√		√
<i>Writing</i> (Brieger 2011)			√	√
<i>Writing for Impact</i> (Banks 2012)				√
<i>Email English</i> (Emmerson 2004, 2013)	√	√		

Table 1: Criteria for the analysis of the coursebooks

6. Conclusions

Through this diachronic study we wanted to find out whether there have been any substantial changes over the last two decades in the development of business email-writing training materials in two directions: towards a re-conceptualization of the language of business and towards an increased awareness of the pragmatic and intercultural/interpersonal skills which are part of ‘Global Communicative Competence’ in BELF.

On the basis of the evidence we have gathered, which is arguably too limited to draw any general conclusions, it is possible to state that there have been some changes in the direction of recognizing the multilingual and multicultural nature of business communication, but the linguistic input provided is still oriented towards nativeness and prescriptivism. In fact, guidelines and tasks are still mainly developed in the ‘Business English’ rather than ‘BELF Communication’ perspective, with the focus still largely on dos and don’ts, and on ‘static’ and often obsolete phraseology.

Since the aim of BE courses should be that of fulfilling work-related needs, and since such work-related needs greatly vary depending on the business sector, it seems impossible to think of one-size-fits-all materials. The business world is becoming increasingly dynamic, fluid, and unpredictable. As a result, also the linguistic needs of business professionals are in a flux: English still represents the working language, but not the only one in BELF multilingual and multicultural interactions. Instead, especially at the micro-level of individual interaction, not only does English seem to have lost the ‘discrete features’ of what has long been simplistically conceptualized as ‘Business English’, but it is also increasingly sharing its communicative function with other languages, namely those of the interactants in the business communication event using BELF to get the job done.

A previous study (Poppi 2015) has ascertained that it is not possible to decide how to draft an email simply by referring to structural characteristics and style language alone. The hybrid nature of the e-mail genre makes it difficult to provide specific ‘rules’ for the writer’s behaviour. It is therefore all too logical to ask ourselves whether ELT materials for business-email writing can effectively train business professionals. All the texts analyzed are still EFL biased, with accuracy considered to be the norm, as well as allegiance to and achievement of the native speaker standards. However, nowadays it is not any longer possible to fall back on the traditions of British or US orientation (Mauranen 2015, 48), as the interlocutors our learners will meet are no longer confined to any nationality or locality. A lot of work is still needed to develop BELF-oriented ELT materials that are more appropriate for the ‘super-diversity’ of global business, fostering for instance the students’ capability to make adept use of interactional practices to both pre-empt and resolve problems of understanding (e.g. Cogo and Pitzl 2016), or how to use various ‘explicitness strategies’ (Mauranen 2006) to enhance the clarity of utterances and promote the comprehensibility of their texts. In other words, it is necessary to develop ELT materials that can help teachers to train business professionals operating in BELF contexts, rather than ‘students of Business English’.

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analysis of ELF accommodation strategies in unequal migration contexts, digital-media virtual environments, and multicultural ELF classrooms”.

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Appendix 1: Selected handbooks

Title	Year	Author(s)	Publishing House
<i>Teach Business English</i>	2000	Sylvie Donna	Cambridge University Press
<i>Writing That Works. How to Communicate Effectively in English</i>	2000	Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson	Harper Collins
<i>Improve your Global Business English</i>	2012	Fiona Talbot and Sudakshina Bhattacharjee	Kogan Page Limited
<i>A Practical Guide to Business Writing. Writing in English for Non-Native Speakers.</i>	2013	Kahled Mohamed Al Maskari	Wiley
<i>How to Write Effective Business English: Excel at E-mail, Social Media and All your Professional Communications</i>	2016	Fiona Talbot	Kogan Page Limited

Appendix 2: Selected coursebooks



Title	Year	Author(s)	Publishing House
<i>Email English</i>	2004, 2013	Paul Emmerson	Macmillan
<i>English for Emails</i>	2007	Rebecca Chapman	Oxford University Press
<i>Writing</i>	2011	Nick Brieger	Harper Collins
<i>Writing for Impact</i>	2012	Tim Banks	Cambridge University Press