BELF in the Context of Globalization in Japan:
A Challenge from Expanding Circle

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This paper addresses the issues of English spoken as a lingua franca in business contexts and offers some insights on teaching practices for future corporate training programs in a globalizing Japan. Firstly, how English is used for international communication will be briefly outlined. Secondly, some controversies over English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) will be reviewed. Thirdly, the issues of business English as a lingua franca (BELF) will be addressed, followed by its application to Asian business discourse and its teaching practice. This paper will conclude with a discussion of future possibilities in BELF-focused corporate training programs.

本稿は、日本のグローバル化の文脈において、ビジネスにおけるリンガフランカとしての英語の問題を扱い、これからの企業研修に対する洞察を示唆していく。まず、国際コミュニケーションにおいて英語がどう使われているかについて概略をまとめる。次に、共通語としての英語(ELF)をめぐる論争をまとめる。続いて、ビジネスにおける共通語としての英語(BELF)の議論に触れ、アジアにおける応用、そしてその教育実践について論じる。結論として、これからの BELF に焦点を当てた企業研修の探求可能性について言及する。

[1] Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. [2] As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. [3] They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. [4] Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." [5] But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. [6] The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. [7] Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." [8] So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. [9] That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

(Quoted from "The Tower of Babel", Genesis 11: 1-9)

1 Introduction

The above episode is a quote from the biblical Book of Genesis. This episode can also be interpreted as an event where the fundamental form of intercultural business communication occurred among people who spoke different languages. The impossibility of mutual communication resulted from the loss of their lingua franca, leading their construction of a stairway to heaven to eventual failure. This episode also suggests that, for effective global transaction, a lingua franca plays a significant role in a business discourse community.

In today's world, English has been regarded as the *de facto* lingua franca in the majority of global business discourse (e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken, 2007; Du-Babcock, 2013; Handford, 2010). Even in Japan, which once was believed by some to be a relatively homogeneous country, an increasing number of companies are eager to maintain business infrastructures that use English as a lingua franca. This tendency results primarily from an increasing need to catch up with global competition.

To do so, companies are placing greater importance on corporate management policies that help employees develop their English proficiency. A nationwide survey by Recruit, a Japanese online information service provider, revealed that over 70% of Japanese companies are eager to introduce in-house English training programs as a part of their globalization strategies as of 2012. However, it has been also reported that the introduction of in-house English training programs could lead trainees to develop a negative attitude toward and actually decrease their motivation for their English learning (Sato, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Moreover, the widespread of English as the *de facto* lingua franca makes it difficult for policy makers to develop their policies regarding what variety of English should be taught, how it should be studied in their in-house English training programs, and how their trainees' skill development should be assessed.

This paper addresses the issues of English spoken as a lingua franca in business contexts and offers some insights on teaching practices for the future corporate training programs in a globalizing Japan. To begin, in the following section, I will briefly outline the issues related to English used for international communication. Due to page limitations, I will draw on only some of the literature relevant to the following discussion on how English could help mediate international business communication. Next, some critiques of ELF will be presented. Finally, the issues in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) will be addressed, followed by a section on BELF's application to Asian business discourse and its teaching practice. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the feasibility of BELF-focused corporate training programs.

2 English as a lingua franca (ELF)

Along with an increase in the number of speakers of English as a second language (L2 English)[1],

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[1] As the number of L2 English speakers increases, applied linguists are advised to give up the term "non-native speakers" and use "L2 speakers" in its stead (McKay, 2002). In light of this situation, I will consistently use "L1 speakers" and "L2 speakers" in this paper to refer to native (or, first language) speakers and non-native (or, second language) speakers, respectively.

the apparent normalization of L2 English communication is also currently taking place. The increase in the L2-English-speaking population has the potential to not only give L2 speakers confidence in speaking English, but also motivate applied linguists to reassess the positionality of speakers of any L2. The current number of L2 speakers of English is estimated to be three to five times as many as that of native speakers (Crystal, 2003). Graddol (1997; 2006; 2010) also suggested that L2-L2 English communication is more common than L1-L2 communication.

Conventionally, L2 speakers are seen as deficient in linguistic competence. However, they are not necessarily defective in communicative competence per se (Firth & Wagner, 1997). In light of this, Jenkins, Cogo, and Dewey (2011) advocated that "non-native speakers […] and all English varieties, native or non-native, are accepted in their own right rather than evaluated against a NSE [Native Speaker English] benchmark" (pp. 283-284). Jenkins (2007) also explained that ELF was traditionally used to describe the English-mediated interaction between/among L2 speakers, while interactions NSs are involved are referred to as *English as an international language* (EIL). The idea of EIL was primarily presented as challenge to L1-L2 dichotomy of the English language. It was also considered as countermeasure against English imperialism (Phillipson, 1992).

World Englishes (WE), which was coined by an Indian linguist, Braj B. Kachru, is another concept similar to ELF and EIL. While ELF and EIL label different categories of English-mediated interactions, WE generally refers to the epistemology of accepting a large variety of the English language spoken all over the world. The tradition of this research field began as a post-colonial movement to legitimatize the use of English by L2 speakers. Kachru (1983) recommended that there ideally be no hierarchical social strata in English-speaking discourse on the basis of L1-L2 distinction. He also postulated three different layers of English: 1) inner-circle (i.e., L1 English speaking countries, such as the US, the UK, and Canada), 2) outer-circle (i.e., L2 English speaking countries, such as India, the Philippines, and Singapore), and 3) expanding circle (i.e., countries where English is learned as a foreign language, such as Japan, Korea, and China).

This argument about WE resulted in the academic controversy between Quirk and Kachru in 1990's. While Kachru defined non-native varieties of English(es) as *different* from native ones, Quirk identified non-native ones as *deficit*. Speakers of English as a native language (ENL) are still generally positioned at the top of the hierarchy, followed by speakers of English as a second language (ESL) in the middle, and then those of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the bottom. Quirk rationalized his argument by pointing out that L2 English(es) could not be valid as teaching models. It has been about three decades since this controversy emerged; however, it does not seem to end. Rather, the epistemological discrepancy between Kachruvian and Quirkian researchers is becoming deeper along with the rapidly burgeoning globalization.

3 Critiques against the ELF epistemology

The controversy over the acceptability of the range of the English language led to some critiques against the EFL epistemology. O'Regan (2014) wrote that the critiques could be categorized into the following four types: 1) hypostantization; 2) lingua franca fetishism and

idealist rationalism; 3) the potential weakness of globalization theory as its rationale; and 4) the poverty of ELF philosophy (i.e., English as a Lingua Frankesteinia). Moreover, some researchers have suggested that the major factor among these four should be the first one, particularly in the context of Japan.

Some researchers have explained that people would want to choose English as a common language due to its potential neutrality (Peters, 2004). Others critically responded to this, stating that the legitimacy of ELF was derived from the fact that English was "in the right place at the right time" (Crystal, 1997, p. 110), not from its neutrality. Phillipson (1992) even questioned the eligibility of using neutral English for mutual L2 communication. Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) acknowledged that users of one particular language, L1 or L2 speakers regardless, could not be perfectly free from cultural ideology. By the same token, Phillipson (2009) argued that the philosophy of ELF might have been more or less created intentionally. He sarcastically called this "linguistic homunculus" as *English as a lingua frankesteinia*, named after *Frankenstein*, the novel by Mary Shelley (1818).

The apparent neutrality of using English, whether it truly is neutral or not, has also been considered to be one of the major reasons for a tremendous number of learners to choose to learn the language. However, some researchers as well as some educators question he legitimacy of teaching neutral English. In this light, Gally (2012) summarizes:

> [W]ith the idealistic arguments in favor of World Englishes approaches not convincing to many educators, administrators, and learners, and with the pedagogical feasibility and practical benefits of such approaches not yet known, the uncertainty about what types of English should be taught in the second-language classroom might last equally as long. (pp. 50-51)

In contexts where English is spoken as a lingua franca, the communicators are expected to deal with Englishes other than the L1-standard. Also, the ability to comprehend the English language spoken among non-native speakers is becoming as significant contributor to successful communication. Furthermore, this L2-English gradually shifts from the peripheral to the central of the actuality of English in today's world (e.g., Bolton & Davis, 2005; Graddol, 2006, 2009). Today, an increasing number of applied linguists are interested in investigating what is happening as well as what is going to happen in physical ELF discourse, including both business and academic settings. Who owns English still remains a controversial topic in the field of ELF (Seidlhofer, 2009).

4 Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)

Business English as a lingua franca, or BELF, is a practical application of the idea of ELF to intercultural business discourse studies. This research tradition grew out of the globalization movement in Finland. People sometimes misidentify BELF as a mere practical application of ELF to business discourse, maybe because of the shared morpheme (i.e., B[usiness]+ELF). However, BELF and ELF were originally had different academic roots. This simplified

explanation, though it helps draw a general picture of the discipline of BELF, requires careful consideration. Providing a clear distinction between BELF and ELF, however, is outside the scope of this paper (see Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kanraanranta (2005)), for more information), so this paper focuses only on providing a general outline of the discussion of BELF. According to a definition by Louhiala-Salminen *et al*.:

> BELF refers to English used as a neutral and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not non-native speakers or learners. (pp. 403-404)

While Seidlhofer (2009) recommended that L2 English speakers also raise awareness of the ownership of English as well as L1 counterparts, Louhiala-Saliminen et al. (2005) asserted that the L1-L2 distinction should be abandoned for the sake of neutralizing English. Handford (2010) supported their argument by stating:

> [T]he most important issue in business is not language ability, but the experience and ability to dynamically manoeuvre within the communities of practice which business people inhabit. (p. 145).

Hence, L1-L2 distinction in business discourse does not matter as much as it does in field of second language studies.

The notion of BELF is theoretically well established in intercultural business discourse. Regarding the teachability of this communication code in a corporate training and consulting program, however, there is an endless debate over its feasibility and validity. In light of this controversy, Jean-Paul Nerriere, a former vice-president of IBM, France, proposed the idea of Globish, as is illustrated below.

Globish, or Global English, is a concept of how to utilize BELF in business settings. Based on the theoretical framework of BELF, Nerriere and Hon (2009) proposed concrete guidelines for putting it into practice. In order to effectively utilize this simplified English, users of Globish are expected to consult the following grammar:

1. Communicate with a vocabulary of 1,500 words, which were selected based on VOA frequently-used vocabulary corpus
2. Limit the length of one sentence to less than 15 words
3. Place more importance on accent than on pronunciation and intonation

Superficially, this proposed grammar looks somewhat feasible in terms of teachability and learnability. However, the issue of cultural ideology brought in into Globish-speaking discourse still remains to be fully addressed. In other words, though it can potentially function as an

apparatus for smooth global business collaboration, Globish cannot be a perfectly neutral and monolithic code of communication in intercultural business discourse. Furthermore, a general consensus about how to teach Globish has not been achieved among practitioners. As was summarized in Gally's (2012) quote above, it is difficult to achieve a general consensus among researchers and educators about the feasibility, validity, and practicality of teaching L2 English. Takamori (2011) also recommended that research on Globish as a tool for BELF discourse be carefully conducted to explore its nature and potential in the new business communication discipline.

Hence, regarding the introduction of Globish to corporate L2 training courses, trainers and curriculum developers, particularly in Japan, might need to carefully consider pedagogical contents and approaches. There is a burgeoning interest in studies of Globish as well as BELF both in academia and business. This awareness-raising occurs in not only Western but also Eastern business contexts, particularly in Asia. Further studies have been called for in this regard to investigate how Globish is employed by who in what type of business discourse to what extent for what purposes. In the following section, I will briefly introduce a few recent studies on Globish and/or BELF in the Asian context.

5 BELF in the Asian context: Some challenges

BELF in the Asian context, which belongs to the expanding circle of WE, is specially referred to as English language for Asian business, or ELAB. This challenging research field focuses its main attention on Asian Englishes (i.e., how differently English varieties are recognized in the Asian context) and Asian competence (i.e., what Asian-specific competence is required for effective business communication in Asian business discourse). Today, an increasing number of business and second language researchers with various backgrounds are interested in conducting research on this research agenda. In this paper, I will mention a few representative studies on ELAB: 1) Du-Babcock and Tanaka (2010, 2013), 2) Fujio (2010), and 3) Sato (2013).

A conversation analysis study by Bertha Du-Babcock and Hiromasa Tanaka (2013) is one of the pioneering studies in this research field. This study was based on their initial analysis conducted in 2010. They investigated the different linguistic behaviors by business professionals from Hong Kong and Japan in a video-conference, in which English is used as the medium of communication. For data collection, voluntary participants from Hong Kong and Japan were asked to do a role-play conversation and make an ethical decision on their imaginary company's product through global collaboration. Regarding the validity of using this simulated conversational data for discourse analysis, the readers stated that "[t]he experiential exercise ... provided the setting for the development of realistic business decision-making dialogs" (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2010, p. 5).

The result of their quantitative and qualitative analysis suggested that the Hong Kong Chinese participants turned out to be assertive when stating their opinions, while Japanese were more reactive. This study concludes with commentary on the further potential of this research topic.

Fujio's (2010) study, by the same token, focused on English-speaking authentic business

discourse in a foreign-affiliated company in Japan. She addressed the issues of communication strategies employed by two Japanese business professionals when communicating with their American business counterpart. Conventional studies defined a communication strategy as an apparatus to overcome linguistic hardship by L2 speakers. Fujio developed the idea of communication strategies to include some linguistic expressions that help enhance effective information delivery. As a result of her study, she identified that the high contextuality of the Japanese language can potentially function as a communication strategy, particularly in terms of floor-holding or retrieving in business context. She concluded her research by suggesting that future studies on intercultural business discourse should focus on how mutual L2 English speaking business is conducted. She also suggested that the research context should be not only foreign-affiliated companies, but also ordinary companies in the Asian context, in which English-speaking business discourse is gradually emerging as a wash-back effect of globalization.

Responding to that suggestion, Sato (2013) conducted a critical discourse analysis on Rakuten's *Englishnization*[2] policy. Rakuten, the largest online retailer in Japan, decided to make English its in-house official language starting July 1st, 2012, after a two-year moratorium period maintaining their intra-organizational linguistic infrastructure. On June 18th, 2012, TV Tokyo broadcasted a TV program entitled *Waarudo bijinesu sateraito, "Kanzen" eigoka iyoiyo* [*World Business Satellite, "Complete" Englishnization at last*] to briefly describe the status quo of Englishnization. There, Tetsuya Iida, a 39-year-old Japanese office worker of Rakuten, represents a successful L2 learner through this Englishnization project. Iida's achievements are showcased in three video clip segments: 1) reflection on his self-study, 2) comments on his TOEIC score growth, and 3) a scene of about 10 seconds showing his L2 business interaction with his Taiwanese counterparts. Sato's study questioned the validity of this oversimplified media representation and conducted a critical reassessment of Iida's performance. The reassessment of his self-study and TOEIC scores did not suggest much. However, the analysis of his English-mediated business communication with Taiwanese businesspersons indicated that even L2 learners who succeeded in Rakuten's Englishnization project may not be able to function in L2 business discourse where participants have low familiarity with Japanese business communication norms. For future studies, a needs analysis on globalization through Englishnization through an organizational ethnographic approach is highly recommended. Furthermore, future curriculum development should also focus its pedagogical attention on helping trainees better understand how to deal with business discourse in L2 English, not just on L1-oriented skills.

The quote about "the Tower of Babel" at the beginning of this paper depicts an example of global business communication in ancient times, in which the participants had difficulty interacting due to the loss of their lingua franca. The impossibility of mutual communication as a result of language confusion led the construction of the stairway to heaven to failure. From a

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[2] The word Englishnization, though Englishization is a more common term, is consistently employed in this paper to refer to the English-speaking corporate language policy of Rakuten.

religious point of view, this episode is believed to mark the beginning of interculturality among human beings.

However, with the rise of globalization in our modern world, the importance of employing a lingua franca, particularly in global business discourse, has been considered essential. The term "globalization" here refers to a "neoliberal" movement to allow worldwide free access to social, cultural and human capital. Although Japanese businesses used to have a relatively homogenous practice, an increasing number of companies are attempting to implement globalization policies to catch up with the global competition. As one globalization strategy, over 70% of Japanese companies are responding positively to the idea using English as a lingua franca in business discourse, according to a survey commissioned by Recruit in 2012.[3]

6 Discussion: Application of BELF to future corporate training programs

As mentioned above, there is considerable interest in BELF in the Asian context, including ELAB, Asian Englishes and Asian competence. It is also expected that an increasing number of applied linguists and intercultural business researchers will address this issue from various angles as globalization further proceeds in Asia. Up to now, issues of WE have been enthusiastically addressed not only in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), but also in that of intercultural business discourse (IBD). Although these two research fields share the same academic interest, researchers from these two disciplines have not been fully communicating with one another. These two fields are not mutually exclusive; rather, there should be a number of ideas that they can offer and exchange. Sato, Nakatake, Satake and Hug (forthcoming), which appeared in the same volume of this journal, also explored the feasibility, validity, and practicality of this SLA-IBD collaborative approach. Future studies are therefore expected to be more transdisciplinary. Possible research topics for up-coming studies include, but are not limited to:

1. Intercultural business discourse analysis on BELF in the Asian context
2. Intercultural conflict due to the use of BELF
3. Curriculum development (L2-English oriented)
4. English for specific purposes
5. How to utilize the high contextuality of Japanese as a communication strategy
6. How to help L1 speakers develop L2-oriented English competence

Accordingly, the roles of English teachers should also change. Conventionally, teachers have been expected to merely convey knowledge to students, which creates asymmetrical relationships between teachers and students. However, with the emergence of World Englishes as well as the changing social factors surrounding the English language, including the Internet,

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[3] *Guroobaru manejimento jinzai jittai chosa 2011* [グローバルマネジメント人材実態調査 2011, A factual investigation on global management human resources] (Retrieved from http://www.recruit-ms.co.jp/research/inquiry/pdf/in111221_report.pdfon 2013/03/30)

teachers' roles are highly likely to become more multi-dimensional. In the very near future, what teachers are expected to do in L2 classrooms might include not only instruction in (socio)linguistic competence, but also consultation regarding better L2 communication so that students can fully utilize all available communicative resources.

As the concluding remarks of this paper, I offer a warning against the idealism of World Englishes. The ending of the novel *Frankenstein,* by Mary Shelley, shows that human beings would be eventually destroyed by the monstrous homunculus that Dr. Frankenstein created. Likewise, the episode at the Tower of Babel also describes a disaster caused by human beings. Ironically, both of these stories have unhappy endings. Are we also destined to construct the Tower of Babel again through English mediated global collaboration, only to be destroyed by the lingua frankesteinia? Whether the answer of this question is affirmative or negative greatly depends on the performance of us future educators of English in countries belonging to the outer and expanding circles of World Englishes.

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