Using English as a Lingua Franca at an International Company

A Study of the Communication Between Non-native English Speakers in a Swedish Workplace

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Abstract

This essay examines the communication in English and use of English at a Swedish company with employees from all over the world. The aim is to investigate how the employees experience speaking English with their colleagues and if they believe that misunderstandings can occur owing to their language differences.

The linguistic focus of this study is towards sociolinguistics, including lingua franca, language use and communication as well as a small portion of language acquisition, considering that the majority of employees do not speak English as their native language.

The results of the study have shown that all employees at the company speak English daily, but the experiences and opinions of it vary, mostly depending on which department they work in and what kind of education they have had previous to them working at the company.

Key words: lingua franca, communication, workplace communication, language use, second language acquisition, technical language
Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 3

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND .......................................................................................... 4
   2.1 LINGUA FRANCA ............................................................................................................. 4
   2.2 BUSINESS ENGLISH ..................................................................................................... 5
   2.3 COMMUNICATION .......................................................................................................... 6
   2.4 LANGUAGE USE ............................................................................................................. 7
   2.5 SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION .............................................................................. 7
      2.5.1 Krashen’s hypotheses ............................................................................................... 8
      2.5.2 Interlanguage ........................................................................................................... 8
   2.6 TECHNICAL LANGUAGE ............................................................................................... 9
      2.6.1 Terminology ............................................................................................................ 9

3. METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................. 11
   3.1 METHOD ....................................................................................................................... 11
   3.2 INTERVIEWS .................................................................................................................. 12
   3.3 SURVEY ........................................................................................................................ 12
   3.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ......................................................................................... 12
   3.5 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH ....................................................................................... 13
   3.6 ETHICS ........................................................................................................................... 13

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS ................................................................................................. 14
   4.1 DATA ............................................................................................................................ 14
      4.2 RESULTS ..................................................................................................................... 14
         4.2.1 Language use ....................................................................................................... 14
         4.2.2 Interlanguage ...................................................................................................... 15
         4.2.3 Lingua Franca ...................................................................................................... 15
         4.2.4 Education ............................................................................................................ 15
         4.2.5 Second Language Acquisition ........................................................................ 18
         4.2.6 Technical language ............................................................................................. 19
         4.2.7 Communication ................................................................................................. 20
         4.2.8 Business English ............................................................................................... 22

5. DISCUSSION ......................................................................................................................... 23
   5.1 WHAT, IF ANY, PROBLEMS ARE ENCOUNTERED BY EMPLOYEES OF THE COMPANY WHO ARE REQUIRED TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH, WHEN ENGLISH IS NOT THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE? ................................................................. 24
   5.2 WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS MAY ACCRUE IF THE EMPLOYEES WERE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE FURTHER EDUCATION IN TERMS OF SPOKEN AND/OR WRITTEN ENGLISH? ................................................................................................................................. 25
   5.3 TO WHAT EXTENT DO MISUNDERSTANDINGS OCCUR OWING TO LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES AND HOW ARE THESE MANIFEST AND ULTIMATELY RESOLVED? ................................................................. 25

6. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 27

7. REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................... 28

APPENDIX A ............................................................................................................................. 30

APPENDIX B ............................................................................................................................. 32
1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the communication in English within one particular international company located in Sweden is perceived by the employees, and the linguistic traits of the communication. The company is based in the south of Sweden and they design and build exclusive sports cars. They recruit staff from all over the world; thus, the employees are of mixed heritage. While the majority are Swedish, many come from other countries. Because a number of employees do not speak Swedish, and because the company has a great deal of contact with companies in other countries, most of the communication, both within and outside of the company, occurs in English. One of the main focuses of this essay is lingua franca. The advantage of a lingua franca is that it is not a fixed language; it is an intermediary language used only to make oneself understood. A lingua franca is continuously changing and developing but, at the same time, it is limited in its scope and therefore restricted in what it can achieve. The study aims to answer these three thesis questions:

- What, if any, problems are encountered by employees of the company who are required to communicate in English, when English is not their native language?
- What possible benefits may accrue if employees were given the opportunity to receive further education in terms of spoken and/or written English?
- To what extent do misunderstandings occur owing to language differences and how are these manifest and ultimately resolved?

The study will also investigate how the different levels of knowledge of English may affect the communication between the departments.

The study begins by reviewing articles by relevant scholars in order to form a theoretical basis for the research. Subsequently, a methodology chapter will describe how the data for this study has been collected and how it shall be processed. The results of the study are later presented in the Results and Analysis chapter, and this is followed by a discussion of the findings and the outcome of the analysis. In the Discussion chapter, deductions are made in order to answer the thesis questions listed above. Finally, a Conclusion chapter summarizes the entirety of the study.
2. Theoretical Background

The following chapter contains a review of theoretical approaches and research by relevant scholars for this study. The main focus is on sociolinguistics, including lingua francas, language use and communication in a technical and business environment. All of these aspects are of interest in the sense that language is used daily at the workplace, and communication in English is a major part of this. Second Language Acquisition theories and methods are also considered and applied in this study as most of the employees communicate in what is, to them, a second language.

2.1 Lingua Franca

A lingua franca was originally used as an intermediary or contact language “by speakers of Arabic with travellers from Western Europe”; it was made up by elements of different origins, considering it was used by speakers of different languages (House, 2012, p. 363). Bell (2014) explains that lingua franca derives from an older pidgin\(^1\) with a Romance-language base (p. 77). At the time of writing, English is the most used lingua franca in the world (ibid.). English Lingua Franca (ELF) is an open-source phenomenon available for anyone who wants to “take advantage of the virtual English language”. ELF is not defined by formal characteristics; it is developed and used depending on the context of the situation it is used in, who the speakers are and what the communicative purpose is (ibid., p. 364). The aim of lingua franca has for a long time been to provide a medium for mutual intelligibility and efficient communication, therefore the grammatical accuracy of the language is seemingly less important as long as the intended meaning of the utterance is conveyed satisfactorily (ibid.). House (2012) argues that lingua franca functions very well for international communication:

“When English is used as a language for communication, it is in principle neutral with regard to the different socio-cultural backgrounds of its users. It has thus great potential as a tool of international understanding, precisely because there is no established norm, and because ELF speakers must always work out anew – in different communities of practice – a joint linguistic, intercultural and behavioural basis for their communication” (p. 364).

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\(^1\) A pidgin is made up of different elements from languages used between speakers who do not share a native language, but a pidgin is not a language (Bell, 2014).
ELF works surprisingly well owing to the ‘let it pass’ principle, where the interactants of the conversation wait patiently for an utterance to become clearer when it has not initially made much sense. “…Many studies of ELF talk have found that few misunderstandings, corrections or other-repairs occur in ELF talk – in stark contrast to non-native – native talk examined in classic interlanguage studies”. (House, 2012, p. 366)

Kankaanranta (2009) explains that, in the modern business environment, it is much more advantageous to use a common language, a lingua franca, rather than having one of the parties being forced to attempt to converse in the other party’s language when they are less than proficient in its use. She also points out that English is the lingua franca of the business world and that this “enables communication among business practitioners coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds.” (p. 1)

Tasic (2009) submits that, whenever two individuals who do not share a native language need to communicate, English will most likely be their language of choice for communication (p. 102). Tasic concurs with Kankaanranta in expressing the view that English is the lingua franca of business, although Tasic also mentions economics, science, technology and even sports where ELF plays a role (ibid.). According to House (2012, p. 364), “ELF is a language for communication”, no matter the background of the speakers, ELF is the intermediate language which is used and works well for communication.

## 2.2 Business English

Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) is used globally to conduct business: it is the common language which most people use when conducting business. BELF is not spoken perfectly like a native language, but rather it is used only to ensure mutual understanding occurs and thereby the purpose of the interaction is achieved (Kankaanranta, 2009, p. 2). Kankaanranta also explains that English is generally the corporate language in multinational companies where the language “is used in such corporate functions as accounting, finance, management, and communications…” (ibid.). According to Latha (2014) “…English is the language of latest version applications and programs and new era where, shoreward, peer to peer, social media networks and all websites, all the software instruction booklets, installation guides and product fact sheets of populate (sic) consumer electronics and entertainment devices usually are available in English first before having made available in other languages” (p. 122). English is thus used in business globally both as a lingua franca and as a standard language for texts for international use.
Munkenberg (2014) expresses her view that, when using English for communicative purposes in business, it does not necessarily have to be grammatically correct, but the better one can express oneself in English, the smoother business will be (p. 84).

### 2.3 Communication

According to Kankaanranta (2009), “the term intercultural is used as a synonym for international in the sense that it is used to refer to communication taking place between people with international backgrounds” (p. 1). She argues that, in this sense, “a different cultural background equals to different national background”, and from that a conclusion can be drawn that the speakers do not share the same native language. When people of different backgrounds speak to each other, they have the option of either switching to one of their native languages, or they could use a common language which is neither of their native languages. She states: “both options call for intercultural communication”. (p. 1)

Savignon (1997) claims that communication basically means “getting our message across” and it is a concern of everyone using language (p. 9). From birth, one communicates with others by interacting with them, and from these interactions one learns certain communication strategies that work. One also learns “that the success of a particular communication strategy depends on the willingness of others to understand and on the interpretation they give to our meaning”. (ibid., p. 10)

Savignon (1997) submits that adult communication can be improved by assertiveness training: “the development of strategies for conquering stage fright, and an awareness of body language – the subtle messages conveyed by posture, hand movement, eyes, smile” (ibid., p. 10). She asserts that communication “is a continuous process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning” (ibid., p. 14). According to Savignon, “members of a community will behave and interpret the behaviour of others according to the knowledge of the communicative systems they have available to them” (p. 17). In a situation like the one described in this study, where there are people with different backgrounds using different communication strategies, they learn new strategies and systems that work for them in the current community.
2.4 Language use

Clark (1996) explains that language use is an activity “in which people do things with language”; it is a form of joint action carried out by people acting in coordination with each other. (p. 3)

Clark distinguishes between the different spoken settings of language use, and he categorises these as follows: personal settings, nonpersonal settings, institutional settings, prescriptive settings, fictional settings, mediated settings, and private settings (ibid., p. 4-5). Conversations are called personal settings, and the most common of these are face-to-face conversations (ibid., p. 9). Clark proposes that “face-to-face conversation is the basic setting for language use” because it is universal and does not need any particular training or skills (ibid., p. 11). When two speakers are to perform a joint action, they share common grounds; these are established by them as individuals and things they have in common (ibid., p.12). “Common ground is a sine qua non for everything we do with others – from the broadest joint activities to the smallest joint actions that comprise them” (Clark, 1996, p. 92).

“When language is an essential part of the social activity, as it is in conversation or novel reading or play acting, there is an additional element of coordination between what speakers mean and what addressees understand them to mean – between speaker’s meaning and addressee’s meaning” (Clark, 1996, p. 12).

2.5 Second language acquisition

Being an international company entails a need for employees to be able to communicate with each other, regardless of their background. The company requires the employees to have a basic level of competence in English to be employed, as English is the company language; however, they do encourage more learning and development of the English language after being recruited. Through working in an environment where English is spoken daily, one can acquire more knowledge of the language from just speaking, listening and using it rather than from a formal learning environment; therefore, second language acquisition is of interest for this study. Acquiring language and learning language are two different ways of developing competence in another language. According to Krashen (2013), “language acquisition occurs subconsciously, we are not usually aware that anything is happening” (p. 1).

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A condition, essential.
2.5.1 Krashen’s hypotheses

Krashen has formulated five hypotheses, each of which describes different aspects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The five hypotheses are: The Acquisition-Learning, The Natural Order, The Monitor, The Comprehension/Input and The Affective Filter Hypothesis. The Comprehension/Input Hypothesis is of interest for this study and Krashen explains the basis of it as follows: “We acquire language when we understand what people tell us or when we understand what we read. And there is no other way it can happen” (Krashen, 1982, p. 3). Speaking is considered to be output and we acquire language by input, not by output; however, speaking as a part of a conversation can help language acquisition since a conversation provides comprehensible input (ibid., p. 4).

Second language acquirers can receive modified input of the three sorts: foreigner-talk, teacher-talk and interlanguage talk. Foreigner-talk is a way that native speakers modify their language for speakers who are not fully competent in their language. Teacher-talk is essentially like foreigner-talk, but it occurs in formal learning environments. Interlanguage talk is “the speech of other second language acquirers” (Krashen, 1982, p. 24). Krashen claims that his input hypothesis has advantages over the finely-tuned input one may receive from teacher-talk as it predicts “natural, communicative, roughly-tuned, comprehensible input” (ibid., p. 25).

2.5.2 Interlanguage

Interlanguage is a term which refers to a second-language learner’s current grammatical competence in the language being learnt. During learning, there are several processes that may affect the outcome of the interlanguage, such as language transfer from the first language, elements acquired from training in the second language, elements acquired from the approach to the material used to learn the second language and communication with native speakers of the second language (McLaughlin, 1987, pp. 60-61). McLaughlin (1987) also mentions fossilization; a second-language learner or acquirer may suffer from their interlanguage being fossilized as soon as they learn enough to be able to communicate and make themselves understood (1987, p. 61). Fossilization as defined by Selinker (in Long, 2008, p. 488) is an end-state, where the grammar deviates from the one of the target-language3 in its rules and forms. Thus, a fossilized interlanguage does not develop further beyond the point at which the speaker believes he or she can make themselves understood.

3 The second language the person is learning.
Interlanguage is thus a not fully developed ability to communicate in a second language, and interlanguage talk describes the communication between two speakers of the same ability.

2.6 Technical language

English is “the most important language in conveying knowledge and new inventions on the international scale” as far as engineering disciplines and mechanical engineering are concerned (Tasic, 2009, p. 102). Tasic claims that it is of utmost importance that one can understand and perform well in the language when dealing with such a broad discipline as mechanical engineering (ibid.).

In her textbook specifically about English for engineers and technicians, Munkenberg (2014) emphasises the importance of having a good knowledge of English when one’s main field is technology or science, especially if the employer has contact with other countries. It is important to be able to interpret a technical text correctly in order to avoid mishaps. She states: “the most likely scenario is that you must speak and write English to communicate with colleagues in other countries. Poor knowledge of English is then a serious drawback, and may even limit your career possibilities considerably”. (p. 83)

2.6.1 Terminology

This study has not focused specifically on esoteric, technical or business-related terminology or terms; however, it was discovered during the study that many employees voiced an interest for education in “technical language”, since they work in a field where such terms are present every day.
Terminology can refer to three different entities:

“1. the set of practices and methods used for the collection, description and presentation of terms;
2. a theory, i.e. the set of premises, arguments and conclusions required for explaining the relationships between concepts and terms which are fundamental for a coherent activity under 1;
3. a vocabulary of a special subject field” (Pearson, 1998, p. 10).
The entity of interest for this study is number three (3) as the company which is the object of study in this research operates within a highly specialised field of precision engineering. A vocabulary of such a field can consist of “nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs which are considered to have a clearly defined meaning when used in the context for which they have been defined” (Pearson, 1998, p. 10). A term is a concept with a label, and one must first define the concept in order to later label it appropriately with regard to other concepts in the same subject field (ibid., p. 12).
3. Methodology

3.1 Method

In order to investigate the various linguistic aspects of the company’s use of the English language and their communication, a study consisting of surveys and interviews was undertaken among the supervisors, middle managers and employees of the company. The supervisors and middle managers were all invited to answer a survey; however, not all of them participated. The employees were selected from different departments at the company to be interviewed. Twenty-six junior employees and five supervisors and middle managers participated in the study. The purpose of including both supervisors and employees in the study was to investigate the range of views held on the matters at hand considering their different responsibilities within the company.

The survey sent out by email to the supervisors and middle managers was in English, as it was established beforehand that all of them had at least a working knowledge of the language and there was confidence that they would understand what was being asked. The interviews were, however, conducted in Swedish for all those speaking Swedish and in English for those who did not speak Swedish. This was to make sure the answers were as inclusive as possible, that nothing was to become lost in translation and that the employees would experience minimal difficulties expressing themselves in English. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and this was with the permission of the employees. There was a single exception, and this related to an employee who could not be interviewed using recording equipment owing to noise in the factory, and this employee’s responses were written contemporaneously. In relation to the other interviewees, audio-recordings were made to ensure that no data was lost and so that the material could be reviewed and analysed afterwards to ensure nothing had been missed.

The questions used for both the interviews and the survey were formulated to achieve a particular purpose. For example, questions on what kind of education they had were intended to establish the extent to which their education had contributed to their knowledge of, and competence in the use of, English, and questions on which department they work in were designed to investigate how their English skills were necessary or desirable for them to perform their daily work.
The data of the survey and the interviews are presented in the Results and Analysis chapter and it will be divided between supervisors and employees, or rather, the results of the interviews and the results of the survey. After presenting the data, an analysis of the data is performed and conclusions from the study are derived.

3.2 Interviews
The employees who were interviewed were all asked the same questions, such as background – whether they were from Sweden or another country and which department they worked in, as well as questions about English as the language of communication, their perceived need of additional education in English and whether they would like to add anything else regarding English or communication. The questionnaire used for the interviews can be seen at Appendix A.

3.3 Survey
The survey sent out to the supervisors (Appendix B) consisted of a set of questions created to gather some background information about the participants, as well as answers to some relevant questions regarding the study. The survey was designed to be quick to complete by using short questions and providing different options from which to choose to answer them. It was intended that the respondent could complete it at a time that suited them best. The survey also included an informational description of why it was being conducted.

3.4 Qualitative Research
Some of the questions were designed in such a way that the employees and supervisors would need to motivate their answers. For example, with regard to the question “Which department do you work in?”, they would need to specify what kind of work they did. With regard to the question which asked to what extent they believed misunderstandings occurred, they would have had to motivate their answers and suggest how the misunderstandings could have been avoided. The qualitative questions were intended to bring more insight to the research.
3.5 Quantitative Research
Several questions could be answered quickly with simple options. For example, regarding the question on how often they speak English at work, they were given four options to choose from. This type of question is quantitative as the answer of the question is statistical in character, and therefore precise and easy to manage and interpret.

3.6 Ethics
All of the participants were informed of the purpose of the questions they were asked. The supervisors received a short explanation of what the research was for, why it was appreciated that they had agreed to participate as well as introducing the researcher. The employees were all greeted with a phrase like the following; “Hello, my name is Josefin and I’m writing an essay on communication in English at the company. Would you have time to answer some quick questions?” All of the employees were also asked if the interviews could be recorded, for the researcher’s use only, and all of them gave their permission. It was explained that all of the material collected from the employees’ details and individual responses would be treated with absolute confidentiality and no one would therefore be mentioned by name.
4. Results and Analysis

The focus of the study was predominantly concerned with English communication at a specific international company. As House (2012) described it, English lingua franca is beneficial for international communication and for people of different backgrounds communicating with each other.

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, twenty-six employees were interviewed and five supervisors participated in a survey, all of whom speak English daily at the workplace. The HR department at the company stated that a basic knowledge of English is required by job applicants in order to be recruited. Depending on work tasks and the origins of one’s colleagues, one might use the English language more or less during the day. Where an employee does not speak Swedish, for example, it is natural that all those working closely with the employee in question would attempt to speak a language that they share, namely English.

4.1 Data

The data was collected through interviewing employees and sending out a survey to the supervisors. Both of the questionnaires used are presented in Appendix A and Appendix B. The employees were asked ten to eleven questions of different kinds with different purposes; all of the questions for the employees are presented in Appendix A. Out of the twenty-six employees interviewed, seventeen of them were Swedes and nine of them were from other countries. Twenty-two of the interviews were held in Swedish and the remaining four in English.

The survey was sent out by email to ten supervisors and middle managers and they are henceforth referred to in this essay as “supervisors”. Five out of the ten participated in the survey. They were asked ten questions in total which are presented in Appendix B.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Language use

Saussure claims that the “langue is the whole system of language that precedes and makes speech possible” (Changeminds.org, 2002-2008), whereas “parole is the concrete use of the language, the actual utterances” (ibid.). Thus, language use, in the form of parole, is highly relevant for this study since, while communicating, one uses language. Clark (1996) argues
that face-to-face conversations is the basic setting of language use, and this study focuses almost entirely on just that, face-to-face conversation and communication.

4.2.2 Interlanguage
In order for communication between employees of different backgrounds to work, they need a certain level of interlanguage as defined by McLaughlin (1987) and, through this interlanguage, talk as defined by Krashen (1982) occurs. Interlanguage is conspicuous at the company with those who do not have a fluent or native competence in English. Out of the twenty-six employees who were interviewed, three of them were native speakers of English, and interestingly they were all from different continents.

4.2.3 Lingua Franca
English Lingua Franca (ELF) is conspicuous at the company. As the language is used daily, but with few native speakers, it is defined as an ELF, an always developing output without formal characteristics (House, 2012). The main purpose of the ELF is mutual understanding, both among employees and between employees and their supervisors.

Speaking a language that is not one’s native language could potentially be accompanied by insecurities or other problems. The supervisors were asked if any employees had ever approached them with views on the language of communication at the company. Out of the two who answered “yes” on that question, they provided comments that some of the employees had expressed insecurities in speaking in English. They felt embarrassed to talk in front of others and could also have difficulties to find the right words; however, the supervisors mentioned that they usually resolved the latter problem by using other words that transmit their intended message.

4.2.4 Education
Through the interviews, it was discovered that all those interviewees with a foreign background had attended university and that all of them also felt that their English was on a high level of proficiency and that they did not need any further schooling in the English language.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the highest level of education of all of the employees that participated in the interviews. The question was: “What is your highest level of education?”
and the options they were given were: elementary school, upper secondary school, university or other; however, no one answered “other” and thus it is not included in the diagram.

*Figure 1*

**What is your highest level of education?**

- **Upper Secondary**: 50.0%
- **University**: 42.3%
- **Elementary School**: 7.7%

Similarly, as with the junior employees, the supervisors were asked about their education; however, they were asked specifically on education in English, what kind of education they had received to learn English. The answers of which are presented below in Figure 2.
As is shown above, two of the supervisors attended upper secondary school for education in English, one elementary school and one university. The one who answered “other” provided a comment for his answer that he attended upper secondary school for education in English, but had also studied at university where he obtained a technical degree.

The employees were also asked in which department they worked. Certain kinds of work at the company would naturally entail that the employee had completed a higher level of education. The departments included in the study are: office, research and development, engineering, production and store-room. Research and development as well as engineering generally require that the employee possesses the appropriate engineering qualifications, whereas office, production and store-room do not require these. "Production" is the umbrella term for all the small departments where the different components of the cars are made. The departments in relation to what level of education the employees had are presented in figure 3.

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4 USS – upper secondary school
This displays how those working in a more advanced field have a higher level of education than those in, for example, production, which is where the cars are built. Additionally, an interesting note is that the two employees with a university education who were working in production were both foreigners.

4.2.5 Second Language Acquisition

According to Krashen (1982), humans acquire language when they are able to understand what others tells them, and he also claims that conversation, i.e. communication, provides comprehensible input which is necessary in order to acquire a language. There are also other types of input in the form of teacher-talk and foreigner talk which could be applied in different scenarios, such as when a native speaker of English at the company adapts their language in order for other non-native speakers to understand or, in the case of schooling in English, where the teacher would then adapt their language the same way.

The employees were asked if they believed they would benefit from taking English classes in order for communication between colleagues to become clearer. Seventeen out of the twenty-six employees that participated in the study felt that they had no need for further education in the English language. Eight of them said they did believe they would benefit

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5 USS – upper secondary school
from classes and one of them could not make a decision. However, fourteen of the employees also articulated the view that others at the company could benefit from staff being provided with lessons in order for the communication to become more efficient. One of the employees expressed an interest in education in grammar, phonetics and conversation, since most of the time he only spoke very informal English with colleagues and would like to have been able to write more properly and professionally. The other employees who believed education would be beneficial expressed an interest in more technical language regarding the kind of work they did at the company.

The supervisors’ views on further education for the employees (Question 7, Appendix B) were divided. Two supervisors answered “no” on the question as to whether they believed the English of all the employees was already on a good enough level. The other three supervisors answered “yes” and one of the three specifically mentioned that more education in technical English would be beneficial to the company.

4.2.6 Technical language

As mentioned in the paragraph above, a perceived need for further education in specifically technical language was indicated by the employees during the interviews. The non-supervisory employees expressed a view that a deeper knowledge in the specific field of engineering and technology would be of benefit in terms of communicating with colleagues and being able to convey their message more easily and without misunderstandings. Revisiting what Munkenberg (2014) wrote as to the importance of being able to interpret a technical text correctly to avoid mishaps and misunderstandings, the employees concurred in this view that misunderstandings would be avoided in a larger scale and communication would be smoother if they had a better understanding of technical language. However, the general view on misunderstandings owing to language differences in the current situation were rare (see Figure 4).
The employees were given a scale of one to five when asked the question displayed in Figure 3, where one represented no misunderstandings and five represented several. No employee answered that there were several misunderstandings (5) and therefore the option is not included in the diagram. The other options have been translated as follows: none (1), a few (2), some (3) and a fair amount (4). As is shown in the diagram, the majority answered a two (2) and most of them gave a similar motivation to the answer that, if they spoke with someone who did not share their native language, misunderstandings could occur; however, they were resolved quickly and did not have any serious repercussions.

The supervisors shared the majority of the employees’ view on misunderstandings, namely that they were unusual and did not occur often. One supervisor suggested that, in the case of misunderstandings, one could usually resolve these by using body language or illustrations. Another supervisor also commented that it is not only the language that can cause misunderstandings, but cultural differences as well.

4.2.7 Communication
The employees were also asked if English was essential for them to do their job, and they all concurred that it was. Additionally, in combination to that question, they were asked to what extent it was essential. The results are presented as the options basic, average and advanced knowledge in Figure 5.
Twelve of the employees were of the opinion that it was essential on an advanced level for them to be able to perform their work to the fullest. Eight of them expressed a view that an “average” knowledge of English was enough for them to perform their jobs, and six of them believed that a basic knowledge was enough. The option labelled “average” in this context refers to an ability to communicate in a more copious sense than merely being able to be understood in commonplace work interactions. In other words, it relates to possessing a larger vocabulary beyond that of a basic level of English. The term “advanced”, on the other hand, refers to a high level of competence in terms of using the language in all conceivable scenarios. The answers given almost entirely depended on the department in which the employee worked. Those in engineering, for example, all answered that an advanced knowledge was necessary due to them communicating with each other a great deal, usually including technical terms, whereas those in production mostly answered that an average or basic level was enough. One employee submitted that, since there were only Swedes working at her station, she did not actually need English to do her job; however, she did need it to talk to colleagues in other departments in the company, but then a basic level of English was sufficient.

Savignon (1997) claims that communication is merely the notion of efficiently conveying a message, and one learns over time how to achieve this goal best. Depending on work tasks as mentioned above, the ways in which the employees choose to communicate are...
entirely up to the individual and his or her mastery in the language. As per Savignon’s (1997) principle, the company creates its own community for communication, where all employees learn the strategies and systems for how to communicate within their particular community.

As an additional note on communication, all of the employees were asked if they had anything to add that was not included in the questions. Most of them did not; however, one employee working in the office department voiced the perception that those who speak English as a native language do not always consider that not everyone they speak to has a high level of competence in speaking English. He mentioned that the native speakers sometimes speak rapidly, perhaps with a strong regional accent and they sometimes use slang terms or other expressions which may be unfamiliar to the hearer.

### 4.2.8 Business English

As for the question on communication outside of the company that the employees were asked (Question 9, Appendix A), out of the ten who had external contacts, two of them reported having no problems with this communication; however, it should be noted that one of the two was a native speaker of English and thus very proficient in the language. Several of the remaining eight asserted that misunderstandings could occur while communicating with companies in Asia particularly. India, China and Japan were most difficult since, as one of the employees commented, education in English in those countries was relatively poor. Thus, communication could be difficult if one party is not proficient enough in the English language, or even in BELF (Business English Lingua Franca) which, according to Kankaanranta (2009), is a simpler version of the language in place particularly for business to ensure mutual understanding.

One employee offered a specific example of a difficult conversation, namely a telephone call with a company in India. He said that it was difficult owing both to the lack of an adequate knowledge of English, or a flawed use of it, and because of the speaker’s strong accent. Thereafter, he preferred to hold such conversations through exchanging emails. The supervisors also mentioned that Asia and Italy were difficult to communicate with at times, but there were rarely any misunderstandings as a result of the conversation.
5. Discussion
The aim of this study is to investigate the current communication situation in English at an international company. The focus of this essay is, with the help of relevant scholars, to attain an insight into the efficiency of communication within one Swedish company which has to conduct much of its business in what is ostensibly a foreign language, i.e. English, and how that efficiency could be increased.

Revisiting the thesis questions which read as follows:

- What, if any, problems are encountered by employees of the company who are required to communicate in English, when English is not their native language?
- What possible benefits may accrue if employees were given the opportunity to receive further education in terms of spoken and/or written English?
- To what extent do misunderstandings occur owing to language differences and how are these manifest and ultimately resolved?

The study has reached a conclusion for all three questions. Although most employees had no larger issues with the current communication, there are definitely measures that could be adopted to improve the efficiency of communication in English within the company, both internally and externally. The theoretical focus of the essay was primarily on communication, language use, lingua franca and second language acquisition. The theories of which has been applied in the results and analysis chapter.

The study revealed many interesting points that one might initially not consider, for example, the fact that the employees’ previous education played a role in their current proficiency of the English language, even though they had not studied English specifically during said education. Additionally, the employees’ views on the usage of English differed somewhat, as presented in Figure 5.

Reviewing how the study was performed, it has already been established that it could benefit from more research through, for example, more detailed interviews with both employees and supervisors and a deeper investigation on their competence in English. The research already conducted could also have been enhanced and extended; it has been insightful to some extent, but the quality and scope was insufficient if an accurate diagnosis is to be made of the main
communication problems that exist regarding the company’s dependence on the use of English are to be identified and a plan devised to address these. The surveys for example, would have given better results if they had been performed as interviews, they would most likely include more participants as well as more thorough answers to the questions: however, under the circumstances at the moment of execution, a survey was the best option. The interviews with the employees worked well as they facilitated further explanation of their answers and motivations as well as follow-up questions.

5.1 What, if any, problems are encountered by employees of the company who are required to communicate in English, when English is not their native language?

Through the interviews, it was discovered that most employees had no major issues with the current communicative situation but there is, nevertheless, scope for improvement. Several employees were identified who relied upon interlanguage i.e. a not yet perfectly formed ability to speak the second language (McLaughlin). Some of them were striving to improve this ability and some were content with their existing level. As a result of the company having a workplace with several non-native speakers of English, they found it necessary to use a lingua franca, ELF (English Lingua Franca), to communicate with each other. ELF does not require a comprehensive mastery of English, nor an extensive English vocabulary, as its purpose is to facilitate mutual understanding with regard to a limited range of matters (House, 2012).

Some problems that could be encountered were, according to the interviewees’ answers: misunderstandings owing to language differences which will be discussed further in a following chapter, and not understanding at all owing, for example, to the speakers having substantially different levels of competence in English. As mentioned in chapter 4.2.7, one employee voiced the perception that native speakers of English did not always consider that the level of competence in English varied among the employees and hence they did not adapt their speech thereafter. To improve this situation, the native speakers should henceforth be more cognizant of the fact that their level of competence could be higher than the person they are addressing and thus use a more limited vocabulary to ensure mutual comprehension.
5.2 What possible benefits may accrue if the employees were given the opportunity to receive further education in terms of spoken and/or written English?

The employees were asked whether they thought they would benefit from more education in English, the answers of which are presented in chapter 4.2.5. The majority of the employees expressed that they had no need for further education; however, as is presented in the same chapter, the majority did feel that others were in need of further education.

Considering the employees’ views on the frequency of misunderstandings as shown in chapter 4.2.6, it is evident that the communication is not flawless even though some employees and supervisors considered there was no need for additional education in the English language.

The benefits of providing classes in English for the employees to attend could offer an improved communication throughout the company, in which misunderstandings would become less frequent. Additionally, several employees requested education in specifically technical language, which was suggested by a supervisor as well. A deeper knowledge of field specific terms would enable the employees to have more detailed conversations with fewer misunderstandings (Munkenberg, 2014).

5.3 To what extent do misunderstandings occur owing to language differences and how are these manifest and ultimately resolved?

As mentioned in the section above, the employees did not express that the communication was without problems; however, they did express that most problems i.e. misunderstandings could most often be resolved quickly and without detriment. Their answers are shown in chapter 4.2.6 (Figure 4), which shows that the majority, fifteen employees, perceived that there were very few misunderstandings while communicating in English.

Those misunderstandings that did occur, however, were most often manifest as speech difficulties in the English language. The misunderstandings were resolved by using body language and illustrations if simple communication did not suffice.

Other Swedish companies, just as the company at the centre of this study, that use English lingua franca for both internal and external communication may report similar experiences in relation to English use in their organisation as the ones described above. How the communication works much depends on what companies lay down as job requirements when recruiting for particular roles; whether they need to have a certain level of competence in English or, if that is less important, how this will affect the communication at the company. It
is not only Swedish companies that are likely to face such issues; all companies across the globe that use English as a lingua franca internally, externally, or both, will have to consider them regardless of where they are located.

Misunderstandings are difficult to avoid; they sometimes occur even when the speakers speak the same language. They occur more frequently, however, when there are language differences and can be more problematic to resolve.
6. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to investigate the communication in English at an international company located in Sweden, and how the employees at said company perceived the communication. Therefore, a study was performed by interviewing employees and supervisors at the company in order to answer the three thesis questions formulated for this essay.

From the findings of this study, a conclusion can be drawn that the communication as it looked at the time of the research is functional, but several employees and supervisors agreed that there is room for improvement. The majority confirmed that additional education in English would be beneficial for the communication at the company. A suggestion would be to have all employees perform a test on their competence in English and also fill in a form on whether they would be willing to undertake education and what kind of education they would like to focus on, for example if they are interested in improving their technical English, grammar, vocabularies, or their speech. All supervisors and employees with certain responsibilities should have a more advanced competence in English since they often use the language externally or internationally, compose reports, manuals and other important documents.

As previously mentioned, the study was limited in its scope since it was performed within a limited frame of time. It could definitely benefit from more profound research, and a more thorough research project involving a greater number of employees. This would be able to probe into this issue more deeply could be enlightening in terms of answering the research questions.
7. References


Appendix A

Questionnaire for employees

1. Where do you come from?
   - Sweden
   - Other

2. What is your highest level of education?
   - Elementary school
   - Upper Secondary School
   - University
   - Other

3. Which department do you work in?

4. How often do you speak English at work?
   - Several times a day
   - Several days a week
   - One or two days a week
   - Less than once a week

5. To what extent is English essential for you to do your job? And what kind of knowledge of English is needed?
   - Basic knowledge
   - Average knowledge
   - Advanced knowledge

6. To what extent do you believe that misunderstandings occur while communicating in English?
   - Choose a number between 1 and 5 where 1 = No misunderstandings, and 5 = Several misunderstandings
7. Do you believe that you would benefit from taking English classes in order for
communication with colleagues to become clearer?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

8. Do you believe that others at the company would benefit from English classes?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

9. Do you have regular or frequent contact with people outside of the company? If the
communication is in English, is it ever a problem? Are there misunderstandings? If so,
please describe the nature of these misunderstanding and the difficulties that arise
because of them.

10. To what extent do misunderstandings occur between you and your supervisor owing to
language differences? *This question was only asked for those not speaking Swedish.*

11. Do you have anything else you would like to add or point out about the
communication at the company, language of communication or other things?
Appendix B

Questionnaire for supervisors

1. What is your role at the company?

2. Where do you come from?

3. How often do you speak English at work?
   - Several times a day
   - Several days a week
   - One or two days a week
   - Less than once a week

4. Is English essential for you to do your job?
   - Yes
   - No

5. What kind of education have you had to learn English?
   - Elementary School
   - Upper Secondary School
   - University
   - Other

6. To what extent do you believe misunderstandings occur while communicating in English? And how can misunderstandings be avoided?

7. Do you believe that some employees would benefit from taking English classes in order for communication to become clearer?
   - Yes
   - No

8. Has an employee ever approached you with views on the language of communication? If so, what were they?
- Yes
- No

9. If you have any contact with people outside of the company in English, do you feel that there are any difficulties with that communication? If so, which countries are these difficulties greatest in?

10. Do you have anything else you would like to add regarding the communication or language of communication at the company?
My name is Josefin and I've studied English Linguistics at Halmstad University. For this bachelor's thesis I got the opportunity to combine my interest in cars with linguistics by doing my study at a small company that builds exclusive sports cars.