

The Role Of English In Global Business Communication And Corporate Culture

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Abstract: English has evolved from a national language to the dominant medium of international business, shaping not only day-to-day communication but also the deeper structures of corporate culture. This article investigates the role of English as a lingua franca in multinational corporations and its impact on organizational practices, identity, and performance. Drawing on an integrative review of research in international business, applied linguistics, and organizational studies, it synthesizes findings about the rise of English as a corporate language, the emergence of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), and the strategic management of language in firms. The paper analyzes how English enables global coordination, accelerates knowledge transfer, and supports brand coherence, while also introducing asymmetries of power, identity tensions, and risks of exclusion for non-native speakers. It argues that language choices are not only communicative decisions but also cultural interventions that shape artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions within organizations. Case-based evidence suggests that deliberate "language strategies" can align corporate culture with globalization goals by balancing English mandates with multilingual realities, investing in global communicative competence, and designing inclusive practices around meetings, documentation, and leadership communication. The article concludes by proposing a culture-sensitive, sector-aware approach to language management that treats English as an enabling infrastructure rather than a universal solution and highlights research-informed levers—training, translation ecosystems, and leadership modeling—to mitigate inequities while realizing performance gains.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; BELF; corporate culture; organizational communication; language strategy; multinational corporations; intercultural competence; globalization.

Introduction: In the early twenty-first century, English has become the de facto language of international business. Multinational companies across manufacturing, technology, finance, and services have explicitly mandated English as a common corporate language to coordinate geographically dispersed units and reduce friction in cross-border collaboration. Such mandates are visible in well-documented cases from European, Asian, and North American firms and reflect the strategic intuition that a shared linguistic code can catalyze speed, efficiency, and integration at scale. Yet adopting English is not merely a technical choice about vocabulary and grammar; it is a cultural intervention that reshapes how organizations think, decide, and relate across boundaries. When companies choose English as their operating medium, they recalibrate participation in meetings, redefine norms of clarity and politeness, and reconfigure who is perceived as

credible and "global"—thus modifying the lived culture of the firm. These developments echo long-standing observations in sociolinguistics about the reach of English globally and in organizational studies about how communication systems entrench cultural patterns. The rise of English as a corporate language is therefore best understood at two levels: as a lingua franca enabling cross-border transactions and as a cultural force that inscribes values, identities, and power relationships into everyday work practices. Empirical and conceptual work—from management cases to applied linguistics—corroborates both levels, showing why English spreads inside firms, where it succeeds, and where it generates new frictions that require thoughtful design of language strategy and culture.

A parallel scholarly stream has conceptualized Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) to capture the specific

forms and functions that English assumes in professional settings. BELF research documents that effective business communication is less about native-like accuracy and more about shared intelligibility, pragmatic clarity, and mutual accommodation among multilingual professionals. This insight complicates simplistic “correct English” narratives and shifts attention toward communicative competence that foregrounds audience design, repair strategies, and tolerance for non-standard forms when meaning is achieved. BELF thus reframes “English proficiency” as an interactional resource distributed across teams and situationally assembled, not merely a property of individual employees.

At the same time, corporate mandates to “speak English” awaken cultural dynamics observable through classic lenses such as Schein’s layers of culture and Hofstede’s national-culture dimensions. A mandated language can alter visible artifacts (templates, signage, digital interfaces), espoused values (what “global” means in leadership rhetoric), and basic assumptions (who counts as competent, how risk is discussed). It also interacts with national-culture differences in power distance, uncertainty avoidance, or individualism, shaping how employees participate in meetings or challenge ideas in English-medium contexts. Consequently, understanding the role of English in global business requires bridging the applied linguistics of ELF/BELF with organizational culture theory.

This study adopts an integrative review and conceptual synthesis approach. First, it examines peer-reviewed research on English as a lingua franca and BELF, including seminal books and highly cited articles that define constructs and document communication practices in multinational settings. Second, it incorporates management scholarship on language strategies and corporate “Englishization” through book-length ethnographies and case-based analyses. Third, it situates these linguistic developments in the broader organizational culture literature, drawing on established frameworks to interpret how language policies shape culture and identity. Representative sources include works by Crystal and Seidlhofer on English’s global status and ELF theory, studies by Louhiala-Salminen, Kankaanranta, and Rogerson-Revell on BELF in meetings and internal communication, management analyses by Piekkari, Welch and Welch on multilingual realities, and Schein’s and Hofstede’s frameworks on culture. The selection privilege was given to sources with strong citation footprints, conceptual clarity, or detailed empirical grounding across sectors and regions. The method yields a cross-disciplinary synthesis rather than a meta-analysis,

aiming to explain mechanisms—how English structures business communication and corporate culture—while acknowledging sectoral contingencies and the multilingual realities that persist beneath a nominal English layer.

English as an enabling infrastructure for coordination. When firms adopt English, they lower the transaction costs of cross-border collaboration by harmonizing documentation, interfaces, and meeting practices. Research on corporate language mandates shows that Englishization can expand information flows, streamline decision cycles, and enhance access to global talent and markets when accompanied by training and inclusive norms. In a widely cited Harvard Business Review article and subsequent book-length ethnography, Neeley demonstrates that English mandates in multinational firms create pathways to global participation but also impose transitional burdens, including anxiety for employees who must upskill and status shifts among native and non-native speakers. These studies suggest that English functions as an organizational infrastructure: it is invisible when well engineered yet highly salient when poorly implemented.

BELF and the pragmatics of getting business done. BELF research overturns the assumption that native-like grammatical accuracy predicts business success. Instead, effective global business communication depends on intelligibility, domain-specific lexicon, and cooperative strategies such as paraphrasing, confirmatory checks, and tolerance for variation. In multinational meetings, interlocutors co-construct clarity by foregrounding shared goals and actively managing potential misunderstandings. Rogerson-Revell’s European case work illustrates both the utility of a common English medium and the persistence of cultural-pragmatic differences that shape turn-taking, directness, and the interpretation of silence. This evidence supports a competence model that is pragmatic and relational: the “best” English in business is the one that gets the deal, decision, or design clarified across cultures.

Language strategy as culture work. Treating English adoption as a language strategy reframes it as a core element of organizational design. Piekkari, Welch, and Welch argue that the multilingual reality of global business never disappears under an English mandate; rather, it becomes layered, as local languages continue to mediate customer intimacy, regulatory navigation, and tacit knowledge exchange. Effective strategies therefore combine a global English layer with planned multilingual practices: translation and interpreting ecosystems, dual-language documentation where risk is high, and localized onboarding that legitimizes code-

switching. Sanden's cross-sector study shows that industry context matters: financial services and manufacturing exhibit different profiles of language needs and adopt distinct toolkits—from language audits and glossaries to local “language champions”—in response. The strategic takeaway is that English should be positioned as a shared backbone, with sector-calibrated supports that respect multilingual realities rather than suppress them.

Corporate culture transformations through English. Applying Schein's three-level model, English mandates transform artifacts by standardizing meeting slides, intranet portals, and signage in English; shift espoused values by recoding “global mindset,” “customer obsession,” or “safety” into English slogans; and eventually alter basic assumptions about voice, expertise, and the legitimacy of dissent. Hofstede's dimensions help explain why the same mandate lands differently across national units: in high power-distance and high uncertainty-avoidance contexts, English meetings may suppress participation from those worried about linguistic face-threats; in more individualist and low power-distance cultures, the same meetings may encourage open challenge. A language strategy is thus a culture strategy: leaders must explicitly model inclusive turn-taking, normalize clarification requests, and reward substantive contributions over accent or fluency. Without such design, Englishization can re-inscribe inequalities by mapping perceived expertise onto native-speaker norms.

Inclusion, equity, and identity. The most delicate cultural effects of Englishization concern identity and status. Employees who previously held strong local influence may experience a sense of loss when English becomes the ticket to visibility. Conversely, non-native but highly proficient English users can gain disproportionate informal power as gatekeepers of global information. BELF research documents that successful teams consciously distribute communicative labor: slower speech by fluent members, explicit agenda scaffolding, and visible summarizing to keep everyone synchronized. Firms that invest in “global communicative competence” shift evaluation from native-like correctness to audience-centric clarity and intercultural pragmatics. This reframing preserves dignity while improving outcomes, and it legitimizes translanguaging practices that employees already use to get work done.

Knowledge, safety, and risk. English mandates can enhance knowledge sharing by enabling searchable repositories and cross-site communities of practice; they can also introduce latent risks if critical tacit knowledge remains locked in local languages or if

safety communication relies on ambiguous phrasing. Public relations and internal communication research advises making explicit choices about “what English” counts: controlled simplified corporate English for standard operating procedures, while allowing local-language depth for regulatory filings or customer escalations. Companies that take a layered approach—global English for visibility, local languages for precision—avoid the false trade-off between standardization and safety.

Meetings, documentation, and digital platforms. The move to English affects micro-practices. Meetings benefit from chairing techniques that encourage paraphrase and confirmation, time-boxing for Q&A so non-native speakers can enter, and pre-circulated materials with definitions of key terms. Documentation practices improve when teams maintain living glossaries of domain-specific terms and record decisions in clear, concise English with link-outs to local-language annexes. Digital platforms—chats, ticketing systems, and wikis—should support side-channel explanation in local languages without stigmatizing it, while final decisions are archived in English for enterprise searchability. These micro-designs, although simple, accumulate into cultural expectations that language will not be used as a boundary but as a bridge.

Leadership and capability building. Leadership modeling is decisive. Leaders who slow down, avoid idioms, and explicitly invite clarification reshape norms more effectively than any policy document. Training investments should privilege interactional skills—turn-taking, framing, and repair—over test-centric grammar drills. Capability building succeeds when it is contextualized by function: sales teams practice objection handling in BELF; engineering teams rehearse design reviews with clarity checks; risk teams learn to escalate in unambiguous English. Over time, such practices encode a culture in which English is a means of mutual intelligibility and accountability, not a marker of elite identity.

Sectoral and regional contingencies. Language demands vary by sector and regulatory environment. In heavily regulated industries, partial multilingualism in customer-facing artifacts may be non-negotiable; in fast-moving tech firms, speed and platform interoperability amplify the value of a single English layer. Cross-sector research shows that effective language strategies are those that acknowledge such constraints and codify when English is required and when local language should dominate. Regional patterns also matter: in markets where English-medium education is common, adoption curves are shorter; in others, companies must invest in sustained

upskilling and mentoring to prevent attrition during transition.

A balanced proposition. The accumulated evidence supports a balanced proposition: English, used as BELF and embedded in a coherent language strategy, enhances coordination and brand coherence and can support an inclusive, high-reliability culture—provided firms design for multilingual realities and build pragmatic communicative competence. English is neither a panacea nor a cultural imposition by necessity; it is an infrastructural choice whose cultural consequences can be steered through thoughtful leadership, processes, and investments.

English today functions as both the operating system and the narrative medium of global business. Its adoption as a corporate language can accelerate collaboration, standardize knowledge flows, and articulate a “global” organizational identity. Yet the same move can undermine inclusion if proficiency is conflated with intelligence or if native-speaker norms remain unchallenged. The literature suggests a practical synthesis. First, treat English as a shared backbone and design a multilingual overlay that protects precision and local legitimacy. Second, recalibrate competence from correctness to communicative effectiveness in BELF interactions, investing in pragmatic skills that make meetings and documents clear. Third, frame Englishization as culture work: leaders should model inclusive speech, codify transparent decision recording in English, and legitimize translanguaging for sense-making. Finally, align language strategy with sectoral realities and risk profiles so that the cultural benefits of a shared code do not come at the expense of safety or equity. Pursued in this way, English becomes not an emblem of dominance but a practical tool for building high-performing, culturally intelligent organizations.

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