

*Exploring Written Business Communication:  
A Next Step for English as a Lingua Franca*

تحري المراسلات التجارية المكتوبة: الخطوة المقبلة للإنجليزية كلغة مشتركة

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### Abstract

English has occupied a growing place in recent years, as an increasing number of international companies have been granted for Algerian partnership. The study seeks to identify the type of English used in written texts between native and non-native partners, and how do its linguistic characteristics affect communication and business success in English as a Lingua Franca context. Much focus has been devoted to English oral workplace communication; yet, little concern has been dedicated to the written medium. The paper maps out the quantitative and qualitative approaches devoted to the case study of an Algerian Cosmetics Liability Limited Company. It describes the use of a triangulation throughout the study by means of a survey with 30 in-service informants, an analysis of different types of written documents in English, typically exploited in the workplace and sequential field observations. The results show that written documents contain a relatively considerable number of grammatical and morpho-syntactic deviations from Standard English; involving word mechanics and order, verbs concord and intercultural considerations to be aware of in business transactions.

**Key-words:** ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), workplace communication, non-native partners, deviation.

### ملخص

احتلت اللغة الإنجليزية في السنوات الأخيرة مكانة مهمة في الجزائر بحكم الشراكة التي منحت للشركات العالمية. إن الهدف المتوخى من هذا العمل هو دراسة نمط اللغة الإنجليزية وعلى استجلاء الخصائص اللسانية للنصوص المكتوبة وكيف تؤثر خصائصها اللغوية على التواصل ونجاح الأعمال بين مستعملي الإنجليزية المشتركة في مختلف مجالات التعامل. لقد تم التركيز سابقاً على التواصل الشفهي في مجالات العمل، ولم يتم التطرق إلى اللغة المكتوبة إلا في جزء يسير في سياق الإنجليزية كلغة مشتركة. حرص هذا العمل. إن هذه الدراسة تحدد معالم المقاربات الكمية والنوعية للغة محل الدراسة متمثلة في شركة جزائرية ذات مسؤولية محدودة لتصنيع مواد التجميل. كما تصف تعددية الطرائق باستجواب 30 عاملاً من الشركة وتحليل نماذج من الوثائق المكتوبة، كذلك تحليل الملاحظات الميدانية التي كانت مساعداً رئيسياً في الدراسة. لقد وضحت نتائج البحث أن النصوص المكتوبة اشتملت نسبياً على عدد من الانحرافات النحوية والإملائية عن اللغة الإنجليزية الأصلية خاصة فيما يتعلق بترتيب الألفاظ ومبانيها. وأخيراً فإن النتائج توضح أن على متعلمي المستقبل أن يكونوا واعين بالاعتبارات الثقافية أثناء تواصلهم الوظيفي في ميادين عملهم.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إتصالات مكان العمل، الشركاء غير الناطقين باللغة الأم، الانحرافات اللغوية، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة مشتركة.

**1- Introduction:**

The Algerian changing nature of work and changing customer demands for products and services are driving the need for organisations to develop business relationships with non -Anglophone suppliers and stipulate suitable workforce, which satisfies the social needs. Indeed, one of the expectations of the Algerian university learner is to be well prepared and knowledgeable enough to be a citizen of the world and an efficient member of a globalized world.

As Lorenzo (2005, p.01) states, “*ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures*”, therefore the Algerian context, where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is practiced outside the university, is a homogeneous ground where English as a Lingua Franca (ELF henceforth) is prominent due the nature of the Algerian commercial partnership.

The notion of English as a global language has been the focus of many debates, yet little has been revealed about its nature and much investigation needs to be carried out as to spot the workable communication stoppers, analyse the whys and identify the subsequent consequences, more specifically in Business English settings. Much focus has been devoted to oral workplace communication; yet, little concern has been dedicated to the written medium in English as a Lingua Franca context as well as in ESP settings. Moreover, the most crucial area of difficulty that ESP learners may face is to be trained effectively to communicate or practice real life situations for the projection of their future careers.

An issue, under focus of much attention, is to identify the type of English used in business communication in a global world. What kind of English, business people use when they come from different countries and where English is not their first or second language? Is the focus on form and accuracy relevant in such situations, as pointed out by the proponents of English as Standard Language? Or is intelligibility correlated only to the message that one intends to send with less focus on form? The research hence addresses and seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1-What are the typical tasks in which English is mostly dominant within the workplace?
- 2- Is the type of English used in Business with the Algerian company's partners (Non Anglophone mainly) exonormative?
- 3- To what extent do deviations from the "native" English relate to: Communication breakdown and business failure?

The case study then intends to explore the use of English as a global language in workplace settings illustrated by language transactions between non-native speakers of English represented by a staff of an Algerian company Liability Limited, and other native and non-native business members in the United Kingdom, Spain, Turkey and China. It will target the analysis of the language practices through the identification of the communication stoppers within asynchronous mails, as well as the investigation of some awkwardness and lack of skills consequences in the use of English in a business environment.

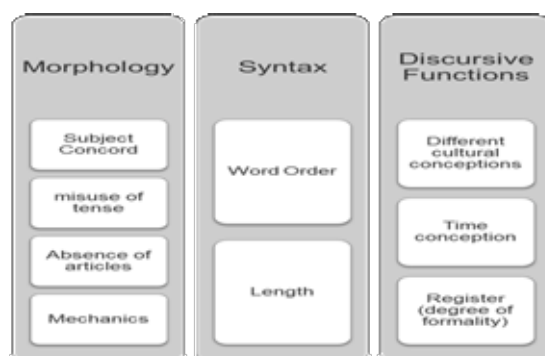
## **2. English as a Lingua Franca:**

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been established recognizably different in nature from English as an International Language. The new factor that has made the difference recently, is that English is not only spoken by English speakers with different nationalities, but also by speakers with different mother tongues in different contexts in the world. In this regard, Mauranen (2018, p.07) opines that "*ELF is not just a contact language where English is a domestic language or otherwise especially salient in a given community, but a non-local lingua franca, the means of communicating between people from anywhere in the world.*"

The definition focuses on several interpretations with regard to the different roles of English. For example, one of the earliest definitions of ELF is the one provided by Firth (1996): "*ELF is a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication*" (p. 240). It is mainly, observed in Europe or all over the countries of the three circles defined by Kachru (1985) especially

the expanding circle. ELF proponents believe that anyone participating in international communication, needs to be familiar with and has in his linguistic repertoire, when appropriate, certain forms (phonological, lexi-co-grammatical and some cultural references.). These language considerations are widely used and widely intelligible across groups of English speakers from different first language backgrounds.

In the same line of thoughts, Jenkins (2001) defined ELF through describing the most essential elements for intelligible pronunciations, such as the sounds /ə/ and /ð / that are subjects among others to variations in English speech. These elements should not be considered as errors according to ELF proponents. In this field of study, D. Crystal (1997) set a model of distinctive grammatical features of New English(es) (p.153), considered as a model of discourse analysis in ELF (p.153). As an alternative, a simplified version may be suggested to facilitate and make the analysis more practical and serviceable for ELF texts analysis is displayed in graph 01. This last has been used as a support for the present study:



Graph (01): Some Levels of Written Text Analysis in English as a Lingua Franca.

The debate over standard norms is held between two poles that oppose the view of the many reasons for which a non-native speaker of English needs to be provided with as a basic and monolithic form of English. The global spread of English has brought the language to new

shapes. With the development of new norms within different contexts, hot debates have begun to turn around the issues of English standards and the definition of English proficiency. While some (e.g. Quirk, 1985) argues that a single Standard English be it American or British English should be promoted over the whole world. Others, mainly Kachru (1985), opines that new forms of English(es) have arisen in new sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts, and these sociolinguistic realities of English should be recognized.

ELF proponents emphasise communicative efficiency of English in ELF communication. Seidlhofer, for instance argues that “the intellectual battles” which are being fought over issues rooted in ideological position, commercial interests, ecological concerns and social identities go largely unnoticed by the largest group of users of ‘English’:

*“Those to whom ‘English’ serves on a daily basis as a lingua franca for conducting their affairs[ ] as the most useful instrument [ ] for communication that cannot be conducted in the mother tongue, be it in business, casual conversation, science or politics - in conversation, in print, on television, or on the internet.” (Seidlhofer 2001: 141)*

In this context, Seidlhofer points to the fact that such speakers are not so much required to be native- like as the “ideal speaker” should be. Particularly when speaking with another non-native speaker, they are rather interested in the speech act and the functional aspect of language than in its form “*people need and want to acquire the instrument ‘English’ whatever the ideological baggage that comes with it*” (ibid: 141).

In this line of thoughts, House (2012) summed up the nature of ELF as being flexible and able to be spread across different linguistic, geographical and cultural areas. It is, also described as to be a fertile ground to foreign forms. The topical lingua franca researches have started to raise great interests among scholars (e.g. Brutt-Griffler 2002; Crystal 2003; Gnutzmann and Intemann 2008; Graddol 2006; Jenkins 2009), and the research carried out, on the role and nature of English used by non-native

speakers, has grown extensively and very rapidly. As Mauranen (2009: 2) notes, today ELF makes “*a vibrant field of study*”. A good indication of this is the International Conference of ELF, arranged annually since 2008, which gathers scholars to present their work and discuss interesting phenomena in the field. In addition, large ELF corpora exist now, called the VOICE corpus completed in Vienna in 2009.

In view of this, Graddol (1997) raises the issue about the kind of model that is established for English as a global language, as he explains, no common form has been established yet. He asserts that everybody talks about global language, but actually, nobody knows about it. In fact, the recent descriptions about the global language concern “Who” speaks it and “Where” it is spoken. Few researchers, namely Andrea Tyler (1994), Seildhofer (2004) have revealed the “How”.

Therefore, this research covers formal features such as lexical, grammatical and phonetic structures, distinguishing ELF core from English as a Native Language (ENL), as well as functional features (for instance, accomplishing success in ELF communication). As its name indicates, the VOICE corpus is mainly spoken and what has been provided in describing ELF as a core has much neglected the written medium.

In fact, thousands of international native to non-native English communications and non-native-to-non-native English exchanges are daily undertaken in a considerable number of settings: trade, diplomacy, tourism, journalism, science technology, and politics. There is no doubt that these kinds of exchanges occur verbally, but the written form cannot be disregarded, and must not be ignored as a subject of research.

Therefore, the present work is a contribution to the general research of the qualitative ELF studies, as one will conduct an analysis of written ELF exchanges in an ESP specific context known as workplace. The case of a Cosmetics Limited Company is one sample of the new trend in Algeria.

### **3. Methodology:**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research was mainly based on fieldwork and participant observations with the aim of identifying progressively the (non- native Vs native) and (non-native Vs non-native) communications. It was based on a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools for selecting, describing and analysing the coherence and cohesion stoppers in business communication.

#### **3.2. Materials and Procedure:**

The research under study was an attempt to analyse the types of English in a workplace setting composed of an Algerian staff. To obtain an overview of the use of English and provide a basis for further analysis, the first step after a short period of exploration, was the distribution of an open- ended questionnaire. During the observation period, the survey results were constantly cross-checked with informal discussions with the staff members. Finally, texts that were composed of mails and other written guides, safety data sheets, contracts and brochures were collected, to be manually and qualitatively analysed.

However, the main concern was not a classification of data for register description. Rather, the special interest was on investigating the influence of deviations from Standard English on Business communication. Grammar structures and style (use of I /We) were observed and other elements such as familiarity in speech and cultural representations were detected in such correspondence. This last was mainly, carried out by users from countries of the outer or expanding circles, who may be influenced by some types of English or their respective native language.

#### **3.3. Participants:**

The Company Ltd. was selected as subject of study, as it held a profile, which was suitable for the present work; It is a client of suppliers from countries in the Inner and Expanding circles. Though small in number, the employees, in more than one service, use English quite frequently



but not predominantly. Consequently, 30 employees out of 50 were selected to be the informants of the current survey.

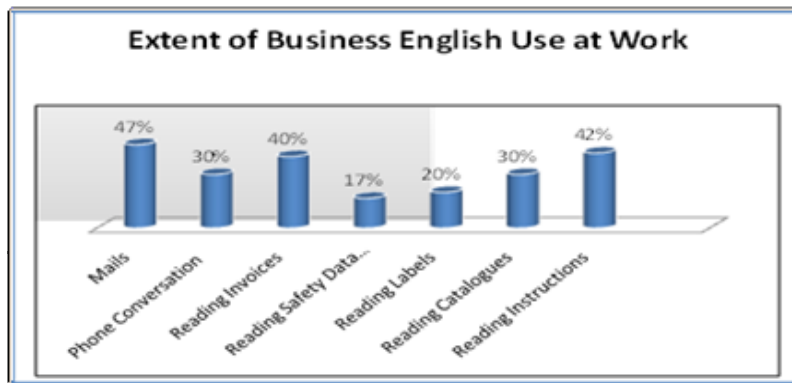
#### 4. Results:

The questionnaire findings revealed different aspects of the company staff profile and writing in English in the workplace. In terms of frequency of writing in English at work, the results of the interviews strengthened the picture obtained from the survey and highly defined the corpus to be selected for analysis.

Section One: The nature of Business English Tasks at Work.

All thirty interviewees reported that reading and writing in English was part of their daily exercises. The survey showed that e-letters and technical documents were the most commonly written documents at work, special focus was put on these types of texts in the informal interviews.

**Figure 01:** Extent of Business English Use at Work



The survey, as could be expected, shows that English is present in all the different tasks performed by the staff. Figure (01) displays that English is highly present in the company sectors, as most of the cosmetic raw materials are imported by foreign companies. According to the em-

ployees' comments during the observation process, a further increase in the use of English had taken place in the two last years. With the spread of synchronous conversations, it is with no exclusion that, in the workplace also, the employees find it easy to have recourse to the instant messages in their daily business communications. However, as confirmed by the members of the personnel, asynchronous conversations were safer and most frequently used, as more than 60% of the partners are in the other part of the globe and the time difference does not allow them to be on line instantly with their collaborators.

As far as reading is concerned, the survey ranks, right after emails, the exercise of reading invoices with a rate of 40% as a regular exercise. Nine respondents out of the thirty indicated that reading catalogues is frequent but they do not mention that it is a daily activity, while six of them use, most usually, the task of reading labels and packaging lists with chemical descriptions. Only five of the informants (16.66%) read safety data materials more often than the other twenty-seven asked population.

Section Two: The Nature of Business English in the Algerian Context

The respondents opined that communication with native speakers was definitely different from the one with non- native ones. They confirmed that most of the misunderstandings occur when they communicate with non-native speakers of English. The following graphs display both the origin and the source of communication breakdowns.

Figure 02: Origin of Incomprehensibility

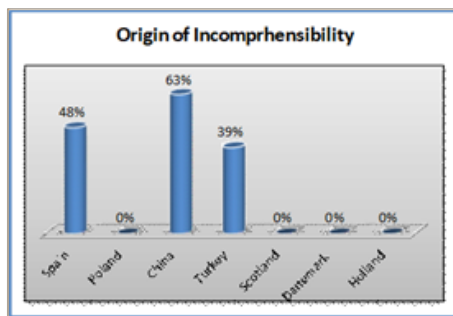


Figure 03: Source of Obstruction

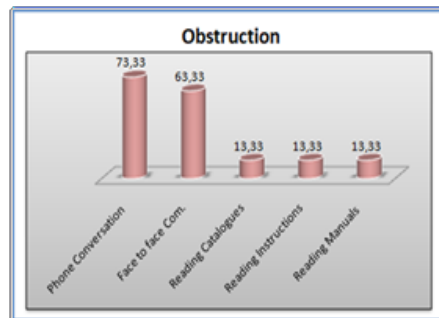


Figure 02 shows that phone conversations and face-to-face communications represented the source of communication breakdowns with suppliers and technicians in provenance of China, Spain and Turkey mainly. The fact that these above-mentioned suppliers were listed as those with whom there are some difficulties, to a certain extent; it justifies one's curiosity in the sense of the research questions, in addition to the tasks cited by the employees as the source of obstruction (figure 03). It impels, also, the research to probe the communication, which occurs between the Algerian staff and the interlocutors listed by the informants.

The company was involved in working with NS as well as NNS; therefore, it was noticed during the short period of observation, that the employees used to prepare their mails and talks in written form by consulting each other and using dictionaries, when it happens to speak with natives. They needed to be prepared to present their enquiries, requests, as well as their proposals in English clearly and precisely. Standard-like English was necessary for them to make this happen. Regarding daily operations, if the good command of English was weak, they had to translate the messages from French to English and vice versa. Otherwise, as they confirmed, they were not able to issue their instructions effectively.

More than half the population (66.66%) ascertained to have encountered World English(es), and revealed that they were disoriented by different varieties of English and felt lacking confidence, when meeting some unfamiliar pronunciations, spellings and other deviations from Standard English norms.

The general comments demonstrated insightful observations for an unconscious alertness of the employees, inside the company, about the different ways English was used for different purposes, and with multiple origins that must be deeply focused on. In fact, staff members needed to spend a considerable period to be acquainted with the NNS's language and to learn some communication strategies to cope with the features of English as a Lingua Franca.

The analysed text types indicated that the written documents in

Standard English, were only the official ones such as commercial papers, catalogues or manuals, devoted to fairs and exhibitions. Whereas other text types, such as instructions, invoices, and manuals which were intended for a local use, were deviated from Standard English and were not necessarily requiring high level of English proficiency. Not surprisingly, e-letters were considered to be the type of texts with the lowest level of language proficiency. However, a great deal of misunderstandings behind communication breakdown took place in mails, especially if the type of deviation concerns mainly the change in word order, misuse of tense, or more importantly the cultural different conceptions.

Table (01) displays the detected deviations from standard in the miscellaneous workplace documents. They were also classified according to their linguistic nature and on their respective provenance.

Table 01: Frequent Instances of Deviations from Standard English

Morphology	Syntax	Pragmatics and discourse
<p>"We offers" (Spain)                      "there is problems"                      (Turkey/ China)                      "Regarding the shipments of the good, I'd like to ask you why the <b>good don't</b> goes through <b>Ghangzhou?</b> because we have other products, that we gather and ships together from <b>Ghangzhou</b>." (China)                      "I will <b>deluxery</b> the bank details and reply you asap tomorrow"                      I sent /send the parts (China/Spain)                      "On the 23th we start manufacture examples of long neck bottles for your attention." (Turkey)                      "Spout standing pouch is very fit for the <b>packagings</b> of the <b>flavoring</b> and the soy asuce which <b>can be eat</b> up at once after open" (China)                      -----                      "the <b>cheng</b>", "liquid", "bagrow". (China)                      instead of "the change, "liquid", "background" (Standard)</p>	<p>"Rinse your head and retain half hair conditioner. If it is dry you will cause it to frizz", (Spain)                      "To detangle your hair, from the end you start at the roots of the hair". (Spain)                      "According to the characteristic of fan-coil air-conditioning systems you require cooling formula of fan-coil units based on the heat transfer and gauge cooling system which can monitor the individual air-conditioning cooling consumption during a period of time by detecting the parameters of inlet air condition - temperature and humidity -- of the fan-coil air-conditioning system as well as the parameters of inlet cooling water provided by chiller." (China)</p>	<p>Absence of receipt of acknowledgement                      Familiarity:                      "I miss you" (China)                      "Can you send me a picture of you?" (China)                      "You found a wife?"                      "I want to imagine your life there."                      Use of "Later" or "Very soon" as indeterminate by time.                      Chronological carelessness in sending commercial documents.                      Different conceptions about "colour terms"</p>

The table illustrates written texts analysis outcomes after using the model of ELF written texts analysis suggested earlier. Recurrent features were detected and tabulized.

**5. Data Analysis:**

The Impact of the Deviations from Standard English on Business Communication.

It can be stated that the reasons behind such deviations from Standard English are mainly due to three factors. First, the outer circle English is gaining ground with the spread of electronic communication and globalization, and that outer English speakers do not show great caution to standard norms, despite the impact of deviations on business communication. Speakers refer to Standard English in highly formal situations that are manifested in commercial official documents shared worldwide.

The second factor is the impact of the native speakers' language on English. A suggestion may be done, in this sense, inspired from (Trask, 1999); through his definition, he provides then evidence that every system, recognized as language, does have a grammar and that no language has little grammar than another. However, samples of grammatical classes such as lexical, number, and gender categories, are different compared to other languages systems that do not necessarily have the same ground to classify their words. In some languages for instance, there are four to ten classes of gender categorizations. Meaning construction via structures of word order and tense in grammar is expressed contrastively in English compared to other languages. Therefore, the impact of Chinese, Spanish and Turkish languages systems are highly present in their users' English correspondence.

The third factor refers to the traits that characterise English varieties, for instance Chinese English which has a number of grammatical features that grant it a Chinese style. These grammatical characteristics are mainly due to differences between Chinese and English. For example, because Chinese language does not have articles, Chinese people tend not to use articles when speaking English. The articles "the" and "a" are either absent from speech or used differently from native varieties of English (Yan Zhijiang, 2002:231). In fact, this is what was identified with respect to Chinese written texts. In addition, Chinese does not have any equivalent to the English auxiliary verb "do". When asking questions, Chinese may omit "do" altogether. A question such as "Do you like the samples?" may come out as "You like it?" or to indicate it really is a question, "You like samples, yes?" In a similar idea, Chinese speakers of English may

also use only one form of the verb, regardless of person or number. This is perhaps most obvious with the present tense third person form of the verb. It is common to hear Chinese people, even those with high levels of proficiency in English, say sentences like “He eat in the cafeteria everyday” (Yan Zhijiang, 2002:231).

There is also a predisposition for Chinese speakers not to use English tenses appropriately, since Chinese language does not have grammatical categories of tense (Trask, 1999). In Chinese, the verb has a complete different shape in the different tenses, sometimes other verbs entities are used when the time changes; therefore, the notion of tense does not exist in the Chinese speaker’s mind. In Chinese, only the time marker defines the time of the sentence, the fact that justifies the Chinese speakers’ misuse of tense “as a pattern” and lack of knowledge in his association of the right time marker to the right tense form.

With respect to cultural, some psycholinguists, as mentioned by Trask (ibid) and on the basis of Sapire -Whorf hypothesis, demonstrate that every language has a set of what we call basic colour terms. English, for example, is considered to have exactly eleven: black, white, red, green, blue, yellow, orange, purple, grey, brown and pink (though some words may be referred to other shades for purple). Other colour terms, such as scarlet, lime green, red-orange and blonde, are non-basic, as stated by Trask. Other languages have different numbers of basic colour terms: for instance Chinese / Singaporean have only four basic colour terms and the other shades go under these four categories. However, one may suggest that this theory can justify the incapacity of Chinese to reply the Algerian mails when they ask for several shades of colour in metallic and plastic materials using specific English colour terms. Chinese did not manifest any reaction during months. These findings suggest that the communication breakdown was because Chinese speakers’ conceptualization of colour terms consists of only four categories.

Finally, the survey showed that the employees, inside the workplace, relied on their own ability to cope with previously unknown fea-

tures of new English different from what has been learnt previously in institutions as English for Academic Purpose (EAP). In asynchronous correspondence, clarity and comprehensibility were emphasised by the staff as being more important than linguistic correctness. The degree of linguistic correctness and formality, as well as the choice of salutations and complimentary closes do not really have a strong impact on business communication failure, yet it provided communication inconveniences.

#### **6. Conclusion:**

The Cosmetic Co. Ltd. case study has highlighted some considerations for future business education, particularly about the use of English as a Lingua Franca and to some hints on intercultural communication. The study shows that English, in business texts produced by speakers from Outer Circle Countries, is not completely free from being mixed with World Englishes features. Workplace English is then identified as exo-normative. It is characterised by deviations from Standard English such in grammar, vocabulary and syntax, besides the distinct speakers' cultural conceptions. These different uses of English are not errors but deviations and only the awareness of these elements in workplace communications makes the business communication breakdown.

The findings suggest that consciousness-raising studies based on frequent grammatical structures and typical constructions in texts and writings, could be relevant for students to achieve increased English varieties awareness in ESP situations. This would be a step towards attaining a higher degree of linguistic comprehensibility and interpretability as well as reducing communication breakdown, caused by the influence of other languages conventions on English in workplace writings.

Moreover, unawareness of the foreign partner's cultural dimensions and conceptualizations in business dealings is a major hindrance to communication. Basic colour terms, use of receipt of acknowledgement and social discursive functions form the basis for this analysis that largely concerned the intercultural detected features in business practices. In view of this, incorporating generalities and features about World English(es)



and English as a Lingua Franca in ESP courses, at universities and institutes of technology, science and business, can be assumed to be important and relevant for students in these programmes.

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