Abstract

This article will provide an overview of current research focusing on the use of English as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts. It selectively reviews research investigating the role of written and spoken communication in English and the work that has been done on specific text genres used by the international business community, such as negotiations, meetings, e-mail and advertising. The use of English as a means of communication within the business world will be discussed with specific reference to the work of the researchers showcased in this Special Issue, and there is also a discussion of the implications of these and other research findings for the teaching of English for Specific Business Purposes.

1. Introduction

In a recent article which provides an overview of research perspectives on teaching English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) in general, Seidlhofer (2004) includes details – albeit brief – of the researchers that have investigated the use of English as a *lingua franca* in international business. She comments that they “illustrate the potential that empirical research holds for a better understanding of how ELF functions in international business settings” (2004, pp. 221–222). My intention here will be to expand this point to explore the findings of empirical research into ELF communication in business over the past decade, including the implications that these findings may have for the teaching of Business EFL, or BELF (see Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, this issue for further discussion).

The dominance of English used as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts is now seemingly beyond dispute. Studies around the world, for instance, by Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) in Finland, Akar (2002) in Turkey and Bilbow (2002) in Hong Kong, all confirm that English is an intrinsic part of communication.
in multinational settings and a fact of life for many business people. Despite Graddol’s most recent suggestion that English may ultimately be replaced by languages such as Chinese, Hindi/Urdu or Arabic as the *lingua franca* of the international business arena, this seems unlikely to occur within the next fifty years, suggesting that an understanding of the role played by English will remain of key interest (Graddol, 2004). The contributions to this Special Issue aim to exemplify the use of English as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts as reflected in a variety of different communicative genres and in the role of language(s) within them. In particular, the papers focus on the role of spoken and written communication in English in business, specifically discussing a number of important communicative genres in which English is commonly used, including negotiations (Planken), meetings (Louhiala-Salminen et al.; Chew) and e-mail (Louhiala-Salminen et al.). The researchers involved represent several different international perspectives from Europe (Planken; Louhiala-Salminen et al.), North America (Rogers, Wong, & Connor) and Asia (Rogers et al.; Chew) and in each case, the implications of the research findings for the teaching of English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) are discussed. In this introductory article I will attempt to provide an overview of current research focussing on the use of English as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts. I will first selectively review research investigating the role of written and spoken communication in English, looking in particular at the work that has been done on specific text genres used by the international business community, such as negotiations, meetings, e-mail and advertising. I will then look at each of the contributions in turn and discuss their relevance for the field of ESBP. In the final part of the paper, I will look at ESBP as research-based practice, both in terms of research-based approaches to the teaching of ESBP and in the teaching materials that are currently available.

In her introductory paper to the 1996 Special Issue of *English for Specific Purposes* on Business English, Maggie Jo St. John commented, “There is a definite need to understand more of the generic features of different events such as meetings, to identify common features of effective communications, to understand the role of cultural influences and the ways in which language and business strategies interact” (1996, p. 15). With this in mind, this Special Issue for 2005 will aim to explore not only how the field has developed and to what extent St. John’s call has been answered over the past decade, but also to speculate on what it might become in the future.

### 2. Business discourse and communicative genres in English

In the course of the last decade, two trends have become increasingly important in the investigation of business language and research focussing on ESBP. While these were already apparent in some of the work featured in the 1996 Business English Special Issue, notably in the articles by Charles (1996) and Louhiala-Salminen (1996), they have since become of influence in the work of the majority of the researchers interested in business language, at least those working outside of North
America (see also Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002, for further discussion). Firstly, there has been a shift from the analysis of the language used in isolated written texts or speech events, towards the analysis of contextualised communicative genres, emphasising the organisational and/or cultural factors that contribute to the realisation of the individual text/event under investigation. This discursive turn is apparent in the work of many researchers investigating English in business contexts, whatever their geographical location or the genre(s) they have chosen to study, as I will go on to discuss below. The second trend is closely related to this increasing preoccupation with language as discourse: there has been a shift in focus from language skills as the driving force behind ESBP research, to an increasing concern with language strategy, i.e., a concern with identifying those strategies that can be associated with effective communication in business, regardless of whether the speaker/writer is a native or non-native speaker.

Recent discourse studies, involving a contextualised analysis particularly in the form of a genre study, have often focussed on one of four major communicative genres; negotiations, meetings, e-mail and business letters, although this is, of course, not an exhaustive list. For spoken discourse, negotiations are exemplified by the pioneering work of Mirjaliisa Charles and by the article by Brigitte Planken that follows in this Special Issue, and meetings have been investigated by researchers such as Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Sandra Harris for British and Italian meetings, by Grahame Bilbow and Pamela Rogerson-Revell, respectively, for meetings in Hong Kong, and most recently, by Gina Poncini in her account of the type of multicultural, multilingual meeting that must certainly be a common feature of at least the European business context if not elsewhere (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Bilbow, 2002; Charles, 1996; Poncini, 2004; Rogerson-Revell, 1999).

Charles’ (1996) study, included in the previous English for Specific Purposes Special Issue on Business English was, in the author’s own words, an early attempt “... to partly fill the gap between a contextual, business approach and a linguistic text-based approach” (Charles, 1996, p. 20). Drawing both on discourse analysis and business studies of negotiation, she demonstrates convincingly how the linguistic choices made in negotiation situations are a direct reflection of the relationship between the participants involved, i.e., whether their relationship is already established or whether it is new. Charles introduces the concept of “professional face” which may be threatened or saved by the participants involved in the negotiation, through a series of strategies or tactical moves, highlighting the strategic nature of the communication event. More recent work on negotiations shows a continued interest in their strategic nature as it is realised by both native and non-native speakers of English, such as the recent extension of Charles’ work by Vuorela (2005) and the exemplary work by Spencer-Oatey on intercultural negotiations which provides a comprehensive framework accounting for the processes involved in the management of rapport between the participants (Spencer-Oatey, 2000).

Like Charles’ work on negotiations, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ study of British and Italian business meetings has also been of considerable influence on later
work on the discourse of business meetings. The study remains of interest as a ground-breaking attempt to understand real communication involving real business people, and it includes both a cross-cultural analysis of the structural and pragmatic properties of British and Italian business meetings, respectively, as well as an intercultural study of the specific meetings that took place in an Anglo-Italian joint venture. It provides countless examples of the mismatch between the language taught for meetings and the language used in meetings that Williams so eloquently described at the end of the 1980s (Williams, 1988). More recent work on business meetings shows a concern with discourse, and the communicative strategies used by participants in the meeting. The two studies based in Hong Kong that I have mentioned above, for instance, provide useful examples of English lingua franca meeting discourse in very similar settings that use a different approach in the analysis.

In Bilbow’s (2002) study of three types of business meetings recorded at a large multinational airline corporation, he applies speech act theory to look specifically at commissive speech acts, like promises and statements of commitment. He reports on differences in when commissive speech acts were used and how they were realised, both between the Western and Chinese participants, and between the different types of meetings. His study therefore suggests that national culture and organizational practices may be of influence in determining the strategic choices that the speakers make, as well as in the linguistic realisations they choose. Rogerson-Revell’s study of management meetings in Hong Kong also focusses on an international airline corporation, and looks specifically at interactive style and interactive strategies. These interactive strategies are procedure-related strategies, which are those used to manage the talk, and message-related strategies, which are those used to indicate how the content is to be understood (Rogerson-Revell, 1999). Rogerson-Revell identifies contrasting interactive styles, characterised by more or less procedure-related and message-related strategies depending on the type of meeting under investigation, and she goes on to discuss the implications of findings like these for ESBP language training. This discussion provides a particularly useful overview of the mismatch that continued to exist between research and materials development in business discourse and ESBP at the end of the last decade, together with a series of suggestions as to how we can raise students’ awareness and develop their language skills using activities such as case-studies, presentations, task-based language activities and fieldwork, collecting samples of “real workplace interactions” (Rogerson-Revell, 1999, adapted from Brislin & Yoshida, 1994).

The final study on spoken business discourse I will refer to here is perhaps the most relevant for the use of English as a lingua franca in the international business arena and the situations in which it is used. Building on Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ work, Poncini (2002, 2003, 2004) gives a detailed account of an Italian company’s meetings with its international distributors in June 1997 and June 1998, representing 12–15 different countries. Poncini shows how the participants in the meetings construct their business relationship through their choice of linguistic strategies, and she also explores the role played by the eight languages other than English that are used in the meetings, underscoring the fact that the communication event is often
considerably more complex than the label of English as a lingua franca would suggest. As in Charles’ work on negotiations, Poncini demonstrates that the participants in the meetings build solidarity and common ground to facilitate their shared goals in a variety of different ways, using language choice, e.g., English, Italian, German, etc., strategic (functional) choices, e.g., the evaluation strategies that speakers use to express and attitude or opinion (Thompson & Hunston, 2000), and their choice of linguistic features.

For written discourse, the work of Vijay Bhatia in particular has been of tremendous influence on research in written business genres, shaping the work of a generation of applied linguists specialising in writing in organizational contexts, including Didar Akar, Paul Gillaerts, Julio Gimenez, Leena Louhiala-Salminen, Catherine Nickerson and Philip Shaw, to name but a few (e.g., Akar, 2002; Gillaerts, 2005; Gimenez, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen et al., this issue; Nickerson, 2000; Shaw, 2005). All these researchers (and others) working in various places around the world, use the approach to genre analysis outlined by Bhatia (1993) in their analysis of English business texts, making a distinction between the discriminative moves that structure a genre, and the non-discriminative rhetorical strategies that (business) writers draw on in putting the genre to creative use. As I have commented elsewhere (see for example Nickerson, 2000; Nickerson & de Groot, 2005), a series of non-discriminative strategies realised through specific linguistic choices would seem to be a particularly appropriate construct in understanding the texts that occur in business settings, because of the competitive edge that is necessary in order for the writers (and speakers for that matter) to be successful in business. Despite Bhatia’s self-professed movement over the course of the last decade away from a concern with the educational contexts that typified ESP-type genre analysis at the beginning of the 1990s, towards other social contexts including business, his most recent work exploring the way in which context and text are related remains a uniquely accessible account of interest both for researchers and for practitioners alike (Bhatia, 1993, 2004).

Building on Bhatia’s work, the large scale project by Ulla Connor and her colleagues in Belgium and the US (e.g., Connor, Davis, & De Rycker, 1995; Connor, Davis, De Rycker, Phillips, & Verkens, 1997; Upton & Connor, 2001) is an exemplary account of cultural differences in application letters written in English. Connor et al. (1995) present a cross-cultural genre and move analysis focussing on the rhetorical strategies that Flemish and US writers use, Connor et al. (1997) show how the research findings were used to inform a course in international business writing, and Upton and Connor (2001) report on the methodology in the project where Wordsmith was used to analyse the linguistic features that realised the politeness strategies writers selected in their letters. The project shows a concern with the application letter as an accessible genre used across several different cultures to interface with the business world, and it exemplifies both the shift in emphasis from language to discourse I have discussed above together with an increasing concern with communicative strategies as a hallmark of ESBP.

Not surprisingly, e-mail communication has been of increasing and continuing interest in the decade since the 1996 Business English Special Issue. It can also be
used to illustrate the shift that there has been towards the contextualised analysis of
discourse. Work by both Nickerson (2000) and by Gimenez (2002) for example, fo-
cusses on the use of English in the Netherlands and Argentina, respectively, and
both investigate the strategic nature of the discourse and the realisation of the e-mail
texts as a construction of the corporate context. Nickerson’s study, however, looks
only at e-mail within the multinational context she studies, whereas Gimenez looks
also at the interaction of e-mail with fax and the contextual reasons for selecting one
rather than the other as these can be related to national and corporate culture, high-
lighting the importance of understanding the relationship between genres as well as
their individual characteristics. Finally, in perhaps the next stage in the process, the
study by Louhiala-Salminen et al., in this Special Issue, looks not only at e-mail and
other forms of written communication within the two large Nordic corporations
that were studied, it also illustrates how the same discourse characteristics are pre-
sent both in written and spoken English lingua franca communication. This type of
integrated analysis is clearly one way forward for research into business discourse,
where a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach is taken in the analysis of a num-
ber of different genres and media, and their linguistic realisations, within the same
organizational context (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002). Such integrated
analysis, should I believe, also involve an investigation of the interface between
those genres where English is used as a lingua franca and those where other lan-
guages are used, e.g., the e-mail and other documents translated into Spanish in
the Argentinean subsidiary in Gimenez’s investigation, the co-existent e-mail in
Dutch in Nickerson’s study and the use of Swedish rather than English in some spo-
ken communication in the Swedish–Finnish merger in Louhiala-Salminen et al.’s
account.

3. In this Special Issue

The Special Issue begins with Brigitte Planken’s account of a negotiation simula-
tion comparing two groups of non-native speaker informants; a group of experi-
enced negotiators and a group of inexperienced students. The study underlines
how important it is to identify the types of strategies that business people use, since
the experienced business people used as informants consistently used strategies in a
negotiation situation that were different than those used by the inexperienced stu-
dent informants. The study is extremely useful, in that it convincingly demonstrates
that despite similar levels of language proficiency, the informants with work experi-
ence were generally much better communicators than the student informants, sug-
gest that identifying, categorising and then presenting these strategies in a
classroom situation is a crucial aspect of helping students to be effective in interna-
tional business.

Leena Louhiala-Salminen, Mirjaliisa Charles and Anne Kankaanranta then pro-
vide a snapshot of several common situations in multinational corporations, where
employees need to be able to communicate effectively in a variety of different gen-
res, in communication with at least one national culture in addition to their own,
and in at least two different languages, one of which will be a foreign language. And all of this is in addition to being effective in a professional capacity, as a banker or manager for instance. Providing appropriate teaching materials for the future employees of corporations like the two they profile, Paper Giant and PankkiBanken, would seem to be a challenge that can only be met through the continued collection of data in a real setting, in order to identify similarities and differences that exist across the international business world, together with the types of communicative tasks in English that business people need to complete. Their work underlines the usefulness of the type of needs analysis survey represented by Barbara, Celani, Collins, and Scott (1996) in the 1996 Business English Special Issue, exemplified here by the survey of English for banking in Hong Kong reported on by Suan Kheng Chew.

Chew’s work is one of several contributions made to a large-scale project within all of the seven higher educational institutions in Hong Kong, intended to identify the English language needs of business students and to provide them with appropriate teaching materials (Bhatia & Candlin, 2001; see also Jackson, 2004). Drawing on informants ranging from students to business professors, and from language trainers to business professionals, the project has been an ambitious and indeed, successful, attempt to provide an inventory of ESBP language needs across the community, with direct applications for teaching purposes. Chew’s account showcases the type of information that can be gleaned from specialist informants that have just entered the workforce, as they identify the skills they need in English to become effective in the workplace. Survey-based research of this nature clearly has a role to play in identifying not only the English language needs within a particular context, but also the way it interfaces with the other languages in use, such as Finnish and Swedish in the Paper Giant/PankkiBanken context, and Cantonese and Mandarin, in the Hong Kong banking context.

In a similar way to the Hong Kong project, the account by Michael Connor, Priscilla Rogers and Irene Wong of the collaborative work between Michigan Business School in the US and Nanyang Business School in Singapore, provides an excellent example of what can be achieved through the co-operation between enlightened institutions and the individual researchers concerned. In this case, it is interesting to note that despite the geographical separation of the institutions involved, the research team were able to identify sufficient similarities within the two (teaching) contexts, to make the collaboration not only possible, but ultimately extremely fruitful. The change in emphasis in Singapore, from proficiency to strategic communication, is a heartening example of what can be achieved when a tertiary institution decides to re-assess the needs of their students and then implement the necessary change. In addition, the researchers make clear that the US partners in the project also benefited from exposure to the complex Singaporean business context as it is embedded within a multicultural, multilingual society. The Michigan–Nanyang project therefore encompasses both a shift from proficiency to strategy in the change in approach to teaching in Singapore, and at the same time, particularly from the perspective of the US partners, an increasing awareness of the complexities of the business context.
4. ESBP: research into practice?

So what then, are the implications of the findings of the studies represented in this Special Issue for the teaching of ESBP, and the others like them that I have reviewed above, and how have they been of influence in the development of teaching materials over the last decade? Many of the researchers involved with the analysis of English in business contexts are themselves also active as practitioners in teaching business English and/or communication, including all of the contributors to this Special Issue, and there has been an increasing acknowledgement in their work that there needs to be a shift from a focus on language proficiency, i.e., from a concern with how can we ensure that non-native speakers of English sound more like native speakers of English, to a concern with teaching the rhetorical strategies, and their linguistic realisations, that have been identified as effective strategies through the investigation of various business genres. Furthermore, there has been an increasing concern with the need to account for the complex nature of the business context, and the range of cultural and organisational factors that determine what an effective communication strategy is and to incorporate this information into teaching and teaching materials (e.g., Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Nickerson, 2002). Despite their observations, however, frequently included at the conclusion of a research account, few researcher-practitioners have actually gone on either to report on their own teaching of ESBP, or to develop teaching materials on the basis of their research findings, at least not published materials. In fact, as I will discuss below, a survey of current publications suggests that the divide between teaching materials on the one hand, and research on the other, may in fact have deepened.

4.1. Research-based practice in ESBP

Research reporting with a specific focus on the teaching of ESBP remains sparse, although a recent edition of English for Specific Purposes focussing on language for business purposes (2004, issue 23) does provide two relevant examples. Zhu (2004), for instance, surveys the writing assignments required in undergraduate and graduate business courses and discusses the implications of her findings for EAP instruction. This study underlines the usefulness of survey research in informing our teaching, since the investigation Zhu describes, could be easily transferred to other contexts and help to inform ESBP instruction. The second example by Almagro Esteban and Pérez Cañado (2004) looks in detail at the use of the case method in teaching ESBP. An established method of instruction in US business schools, the authors explain how the case method can also be used to great effect with non-native speakers of English, providing ample opportunity for the activities recommended by researchers like Rogerson-Revell (1999) such as presentations and task-based language activities in a simulated classroom setting.

Other aspects of the teaching of ESBP are explored by Brett (2000) in his report on the attitudes of undergraduate learners of business English from France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands to the incorporation of two interactive multimedia...
Business English CD-ROMs into their Business English course, and by Connor et al. (1997), as I have detailed above, on the implications of their research findings in application letters for teaching. One final study by Planken, van Hooft, and Korzilius (2004), describes a number of awareness raising tasks incorporated into foreign language courses for learners of Business French, German, Spanish and English, in which students observe and analyse authentic business interactions as a precursor to their own proficiency practice. Students are asked to identify the rhetorical strategies they observe, for instance in a video recording of a business negotiation, and to comment on how that strategy is realised linguistically. The study therefore shows how the use of language may be contextualised throughout a course in LSBP, referring to current research on foreign language acquisition, business pragmatics, intercultural communication and business discourse. As is the case with the study by Connor et al. (1997), it provides a useful example of research-based practice which could be used in many different classroom contexts and at various levels of proficiency. The very small number of research-based teaching accounts in ESBP indicates that this is an area of investigation that remains largely unexplored. Not surprisingly this has parallels with the link between research and teaching materials as I will go on to discuss below.

4.2. Teaching materials for ESBP

A brief survey of twenty of the published materials that St. John includes in her introduction to the 1996 Special Issue, reveals that seven are still available – all now between ten and twenty years old. Although, of course, these will certainly have remained in print due to popular demand, this must surely also be an indication that the market has remained somewhat static over the last two decades. In addition, although an advanced search of the Amazon.uk book site using the key words, English for Specific Business Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, and English for Specific Purposes plus Business, results in 163, 611 and 143 publications, respectively, the majority of the publications listed are either bilingual business dictionaries, are intended for learners at a low level of proficiency (e.g., Barnard & Cady, 2003), focus on business letters (e.g., Bly, 2004), or date from 1999 or before. The keywords ELT; English for Business, are more promising, yielding a total of 772 publications. Of the 31 listed that were published – or due to be published – in 2004, however, where content information was available, only Mascull (2004) and Collins Cobuild (2004), specifically mention a link with (corpus-based) research as the rationale behind the volume, both of which are intended as advanced business vocabulary books. Knight, O’Neil, and Hayden (2004) mention “realistic business situations” in their book intended for elementary/lower-intermediate learners, and Sweeney (2004) reports that students “analyse [the] requirements of the relevant communicative situations” in his course for intermediate level students, suggesting at least some concern with the real world. However, in neither case is there any additional information on how these situations were identified or operationalised further. The other ELT Business English publications scheduled to appear in 2004, are either skills-based courses for learners at low levels of proficiency, e.g., Dignen, Flinders,
and Sweeney (2004) combining business English and general English, and Andon and O’Riordan (2004) providing a self-help book on teaching yourself business English, or they are updated editions of existing texts, e.g., Geffner (2004) a fourth edition of a book on business English writing and Naterop and Revell (2004) the third edition of a book on telephoning in English which, according to the authors, does take “the most important recent developments in telecommunications” into account. None of these books refer ostensibly to the findings of research in their descriptions, with the exception of the corpus-based accounts. This suggests that although we may certainly know more about the “generic features... common features... and cultural influences” that St. John (1996) identifies as areas that should be of interest in Business English, we do not draw any more on research in our development of teaching materials now, than we did a decade ago.

5. The future of English as a business lingua franca: research and practice

The research and teaching materials I have selectively reviewed above suggest three possible ways forward for the future of research and practice in English as a business lingua franca and in ESBP. Firstly, the development of a shared framework for research or the adaptation of an existing framework, secondly, the need to refer to native English business speakers and writers alongside non-native speakers and writers, and thirdly, the pressing need to refer to the findings of research in the development of teaching materials. I will deal with each of these in turn.

In his well known discussion of English as a second language (L2) in the mid-1980s, Kachru speculates on the status of English across a number of different communities in the world (Kachru, 1985). He identifies three different groups of speakers of English; English as a first language (L1), English as a second language (L2) and English as a foreign language (FL) and refers to these as the “inner” circle countries, the “outer” circle countries and the “expanding” circle countries. Seidlhofer (2004) provides an extensive review of recent work in ELF that builds on this understanding of English, and to some extent there may indeed be useful parallels with the specific use of English as a lingua franca in business contexts, since it may certainly be possible to identify several different geographical areas in a similar way where English is used as a first language (L1), as a second language (L2) or as a foreign language (FL), respectively. The research I have reviewed above investigating situations where English is used as a lingua franca in international business contexts, provides examples of all three situations, such that Charles’ work on negotiations and Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ work on meetings draws on British English native speaker discourse, Bilbow’s account and Rogerson-Revell’s account of meeting discourse in Hong Kong investigates second language (Cantonese) speakers of English, and much of the European-based research, including Connor et al. in application letters and Poncini in meetings, involves speakers or writers of English as a foreign language. In reality, however, the situation is somewhat more complex than this would suggest, since the international business community is characterised by a multinational workforce continually moving and communicating
across borders, leading to numerous situations in which English is used by first, second and foreign language speakers of English simultaneously, sometimes in co-existence with one or more other languages. For example, in my own account of e-mail discourse at the Amsterdam division of a multinational corporation I found British and Dutch writers of English using both Dutch and English, and on occasion, a hybrid form involving both languages, in the investigations of meetings in Hong Kong by both Bilbow and Rogerson-Revell, English is used by native, second and foreign language speakers, and in Poncini’s account of meetings in Italy, there are both foreign and first language speakers of English using English, with up to eight other additional languages being used at any one time. Some of this complexity is captured by Babcock and Du-Babcock (2001) in their award-winning account of language-based communication zones in international business communication, in which they propose eight communication zones according to the participants involved and the languages used. And although this model is as complex as the situations it seeks to account for, it shows considerable promise as a comprehensive and perhaps ultimately, definitive, framework. It could provide us with a useful way of thinking about the use of English as a lingua franca in business settings around the world.

Much has been written on the status of English in general around the globe and the political consequences of its adoption and use (see for example Mair, 2003; Pennycook, 1994). Interestingly, most research into English in international business contexts has remained largely uncritical in approach, opting instead for a view of English as a neutral medium not associated with any one particular dominant culture. One exception to this is the 1998 research forum on business communication research edited by Priscilla Rogers in the Business Communication Quarterly (Rogers, 1998), where she refers to the “English divide” within the business communication discipline, depending on whether English is viewed as a neutral “cultureless” language used for business purposes, whether it is resented by those required to learn it to be successful in business, or whether it is seen (by first language speakers) as being appropriated by the international business community, precluding the need for native speakers of English to learn another language. Rogers sees this “English divide” as a determining factor in the type of research activities that we pursue, such that research in countries where English is a foreign or second language is characterised by multilingual research, whereas research originating in the English-speaking world tends to focus on, or indeed prioritise, English. Six years on, this division still remains in international business communication research in general and research focussing on English in particular, as is also reflected in the papers that make up this Special Issue. Multilingual environments in non-English speaking countries, like those investigated by Louhiala-Salminen et al. in Sweden and Finland, and Chew in Hong Kong, are frequently the focus, and native speakers tend not to be investigated unless they are viewed in contrast to non-native speakers. The type of project that Rogers, Wong and Connor report on involving US and Singaporean teams of researchers at two business schools remains an exception, although it is exactly this type of collaborative endeavour that I believe would enrich our understanding of the use of English in international business contexts, including those in English-speaking
countries, and would perhaps lead to a better understanding of business discourse as a creative, strategic activity.

In describing the booming market for Business English in the 1990s, St. John (1996, p. 15) refers to Business English as “a materials-led movement rather than a research-led movement”. I believe that we should be heartened by the fact that in the eight years that has passed, research into business discourse in general and Business English in particular has revealed much more about the “common features of effective communications... the role of cultural influences and the ways in which language and business strategies interact” (1996, p. 15). The challenge for the future will be to apply these research findings both in the development of appropriate teaching materials and in our teaching of ESBP.

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