

MALAYSIA- THAILAND CROSSBORDER COMMUNICATION: THE POTENTIAL OF BUSINESS ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA

Ina Suryani¹, Hazry Desa, Aizan Yaacob²

¹Centre for Communication Skills, Universiti Malaysia Perlis

²College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia

E-mail: inasuryani@unimap.edu.my, hazry@unimap.edu.my,
aizan904@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Recently, with the spread of English as the global language, English has been professed as one of the prominent lingua franca for the new world. It has become the means of communication between nations in the area of judiciary, economic, education and in almost all aspect of global negotiation. Countless studies have been made on the role of English language as a lingua franca; however there is a limited study on the usage of English as lingua franca in crossborder context. It is understood that most people turn to English when communicating across nation, yet it is unclear how English language fare as the lingua franca in crossborder communication especially in South East Asia. Sharing border denoted sharing similar culture, history and exposure and for these similarities it is a wonder if English would still emerge as the language of choice for communication between such parties. This paper analyzes both Malaysian and Thai students' use of the Business English as Lingua Franca (BELF) during a few crossborder activities held throughout a collaborative project. The findings in this paper suggested that BELF emerged mostly in informal situations for ESL users and as for the formal situations, the ESL users prefer to use the standard English variety. On the other hand, the EFL users use BELF for both formal and informal situations. The EFL users are more inclined to use BELF for both occasions where getting the message across and getting the job done surpassed the concern for English accuracy. ELT implications are cues that English language usage can be encouraged by taking up the following measures such as setting rule on using English for communication, intervening when mother tongue emerges, assigning reports and presentations. In conclusion, this study adds on to the understanding on the role of ELF especially in the context of crossborder communication in South East Asia.

Keywords: *Business English Lingua Franca (BELF), crossborder, mother tongue, communication, lingua franca.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recently, with the spread of English as the global language, English has been professed as one of the prominent lingua franca for the new world. It has become the means of communication between nations in the area of judiciary, economic, education and in fact in almost all aspects of global negotiation. Countless studies have been made on the role of English language as a lingua franca (Thewel, 2003; Cenoza and Jessner, 2000; Plumlee, 2000; Kankaanranta, 2008; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Gill 2010); however there are only a limited study on the usage of English as lingua franca in crossborder context (Krikorian, 2011; Coury, 2001; Ina, Shaharom and Zuraidah, 2008; Ina, Sharmini and Rozilawati, 2008).

In business environment, the first option of switching over to the other party's native tongue in intercultural encounters is increasingly giving way to the second option: using a common language a lingua franca (Kankaanranta,2009). It is understood that most people turn to English when communicating across nation, yet it is unclear how English language fare as the lingua franca in crossborder communication especially in South East Asia. Sharing border denoted sharing similar culture, history and exposure and for these similarities it is a wonder if English would still emerge as the language of choice for communication between such parties. With regards to these concerns, this paper aims to:

1. examine the potential of BELF in crossborder communication.
2. identify the potential of English as Lingua franca among English Second Language (ESL) users and among English Foreign Language users in formal settings.
3. identify the potential of English as Lingua franca among English Second Language (ESL) users and among English Foreign Language (EFL) users in informal settings.

1.1 Literature Review

The importance of English language as the language of science and technology has established steadily. Thewell (2003) pointed out that English is gaining ground in the European communication hence, more and more Dutch and German scientist are publishing in English web pages, journals and conferences. The explanation given was that the international audience are more attracted to English language

publication. An increase in the importance and usage of English has been reported by researchers around the world (Aizan, 2008; Azusa, 2008; Arunee, 2001). Cenoz and Jessner (2000) added that for same reason, Euro English is emerging and moving towards becoming the second language for the European Union. In a similar vein, English as a global lingua franca has been discussed by many researchers (Azusa, 2008; Allies, 2008; Coury, 2001). In business context, the reasons for the increase in using ELF are connected with globalization of both business operations and communication technology (Kankaanranta, 2009). With globalization, varieties of English language have emerged and the term of World Englishes have appeared in many studies (Plumlee, 2000; Kachru and Nelson, 1996; Allies, 2008; Azusa, 2008).

The English used in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and India confer to the term "World Englishes" (Plumlee, 2000). "World Englishes" refers to non-native varieties of English, which have developed identifiable non-standard (e.g., non-British, non-American) patterns of lexical, phonological and syntactic usage. Usage is usually as intra-national and inter-ethnic Lingua franca, typically in former British colonies (Kacru, 1988 as in Plumlee, 2000). Studies on acceptance of World Englishes and ELF in public schools in Korea found that the teachers are positively taking in the model however the language policy in Korea still favours native speaker models (Allies, 2008). Having the globalisation of the English language, it is important for the learners to be aware of varieties of English in forms of World Englishes. Azusa (2008) in his study on Japan schools has pointed out the fear of the Japanese students in using their own variety of English. He emphasised on the needs in raising students' awareness and flexible attitudes towards the existence of other kinds of English as to make the students more comfortable in trying to learn English.

As for the case in Thailand, Arunee (2001) stated that Thai's level of English proficiency is low in comparison to many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines). Marilyn Plumlee (2000) the president of Korea TESOL 2009 reported the ranking for TOEFL scores for the period 1995-1996 in descending orders are as follows; Singapore (599), the Philippines (575), China (556) South Korea (518), Malaysia (500), Japan (499) and Thailand (494). Low proficiency in English has also been the blame for not making much progress in terms of science and technology and the misunderstanding and negative attitudes towards Thailand in the tourism business (Arunee, 2001). Very few studies reported on the use of English as Lingua franca in Thailand. Even though the awareness on the importance of English is increasing in Thailand, at the crossborder context, the switch from low variety

of Malay and Thai language to English is very slow and unhurried. In the rural areas, the environment sets that English is less used and even to some extent functions like a foreign language (Ina, Sharmini & Rozilawati, 2008). At the border, the people still prefer to use their traditional way of communication and English is rarely used in the crossborder street communication amongst the locals.

In Malaysia, the historical link with the British Empire has given a good footage for English to be the second language and it is the language widely used in corporate profession and the academia. British English is widely used as the formal version until in the past decade; American English has also been accepted. The education system sets that the school leavers will have eleven years of English lessons. In short, English has officially earned the status as the second language in Malaysia. Despite the fact that English is highly used in informal and formal situations, very few studies reported on the potential of ELF in Malaysia.

The existence of multinational companies in Malaysia has also supported ELF. Kankaanranta (2009) pointed out that in multinational companies, English is typically the corporate language, which is used in such corporate function as accounting, finance, management and communications and the usage is on getting the job done rather than exercising English experts issues. She further added that the increasing use of English in these intercultural business situations brings forth the variety Business English Lingua Franca (BELF).

According to Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta, (2005) the term Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) refers to English as a neutral and shared common code among non-native speakers. They justify that BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as hers or his mother tongue. They added that the neutral ground will help the speakers feel safer in utilizing the language. The conception of BELF does have some unresolved issues for example users becoming more proficient than others not because of their superior English but rather due to their highly effective business communication skills. Kankaanranta (2009) further added that BELF users share the same international business culture but are separated by their personal, specific cultural background that is not typically identical to the cultural background of another BELF user.

1.2 Background of the Study

The Collaborative Project between Hatyai University (HU) and Universiti

Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) was designed in a way that discourages both the Malaysian and Thai students from using their mother tongue during interaction. Initially, rather than having BELF, ELF or standard variety of English as the main concern; the English instructors were more focused in finding ways to make the students use English. The idea of providing an environment that necessitates the students to use English has drawn the English Instructors from both countries to come up with some alternative measures to promote the use of English. It was upon further development that the project was found suitable for studying BELF. In the case of the study, UniMAP and HU students share the common code of being on neutral plane where neither of them uses English as their mothertongue thus providing a good chance for a study on the potential of BELF emergence in such cross-border collaboration (Ina, Sharmini & Rozilawati, 2008).

This project was made possible when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the management of the two universities. Among other reasons for crossborder collaboration are to enable the sharing of resources such as academic staff, teaching and learning facilities, research equipment and ideas and to provide enrichment and diversity amongst the students (Zuraidah, Zul & Ali, 2004).

The location of the study is at both UniMAP and HU campuses and surrounding vicinities. Both universities are at the location of one hour drive from the border. Forty students participated from both universities and they were required to produce a business proposal for a product of their group's choice. In order to encourage the English language usage, the participation was restricted to non-Thai speaking for the UniMAP students and non-Malay speaking for the Hatyai University students (Ina, Sharmini & Rozilawati, 2008). The UniMAP students were from the engineering faculty and they were expected to contribute mostly in the operation, production and technical aspect of the business plan whereas, the Hatyai University students were from the business school and they were expected to contribute mostly in the management and financial section of the business plan (Ina, Shaharom & Zuraidah, 2008).

The main objective of the project activity was to produce a business proposal on a product of their group's choice. This was to create a void in the function of the mother tongue thus encourages the English language usage among the participants. The students were required to use English all the time when communicating with each other.

In the case of this study, the project relies on the sharing of expertise among academic staff, where the HU staff supports the business plan production by assisting the progress in the business content such as developing the marketing plan, risk assessment, financial plan and Revenue projection; whereas the UniMAP staff assisted in the soft skill, teambuilding and final oral presentation (Ina, Shaharom & Zuraidah, 2008).

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using triangulation method consisting of observation, questionnaire and interview. Most of the data were collected during the activity session and based mostly on the participants' perceptions.

Observations were made on the first project meeting which was held in HU. Both, Malaysian and Thai students were observed during the business workshop and during the outing at the night market, particularly during meal time and during cultural exchange sessions. The most common communication activities that occur in the cross border collaboration project were observed and the most occurring activities were identified. The purpose was to identify the construct for the questionnaire. Based on the observations, 28 items were constructed.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 items were rated using a five-point likert scale. The items were statements based on the common activities used in both formal and informal settings for example interacting with the program participants at meal time, asking clarification from the facilitators and writing out the marketing plan. The questionnaire was used for the following reasons:

1. To rate the participants' perceptions on the usage of English language in conducting the activities both in formal and informal settings.
2. To rate the participants' perceptions on resorting to other language(s) than English in conducting the activities both in formal and informal settings.

Interview with the teachers, facilitators and students were conducted after the observations to capture some of the other issues such as the alternative language used other than English, the students' justifications on the rating and the teachers' opinions in the effective measures to achieve the activities' objectives.

3.0 FINDINGS

Findings from the questionnaires are tabulated in the following two tables.

Table 1: High scores for perception on the frequency of English language usage during the crossborder activity

<i>Item</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Unimap</i>	<i>HU</i>
21	Writing out the Business Idea	H ¹ 4.00	
20	Writing messages (SMS / Yahoo Messenger / Emails) for the other participants	H ² 3.89	
22	Writing out the competition section in the Business Plan	H ³ 3.83	
23	Writing out the Goals and Objective in the Business Plan	H ³ 3.83	
24	Writing out the marketing plan	H ³ 3.83	
16	Receiving instructions from the supervisors		H ¹ 3.85
5	Expressing yourself during the field trip in Penang		H ² 3.46
21	Writing out the Business Idea		H ² 3.46
9	Discussing the Business Plan with the group members		H ³ 3.38
		(AVG : 3.78)	(AVG : 3.12)

Table 1 shows that the activity with highest rating (H1) for usage of English among UniMAP students is *writing out the business plan*, followed by *Writing messages (SMS / Yahoo Messenger / Emails) for the other participants (H2)*. *Writing out the competition section in the Business Plan*, *Writing out the Goals and Objective in the Business Plan* and *Writing out the marketing plan* have the same average score of 3.83. The HU students rated *Receiving instructions from the supervisors* as being the highest in English language usage (H1). *Expressing yourself during the field trip to Penang* and *Writing out the Business Idea* both ranked second highest (H2) and the last on the list is *Discussing the business plan with the group members (H3)*. In short, the usage of English for the UniMAP students' are in both situations of formal and informal.

All the activities rated by the HU students are situations where the students have no choice but to speak in English. Thai language became dysfunctional in those occasions especially when receiving instructions from the supervisor who are mostly Malaysian and also for expressing themselves during the field trip in Penang. If they use Thai for these occasions, communication will not work. This finding conforms to the BELF description by Kankaanranta (2009) which describes the BELF usage is on getting the job done rather than exercising English experts issues.

Interviews with the facilitators reveals that for formal situations such as drafting out the reports and presentations, the UniMAP students are more concern on the usage of correct tenses, subject verb agreement and other mechanics of standard English. The HU students on the other hand are more concern in getting the message across and getting the job done. In short, the findings suggested that BELF emerged mostly in informal situations for ESL users and as for the formal situations; the ESL users prefer to use the standard English variety. On the other hand, the EFL users use BELF for both formal and informal situations. The EFL users are more inclined to use BELF for both occasions where getting the message across and getting the job done surpassed the concern for English accuracy.

Table 2: High scores for perception on the usage of other language than English during the crossborder activity

<i>Item</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Unimap</i>	<i>HU</i>
14	Listening to other participants expressing him/herself	H 1 3.11	
15	Receiving information from other participants	H 2 3.05	
18	Gathering relevant information from printed sources	H2 3.05	
4	Describing a particular issues of interest		H 1 4.00
23	Writing out Goals and Objectives of the Business Plan		H2 3.77
25	Writing out the operation section for the Business Plan		H 3 3.54
11	Interacting with the program participants at meal time		H 3 3.54
		(AVG : 3.11)	(AVG : 3.21)

During the project, the students were instructed to use English in all aspect of communication. Previous writing on this study has reported that resurfacing of mother tongue during the project is perceived as moderate among the HU students and lower among the UniMAP students.

Table 2 indicates that The UniMAP students reported that English is least used while listening to other participants expressing him/herself (H1). Next least usage of English are *Receiving information from other participants* and *Gathering relevant information from printed sources* (H2). On the other hand, the HU students rated *Describing a particular issues of interest* as the highest for using other language than English (H1). Second highest is *Writing out goals and objectives of the business plan* (H2). Next are *Writing out the operation section for the business plan* and *interacting with the program participants at meal time* (H3).

The findings demonstrate that other language than English surfaces in both formal and informal situations for the Thai students who are EFL users. Whereas, the other language than English surfaces only in informal activities among the Malaysian students who are ESL users.

The interviews held before the activities began with the language teachers from both sides reported that the English language usage among the students is not satisfactory. Both sides agreed the fact that English language is not widely spoken in the society which the students are in could be one of the main factors that hinders the usage. The interview after the activities with the facilitators and the teachers reported that the English used was non-native standard and mostly just to get the message across or get the task done. This comment supports the conceptions of BELF by Kankaanranta (2009). The teachers also reported that in many cases, the students discussed among their own country friends in their mother tongue and then upon decision, a spoke person will speak on behalf of the group.

As reported earlier (Ina, Sharmini & Rozilawati, 2008) the observation by the facilitators states that the students mostly fallback on their mother tongue when they speak; especially in expressing ideas and giving explanation. Students from both universities use English in activities that require reading and writing. Frequently, the students who are better in English act as translator for their friends. The students speak in English with the facilitators when they are working on the business plan. They code switch to mother tongue in informal situations like during meal time, during the journey on the bus and during visits to interesting places. Interestingly, the findings from observation also show that students from both countries were found to prefer using Yawi or low variety of the Malay language in informal situations where the ambience is relax and casual. English is mostly used in formal situation or when imposed. The students were also found to voluntarily learn the language of their counterpart. The average score by the HU students is 3.11 whereas the average for the UniMAP students' score is 3.31. The explanation for lower average scores among the HU students is obscure in the grey area of the mother tongue. The Thai students could not use their mother tongue which is Thai language as the Malaysian students could not understand Thai at all; hence the rating is lower. Some of the HU students have resorted to "Yawi" which is similar to Kelantanese Malay variety. "Yawi" is a highly divergent dialect of Malay language used in the southern province of Thailand but the language has no official status. However, it can be understood by the Malaysian students. As explained earlier, the participants from HU were restricted to those having Thai as their first language. Their strategy to use Yawi is linked to cultural learning theories in crossborder society.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The findings support the conceptions on BELF proposed by Kankaanranta(2009) that the English used was non-native standard and mostly just to get the message across or get the task done. The drafts sent by the students also show that The UniMAP students who are ESL users were more concern with the English language accuracy whereas the HU students were paying more attention on the business concepts. The findings in this paper suggested that BELF emerged mostly in informal situations for ESL users and as for the formal situations, the ESL users prefer to use the standard English variety. On the other hand, the EFL users use BELF for both formal and informal situations. The EFL users are more inclined to use BELF for both occasions where getting the message across and getting the job done surpassed the concern for English accuracy. The analysis on the use of other language than English language also shows different pattern between ESL and EFL users. Other language than English language, (Yawi) surfaces in both formal and informal situations for the Thai students who are EFL users. Whereas, the other language than English (Malay) surfaces mostly in informal activities among the Malaysian students who are ESL users.

When analyzing the findings from sociolinguistic view on communication strategy, it is interesting to note that in this cross border collaboration project, the highly distinct variety of Malay dialect of Yawi or Kelantanese has emerged as the unconventional choice. It is also interesting to see some of the participants who are not Kelantanese attempted to use this Malay variety. Such moves suggest questionable chances of BELF emergence in such cross border situation should there be no proper instruction and supervision. The ELT implications from the study are cues that in order for BELF to thrive, measures must be taken to encourage the use of English among the students. Measures suggested are setting rule on using English for communication and intervening when mother tongue emerges. Assignments in the form of reports and presentations are also found to be effective means to encourage the use of English among these learners.

Logically, overuse of mother tongue will naturally reduce the frequency of English language usage. However scholars have also agreed that the use of mother tongue or direct translation method does not hinder the learning of the second language (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Cook, 2001). These arguments bring forth that, attempt should be made to keep a balance between mother tongue and English use (Auerbach, 1993).

These attempts are essential in promoting English as a whole. As a result, a natural emergence of BELF is made possible under informal circumstances and standard English can be further encouraged for formal situations. The surfacing of mother tongue and alternative language for informal and casual contexts among the crossborder participants could be due to the common ties that they share such as culture which include similar food dishes, fruits, weather and clothing. This study was conducted under controlled activities with regular meet up that spread over two months and should not be generalized for cases in natural settings conducted over longer period of time. Attempts in the form of intervention by the supervisors, providing rules on using English for speaking, conducting presentations and report writing in English have been proven essential in promoting the use of Business English as a *Lingua franca*.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings from the study suggested that, in this cross border collaboration BELF emerged mostly in informal situations for ESL users and as for the formal situations, the ESL users prefer to use the standard English variety. On the other hand, the EFL users use BELF for both formal and informal situations. The EFL users are more inclined to use BELF for both occasions where getting the message across and getting the job done surpassed the concern for English accuracy. The emergence of BELF is natural in informal contexts and can be further encouraged with proper instructions, supervision and interventions from the instructors of such crossborder activity. It is suggested that future studies should make use of sociolinguistic framework and add more specification in the area of discourse analysis, code switching and mother tongue influence in exploring the use of English as a *lingua franca*.

REFERENCES

- Aizan Yaacob and Pinter, A. (2009). Using Big Books in Teaching Primary English in Malaysian Classrooms. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*. Universiti Utara Malaysia. Pp 1-20.
- Allies, G.J. (2008). Laying Foundations: A course in World Englishes and English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) for Public School Teachers of English in Korea in proceeding for 6th Asia TEFL International Conference, Bali Indonesia, August 1-3 2008.

- Arunee Wiriyachitra (2001). English Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand in the Coming Decade The Language Teacher Online: Issue 25.06; June 2001 <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2001/06/index> retrieved on 6 January 2011.
- Auerbach, E. (1993). Re-examining English only in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(1), 9-32.
- Azusa Kodate (2008). A Study of the Attitudes of Japanese Undergraduates towards World Englishes and their own Variety- Implications for English Teaching in Globalising Asia in proceeding for 6th Asia TEFL International Conference, Bali Indonesia, August 1-3 2008.
- Cenoza, J. & Jessner, U. (2000). English in the Europe: The acquisition of a Third Language, URL: <http://books.google.com/books> Retrieved 6 January 2011.
- Cook, V. J. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57(3), 184-206.
- Coury, J. G. (2001). English as Lingua Franca in the Brazilian Academic World URL: <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/linguafranca.htm> retrieved on 6 January 2011.
- Gill, J. (2010). The Double Danger of English as a Global Language in Cambridge Journals URL: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?> Retrieved on 6 January 2011.
- Ina, S., Syaharom, A. and Zuraidah, Z. (2008). 'Using Cross - border Collaborative Project to Encourage the English Language Usage among Undergraduate Students'. In Proceeding for International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning (IMCICON), Marriot Putrajaya, 16 -18 March 2008.
- Ina, S., Sharmini A. and Rozilawati M (2008). BELF Vs L1 in Communication During Crossborder Collaboration project Activities". In Proceeding for International Conference on Human Science in Engineering (ICoHSE09), Kuala Lumpur. 3-4 Dec 2008.
- Kachru, B. B. and Nelson, C. L. (1996). *World Englishes in Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, 71-102.
- Kankaanranta, A. (2008). "Business English Lingua Franca in Intercultural (business) Communication" Language at work- Bridging Theory and Practice. Danish Society for LSP and Professional Communication, Spring 2008:22-27.

- Krikorian, O. (2011). Reconstructing the tower of Babel: Unconfusing language in Armenia-Azerbaijan cross-border communication URL: <http://www.international-peaceandconflict.org/profiles/blogs/> retrieved on 6 January 2011.
- Louhiala-Salminen L., Charles M. and Kankaanranta A. (2005). 'English as a lingua franca in Nordic corporate mergers: Two case companies' English for Specific Purpose Volume 24, Issue (4), pp 401-421, (Online) Retrieved on 16 February 2008, from URL: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?>
- Nunan, D. & Lamb, C. (1996). *The self-directed teacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plumlee, M.K. (2000). *Lingua Franca or Language of Domination* revised version in Conference on Language and Culture, November 2000, Retrieved on 6 January 2011 URL: http://maincc.hufs.ac.kr/~lri/contents/content07_2.htm.
- Thewell, M. (2003). *Patterns and Problems of Cross-Border Collaboration the Social Impact of the Hybrid*, Web <http://www.scit.wlv.ac.uk/> retrieved on 6 January 2011.
- Zuraidah M.Z, Zul A.Z.J and Ali Y.M.S (2004). 'Educational Collaborations With Thai.
- UniMAP: 'The Case of KUKUM.' in *Proceeding for International Collaborations on Education: Perspectives and Strategies*, 27-28 August 2004 Hatyai Thailand. Retrieved on 15 December 2007 URL: <http://portal.unimap.edu.my/pls/>.

