

English as Business Lingua Franca: Examining the Use of English in Indonesian Online Business

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Abstract:

English has become a global language due to its widespread usage around the world, which has also influenced the business world. The term "English as Business Lingua Franca" refers to the use of English as a communication tool for business purposes. The present study aims to describe how Indonesian online businessmen perceive English and examine the impact of using it as a Business Lingua Franca on their businesses. Data were collected through a mixed-method approach, including online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that Indonesian online businessmen mainly use English as a marketing tool, and despite the difficulties they face while using it, they rely on it for various business endeavors. The study presents an implication that the need for employers to provide their employees with English courses to improve their communication skills with customers and enhance their business skills. In conclusion, the use of English in business communication is essential and beneficial in Indonesia as it has become a global language.

Keywords: *Communication, English, Indonesian Online Business, Lingua Franca*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the internet has led us to the age of globalization, where information can be shared instantaneously with people around the world. This has created opportunities for businesses to connect with customers and markets that were previously out of reach. However, it has also led to some challenges, as businesses must now compete on a global stage to succeed. Besides, the use of language has to become more standardized to be understood by people from all cultures (Seidlhofer, 2011). English has unarguably become the most significant language in global business and is now believed to be the lingua franca of the business environment (Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020). The term Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) has been used to refer to the use of English among non-native speakers for workplace communication (Takino, 2020). The term is not restricted to any particular geographic region or industry but is used most often about the growing phenomenon of English being used as a shared language among speakers of other languages in international business settings (Charles, 2007; Nickerson, 2005). Professionals worldwide businessmen to small online business owners from different cultural backgrounds have adopted English as the main language of their business, especially in this digital era where information is spreading swiftly. Therefore, English is often regarded as an essential tool for professionals who operate on a worldwide scale (Ehrenreich, 2010).

As an international language, English plays an essential role in worldwide communication (Adisti, 2018). Given that English is the language of globalization, the economics of language places a lot of emphasis on the economics of English (Doan & Hamid, 2021). The worldwide market, the business community, technology, science, culture, and intellectual life are all parts of the global eco-cultural system, which includes English. Therefore, modern policies and practices surrounding English language education in nations where English is commonly used are based on the idea that English has a significant economic value. In a globalized environment, English is assumed to be an essential factor for social mobility, economic development, human capital, trade, and investment in global competition (Erling, 2017).

Meanwhile, online marketplaces have aided in the expansion of English as a worldwide language through e-commerce (Roshid et al., 2022). The Internet has become an environment for conducting international business transactions, and as such is more likely to be used by people in every market around the world if it were not for language issues (Lee, 2020). On the contrary, a study revealed that English's position has been jeopardized due to globalization, the increased usage of the Internet, and the impact of social media on business transactions in multicultural nations. The study highlighted that English is being replaced by the native language of the country as the preferred language of business transactions (Roshid et al., 2022).

Several previous studies dealing with English as a business lingua franca have been conducted by some scholars. Kaur & Birlik (2021) in their study emphasized the importance of fostering pragmatic strategies in English business communication. In addition, Nickerson (2005) elaborates on the importance of spoken and written communication in English to support international business settings including e-mail, negotiation, and others. Roshid et al. (2022) investigate how people use written discourse in building communication in business e-mails. Likewise, Kralova & Dolezelova (2021) pinpoint the paramount role of English in building communication around the world.

Referring to the above elaborations, some studies focusing on the role of English in business communication have been done by some authors. Meanwhile, studies on the role of English in enhancing communication in online business in the Indonesian context have not been explored yet. Therefore, this study focuses on how Indonesian online businessmen perceive English overall and examines the impact of having English as the business lingua franca in their business.

2. METHOD

The purpose of this study is to report on how Indonesian employees perceive the relationship between their level of English and the use of English for business communication based on data from an exploratory survey of 33 Indonesians who use English for business purposes. A mixed-method approach was employed to collect data, which included online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This form of instrumentation guarantees that both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and used to present a diverse, yet supportive viewpoint on issues concerning the use of English by Indonesian internet industry workers.

Participants were recruited through an online Google form questionnaire. We distributed the questionnaire to 100 participants, but only 33 participants filled out the questionnaire. To motivate the participants to fill out the questionnaire, an incentive is given to the online business employee that fills out the questionnaire. This method is effective because it allows us to reach a large number of people in a short amount of time.

It also allows the authors to collect data from all over the world, which can be useful for research on global trends. Furthermore, incentives can increase the response rate, which makes it an efficient method of recruitment (Church, 1993).

The questionnaire included questions about the frequency of use of English for business purposes, the level of proficiency, the difficulties in using the language, and the strategies used to fight these hardships. To gain better a better result, the questionnaire was posted in Indonesian due to Indonesian being their native language. The interviews were used to gain a deeper comprehension of the participants' experiences with English in business. The interviews focused on their motivations for using English, their language learning strategies, and the impacts of language proficiency on their business activities. In this matter, we interviewed 7 participants concerning Indonesian online businesses. They comprised of three online businesswomen categorized as R1, R2, and R3 and four online businessmen. Their age is around 25-35 years old. They are anonymized to maintain their confidentiality.

Then, the collected data from the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative data were examined to identify patterns and trends related to the frequency and proficiency of English use, while the qualitative data was analyzed to gain a better understanding of the participants' motivations, strategies, and experiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Use of English in Indonesian Online Business

In total, 33 participants filled out the questionnaire. Participants varied in gender and age. Among 33 participants, only 5 of them were males and the rest were females. Instead, this reflects how Indonesian online business is pre-dominated by female sellers. The participants were sourced from a wide variety of sectors, from skin shops to furniture companies. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 35 years old, with the majority aged between 20 and 24 years old. This indicates that the majority of Indonesian online business owners are young and that most of the businesses are relatively new. The participants also had varying levels of experience in the online business, ranging from those with less than one year of experience to those with more than three years of experience. This shows that there is a wide range of experience among online business owners in Indonesia.

Employers often demand a certain level of English proficiency when recruiting new employees. The required proficiency level typically requires a minimum of basic knowledge of the language and the ability to communicate in English at a basic level. They typically require English proficiency for a variety of reasons, such as the ability to effectively communicate with colleagues and customers, as well as to better understand business standards and documents. English proficiency can also be beneficial for employees who work in an international setting, as they may need to communicate in English with co-workers and customers from around the world. Employers may also use English proficiency levels as a way to assess the level of technical competence and professional skills of job applicants. In addition, employers may use English proficiency tests to determine which applicants are the most suitable for a particular role. It was evidenced by the following chart related to the necessity of English acquisition for employees:

Apakah memiliki kemampuan bahasa inggris menjadi keharusan setiap pegawai?
33 responses

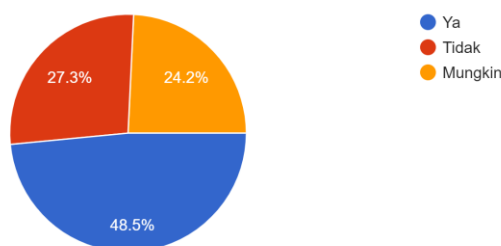


Chart 1: The necessity of English Acquisition among employees

Chart 1 depicts the requirement for employees to acquire proficiency in English. It reveals that 48.5% of 33 participants agree that their management or company requires them to be good at English, while 27.3% disagree. A further 24.2% were unsure. The survey appears to indicate that the majority of participants believe their company or management requires employees to be proficient in English. This could suggest that many businesses in this survey place a strong emphasis on having employees who can communicate effectively in English.

The results of a Likert scale survey revealed that English is widely used as a business language among participants. Specifically, the survey asked participants about their use of English in business conversation, to which the majority responded in the affirmative. This finding is in line with the growing dominance of English in the global economy, as well as its increasing use in the digital age. The survey results also suggest that English is becoming more popular as the language of international business. This is likely due to the increasing globalization of markets and the steady growth of international companies, which rely on English as a common language for business communication.

Para pegawai menggunakan bahasa inggris saat menangani pekerjaan
33 responses

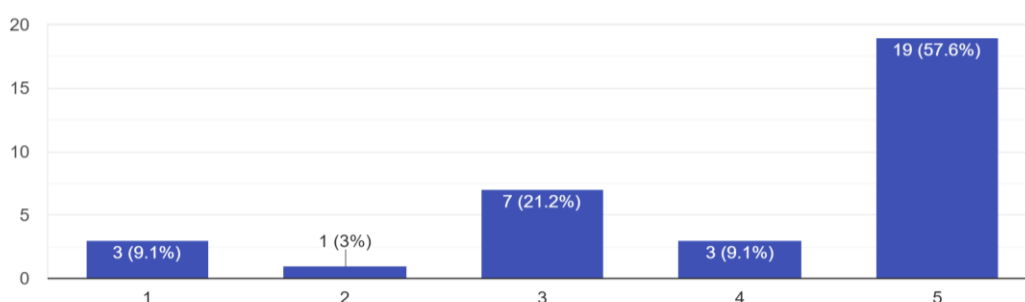


Chart 2. The utilization of English among employees in business conversation

Chart 2 shows how the employees use English in business conversation (1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = nor agree or disagree, 4= somewhat agree, 5= agree) that reached the average of 4.03. The survey results on the participants' level of English

proficiency appear to be contradictory to the fact that they use English for business conversations. From the 33 participants, 16 identified themselves as novice English speakers, 16 as intermediate, and only 1 as an expert.

Apa level kemampuan bahasa inggris anda?

33 responses

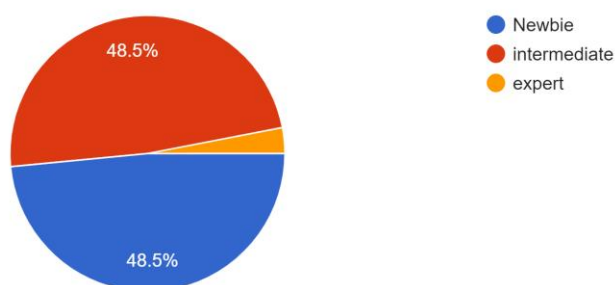


Chart 3: The Levels of Employee's English Ability

Despite the survey results indicating that only 1 respondent out of 33 claimed to be an expert in English, the fact that they all use English for business conversations suggests that the participants are likely more proficient in the language than the survey results suggest. It is possible that the participants simply underestimated their English level, or that the survey questions were not accurate or comprehensive enough to accurately assess the participants' English proficiency. An in-depth qualitative study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the results. Seven participants out of the 33 were selected to take part in an online interview using Google Forms. The questions asked during the interview were focused on the daily usage of English and the motivation behind it, such as the motivation to speak English, the hardship when using English in the workplace, and how they use English in their workplace.

English is mainly used for promotional agendas by local online businesses.

The difficulties of using English were discussed among ten participants. While they all somewhat agreed that learning and speaking English is difficult, they noted that their companies do not require them to use it all the time. However, they do need to use English to perform certain job-related tasks, such as promoting their products and talking to customers. For instance, R5 (an independent artist and owner of an art shop) mentioned that this is an issue they face.

R5: "I found difficulties in talking with my customers because a lot of them speak English. For example, when I am trying to explain something to them in my native language, they are not able to understand me. To overcome this difficulty, the best option is to use a translator like Google and to learn basic phrases".

R2: "We in our workplace don't usually use English to talk with each other, but English is still used for product promotions through our social media like Instagram and Shopee. I think English is necessary (to be used in promotional campaign) because it looks 'modern' and 'so present day' so that more customers become interested".

R7: *“In general, I don't have a burden because neither I nor the buyers of my online business are foreigners (so we only communicate in Bahasa Indonesia). Even if there is a burden, namely when I want to promote my business in English because of my limitations in speaking English”.*

Despite not requiring to use English as a communication tool for customers, R2 and R7 both use English for promotional purposes. R2 promotes its online boutique through social media, while R7 promotes its freelance services through online platforms. By utilizing English, they can reach a wider audience and expand their business. This is supported by the fact that English is the most widely-spoken language in the world, and is the official language of numerous countries, making it a great choice for global communication. Additionally, English is often the language of choice for businesses and customers, as it can be more easily understood by more people than any other language.

Employees often use translator machines to overcome their hardships

The introduction of online business has had a significant impact on local vendors, presenting them with unprecedented and challenging circumstances. With its global reach, customers from all over the world can now purchase products and services, drastically altering the traditional local market. This has resulted in many local shop owners encountering foreign customers through social media. To combat the language barrier, these sellers have turned to English translation machines for assistance. For example, this is an excerpt from R4 who is an employee of a skincare shop.

R4: *“I only can speak English a little bit. I should've learned English when I was young. My English is like a third grader and I'm too old to learn because I am a pretty forgetful person but now there is a technology, google translate, I can reply to chats in English despite my weakness in English proficiency”.*

R6: *“Do I use Google Translate all the time? Absolutely. Since our company had budget restrictions and couldn't provide us with a human translator, Google Translate has been a great asset. It is helpful for quickly and accurately translating documents, as well as having conversations with people who speak different languages”.*

The employees use English to stay up-to-date about the trend in the market

The employees use English to stay updated about the trend in the market and to communicate with their customers. They also use English to describe their products, services, or processes to customers and potential customers. They use English to write reports, emails, and other documents. Lastly, they use English to develop marketing materials and to collaborate with colleagues from different countries. For example, R1 is a multinational freelancer.

R1: *“I think I'm pretty good at English. You know in this internet era everything is connected and news can travel fast due to the advanced technology. Usually, when I look for information on the internet in Indonesian, the information does not yet exist but when I use English words to search for the same information it has always been published. English is very widely spoken so information can travel faster”.*

R3: *“I use English to stay up-to-date about how the customers like about new skincare products”.*

Based on the studies above, the use of English as a business lingua franca is implemented even in local industries. This is because it is seen as an important tool for communication with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders in a global market. As it is widely spoken and understood, it is easier to use English as a common language for business purposes. Furthermore, it allows companies to access international markets and build relationships with foreign customers and suppliers. At length, using English as Business Lingua Franca allows companies to stay competitive in the global market, as it is an important factor in enabling them to do business with people from other countries.

English is seen to be a sophisticated and fashionable language and due to that customers become more interested in buying products from businesses that can communicate in English. It is also seen that English language proficiency gives employees an edge in seeking promotion or getting better jobs in their respective fields. English is also used for searching for information because it is so widely spoken (Seidlhofer, 2011). However, the use of English is limited only to business promotion, negotiations, or when dealing with foreign partners.

The Indonesian language is still used in the majority of communication within the business. The result of this study is in line with the study conducted by Doan & Hamid (2021) that English is mainly used for marketing purposes, not for communications between employees. However, it is also mentioned that English is difficult to learn. Indonesian businesses are still in the early stages of learning English and require more guidance and support from English language professionals and English language courses. The challenges of speaking English felt by the users include the lack of vocabulary, structure, exposure, and pronunciation. This is strengthened by Wahyuningsih & Afandi (2020, 2022) that some common barriers to speaking English experienced by speakers are the lack of vocabulary, structure, confidence, and pronunciation. Therefore, entrepreneurs should focus on improving their English-language skills and use English for all their business operations. This would enable them to reach out to a larger target audience. More importantly, they should utilize technology and social media to promote their online business (Wahyuningsih & Mustaqim, 2021; Wahyuningsih & Wijayanti, 2021).

More importantly, the need for fostering English skills and pragmatic competence to enhance communication in business contexts has been emphasized by Kaur & Birlik (2021) that pragmatic competence and English skill have crucial roles in enhancing business communication. Moreover, Nickerson (2005) asserts that English is beneficial for enhancing international business including a means of meeting, negotiation, advertisement, and so on. Moreover, to develop English skills, the employee can upgrade their knowledge and skill by utilizing technology, online sources, and others (Fathira et al., 2023; Syaifullah et al., 2023; Wahyuningsih, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that many employees and freelancers in Indonesian businesses are still using English for their business purposes. Even small businesses like home businesses still use it for promoting their products to a greater audience. This is because English is seen as an important tool for communication with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders in a global market. In addition, employers may use English proficiency tests to determine which applicants are the most suitable for a particular role. In terms of the necessity of English acquisition for the employees, it reveals that 48.5% of 33 participants agree that their management or company requires them to be good at English, while 27.3% disagree. A further 24.2% were unsure. Concerning the participant's level of English

proficiency, it appears to be contradictory to the fact that they use English for business conversations. From the 33 participants, 16 identified themselves as novice English speakers, 16 as intermediate, and only 1 as an expert. Moreover, the result of interviews reveal that English is mainly used for promotional agendas by local online businesses, Employees often use translator machines to overcome their hardships and the employees use English to stay updated about the trend in the market. The study was conducted over a short period, so the results may not be generalizable to other contexts. Overall, this study provides useful insights, but further research is needed to draw more reliable conclusions.

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