English as a Lingua Franca in China-Based Workplace Communication: A Mixed Approach to a Comparison of Perceived Communicative Needs

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a multifaceted investigation into the communicative needs of using English as a business lingua franca (or BELF) in three types of companies in Mainland China: state-owned, privately-owned, and multinational companies. The findings were derived from online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with Chinese business professionals. The findings suggest that English has played an increasingly important role in the workplace communication in Mainland China, especially in multinational companies. Using English has become a business convention in multinational companies, although the extent of its use differs depending on various contextual factors, primary among which are a professional's duties and English proficiency. The findings also illustrate that culture plays a role as important as language in BELF communication at work. For example, social interaction, due to both cultural and linguistic reasons, has long been an issue concerning and challenging Chinese business professionals. Cultural differences may not be an insurmountable barrier, but the lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge can cause a disruption in communication or lower the chance of promotion in a company.

Keywords: English as a Business Lingua Franca, communicative needs, culture, needs analysis, intercultural business communication.

Resumen

El inglés como lengua franca para la comunicación en el contexto laboral chino: un acercamiento mixto a una comparación de las necesidades comunicativas percibidas

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación sobre las necesidades comunicativas para el uso del inglés como lengua franca de los negocios en tres tipos de compañías en China continental: estatales, privadas y multinacionales. Los datos se han obtenido mediante cuestionarios en línea y entrevistas semiestructuradas con profesionales chinos del ámbito de los negocios. Los resultados sugieren que el inglés ha ido adquiriendo una importancia cada vez mayor en la comunicación que se produce en el lugar de trabajo en China continental, en especial en las compañías multinacionales. El uso del inglés se ha convertido en una práctica habitual en las compañías multinacionales, si bien es cierto que su alcance difiere en función de varios factores contextuales, entre los que destacan el tipo de obligaciones de cada profesional y su nivel de inglés. Estos datos también muestran que la cultura ejerce una influencia tan importante como la propia lengua en la comunicación en inglés como lengua franca en contextos laborales del mundo de los negocios. Por ejemplo, la interacción social, por razones tanto culturales como lingüísticas, ha sido durante mucho tiempo un asunto que ha preocupado a los profesionales chinos del mundo de los negocios, para los que suponía un desafío. Si bien las diferencias culturales no constituyen una barrera infranqueable, la falta de sensibilidad y de conocimiento cultural puede causar problemas de comunicación o bien reducir las posibilidades de promoción en una compañía.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua franca en el mundo de los negocios, necesidades comunicativas, cultura, análisis de necesidades, comunicación intercultural en el mundo de los negocios.

1. Introduction

The rapidly globalized economy of China has shown that intercultural business communication between people from China and the rest of the world has broadened and deepened, with an increasing number of people from other countries now working in China-based multinational companies or indigenous Chinese organizations (Du, 2015). In such a multilingual and multicultural environment, companies tend to choose English as their official corporate language to cope with the challenges of intercultural business communication and coordination (Charles, 2007), with companies in China following this trend (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Yuan, 2009). English has gradually become the lingua franca (ELF) used by business professionals coming from various cultural backgrounds (Evans, 2013), or in other words, it represents a business lingua franca (BELF) (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). ELF was defined on the VOICE website as "an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of

communication for speakers of different first languages". This definition suggests that "it does not exclude native speakers of English (henceforth NESs), since ELF is not the same as English as a native language, and must therefore be 'additionally acquired' by NESs too." (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011, p 283). Building on the concept of ELF, BELF can be defined as a shared language used in the business domain by speakers with different mother tongues (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005).

In addition to language, the current "world flattening" (Friedman, 2007) phase of economic globalization also recognizes the importance of culture in intercultural business communication (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2013). One study conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in 2010 reported that cultural sensitivity and language proficiency are recognized as two vital and essential abilities for a successful international business career.

These findings have confirmed the importance of language and culture abilities needed for business professionals to perform successfully in today's multicultural workplaces. Language and culture are also interconnected in that BELF is not a "cultureless" language, but is a dynamic professional language that can create new operational cultures (Charles, 2007). Since BELF speakers use the language following different sociopragmatic rules (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006), they bring their own cultural characteristics into BELF communication. In this sense, "BELF communication is inherently intercultural" (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010, p. 205).

Having an expanding collaboration with the rest of the world, China increasingly requires numerous talents who are competent in intercultural communication skills. Consequently, business English (BE) teaching has been playing an increasingly significant role in university education in Mainland China. In the early 2000s after China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), BE was officially added to the higher education curriculum with the aim of cultivating highly skilled graduates with combined language and business skills (Bargiela-Chiappini & Zhang, 2013). More remarkably, the year 2007 witnessed a major breakthrough in the history of BE teaching as The Ministry of Education granted one university the qualification of offering a BE program as an undergraduate major. According to Education Online (www.eol.cn), a platform for China's educational information service accredited by The Ministry of Education,

up to 2018 more than 650 universities and colleges have provided a BE program for undergraduate study in China.

In order to facilitate the BE curriculum development, much has been written by Chinese scholars about the teaching, learning and use of English for business communication (Wu, 2013). A notable feature in this line of research is the focus on needs analysis, which is most often the initial step conducted to understand what is supposed to be provided for learners (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012). In an academic context, there have been many studies examining the needs of BE learners in China (e.g., Dai & Liu, 2016; Wu, 2012; Xie, 2016). Dai and Liu's (2016) study revealed that 79.65% of the respondents regarded the BE related courses as not career-oriented and that 53.98% of them felt the current teaching materials hardly matched their career development plans. The finding is a manifestation of the gulf between the current BE teaching at school and the demands of career development after school (Wu, 2012). Dai and Liu's finding also reflects that previous studies may not have extensively examined the communicative needs of using English as a lingua franca in China's workplaces and that many needs analysis studies are largely focused on the perspective of language needs, with little or no consideration of culture, which is recognized as indispensable for today's intercultural (business) communication.

To fill this research gap, the present study aims to conduct a needs analysis about English use in China's business context by answering two research questions (RQs). RQ1 examines the extent to which English is used at work in Mainland China. RQ2 investigates the role of culture in BELF communication at work. It is hoped that the present study can better inform language learners, education practitioners, and organizations about what kind of communicative needs are found at work from the perspectives of language and culture. With a clear knowledge of communicative needs, researchers and practitioners can gain better insights into how to invest the time and resources necessary to achieve an advanced level of intercultural communicative effectiveness.

2. Literature review

Use of the needs analysis to determine the use of English as a communicative code at work has drawn plentiful attention from researchers,

in an attempt to bridge the gap between classroom textbooks and real-world practices (Brown, 2016). Over the last two decades, researchers have engaged in needs analysis in geographically dispersed contexts such as Thailand (Gass, 2012), Japan (Cowling, 2007) and Finland (Charles & Marschan-piekkari, 2002). China has also recognized the importance of analyzing English needs. Evans (2010, 2013) conducted a large-scale investigation into the use of English in Hong Kong's four key service industries. However, Mainland China is categorized as one of the Expanding Circle territories (Kachru, 1985) where English has traditionally played a limited role in Chinese society and is basically learned as a foreign language in the education system. Accordingly, the situation in Mainland China contrasts with that of Hong Kong where English has long been used as an official language due to its colonial history. Furthermore, according to Graddol (2006), China, as a rising giant economy, would "determine the speed at which other Asian countries, such as Thailand, shift to a global English model" (p. 94), which suggests the significance of doing research on English use in China.

Pang, Zhou, and Fu (2002) conducted a survey examining the influence of China's WTO membership on business professionals' language use in five cities of Zhejiang Province. They found that despite acknowledging the importance of English skills, Chinese professionals did not use English as frequently at work as expected. Although e-mails, contracts, faxes and forms were identified as the major media that required English in written communication, those tasks were often assigned to professionals with high English language proficiency. Therefore, for most Chinese professionals, the communicative needs of using English were limited to filling in forms with figures or simple words and phrases. However, according to Evans (2010, p.155), "as far as workplace communication is concerned – the language (English) is increasingly being used both externally and internally in many Expanding Circle contexts", which contradicts the research findings of Pang et al. (2002). One possible reason for such a contradiction can be that the study was conducted over 15 years ago, and therefore, the role of English in China's workplace has been changed due to the rapid development of technology and globalization. As Li and Moreira (2009, p.41) contended, "the knowledge of English as an international business language is becoming more crucial than ever" in China's enterprises since 2001.

More recently, Zhang and Guo (2015) investigated Chinese professionals' linguistic choices between Mandarin Chinese, English, and dialects[1] in large state-owned petrochemical companies in the cities of Xi'an and Beijing.

They identified several noticeable attributes regarding professionals' linguistic choices. Firstly, the Chinese language functions as a common medium in the workplace and the interplay between Mandarin Chinese, English, and dialects was pragmatic, thereby enhancing communication efficacy and relation building. Secondly, echoing Pang et al. (2002), Zhang and Guo found that English was not as frequently used as was originally imagined under the influence of economic globalization. Even if there was a need to speak a foreign language, it was often the case that selected staff would handle the communication rather than the professionals themselves. However, their study only provided a picture of how English was used in state-owned companies. With multinational companies (MNCs) out of the picture, Zhang and Guo's (2015) study can hardly provide comprehensive insights into the linguistic landscape of the Chinese business world today.

According to Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011), in addition to language competence, multicultural competence was also required by business professionals to perform effective global communication. Plenty of preceding studies (e.g., Cowling, 2007; Du-Babcock, 2013a; Du-Babcock &Tanaka, 2013b) have reported that cultural differences and language skills are closely linked to misunderstandings or ineffective intercultural communication. As suggested, BELF has the characteristics of multiculturalism and multilingualism due to its users' (including NES) different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kankaanranta &Louhiala-Salminen, 2013).

Based on the literature review, two observations stand out. One is that limited information is known about the needs of English use in today's Chinese business contexts. Another is that both language and culture competencies are important for professionals to engage in intercultural communication. Therefore, the present study aims not only to examine the role of language (BELF) in different types of companies in Mainland China (RQ1), but also to investigate the perceived role of culture when using BELF for communication at work (RQ2).

3. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was employed for the data collection consisting of a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was used to answer RQ 1 investigating the English use in three types of companies, while the interviews aimed to answer RQ 2, exploring

the interaction between culture and language by triangulating, explaining and supplementing the statistical findings.

3.1. Online questionnaire

The online questionnaire was developed to look into the needs of using English at work in Mainland China from the perspectives of Chinese business professionals. The items in the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) were adapted from the instrument developed by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) to examine (a) the proportion of the English used with native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES) and (b) the proportion of their language use between English and Chinese. Although we acknowledge that both Chinese and non-Chinese professionals are able to comment on English needs, in the present research we focus only on Chinese business personnel for two reasons. First, we wanted to investigate if there is an increase in English use in the Chinese business context, considering the results of previous studies that English was not often used in the workplace (e.g., Pang et al., 2002, Zhang & Guo, 2015). In this case, non-Chinese speakers may not be able to estimate the proportion of their language use between English and Chinese. Second, Chinese professionals can provide more reliable information about how cultural differences (particularly between Chinese culture and other cultures) influence their BELF communication. Therefore, collecting data from Chinese business professionals' practices and experiences can help us arrive at a better understanding of the issues in question.

Considering that the respondents' first language was Chinese, the questionnaire was composed in Chinese. According to Oscarson (1997), respondents can more truthfully self-rate their performance if the questionnaire is composed using respondents' first language as compared to when the questionnaire is composed in their target language. A back-translation method (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010) was used after initial translation, which involved an independent translator turning the translation in Chinese back into the original language (English) and then comparing the two English-version texts. It turned out that the two English versions corresponded well with each other so that both instruments investigated the same aspects.

The questionnaire respondents were first recruited using a convenience sampling because they were the acquaintances of the researcher, followed by

a snowball sampling method (Dörnyei, 2007) where existing respondents helped recruit future respondents from their acquaintances. In total, 248 Chinese business professionals completed the online questionnaires in April and May, 2017. Since the main selection criterion was that the respondents should be Chinese business professionals who need to use English in their workplace, 21 respondents who answered that they did not use English at all (0%) in their jobs were not included in any statistical analysis. Therefore, a sample of 227 respondent questionnaires was applied in the data analysis. As shown in Table 1, a clear majority of the respondents were young professionals under 30 years old, who held junior or mid-level positions in their companies. In terms of the nature of the company they worked in, 71 were state-owned companies, 57 were privately owned companies, and 99 were MNCs (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan).

Gender	Male	93
	Female	134
Job Rank	Junior	96
	Middle	114
	Senior	17
Company Ownership	State-owned	71
	Privately-owned	57
	Multinational	99
Age Group	20-25	59
	26-30	98
	31-35	54
	Over 35	16

Table 1. Demographic information of questionnaire respondents (N=227).

The questionnaire data were analyzed by using SPSS (version 24). The reliability of the instrument was determined by Cronbach's alpha test (α = .97), indicating a "very good" degree of reliability. The means were calculated and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine if the means were statistically different from each other.

3.2. Semi-structure interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used because interviewing is suitable to a large degree for exploratory studies (Daniels & Cannice, 2004), as is the case

with the present study on BELF in the context of Mainland China. It also allows interviewers to ask open-ended or probing questions to gain an in-depth knowledge about interesting issues as they arise or to clarify the respondents' views or perceptions (Gillham, 2005). The interviews for the study were conducted based on an interview guide that outlined the questions to be discussed (see Appendix 2).

The interviewees were recruited from the questionnaire respondents. Respondents were asked to provide their contact information if they would like to participate in follow-up interviews. Nineteen of them left their email addresses when answering questionnaires. According to Kassim and Ali (2010), when choosing participants for the needs analysis, MNCs should be approached instead of national industries, so we contacted the respondents working in MNCs. For the respondents working in national companies, those who reported using English for over 40% of communication were also considered suitable for the study. Eleven interviewees accepted our invitation to participate in the interviews and sent back their signed consent forms. Table 2 describes the demographic information about the interviewees. For confidentiality, the interviewees' identifications were replaced with letters (A-K). The interviewees were working in different types of companies, which ensured the richness of information elicited for qualitative analysis. For the interview questions, responses were categorized and analyzed accordingly by using NVivo (version 11) for facilitating the cross-referencing and quantification of the interviewees' responses in each category or subcategory.

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Job rank	Company ownership
A	M	31	Electrical Engineer	State-owned
B	F	32	HR executive	MNC (Swiss)
C	F	27	IT technician	MNC (UK)
D	F	31	Accountant	MNC (USA)
E	F	31	Purchasing	MNC (USA)
F	F	29	Customer service	MNC (UK)
G	F	32	Project manager	Privately-owned
H	M	33	HR supervisor	MNC (German)
I	F	31	Logistics executive	MNC (Netherlands)
J	M	31	Marketing executive	MNC (USA)
K	F	22	Logistics executive	Privately-owned

Table 2. Demographic information of interviewees (N=11).

The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in Chinese, the participants' first language. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and translated into English for further content analysis. Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was used as a method for systematically reporting the meaning of interview data. According to Schreier's (2014) sequence of steps for this method, the preliminary analysis involved reading and annotating the translations together with coding, comments, and observations. Successively, the interview data were further analyzed to identify any missing information regarding the issues concerned and also for patterns showing shared topics, ideas, and values concerning needs regarding BELF use in the business context of Mainland China.

4. Findings

This section reports the findings regarding perspectives on English use in China-based workplaces and its interplay with Chinese language use. It commences by demonstrating the ownership-based findings from questionnaires, which generally provide a linguistic landscape of language use at work. The section then proceeds to explore the nature of using English in the workplace and the interactive relationship between cultural differences and language use by presenting the qualitative findings.

4.1. Quantitative findings

RQ1 examines the use of English at work in Mainland China. To answer RQ1, two aspects regarding the communicative needs of English use are examined by comparing the proportion of (a) the English used with NES as to with NNES and (b) their language use between English and Chinese. The respondents were asked to estimate the percentages (0% - 100%) relating to their communication in English (see Appendix 1). We understand that it is hardly possible for anyone to be able to accurately determine the percentage. However, due to the exploratory nature of this study, the focus is on observing general trends with descriptions of relationships and estimated values, rather than aiming for completely accurate values.

4.1.1. English as a lingua franca in communicating with NES and NNES in workplaces

Concerning the proportion of English language use by Chinese business professionals in communicating with NES and NNES, the results show that, on average, English used with NNES (64.15%) was approximately twice that of the amount used with NES (35.84%) (see Figure 1). In comparing the percentage means of each company type, the result shows that Chinese professionals working in non-MNCs used BELF significantly more with non-native English speakers than with native English speakers, while those working in the multinationals used BELF slightly more with non-native speakers. One reason might be that almost half (47.27%) of the MNCs from the sample were associated with native English-speaking countries such as the US and the UK. Hence, it is not surprising that the respondents under this category reported that the frequency of communicating with NES vis-a-vis with NNES was not very different (47.65% and 52.33% respectively). In spite of this, it still suffices to conclude that in today's business world in China, professionals need to communicate in English with NES and, to a larger extent with NNES.
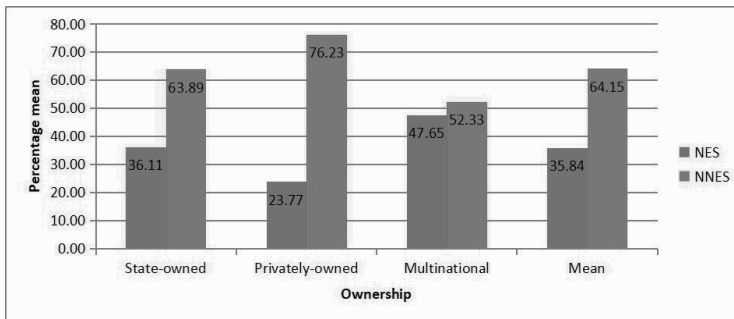

Figure 1. The proportion of communication in English with NES vis-a-vis with NNES.

4.1.2. The proportion of communication in English vis-a-vis in Chinese

Concerning the proportion of English vis-a-vis Chinese used in the workplace, Figure 2 presents the mean scores of using each language code at work in percentage. The result indicates that English was not perceived to be frequently used either in state-owned companies (25.01%) or in privately owned companies (32.91%). In contrast, 54.06% of communication taking place in MNCs was perceived by the respondents to be fulfilled in English, which outweighs the use of Chinese (46.04%) for workplace communication. To further investigate the significance of the difference

between the mean values, one-way ANOVA was conducted. The result shows that there was a significant difference in the percentage of using English vis-a-vis Chinese between three types of companies, $F (2, 224) = 43.81$, $p < 0.001$, and Post Hoc Tests showed that the difference was significant between the non-MNCs (including state-owned and privately-owned companies) and MNCs.
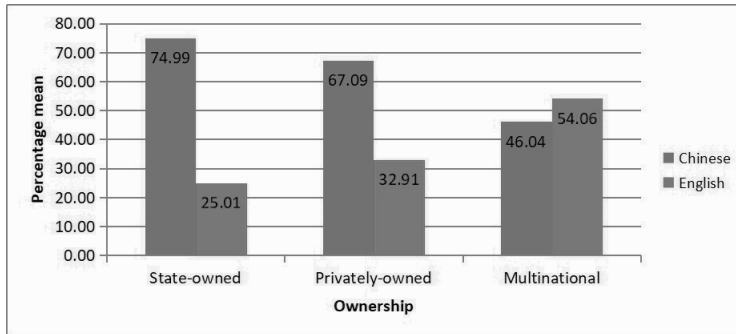

Figure 2. The proportion of Chinese vis-a-vis English used at workplaces.

The findings of the quantitative analysis suggest that English, mostly used with NNES, has played an important role in workplace communication in Mainland China, especially in MNCs. However, although Figures 1 and 2 provide a general trend of English use in different types of the company, neither of them offers any clue as to the reasons behind the observed trend. The following qualitative findings can unravel the nuances associated with English use at work.

4.2. Qualitative findings

RQ2 investigates the interactive relationship between culture and language in multicultural workplaces. To answer RQ2, semi-structured interviews were applied to further examine the nature of using BELF at work in three types of companies in two aspects: (1) the interplay between English and Chinese in workplace communication; and (2) the role of culture in BELF communication at work.

4.2.1. The interplay between English and Chinese in workplace communication

To further explore BELF use in Chinese workplaces, Questions 1-3 (see Appendix 2) were asked to all interviewees. Confirming the finding from quantitative analysis, interview data indicated that Chinese was always used as the default language in day-to-day communication in non-MNCs and that English was only used when there were non-Chinese speakers involved. Documents circulating in the company were mostly written in Chinese with only a few written in English and Chinese when colleagues in overseas branches were involved. One respondent who worked in a privately owned logistics company in Shanghai remarked:

> English is only used when I need to communicate with our overseas business partners; for example, from the US, Mexico, India, and Hong Kong. Most of the time, we emailed each other and sometimes used phone calls if something urgent needs to be dealt with. (Participant K).

As expected, non-MNCs tend to employ a greater number of Chinese-speaking staff and be less involved in intercultural business communication than their multinational counterparts (Evans, 2013). Thus, Chinese professionals employed by non-MNCs reported that they used Chinese significantly more than English as their working language, which echoes the findings by Zhang and Guo (2015). As Mandarin Chinese is the national language in Mainland China, it is commonly used as an unmarked medium of communication to facilitate the interaction between Chinese professionals from different geographical parts of the country.

By contrast, respondents working in MNCs shared different stories. Participants C and D reported that they needed to use English all the time at work, no matter who they were communicating with - Chinese or non-Chinese speakers. Considering the scope (multinational) of their company businesses and the standard practices of their own professions (information technician and accountancy), we can understand that English played a more prominent role at work. Other interviewees who were also working in MNCs stated that professionals tended to use English as the medium of communication in all information exchange (usually by emails), especially when in contact with other departments rather than their own. As one participant remarked:

> We chose to use English for work-related communication when colleagues from a different department were involved, while we usually use Chinese to communicate with colleagues from the same department. Although it is not

a company policy, we are inclined to write in English for cross-departmental communication. (Participant F).

Participant J provided one practical clue that justifies the use of English here: "It would be better if we could use English because some documents, reports and emails, are to be checked by or forwarded to foreign managers or clients." Her comment accords with recent research in Europe (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) and Hong Kong (Evans, 2013); that the main reason for communicating in English is that emails, most of the time, need to be routed to non-Chinese speakers.

Whereas the reason for using English in communicating with non-Chinese speakers is self-obvious, the reason for its use in intracultural communication is less apparent. The interviewees reported that English was used even when it was a Chinese-to-Chinese interaction and there was no corporate policy stipulating this practice. Although it was agreed that it could be more effective to use Chinese for communication among Chinese workers, the participants generally preferred to write in English, even if it risked causing confusion or misunderstanding due to limited language proficiency. The reason for such practices emerged from the participants' responses. Chinese professionals are inclined to use English rather than Chinese in intracultural communication to strengthen their professionalism and the importance and formality of the communication. Such a way of conducting business seems to have become a unanimously accepted convention or a reflection of the culture of MNCs, though it is often not written in company policy, as one interviewee commented:

> It would be the best if you can use the other party's mother tongue (Chinese) for communication because anyone would feel comfortable when interacting in their native languages. However, for workplace communication, you must use English to show professionalism and formality, so even if you dislike using it, you still need to. However, for personal communication, you don't have to use English if you don't like it. (Participant B).

Interestingly, as revealed by the interviewees, we observed an interplay phenomenon of using spoken Chinese but written English in MNCs (see also Chan, 2014; Evans, 2010). Several participants mentioned that they prefer using Chinese when engaging in informal communication such as reminding a colleague or following up with a telephone call to further discuss the content of an English email. Participant F shares her practice as follows:

> We use Chinese for dealing with informal or trivial things like reminding a colleague to help follow up a case. We wouldn't specially write an English email to that colleague just for a reminder. He may regard me as crazy…. Instead of directly calling, when something really complicated happened, I would write him an email first in English, which allows the other party enough time to digest the message. Later, I would call him for a further discussion in Chinese. I found it's the most efficient way for communicating in such situations. (Participant F).

Moreover, Chinese also played a more important role when professionals found that their Chinese colleagues were not proficient enough in speaking English. Participant J commented:

> English would only be used for email communication or at the meetings where non-Chinese speakers are involved. As many sales managers in other areas are not competent in communicating in English, we are therefore inclined to use Chinese.

The findings reported so far have shown an increasing use of English in internal communication in China-based MNCs, although not as a deliberate policy but as an ad hoc practice (e.g., business culture/convention). It is therefore no coincidence that all multinational-based interviewees mentioned that English language skills would serve as a barrier to Chinese employees' career development. "In several foreign companies where I have worked, I found that salespeople who were proficient English speakers stood out in the eyes of overseas superiors," observed Participant E, "the current trend of job hunting or promotion, you don't need to be an expert in your field, but you must be a proficient English speaker." This comment reflects that high English language skills enable individuals working in MNCs to enhance their effectiveness of workplace communication and career advancement.

In all, while Chinese still plays a dominant role in the communication system of non-MNCs, English and Chinese play important complementary roles in MNCs, with these two codes enjoying virtually equal status as communication media in the workplaces. The extent to which Chinese business professionals need to use English at work takes many factors into consideration. The primary factor would be its usage by those who are actually involved in the communicative activity. If interlocutors speak different mother tongues, BELF would naturally be used without question. If the communication involves only Chinese speakers, other contextual

factors are taken into consideration in terms of language choice. One key factor is the level of significance and formality assigned to the communication. If the communication implies a high degree of importance and formality, English, rather than Chinese, is often used as the communicative language code.

4.2.2. The role of culture in BELF communication at work

To investigate the role culture plays in BELF communication at work, Questions 4-6 (see Appendix 2) were asked. Six interviewees commented that cultural differences do not have an obvious impact on their daily work communication. Participant A working in a state-owned company commented, "since our communication is only related to work, discussing technical issues, culture has little impact on my work." From his comments, it appears that cultural differences have little influence on BELF communication in terms of professional genre, considering the profession of the interviewee (an electrical engineer). As pointed out by Du-Babcock and Babcock (2007), professionals from each particular discourse community, within or across organizations, industries, and countries, have common or similar education and experience, so they acquire a shared professional knowledge base, although possibly to various degrees. In this case, cultural differences may not extensively affect the language used in these specified disciplines.

However, the other five interviewees, especially those working in MNCs, commented that cultural diversity did play an important role in their BELF communication at work. Knowing foreign counterpart's culture and being able to have small talks about topics of mutual interest facilitates off-work communication and rapport, especially when chatting with superiors:

> In day-to-day work, whether you can write an English email well or not does not matter much. However, if your (spoken) communication is good, you can socialize well with your English-speaking boss at or after work, and have a better performance in the meeting, which in turn would make a difference to your future career development in the company. (Participant D).

Participant D's remarks implied that professionals who can socialize or communicate well with their superiors have a better opportunity to get ahead in the company. This remark aligns with Guo and Gallo (2017) in that many local Chinese felt those who were promoted are individuals with a good

command of English and who are more familiar with Western styles of communication. Indeed, social talk takes on a distinguished role in workplace communication (Holmes, 2005) because sound socialization with foreign colleagues and superiors can facilitate rapport building and maintenance.

Although Chinese business professionals acknowledged the importance of having social talk in the workplace, they did not frequently socialize with their foreign counterparts. As Participant I remarked: "Many colleagues always try to avoid face-to-face encounters with foreign superiors because Chinese professionals often feel embarrassed without knowing what to say and how to say it". As for "not knowing how to say it", this implies that Chinese professionals may not have a good mastery of these language skills to socialize at work. According to Du-Babcock and Babcock (2007), the vocabulary of a relational genre in which social talk is included originates from general language, so it is different from the vocabulary used in other genres such as professional or commercial genres. Therefore, despite having a good knowledge of profession-specific vocabulary, Chinese professionals may still have little idea of how to socialize appropriately in English. As for "not knowing what to say", this suggests that the low frequency of social talk at work may be related to cultural differences. Hence, Chinese professionals often have little idea of what to say in small talk so as to establish and maintain relationships with their foreign colleagues. As Participant H reported:

> It is easy for us (Chinese) to have a common topic to chat about for socialization because, nowadays, we know what happened in others' life from Wechat (a platform called "moments" designed for users to share what is happening in life among friends). Our German colleagues, however, can't (either because they don't use Wechat or they don't understand Chinese language). Consequently, we Chinese have nothing but work to talk about with German colleagues. Also, what concerns Chinese and Germans is totally different. Chinese may be concerned about the sky-rocketing cost of buying an apartment, while Germans may care about destination to go for summer vacation. (Participant H).

Participant H's remarks explain the reason why Chinese professionals are reluctant to have social talk with their foreign co-workers at work. The use of different social networking tools (e.g., Wechat used by Chinese and Facebook used by their foreign colleagues) for keeping social connections

can be the primary reason. Without knowing each other's lifestyle beyond work, it becomes difficult for Chinese professionals to initiate social conversations with expatriate colleagues. Moreover, Participant H later supplemented this idea by noting that in Chinese culture it is often regarded impolite and disrespectful for subordinates to ask superiors many questions about their personal life. This concern may also explain why Chinese professionals deliberately avoid socializing with their foreign superiors.

Therefore, apart from limited language skills, cultural differences were also discovered to inhibit Chinese professionals' being engaged in social interactions, considering the differences between Chinese and Western culture (Hofstede, 2001). This finding highlights the fact that even if business professionals use a shared language for communication, different cultural backgrounds influence the way they communicate and the topics they discuss. Cultural differences may also lead to miscommunication in developing mutual understanding between Chinese professionals and other BELF speakers. As Participant A said, "Just like we Chinese have no problem understanding each other's jokes and those westerners can understand each other well too. But we can hardly get the "haha" point when a westerner tries to entertain us with jokes, which often makes all of us feel embarrassed at that moment." When facing these difficulties arising from cultural differences, the interviewees found that even if they had cultural sensitivity for intercultural communication, they often felt at a loss as to how to adjust their behavior or language to meet various situational needs of communication. Participant F complained that "I know that I need to adjust, but I don't know how to, because there are too many different situations, Americans, Koreans, Israeli, Russians, just too many."

The interviewees' comments indicate that how culture influences BELF communication at work depends on one key factor: the genre of discourse involved in professionals' communication. Cultural differences influence BELF communication in relational genres (e.g. social talk) more than in professional genres (e.g. specialized languages used by specialists, such as lawyers or engineers) (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007), which is manifested in three aspects: the way Chinese professionals communicate with foreign colleagues; the topics they discuss; and the mutual understanding of each other's meanings. Whereas cultural differences were not found to be an insurmountable barrier, the present study suggests that professionals should not only be sensitive to cultural factors that might cause a disruption in communication, but also be informed of cultural knowledge that might

facilitate interpersonal relationships, especially with overseas superiors who often have the power to decide on an employee's promotion within the company.

5. Implications

Presenting multiple perspectives on the use of English vis-à-vis Chinese in China's three types of companies, the study has three important pedagogical implications for business English instructors and learners.

First, the study suggests a trend in which English has played an unprecedentedly crucial role in workplace communication in Mainland China, especially in MNCs. While Chinese is a dominant language code in non-MNCs for communication, both English and Chinese are used as the principal working languages and play important complementary roles in MNCs, with both languages enjoying virtually equal status as media of communication. English has become a corporate language in MNCs, although the extent of its use differs due to various contextual factors, primary among which are a professional's duties and English language proficiency.

This finding is significant given that few studies have investigated this issue across contemporary Chinese business contexts. Also, it contradicts the results from Pang et al's (2002) study that the value of English at work was generally underestimated and that the use of language was insufficient for doing business. The interplay between English and Chinese in workplace communication as informed in this study not only emphasizes the importance of developing good proficiency in both languages for business professionals to fulfill tasks at work, but also highlights the necessary skills of always choosing an appropriate language code to meet the needs of various communication situations. Moreover, since the language plays an important role for intercultural communication, it is necessary to understand how the language structures and communicative tasks are interrelated in the given setting so as to efficiently deliver the interlocutors' purpose and accomplish effective communication (Martins, 2017). For example, the style of business letters can vary because this genre usually depends on the relationship between the interlocutors involved. Also, business letters can have a wide range content type, such as requesting information, apologizing, or conveying goodwill. Therefore, in addition to language knowledge, BELF

instructors and trainers need to enhance learners' awareness of intercultural business context such as the relationship with interlocutors and the purpose of their interactions.

Second, the study offers detailed information regarding the role of culture for BELF communication at work. The influence arising from culture is extremely obvious in one particular communicative activity, namely, social talk at work. The present study reveals that social talk has long been an issue of concern to Chinese professionals, and our findings confirm that in addition to linguistic issues, cultural issues also affect or even hinder the communicative competence of Chinese professionals in their working contexts. Although Chinese professionals use ELF for communication, the language deficiency and cultural differences are likely to prevent them from initiating or maintaining social conversations with other BELF users such as foreign clients, colleagues, and superiors in the workplace. Therefore, it is important for both learners and professionals to be equipped with the knowledge and skills in both language and culture to succeed in BELF communication.

Third, despite an academic fascination with needs analysis in language learning and use, the study underlines the need to view culture as one indispensable element influencing BELF use in the contemporary workplace. In other words, BELF communication is more than just speaking a foreign language. Business professionals need to show tolerance toward the differences between cultural backgrounds and language proficiency. Yet, this is not enough for those who intend to achieve more than just getting their work done, as it is also necessary for professionals to understand what cultural differences are and what specific adjustments should be made in order to reach a balance between the target culture and home culture. In this case, business professionals should be trained not only to raise their intercultural awareness (Baker, 2011), but also to enrich their cultural knowledge so as to adjust their communicative behaviors. For example, business professionals need to understand that the different communicative styles may result in the power distance between the two different cultural societies (Hofstede, 2001). Because of this, the Chinese professionals coming from a high power distance cultural society may feel hesitant to socialize with their foreign superiors. With the possible impact of cultural difference, this poses another challenge to the BELF and intercultural communication instructors. To ensure that learners can efficiently manage various intercultural communication situations, it is important that

instructors and trainers teach learners about the different types of cultural knowledge. These types of cultural knowledge include the knowledge of national culture, organizational culture, professional culture, and business culture. Learners also need to be informed of both the uniqueness and the limitations of different cultural dimension frameworks (e.g., Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2004). In this way, they can refer to the appropriate framework when applying the theories to practicing intercultural communication, either in class or at work. In doing so, learners and professionals can enhance their intercultural understanding and be well trained and prepared for working in an intercultural business setting.

Moreover, considering that business professionals often encounter a situation where meanings cannot be understood due to cultural differences, it is necessary for them to be equipped with appropriate communicative strategies to deal with such situations so that smooth communication can be attained. For example, it is necessary for business professionals to be skillful at applying verbal or non-verbal solutions to construct mutual understanding. In brief, to succeed in intercultural communication, business professionals need to keep in mind three factors: intercultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and communication strategies.

6. Conclusion

The present study provides a multifaceted investigation into the communicative needs of English used in three types of enterprises in Mainland China. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the analyses focused on the perceived BELF communication with native and non-native speakers of English, the perception of their language use in English and Chinese, and the role of culture in BELF communication. Admittedly, the results of this study should be interpreted with some caution due to its limitations. The present study has the typical limitations of self-report data such as social desirability bias and response bias. Nevertheless, the general criticisms of self-reported methods have been exaggerated (Crampton & Wagner, 1994; Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Spector, 2006), and empirical evidence has suggested that people are capable of providing information by reflecting on their own communication behavior (Riggio & Riggio, 2001). Thus, the findings of this study can effectively contribute to knowledge expansion in BELF research.

Findings suggest that BELF has played an increasingly important role in the workplace communication in Mainland China. The qualitative analyses reveal that while Chinese remains the dominant communication mode in China-owned enterprises, English and Chinese are the principal working languages that have played important complementary roles, particularly in multinational corporations. Moreover, we also recognize the importance of culture in intercultural business contexts, where cultural diversity can have an impact on workplace communication. Cultural differences may not be an insurmountable barrier, but lack of the cultural sensitivity and knowledge can cause a disruption in workplace communication or can lower the chance of promotion in a company for indigenous employees. Considering the importance of cultural impact, future research should further investigate other key aspects to which instructors of BELF/intercultural communication should pay special attention, so as to enhance Chinese professionals' communication skills and communication efficacy.

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NOTES

[1] Mandarin Chinese is the official language of China and there are other dialectical groups as well such as Min, Wu, and Yue. Under each group, there are many individual dialects. For example, Cantonese is the standard form of Yue Chinese.

Appendix 1. Questions for online questionnaire

1. The proportion of communication with native speakers versus non-native speakers of English
Please estimate what percentage (0% - 100%) of your communication in English takes place with
a. Native speakers of English?
b. Non-native speakers of English?
Note: Those whose mother tongue is English are the native speakers of English. E.g. British, Americans, Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders.

2. The proportion of communication in language (English vis-a-vis Chinese)
Please estimate what percentage (0% - 100%) of the communication at work is conducted in
a. Chinese?
b. English?

Appendix 2. Interview questions

Questions below are concerning the communicative needs of using BELF at work in terms of two aspects, language and culture.

Language-related questions
1. With whom do you communicate in English at work? Why?
2. What kind of tasks do you have to perform in English at work?
3. How important is it for you to use English in your job? Why?

Culture-related questions
4. How do you perceive cultural differences in BELF communication? Why?
5. How will the cultural differences influence communication at work? Why?
6. Based on your personal professional experience, what types of activities and tasks can be impacted or affected by cultural issues? Please explain and provide examples from your own personal experience