THE USE OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA: WHERE DOES FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION FIT?

ORLANDO R. KELM
University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

After nearly 30 years of teaching hundreds of students, professionals, and clients to speak Spanish and Portuguese, mostly for business and professional purposes, I find myself reasessing the role of foreign language proficiency for professional purposes. There are several reasons for this. However, the principle one relates to the abundant use of English as a lingua franca. Within professional settings and in many parts of the world, English simply dominates as the language of communication. What are the implications of this in relation to the teaching of non-English foreign languages? As an educator who focuses on the acquisition of foreign languages, it is essential to know where, when, and in what context those foreign language skills really are necessary. It is equally important to know where, when, and in what context it makes more sense to use English. In the absence of this knowledge, we run the risk that our teaching will be less relevant.

Sometimes people, those who do not understand this issue, fall into one of two stereotypical traps. First, there are those who assume that all conversations abroad are only conducted in the local foreign language of choice. At times these people are so enamored with the foreign language and culture, that they are incapable of considering that anything but the local language is used for everything. The second group, equally naïve, believes that English is used everywhere, by everyone, and the whole world somehow has native-like fluency in English. The dilemma of the foreign language educator is to know the “sweet spot” between these extremes, so that real-life interactions are enhanced by communication in the local language or in English as needed.

We begin this essay with some background observations about the use of English as a lingua franca. Then we will review comments and observations from international business professionals who share opinions about their use of English and other foreign languages. After these two sections, the third
part looks at specific recommendations for the teaching of foreign languages for professional purposes.

**Use of English as a Lingua Franca**

The following ten scenarios illustrate some of the instances where English is used internationally. In my own recent visits abroad and in working internationally, the following observations about English as a lingua franca arise:

1. In Lima, Peru, a Korean company has a branch office with about twenty employees, eight of them are Korean and the rest are Peruvian. English is the official language of communication, and both the Peruvians and the Koreans all speak English to one another. All written communication that goes back to the home office in Korea is also prepared in English. None of the eight Korean employees, some who have been assigned to Peru for a couple of years, speaks significant amounts of Spanish.

2. In Beijing, a multinational engineering firm with home offices in Germany uses English as the official language for all oral and written communications. Even when there are local meetings, the Chinese engineers use English when talking to one another. The motivation to improve English and the need to use it with colleagues worldwide causes them to “practice” even among their local partners.

3. A couple of years ago I was invited to teach a course as a visiting professor at a university in Santiago, Chile. I taught the course in Spanish, things went well, and the course evaluations were positive. After the course, representatives of the university asked if I were to return, would I be willing to teach the course in English? The students are highly motivated to improve their English language skills and having an American as the professor would be an opportunity to do so. I was struck with the thought of how interesting it was that instead of considering my ability to teach in Spanish as a positive feature, they really would have preferred that I had taught the class in English.

4. An executive from a large multinational telecommunications company previously lived in France and speaks fluent French. Currently he is assigned to work in Malaysia and China. The company believes that by living in France, he gained experience in working in an international setting, which provides experience in dealing with the unknown. The fact that he does not speak Chinese is less of an issue than the positive aspects of his experience abroad in France.
5. A lawyer who frequently travels to Latin America, and who also speaks “basic” Spanish, reports that frequently his strategy is to speak English while his Latin American colleagues speak to him in Spanish. Both understand the other’s language enough to follow along and the strategy allows everyone to use their native language, without any of the restrictions of non-native fluency. This is a strategy that many use, but it is also a practice that is seldom considered by educators who teach foreign languages.

6. In my own experience while participating in professional assignments abroad, many times I have traveled to Latin America with other North American team members. Even though I could use the local Portuguese or Spanish, in the end, we end up using English because the other members of the team do not speak the local language. This is not a criticism per se, but rather an observation that sometimes English is still used simply because it becomes impractical to expect that the whole group will speak the foreign language in question.

7. When it comes to learning a foreign language for professional purposes, one of the easier tasks is vocabulary acquisition. That is to say, people learn the words that they need and that they use. When general proficiency is more advanced, vocabulary acquisition in context becomes easier. On the other hand, vocabulary that is not relevant simply does not stick. For example, if a person works in accounting, accounting-related vocabulary is quite easily obtained, both because of context and repetition. However, for that same person it may be that marketing-related vocabulary remains passive, simply because it is less relevant. People learn what they really need. This has implications for teachers of business language. Time spent on vocabulary may actually be less effective, given the broad ranges of areas of expertise and focus.

8. When it comes to abilities that professionals who work internationally need, it is important to recognize that foreign language proficiency is not a transferable skill. That is to say, for example, if a person becomes proficient in French, that skill will not help out as much when this person is assigned to work in Argentina. At the same time, if a person becomes proficient in dealing with cultural issues or develops communication skills, those skills are transferable. International business professionals are seldom “restricted” to work in countries where people happen to speak the same foreign language that they do. This implies that it may be more effective to train people about culture and communication than it is to teach a foreign language. This is especially true when one considers how long it takes to truly become proficient in a foreign language as compared to how
long it takes to be trained in culture and communication. Please note that I am not minimizing the importance of foreign language proficiency, but simply noting that language ability alone is less transferable than cultural knowledge.

9. In learning a foreign language for specific purposes, another challenge relates to when it is more effective to introduce that specific purpose. That is to say, is it better to teach general language first, build a foundation in that language, and then introduce the specific purpose on top of the foundation? Or, is it better to begin foreign language study within the context of the specific purpose, using for example, vocabulary related to the specific purpose while simultaneously learning the basics of the language. The truth is that both have their limitations. The problem with starting with general language first is that learners never get to their special purpose. That is to say, for example, if a person learns Spanish in an academic setting, and hopes to be a nurse some day, can we really expect that person to study Spanish for two or three years and never in that time have a chance to learn specific nursing Spanish? People simply do not have that much time to put off the specific learning needs. On the other hand, if learners begin their study of a foreign language within the context of their specific purposes, this implies a personalized approach that may work on an individual basis, but it is difficult to scale to larger groups of learners. There are simply too many specific purposes, which make it impractical to subdivide learners into such groups.

10. There is another challenge that comes to those who teach foreign languages. If a person is trained in teaching a foreign language, and understands the pedagogy behind the methods, we are still faced with the challenge of wondering how proficient in the specific purpose a foreign language educator needs to be in order to be an effective teacher of that specific purpose. That is to say, for example, how much does one need to know about police work to teach police Spanish? How much does one need to know about law to teach legal Spanish? If we do not have experience with income statements and balance sheets, how effective can we be in teaching business Spanish, even if we know a lot about language teaching in general? The answer lies somewhere in that balance. Certainly a teacher who is effective in teaching language for general purposes will have an advantage in teaching language for specific purposes. At the same time, the more one understands the actual subject, context, work, activities, and language needs of a learner, the more effective one will be in teaching. However, it is also impractical to think that a person who is an effective foreign language teacher and who is also knowledgeable about
business, will also have the same expertise in law, nursing, missionary work, and emergency responders.

Each of the issues above raises the question of where the teaching of foreign language for specific purposes fits. In following sections we will look as some recommendations, but first let us take a brief look at what some previous studies tell us about English as a lingua franca.

Academic Perceptions of English as a Lingua Franca

In the literature there are many studies that specifically address the issue of Business English as a lingua franca, even using the abbreviation BELF. In a recent article, Selmeir & Oh share empirical data that indicate that international business transaction costs are actually lower when both parties use a lingua franca, meaning English (191). Their data apply to both international trade as well as foreign direct investment (FDI). In fact, their data show that the use of English as a lingua franca is even more important for FDI than it is for international trade. They surmise that this is because FDI implies a longer-term investment. These lower costs actually promote the use of English, at the expense of other languages. Selmeir & Oh also observe that in situations where neither side has native proficiency in English, BELF becomes a culture-neutral medium (195). That is to say, if neither party uses his or her native language, and everyone uses English, the country, cultural, and linguistic advantages disappear, because everyone is using a neutral language. It is not difficult to imagine a situation, for example, where a Japanese company and a German company use English, simply to avoid the power positioning that would be implied by using Japanese or German. In the end, Salmier & Oh recommend that in the absence of proficiency in a foreign language, apply the same strategy that we do to sales, “Just as you look for something you could like in your client, find something you like in the target culture. It could be Italian cuisine, Brazilian architecture, Russian novels, or Kenyan pop music. Use that affinity to study the language, and learn a few key phrases. Implement the same policy with your employees” (197). They are saying, in essence, in cases where full proficiency is absent, pick an area of interest and use that as a point of departure.

Nickerson (2005) similarly provides evidence that international business professionals, in the absence of foreign language skills, should try to build solidarity and common ground to facilitate their shared goals. For Nickerson, language is just one of many variables that affects business. Strategic choices, discourse decisions, communication strategies, evaluation tactics, these all influence business interactions. Language is simply one, and not necessarily the primary strategic choice. Nickerson also reminds us that the use of language is actually more complex than what people would surmise
because multinational workforces are actually moving and communicating across borders all of the time. It is not uncommon for English to be used by first, second, and foreign language speakers of English simultaneously.

For many international business professionals, the use of English is simply a tool of the trade. For these people, for example, coding may be done in javascript, or C++, spreadsheet calculations may be done in Excel, online database searchers use Google or Bing, and English is the language people use to communicate. According to Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, English is simply thought of as a business domain to get a job done. This is true in the role they play (e.g., buyer, seller, manager), the kind of job they do, (e.g. negotiating deals, managing projects), the issues they discuss (e.g., price, recruiting, finance), and the genres they use (e.g., business email, intranet, meetings). In fact, Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen emphasize that business know-how may have traditionally included innovations, entrepreneurship, marketing, business processes, management strategies, building networks, and creating knowledge, but now intercultural communication and the use of Business English is simply one more piece of the business know-how puzzle (205).

A number of years ago some of our international MBA students at the University of Texas - Austin confided that one of the most difficult aspects of returning to their home countries was that they had done all of their training in North American universities, in English. They literally had never used their mother tongue to do their professional work. Consequently, they simply felt more comfortable using English. Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen similarly observe the same situation in their data. Not only do employees feel more comfortable in using English professionally, their data also show that nearly 70% of all English communication takes place between other non-native speakers of English (206-207). It is for this reason that their training does not focus on English as a language, but rather on effective communication, which happens to be in English. Effective communication centers on clarity (succinct and explicit communication), directness (where the main point comes out early), and politeness (including such things as interpersonal orientation, small talk, making things sound nice). Because the expertise in English is related so much to the actual work, it is not uncommon for international professionals to be able to handle English at work (coding, drawing, negotiating, etc.) better than they can handle non-professional conversations (e.g., buying bread at a local bakery). It is precisely the non-professional conversations that often cause greater communication challenges.

Native speakers of English are simply the minority in professional settings. Skapinker (2007) reports data where non-native speakers in international professional activities outnumber native speakers by three to
one. He observes that there is actually a sense of relief when the speakers find out that they will be using their English with other non-native speakers. The British Council’s “The Future of English,” although perhaps overstated a bit, suggests that over 1,400 million people live in countries where English has official status. They also suggest that one out of five in the world’s population speaks English to some level of competence (Graddol, 2000). Whether or not we adhere to these exact numbers, each of the researchers mentioned above solidifies the fact that English as a lingua franca has a stronghold among international professionals. They all bring to the forefront the importance to reassess the need, role, and scope of teaching other foreign languages for professional purposes.

**International Professionals’ Perceptions of English as a Lingua Franca**

Recently I accompanied a group of Korean executives to Brazil. What follows are some of their observations, via personal communication, surveys, interviews, personal chats, and emails, that they offer as related to their use of English, as well as their native language, both with native and non-native speakers. Their comments give insights into the use of language from their perspective. We begin with the comments from the Korean executives.

I use English almost every day, mostly by email and sometimes by phone. About once a week I also meet with foreign business partners who come to Korea. When I speak with non-native speakers of English who are from Europe, it’s easier to understand them. However, due to their accents, it’s really difficult to understand people who are from Singapore and India. The major difficulty, in all cases, is that the quality of communication suffers because we often both lack vocabulary and expressions.

This comment is significant because it specifically addresses the issue of a quality of communication that suffers when both sides lack proficiency. Notice the comments of this second person also gives hints about what it is like to talk when both are non-native speakers of English.

Once a month I receive foreign business partners at our offices in Korea. I’m responsible for the ceremonial introductions. These are mainly non-native speakers of English who also do not speak any Korean. Before their visits, I always send and receive emails with these people, all in English too. I do feel comfortable communicating with them, because as non-native speakers their pronunciation is clear and slow. They do not use slang expressions or jargon. Frankly, since we are both non-native speakers, we are in the same situation and we relate to each other.
Many of the Korean executives reiterate how much easier it is to communicate with non-native speakers who speak slower and use less slang. My association with many of these Korean professionals was both within the United States and outside of the country. For example, I accompanied them to Brazil, where they interacted in English without any difficulties and without being self-conscious about their language proficiency. Then we traveled together to Austin, Texas. Suddenly they lost their confidence to use English, had difficulty with the accents and speed of the native speakers, and they generally struggled to communicate much more. The change was traumatic. Later when we were back in Latin America again, they returned to their confident selves. Notice similar comments from a third Korean executive.

OK, advantages and disadvantages. As to advantages, with other non-native speakers, they are not as fluent, and so I do not hesitate to communicate with them. There seems to be more concern for each other. When speaking we try to meet each other’s needs and there is no dog-eat-dog mentality. As to disadvantages, when we fail, we fail together. Second, it is harder to improve my English with other non-native speakers. And third, when I use English with non-native speakers, since neither is using their mother tongue, there is low intimacy, the conversation lacks emotion, it remains formal, and it is just not natural.

These are really insightful observations. On the positive side, notice the concern for others and the empathy that is shared. However, on the negative side, notice that real emotions and intimacy are absent. This next executive also shares his experience in using English and Chinese.

Now that I am stationed in Shanghai, I usually use Chinese, but I also sometimes use English with foreign customers or financial experts. When I do use English with non-native speakers I believe that negotiations are more fair, because nobody has the linguistic advantage. When speaking with native speakers, I feel that I can’t express all of my strategies and so I get nervous because it is harder to select the right words. I should add, however, that this is different here in China. In China it is more important to become a friend first, by speaking Chinese. Here, speaking even a limited Chinese is more important than speaking a neutral language.

Parenthetically, this person had excellent English proficiency, but even he felt nervous when speaking with native speakers of English. It is also significant to see that his opinion of Chinese is related more to the importance of building a relationship, not simply getting the job done.

We now look at some of the comments from Brazilian executives. We will see that their comments actually have a different perspective.
Just last week I was in New York at a retail convention. Almost 2,000 Brazilians were there, and only 5% were really able to interact in English with the other retailers. Doors open only when you speak the language of your interlocutor. I actually find it harder to talk to non-native speakers of English, because I find myself having to adjust my vocabulary and pronunciation for them. In this sense I probably have an advantage over the native speakers of English who are unaware that others do not understand everything they say.

Clearly this Brazilian’s proficiency of English is high, and as such he both appreciates the difficulties that other non-native speakers have, but he also has the ability to modify his speech in English, something that many native speakers are unaware of. Notice this flexibility in the next person’s comments, who can speak Spanish and English.

In a professional atmosphere I use English daily, both in writing and orally. I use English in writing and in responding to emails, in taking international phone calls, and in the meetings I attend and in the lectures that I give. I use English with foreigners from all different countries, with the exception of those whose native language is Spanish, in which case I prefer to use Spanish. I can say that when I talk with non-native speakers, I consciously try to talk slower, more clearly, and more mechanically because I have noticed that they don’t understand me when I talk too fast. When I’m with native speakers I try to talk faster, and I try harder to speak with a native accent.

This person receives daily visitors from all over the world. Her English is very technical. She works in biofuels and the lectures that she is referring to are highly technical and require extremely specialized vocabulary. The next Brazilian executive also demonstrates well the adjustments that one makes when speaking English to others.

In my case, I read things from websites in English every day. I sometimes communicate with people in English via email too, but I only speak in English when visitors come to the training center. This is less often, not even five times a year. The hard part is keeping up with the rhythm of native speakers. Usually it is difficult at the very beginning, to get my fluency going, but after a few minutes, things settle down a bit and then I understand OK. With non-native speakers I believe it is harder to understand them sometimes and I know that I have to talk slower so that they can understand me too.

Notice that where the Koreans felt more comfortable talking to non-native speakers, most of the Brazilians state that they feel more comfortable talking with native speakers. This is specifically seen in the next two comments.
I mainly use English when we receive visitors who are not from Brazil, which includes people from Norway, the United States, Singapore, and other non-Spanish speaking countries, in which case I just use Spanish. The Japanese and the Koreans have a very difficult pronunciation, and in that case it is much easier to understand native speakers. I also use English whenever we go on business trips. Also, all of our video conferences are in English, and all of the documents and schedules that come from the corporate offices are done in English.

This person actually works for an American petroleum company that has offices in Brazil, so her interactions with the home office are mainly conducted with native speakers of English. This final example reinforces this same sentiment.

I mainly use English to interview candidates and talk to those who are finishing their university careers, except of course in the case where these people speak Spanish. As to understanding their English, the advantage of the non-native speakers is that they talk much slower, but I do believe in general it is harder to understand the non-native speakers.

Notice that this person was the third Brazilian to mention that they use Spanish with the Spanish speakers. On balance we see that all of the comments from both the Korean and the Brazilian executives demonstrate that indeed English is simply a tool of the trade, which they all use to complete the task of their jobs.

**A Case for Foreign Language Proficiency in Professional Settings**

The preceding section is not designed to discourage people from learning a foreign language for professional purposes. Nor is it designed to say that it is not important to learn foreign languages. And it is not to say that it is not advantageous to learn another language. It is, however, undeniable that English plays a significant role as a lingua franca. We simply need to know where foreign language proficiency fits it. As such we now turn our attention to some situations in which it is important to have foreign language skills in professional settings. By identifying these areas, I am also identifying areas of focus for the teaching of language for specific purposes (LSP).

_LSP does aid in communication with those who are not proficient in English._ If we only communicate with the thin layer of upper management that has English proficiency, we have eliminated the possibility of receiving direct communication and feedback from large portions of those vested in our work: supervisors, employees, laborers, factory workers, suppliers, end-users, local officials, etc. The illusion is that we begin to believe that everyone really does speak English, and we cut ourselves off from those who do not.
For example, I recall an instance where an American who owned a restaurant in China was unable to deal with a disgruntled employee who began to destroy restaurant property. The owner asked the managers to dismiss her because she was eating the customer’s food off of the plates while serving the dishes. The owner had to communicate everything through his managers, including with the disgruntled employee as well as with the police who were called to the scene. It is simply not true that everyone speaks English.

*LSP proficiency allows for the performance of tasks that require actual proficiency in the local foreign language.* When a given task truly requires advanced or superior proficiency in a foreign language, if we do not have the necessary proficiency, we simply will not be able to perform the task. For example, years ago we were working with the Austin Police Department, developing Spanish language programs as part of the cadet training. Police officers who had limited Spanish proficiency were able to learn basic Spanish to deal with routine traffic stops in Spanish, because that task did not demand high-level proficiency. However, these officers were not able to use their limited Spanish proficiency to respond to family disturbance calls. The nature of the task (dealing with potentially violent family members in a family disturbance call) requires higher levels of Spanish proficiency.

*Proficiency in LSP allows for higher levels of rapport and relationships with local contacts.* In the absence of foreign language skills, it is easy to minimize the loss that comes from not being able to build personal relationships with colleagues, co-workers, and local contacts. However, in most of the world, business and relationships are inseparable. For example, we once dealt with Americans in China who were unable to obtain local permits because they were never able to interact directly with the local government, party, and professional contacts. In the absence of this direct interaction, no progress was made.

*Those proficient in LSP are more sympathetic to the language and cultural issues that accompany international professional activities.* Those who have never gone through the process of learning a new language find themselves at a disadvantage when communicating with non-native speakers because they speak without any adjustment for language and culture. They do not have experience in knowing what vocabulary is easy or hard. They do not realize how fast their speech seems to non-native speakers. They do not realize of their use of slang expressions, and they have no reference for culturally obscure comments. For example, because I live in Texas, we have had the experience of working with Texas businessmen who talk to foreigners with the same slang expressions, references to football, baseball analogies, back slapping asides, and good ole boy jokes that simply create communication barriers for their foreign counterparts. Having never gone through the process of learning another language themselves, they are unaware of the effects.
LSP proficiency gives us the ability to be part of the non-business side of business. Those who have no foreign language proficiency may be able to conduct business, but they are limited in their ability to share in everything else around them. They are limited in their understanding of current events, local happenings, politics, religion, art, foods, theater, sports, and newspapers, etc. For example, recently in Brazil we observed that the American who spoke Portuguese was able to share his experience of going to the theater and watching a play about Lampião and Maria Bonita. The non-Portuguese speakers of the group simply had no way of associating with the Brazilian colleagues at that same level of interaction.

Those who are proficient in a LSP become aware that there is always a “local price” and a “foreigner price.” Those who can communicate locally also have the option of negotiating local prices for things. Those who cannot are subject to the inflated prices that such a service requires. If one knows the local prices for things, for example, shipping and transportation costs, then these can be negotiated with a realistic knowledge of the price of local goods, which helps to put initial negotiated prices at realistic levels.

Those who are proficient in LSP know that all things are cultural. It is nearly impossible to separate cultural knowledge from linguistic knowledge. Those who speak a local language inherently glean cultural insights to local customs as well. For example, speakers of Chinese understand the implications of guanxi, the use of personal connections, relationships and networking. Those who speak Portuguese relate to the importance of dar um jeito, the ability to finagle around things. And those who speak German know what weisungsbefugnis is all about the responsibility and authority to manage and make decisions. Language and culture are inseparable.

Conclusions and Practical Applications

In this essay we have seen examples regarding the reality of how much English is used as a lingua franca in professional settings throughout the world. However, we have also seen examples where it is beneficial, even essential, to have foreign language proficiency in languages other than English. From an educational and pedagogical perspective, it is important for foreign language educators to acknowledge these realities. This still leaves us with the question, when assisting learners in improving foreign language proficiency for professional purposes, of what to teach and how to teach it. What should our strategy be and how should we go about teaching language for specific purposes?

Recently the Modern Language Journal (2012) published a focus issue on the continuing evolution of language for special purposes studies in the United States. The focus issue looks back on the twenty years since Uber-Grosse and
Voght (1991) had published their report on the state of language for special purposes. What comes out in the focus issue is the need to prepare students for the practical application of their L2 in professional environments. Our challenge as educators is to find out what the learner needs are, develop methods that respond to those needs, and acquire pedagogical expertise to be “needs-knowledgeable instructors” (see Lafford 2012:2 who was quoting Belcher 2009).

In 2007 the Modern Language Association’s Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign languages gave the following charge:

The critical moment in which language departments find themselves is therefore also an opportunity. Many factors in the world today make advanced study of languages and cultures appealing to students and vital to society. Replacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole, supported by alliances with other departments and expressed through interdisciplinary courses, will reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities and to the missions of institutions of higher learning. In our view, foreign language departments, if they are to be meaningful players in higher education—or indeed if they are to thrive as autonomous units—must transform their programs and structure (3).

Indeed, the teaching of foreign languages needs to be relevant, and relevant means that we should not ignore teaching to the practical needs of the learners. The Ad Hoc Committee of the MLA first recommends that language professionals move beyond the limiting linguistics and literature only, and instead branch out also to other departments and interdisciplinary courses.

As an example of this effort, the Center for European Studies at the University of Texas at Austin recently offered a Spanish language course that was designed to be a one credit-hour add-on to the existing introductory courses in Marketing and Accounting. Initially we thought that the class would focus on teaching Spanish vocabulary of the same concepts that the students were learning in their Marketing and Accounting classes. To our surprise, however, all the students who enrolled in the course were double majors. Not only were they studying business, but they all had secondary majors which, to be honest, were the areas where they had the most passion. For example, one marketing major student was interested in promoting music events and festivals. She had already participated in the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival by assisting with the logistics for the Latin American artists who attended the festival. Another student, majoring in Government, was looking toward law school and wanted to work with immigrant populations. A third was a writer for the school newspaper and her passion was journalism.
Another student loved finance; another, community programs for Hispanic populations; another, information sciences; and yet another, theater. It became immediately apparent that if we wanted to teach to the needs and interests of the students, we needed to be more flexible in what type of vocabulary these students wanted to learn. In the end, we created assignments that we called oral pass-offs. Here is a description from the syllabus of the oral pass-offs:

Students orally ‘pass off’ brief presentations related to approved business or professional topics (e.g., accounting: income statements, assets vs. liabilities, depreciation, cash flow statements, etc. Students may also choose other topics related to their areas of interest and expertise.) During the semester, students choose 6 topics that they would like to pass-off to the instructor. The pass-off consists of a 5-7 minute oral presentation in which the student demonstrates ability to talk about a given business or professional topic in Spanish. Grades are based on the students ability to use correct grammar and vocabulary, give a polished presentation without being dependent on notes or visual prompts, and provide clarifications and answers to questions as they come up. Students may use notes to help them with the outline of the presentation, but they must not be dependent on the notes. All pass-offs must be completed by the last day of the semester, and no student can complete more than 2 pass-offs per week. Provide the instructor with the 6 topics of your pass-offs by March 1. The mini-lectures that are presented in class can be among the topics that are passed off, but students are invited to choose their own topics as well.

The in-class activities during the semester were centered on helping the students prepare for their oral pass-offs. In the end, where one student chose to compare stocks and bonds, another chose the four P’s of marketing. Where one student talked about assets and liabilities on a balance sheet, another chose to talk about strategies in teaching Flamenco. While the events promoter talked about organizing a local music festival, another decided to talk about INCOTERMS and letters of credit. Because the oral pass-offs were individually performed to the instructor, it was relatively easy to allow for the flexibility in the topics that the students chose. This example from the Center for European Studies illustrates the benefits that come from the interdisciplinary approach that was recommended by the MLA.

There is one final area that we should address in discussing the teaching of foreign languages for professional purposes. Part of the problem in gaining advanced proficiency in a foreign language is that learning of foreign language takes time. In educational settings there is almost never enough time to learn the content of a given major and simultaneously learn a foreign language. If the only way to increase foreign language proficiency is to give the task more time, we have two options. Either learners start learning a foreign language
earlier or they spend more time on task. If we were to start learning a foreign language earlier, we would be following the method that most of the world employs in learning English. Learners of English have often studied ten to fifteen years of English by the time that they enter the professional world. Unfortunately, in our case, instead of one language, we have learners who want to learn any of dozens, even hundreds of different languages. It is nearly impossible to create an infrastructure where we can teach all of these other languages for ten to fifteen years. The Germans, Brazilians, Chinese, Japanese, Chileans, and Koreans may all be studying English, but we cannot provide the same infrastructure to have everyone learn German, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and Korean.

Instead, in North America, our general tendency is to study a foreign language for a few semesters or a couple of years. A few semesters of finance may get a student started in finance and a few semesters of marketing may get a student started in marketing, but a few semesters of a foreign language will not be sufficient to be proficient in a foreign language. Given our infrastructure, the best scenario is that a few semesters of foreign language study puts a learner in the best position to take advantage of an experience living abroad. When we talk about internships, volunteer work, or study abroad, the experience needs to be long enough to actually gain proficiency in a foreign language. We often see academic programs that include two weeks abroad or six weeks abroad. These programs can be excellent in terms of learning experiences, cultural awareness, and content expertise, but they are not long enough to correlate with actual high-level foreign language proficiency. If someone really wants to learn a foreign language, a minimum of three months is really a more realistic time frame for substantial language acquisition, and even then this implies active learning and study during those three months. Part of our charge as educators should be to prepare learners for time abroad.

This essay began with an introspective look at the role of English as a lingua franca and what the implications are as related to the teaching of foreign languages for professional purposes. The objective was to show that indeed English has its role in worldwide communication. At the same time, there are clear benefits and practical needs for proficiency in foreign languages for professional purposes as well. Consequently, it is incumbent on those who teach foreign languages to be flexible enough to teach to those practical needs. We need to accept the social responsibility of solving real work problems in a real world setting, which implies the appropriate application of foreign language proficiency.
WORKS CITED


