

The importance of employees' knowledge of the English language in
two Finnish companies

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Englannin kielen käyttö on globalisaation myötä levinnyt yhä laajemmalle Suomeen ja tämä on nähtävissä erityisesti työelämässä. Yhä useampi työntekijä eri alojen yrityksissä saattaa kohdata tilanteen, jossa heidän täytyy suoriutua työtehtävistään myös englannin kielellä. Onkin siis tarpeen tarkastella, onko tämä ilmiö yhä yleistymässä ja vaaditaanko englannin kielen taitoa suomalaisilta työntekijöiltä nykyään enemmän jo perustaitona vai onko hyvästä kielitaidosta yhä hyötyä. Aihetta on tutkittu varsin vähän aikaisemmin ja kvalitatiivinen tutkimus voi tuoda lisää tärkeää tietoa työelämän nykyisistä vaatimuksista.</p> <p>Tämä kandidaatintutkimus keskittyykin selvittämään, kuinka tärkeänä työntekijöiden englannin kielen taitoa pidetään kahdessa suomalaisessa yrityksessä niin itse työssä kuin työnhakijoidenkin kohdalla rekrytointiprosessissa. Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin haastattelemalla kahta suomalaisen yrityksen toimitusjohtajaa markkinoinnin ja ohjelmoinnin aloilta.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, kuinka molemmissa yrityksissä englantia tarvitaan päivittäisessä työnteossa, mutta työntekijöiltä ei vaadittu erityisen korkeaa kielitaitoa. Tutkimuksessa tuli selvästi esille, kuinka englantia pidetään ennemminkin kommunikoinnin välineenä kuin erityistaitona, mutta hyvästä kielitaidosta voi yhä saada etua työelämässä. Tämä tutkimus toi tärkeää uutta tietoa aiheesta ja näytti kuinka tärkeänä englannin kielen osaamista voidaan pitää, mutta aihe vaatii yhä lisää tutkimusta useammista yrityksistä ja eri aloilta.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The English language has become the lingua franca around the world, and due to globalization, it has affected several different domains from education to the business sector. As a growing number of companies become international generally either by creating branches in other countries, acquiring foreign clients or trading with foreign companies, the role of English as a common language between different nationalities is becoming even more apparent. This phenomenon has reached Finland as well. Increasingly, Finnish company workers face different kinds of multinational environments, and this has led to the internationalization of Finnish working life and raised the importance of the English language at work places (Virkkula 2008:382). Therefore, the requirement of foreign language skills for Finnish workers has increased and more and more people might need a basic knowledge of English in order to do their work. For example, in a survey made by Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto (2014:8), it was revealed that already 76% of their member companies use English at work. However, it is not entirely clear whether knowledge of English is still viewed as an asset or already more of a requirement in Finnish companies. This issue arises particularly while applying for a new job as one might wonder is everyone expected to have at least a basic knowledge of English or is high competency in the language still valued.

There have been several previous research projects focused on the use of English in Finnish companies but they have concentrated mainly on attitudes towards its use (Lehtonen 2004, Bergroth 2007), problems in English internal communication (Lehtonen 2004), the impact of the language from the point of view of power (Siiskonen 2015), and the experiences of professionals with limited English proficiency (Bergroth 2007). Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto (2010) made a survey also concerning language skills in recruiting in their member companies but there has been little qualitative research from the point of view of the manager responsible for hiring new employees, considering how a person's language skills affect the recruitment process and what level of language competency is expected from the employees. This kind of information is quite crucial in today's Finland when the competition for jobs is tough and one might not know the value of foreign languages in the recruitment process.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to discover the importance of language competency in the recruitment process, whether English is seen as an asset or a requirement in Finnish companies and possible reasons behind this phenomenon.

2 ENGLISH AT WORK

In order to fully understand the situation in Finnish companies concerning the use of foreign languages and see how it has come to this point, one must study what the situation is like in other parts of Europe and how the English language has gained such an important position across the world. This next section gives important background information on the subject and aims to understand why some Finnish companies have become more multilingual, resulting in company policies studied in this thesis. I will first discuss multilingual aspects in companies across Europe, then I will focus on the position of English as a lingua franca and a business lingua franca, after which I will examine previous studies made in Finland on the subject, and finally examine how language is seen in recruiting.

2.1 Multilingualism at work in Europe

To begin with, the need for English and other foreign languages in companies can be seen all around Europe, which has affected the situation in Finland as well. It is, therefore, important to first see how different language policies are implemented across Europe as they might give some guidelines on how one can cope with multilingualism at the workplace. Multilingualism at work is a relevant issue today in Europe as the borders between nations are slowly fading and many companies are employing people from different countries. Berthoud et al. (2011:8) have taken note of this, stating that companies today have a growing number of international partners and multicultural and multilingual staff working together, both virtually and physically. One major example of investigating this phenomenon is the DYLAN research project which addressed mainly language practices, policies and strategies and representations of multilingualism and linguistic diversity in twelve different European countries (Berthoud et al. 2011:6-7). One of the project's focuses was on European companies, in the side of EU institutions and bodies, and higher education.

Naturally, different companies implement various sorts of language strategies but usually there are at least some agreed practices concerning the use of language. According to Berthoud et al. (2011: 11), there are chiefly two ways a company can go (albeit the problem is

not exactly as straightforward). Firstly, the company can choose one corporate language that is used both in internal and external communication (this solution is called OLON – one language only). It usually is the national official language but as the result of the lingua franca status of English, many multinational companies have recently chosen English instead. The decision to use a local language promotes efficiency and fairness for the local employees as then they are using their mother tongue and are more confident and can be sure that they will be understood. Choosing English on the other hand promotes equality between different nationalities. However, choosing one corporate language does not necessarily mean that no other language is ever used. As Lüdi et al. (2010: 231) noted, even if a company's corporate language is English, the actual language behavior can vary greatly according to personnel's language competencies. This brings us to the second option that companies have, as told by Berthoud et al. (2011: 11-12). Companies can also choose multilingualism as their language policy. One example of this would be the European Union as it communicates with the member states in the 23 official languages. As in that case, a company can officially choose to be multilingual or they can implement it by acknowledging the different language competencies of their employees. This is fulfilled especially in commercial companies where one can hear the saying "sell in the customer's language". This brings an interesting opposition to the sole use of English, and Virkkula (2008:397) also mentions how in a business situation involving competition, one might use the other participant's own mother tongue instead of more fluent English in order to make an impression on the participant and therefore enhance the business relationship.

Furthermore, a case of multilingualism in a Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company was studied by Lüdi et al. (2010). In their research they noted how multilingualism was fulfilled in the company by choosing the language of communication according to the language competences of their employees, even though the official corporate language was indeed English. This multilingualism could be seen already from the job advertisements, as the company required English for 77% of the jobs, German for 56%, French for 11% and Spanish for 1% (Lüdi et al. 2010: 218). Therefore, a one corporate language policy may not be completely implemented in the actual work discourse. In one of the interviews conducted by Lüdi et al. (2010:220), head of a section talked about the language requirements they have in the company during the recruitment process. Even when it depended on the job description, he stated how important English still is in the company: for example, a scientist in their

company must have a high proficiency level in order to being able to work, whereas a lab assistant can have the job with only good technical skills, although they will then be sent to a language course afterwards. This topic of languages' role in recruitment has not yet been much studied in Finland, but I hope my present thesis will shed some light on it.

2.2 English as a Lingua Franca

Focusing more specifically on the English language, one can see how it has over time become the most widely-spread means of international communication all over the world (Seidlhofer 2011:ix) and as a result it has acquired the status of being the lingua franca, or the common language, of the world. Seidlhofer (2011:7) defines English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) in the following way: “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option.” This definition does not exclude native speakers from the equation as many other definitions do, but instead it acknowledges how English is used as a lingua franca in two ways: between participants with different, non-English, mother tongues and between a native speaker and a non-native speaker.

One feature of ELF is that the language is used more as a tool for communication rather than, for example, expressing one's cultural identity. The ideal with ELF is to communicate successfully with persons with different mother tongues, especially in a situation where there is not a native English-speaker present (Koester 2010:122). This has emerged from the rising need to be able to communicate across national boundaries without the help of translators or native speakers. Therefore, the main goal is in general to get the point across instead of focusing on, for example, grammatical accuracy or correct pronunciation. This is called the 'let it pass' principle, as one does not repair oneself or one's interlocutor in case of an error as long as the message goes through and mutual understanding is achieved (Firth 1996, as quoted by Koester 2010:125). The number of people using English as not their first or second language has grown in such a way that only around one out of four people using it are in fact native speakers (Seidlhofer 2011:2). This has led to ELF being almost “de-anglicized” (Seidlhofer 2011:xi), meaning how it is not closely connected to the traditionally associated cultures such as the Great Britain but instead it is being used more as a practical tool.

English is today in the position of being quite automatically selected as the shared language because of practical measures, and the competency in English continues to rise all over the world (Crystal 2003:12). It is a common occurrence all around the world that a group of people with different mother tongues gather together and use English as the shared language. It is almost taken for granted that a person should have English skills while communicating in an international setting (Seidlhofer 2011:18). However, the use of English as a common language also creates equality between the participants as none of them use their own mother tongues. This could be seen for example in the study of Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) as they studied merged Finnish/Swedish companies and noticed how English was used as the common company language as it was not seen fair to use Swedish when it was the Swedish workers' mother tongue but not the Finns'.

2.2.1 Business English as a Lingua Franca

The study of English as a lingua franca can be narrowed down to focus on especially business contexts, which is essential to the subject of this thesis. In this case, it is called Business English as a lingua franca (henceforth BELF). Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) describe it as a neutral way of communication; that none of the participants are labelled as native-speakers or learners but it is used as a shared language in discourse communities in international business. Due to globalization and the rise of technology, workers living in different countries are able to communicate with each other. As they rarely have a common mother tongue, competency in foreign languages becomes essential and today it is most common to choose English as the common working language (Virkkula 2008:383).

BELF contains similar features to ELF generally in that the language is seen as a very practical tool in conducting business and enables company workers to do their jobs (Lehtonen 2004:62). According to Lehtonen (ibid.), the level of English proficiency does not seem to matter greatly among studied workers as it is considered the main goal to be able to do their work and only technical vocabulary and other jargon would have some value. However, the level of language proficiency among workers differs. As Lehtonen (2004: 82-83) points out, communication skills are important, as even if one has a high level of English proficiency, one still has to manage to communicate with other workers with lower levels of proficiency.

However, especially in these business contexts, it can be quite important to avoid misunderstandings as they could significantly harm one's work (Lehtonen 2004:46). Even though BELF brings with it many advantages, using a language for work that is not one's mother tongue can cause loss of information, misunderstandings, and inequality between employees with different levels of English competencies (Lehtonen 2004:4). In addition, especially in competitive international business environments, it can create great pressure on employees as they have to work in a foreign language and not let it diminish their work quality (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005).

2.3 English in Finnish companies

Due to globalization and the internationalization of companies, Finnish companies have faced the effects of English as a lingua franca in their everyday work as well. This issue is quite a large one and even though when there has been some research on it so far, no uniform result has emerged as to how much it is actually used in practice. For example, according to the National survey on the English language in Finland (Leppänen et al. 2011), when asking how often one uses English at work, the options 'never' and 'less frequently' (than once a month) were the most often answered. This is quite surprising data but one must take into consideration that the survey covered the whole Finland and many types of workplaces. At the same time, a survey made by Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto (2014:8) shows how almost 80% of their member companies use English at work. This can be quite contradictory but it shows that more research must be made and one must also inspect the reasons behind these language policies to try to understand where the need for foreign languages actually stems from.

In a more qualitative study, Virkkula (2008:383) noted how in today's world, more and more Finnish workers have to be able to do their work in other languages than their mother tongue without much help. She argues that English skills are starting to be already a requirement for doing one's job instead of an aid in succeeding. Most companies may not use translators extensively anymore but instead, in addition to professional knowledge, workers are expected to have knowledge in languages as well (Bergroth 2007:11). It was also revealed in a study made in a Finnish company that the interviewed employees told how they use English at work

every day, and some of them might even use English more than Finnish during a work day (Lehtonen 2004:39).

In addition, Virkkula (2008) combined in her article the results of four different Finnish research studies concerning the use of English in Finnish business, commerce and industry areas. She noted that workers in business saw English as a necessary and natural part of communication mainly because their companies were involved in international business and had subsidiaries and partners all over the world (Virkkula 2008:394).

However, often research projects tend to focus on large international companies while the grass-roots level can be forgotten. In the report made by Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto (2014:7), it was noted that language skills are no longer a precondition only for these large companies in Finland but instead small and medium sized companies also have to adjust to these new requirements. Virkkula (2008:417) points this out also by saying that smaller Finnish companies with foreign connections should also be studied in order to achieve a fuller picture of English in Finnish working life. This is a viewpoint that this thesis will focus on and hopefully provide some more information.

2.4 Recruiting and language

According to Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto (2010:5), there are several different factors that contribute to hiring a new employee to a company. For example, the knowledge and skills one has acquired from education and previous work experience, and one's attitude and personality. In addition to these, language skills are one criterion which might have an effect in differing ways depending on the business and the open position. However, employers today widely expect job applicants to have foreign language skills and it can be considered to be already part of one's professional knowledge rather than a special skill. Lehtonen (2004:67-68) noted also in her study that basic English skills were required from new employees and they had to be able to do their work tasks in English. However, she was told by her interviewee that even if one's language competency does not necessarily reach the required level but one is expert in the field, the language skills should not be a hindrance in acquiring the job (Lehtonen 2004:87).

Therefore, the requirement of both good professional knowledge and language skills may be quite difficult to fulfill at times as not every applicant has both of these skills. How these possible employees are treated might depend on the company. It may lead to the applicant being eliminated from the recruitment process or if one's professional skills are superior, the company might decide to hire them and train their language skills afterwards (Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto 2010:5). As there clearly is still some ambiguity in the matter, it is important to investigate it further.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

In this section, I will explain the aim of my study and my research questions. In addition, I will explain what my data consists of, how I gathered it and how I analyzed it.

3.1 Research aim and questions

The aim of this study is to inspect how the CEOs of two different Finnish companies perceive their employees' competency in English at work and how important job applicants' language skills are considered to be in the recruitment process. It is a qualitative approach to a subject that has previously been approached more quantitatively and should therefore provide some more insight into the phenomenon that is the spread of the English language in the Finnish business sector. It will not provide information that could necessarily be generalized to the whole of Finland but instead may help to understand the reasons behind different language policies and to ascertain how language competency is appreciated in some companies.

My research questions are the following:

1. How important is employees' competency in English considered to be in two Finnish companies?
2. How important is applicants' competency in English considered to be in the recruitment process?

3.2 Data and methods

The data for this study was collected by conducting two 30-minute interviews, and this method was chosen because of the benefits of a face-to-face interview. That is, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, as the interviewees were able to freely answer the questions and I was able to ask more specific questions when necessary. I had prepared a set of questions beforehand, which can be found in the appendix. The questions focused mainly on what languages they use in the company, for what reasons and in what kinds of situations, and what sort of competency they expect. Through these questions I was able to receive quite

a clear picture of the normal use of English in their work and the level of English skills they need in general. In addition, another part of the questions covered how important the CEOs perceive the knowledge of English during recruiting and what they consider a good indicator of language skills. I aimed at asking questions that would reveal the most about the use of English in their work and that would help me to understand the underlying reasons behind their language policies. I formed the interview questions as neutrally as possible in order to avoid leading the interviewees in any way and I managed to do so in most cases. However, unfortunately I noticed in a few cases that the interviewees used some words straight from my questions while answering and thus the questions could have been slightly more neutral.

However, because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, there were some additional elaborating questions asked during the actual interview (for example about accents) and the phrasing of the questions might have differed somewhat during the talk. The interviews were conducted in Finnish as I believed it would create a more comfortable situation for the interviewees as they did not have to focus on speaking in a foreign language and may therefore give more insightful answers in their mother tongue. As a result of this, the interview extracts used in the text are translated from Finnish to English and thus there is a possibility of small differences in meaning created by the translation. For this reason, the extracts are also provided in the original language in the text. In addition, the interviews were recorded and therefore I was able to analyze them afterwards using the recordings and make sure I did not misrepresent anyone's words.

The interviewees were both CEOs of their companies. The first company (henceforth referred to as company 1) was a Finnish marketing company that employs 17 people in addition to freelancers, summer workers and volunteers. Their main working language is Finnish, but their work is highly international and they use English at work daily. The second company was a Finnish software company (henceforth company 2) that has eight employees and their main working language is English. Both of these companies were founded in Finland and are still based there but have international contacts and therefore provide an interesting focus for my thesis. They are both also considered to be small companies (as they employ under 50 people) and thus help to cover the gap in research into smaller Finnish companies. I chose to interview the CEOs of these companies as they know their companies' language policies and are responsible for the recruitment process, and therefore they were able to answer all my

questions. In this thesis, I will refer to these interviewees as CEO 1 (from the marketing company) and CEO 2 (the software company).

The analysis process of this study began by transcribing the recorded interviews. Next, I color coded parts of the answers that were essential to my research questions. In this way, I could clearly focus on the important points and categorize them according to which of the questions they mainly answered. Then, I decided to do a thematic analysis, which means that I divided the essential answers into different themes. For example, one of the themes was how both of the companies used some sort of a language specialist. I analyzed each of these themes in turn (there turned out to be six themes in total) and thus created a clear structure for my analysis.

4 ANALYSIS

In this section, I will present my analysis according to my two research questions. Firstly, I will examine how important the interviewees perceived their employees' knowledge of English to be and how the phenomenon of English as a Business Lingua Franca could be seen. Secondly, I will focus on how the employers view the importance of applicants' English skills in the recruitment process.

4.1 The employer's perception of employees' competency in English

The first theme that I discovered in this study was that both of these Finnish companies needed English in their daily work but did not necessarily require high competency level from their employees. In company 1, CEO 1 explained that all of their staff are required to at least cope with using English because of the international context of their work. The company's main working language was indeed Finnish, but as they work every year with a large international event and have many international colleagues, everyone is expected to have at least a basic knowledge of English. However, the level of competency required depended on the job description. CEO 1 told that, for example, in a sales job in Finland it is enough to know English only tolerably, but in a marketing or communications role (which focus more on the international side of their work) one simply cannot do one's job with poor English skills. In company 2, on the other hand, CEO 2 told that their main working language was English and therefore it was also expected from every employee. However, they did not have large differences between different job descriptions as they were a small company and everyone worked quite closely together. In addition, CEO 2 noted that one reason for their use of English was having a foreign coworker, who did not know Finnish, and therefore they used English in internal communication so that he or she would not feel like an outsider.

One quite notable aspect was that in company 1, even though they work very internationally and CEO 1 said that their working community used naturally English, their main working language was still Finnish and they did not require everyone to have particularly high

competency in English. CEO 1 explained that everyone had a different background in their company and that is taken into consideration:

- (1) Depending a bit on the educational background, some have stronger language skills, some not, so we have encouraged that English, at least English should be somewhat natural so we of course help everyone is of course helped
- (1) Vähän koulutustaustasta riippuen osalla on vahvempi kielitaito, osalla ei, ni ollaan kannustettu sit siihen että totaa et englannin ainakin englannin pitäis olla sellasta luontevaa että meillä toki au- kaikkia toki autetaan

Here one can see that everyone's educational background is taken into consideration. CEO 1 realizes that not everyone has studied foreign languages to the same degree and this has led to helping those whose English skills are not equally good. This point could also be seen when CEO 1 was talking about other foreign languages they use at the workplace. She said that one could find employees in their company who know French, German, Spanish or Italian, and when there is a need for, for example, French the person with French skills can always help others in that matter. Thus, everyone is not expected to know a great range of languages but instead it is enough if there is one person in the company who knows it. This might hint that knowledge of English or other foreign languages could be seen as an asset in this company as then one does not need much help and can therefore do one's job quicker.

In company 2, the use of English was also seen as a very natural part of their work. As English was their main working language, everyone was naturally then expected to be able to do their work in this language. This stems from the area of work, as CEO 2 explained that in the IT world, English is very widely used and one rarely comes across a software developer who does not know any English. In their case, however, CEO 2 suggested that it was important that one had the necessary language skills to do their job but very high competency might not be required at all. CEO 2 said the following about their employees' needed language skills:

- (2) And it is important that you know how to use the terminology of your field and through that you get the message through quickly. And that you can pronounce so that it is understood
- (2) Ja se on tärkeätä että osaa käyttää alan sanastoa ja pääsee sitä kautta, saa niinku viestin perille nopeesti. Ja osaa sen verran lausua että sitä niinku ymmärretään

From this extract, one can see that CEO 2 views the terminology of the IT field as important to know and that one should know how to pronounce English well enough for others to understand. The main idea for them is therefore to communicate comprehensibly. This point of view was clearly seen in previous research as Lehtonen (2004:62) described the use of English as a business lingua franca also as a tool for doing one's job and getting one's message across. It is an interesting observation to make therefore that this theory seemed valid within this context and thus provides more evidence on how English is used more as a communicative tool in business. However, I will go deeper into this topic of BELF later on.

A second common theme that could be found from both companies was that they used a language specialist of some sort to help them in the most important cases. CEO 1 pointed out that they had particularly one employee who was *phenomenal* in English and was therefore responsible for all official written documents in English. CEO 1 herself said using this employee to read through some of her more official texts in order to write the most accurate English possible. In this case, one can see yet again that people with higher language skills were a major help for other employees and therefore not everyone was needed to have as high skills. This also shows what sort of a role a person with especially high competency in English might acquire in a company. In addition, in company 2, CEO 2 pointed out too that when they produce English material for external communication, they tend to have it first examined by a coworker in England in their sister company. He stated the following about their external communications:

- (3) There when you are producing the original text, we are more careful. Mainly we do know grammar really well but when we are communicating among ourselves, when it doesn't matter then you don't think about it that much. When we are producing materials outward, then we think a bit what, how this thing goes right. Then in general we check it too.
- (3) Siinä kun se alkuperäinen teksti tuotetaan niin ollaan tarkempia. Kyllähän me pääosin osataan kielioppi tosi hyvin, mutta tekemisissä keskenään kommunikoidessa kun sillä ei oo merkitystä niin ei sitä ihan hirveesti mieti. Sitku tuotetaan ulospäin materiaalia niin vähän mietitään että mikä, miten tää juttu nyt menee oikein. Sitte pääsääntöisesti vielä tarkastetaankin.

Here CEO 2 explains that they are more careful with the language while communicating outside of their company. He states that they know grammar quite well but still tend to have their official texts examined. This was an interesting observation to make, as it shows that

both companies feel the need for someone with particularly high competency of English to view their most official texts. One could therefore think that as neither of them require very high competency from all of their employees, they consider it sufficient to have only one person who can act as a sort of a language specialist and help others. It is quite encouraging information for both people with higher skills as their knowledge can be of great help to others in the company and also for those with lesser skills as they know they can be supported in the matter.

The third theme that I discovered in this study was the use of English as a communicative tool. As Lehtonen (2004:62) pointed out, BELF is seen as a practical tool in conducting business, enabling employees to do their work. This can quite clearly be seen happening in these two studied companies. Both CEOs emphasized how important it was to be able to do one's job while using English and high competency was therefore not greatly required, although it was certainly beneficial. CEO 1 said that she sees *language as a tool; it helps your life* and this viewpoint is greatly in line with the principles of BELF. As the main aim is to do one's job well, the English language was seen only as a skill that enabled that and helped one's life.

In accordance with this, in company 2, how accurately one uses grammar or how fluently one speaks did not seem to have much weight in importance. CEO 2 also emphasized how important it was to simply get the message across. He said that the quality of the language might not be perfect in their company but the message must be still clear to the recipient. Both CEOs also indicated that they did not expect native-like pronunciation from their employees, especially any sort of different accent. CEO 2 stated that *rally English works really well* and this depicts how even if their work language is English, employees are not required to master the pronunciation, as 'rally English' is famously perceived as being very simple and used with a thick Finnish accent. It is an interesting finding therefore as in general one could imagine that a company with English as its main working language would benefit from native-like fluency in pronunciation. On the other hand, in this case a part of the use of English was in internal communication where only coworkers speak with each other (making it thus more relaxed) and writing English perhaps held a larger part in their use of English.

Lastly, the fourth theme regarding the first research question was that both CEOs emphasized greatly the courage to use English regardless of one's language proficiency. CEO 1 stated this:

- (4) It is lovely if you know how to speak beautiful flawless language, but if that your accent is not going to change into anything then whatever, just go with it, the main thing is that you are speaking and are being understood and are using the language, so you have no need to be afraid of speaking
- (4) On ihanaa jos osataan puhua kaunista virheetöntä kieltä, mut se, jos ei sit se sun aksentti ei sit niinku siitä muuksi muutu niin ihan sama, anna mennä vaan, et pääasia et sä puhut ja niinku tuut ymmäretyksi ja käytät sitä kieltä et ei suotta pelätä sit sitä puhumista

She sees high levels of language proficiency as a beautiful aspect but not as something that everyone should definitely have. Thus, the most important matter is to have the courage to speak and use the language, no matter what sort of accent one might have. CEO 2 emphasized this point also by saying that even if one did not speak very fluently or did not know the grammar perfectly, the most important aspect was to still have the courage to use the language. This might argue against the general idea that Finns are very modest when it comes to their language skills. As CEO 2 also points out, Finns are quite careful with what it means to say that they know English. Even if someone has quite a good command of the language, they might still say they do not speak it. Both CEOs showed encouragement against this sort of attitude and emphasized that Finns should be braver to use the language and not care too much whether the grammar or pronunciation is correct.

4.2 The importance of English skills in the recruitment process

As it can be seen, both of these companies used the English language quite a lot in their work and therefore another point of this study was to discover how important the CEOs then consider a job applicant's English competency to be while hiring a new employee. CEO 2 was very clear on the matter that they cannot hire a person who cannot speak and understand English. The need for English is such an essential aspect that they can even hire a person who does not know any Finnish. However, one common theme that could be found was that a person's professional knowledge was naturally seen as a more important factor than evaluating their language skills as one must first know how to do one's job and language

comes second. It is an interesting issue therefore that company 2 focuses on an applicant's professional skills and demands English skills as an underlying norm. This suggests that particularly in the IT world the knowledge of English can be a requirement for all employees. It would have been interesting to hear how they measure applicants' English skills during the interview but unfortunately the interview questions for this study did not cover this.

CEO 1 had the same opinion that language skills do not surpass professional knowledge in importance during recruitment. However, this shows the difference between different areas of business as they do not demand English from absolutely every employee in company 1. She gave an example from their company showing that one can still work there even without basic language skills and phrased it in the following way:

- (5) I'm not ready to replace a person in that case when he/she is so good in his/her tasks even without English, so then we just manage
- (5) En mä oo valmis ihmistä korvaamaan sit siinä kohtaa kun se on niin hyvä niissä tehtävissään ilman sitä englantiakin et sit me vaan selvitään

This indicates that it will not be a definitive obstacle if an employee or an applicant has extremely good professional skills but lacks the knowledge of English as then they will cope with the situation. This refers to my previous observation that a person with low-level language skills is helped by other coworkers in their company, thus creating the possibility of working without more than basic English skills. This same observation was made by Lehtonen (2004:87) in her research which I discussed earlier, that being an expert in the field can be enough in acquiring a job even without the necessary language skills. Nevertheless, CEO 1 also pointed out that she sees the lack of language skills as a restricting factor in general:

- (6) If you can never read, study, familiarize your field in your own eyes also in English as in other languages, I think it is a big shortage
- (6) Jos sä et pääse itse koskaan niinku koskaan omin silmin lukemaan, tutkimaan, perehtymään sun alaan myöskin englannin niin muilla kielillä, minun mielestä se on iso, se on iso puute kyllä

Thus she feels that not knowing English can also be seen as a lack of knowledge and as limiting one's world view, if one cannot read about their field of work through any other

language than Finnish and see what is happening all around the world. This can be related to many other areas of work where it is important to, for example, learn about new research or innovations in their field. Therefore, one can assume that even though an applicant can acquire the job without basic English skills, it still can be seen as a lack of knowledge, and therefore people with higher proficiency levels might have an advantage of knowing their work field also internationally.

Another occurring theme was that job applicants should prove their language skills in the recruitment process. In the IT world one can expect the applicant to know English as it is such a common feature in their area of work, and therefore CEO 2 pointed out that if the applicant has an especially high proficiency level, they must highlight this skill in the interview or otherwise it will not make a difference:

- (7) Emphasize that why you know it so well and tell how well you know it and tell that you speak it like your mother tongue and then it is an advantage
- (7) Painottaa sitä että miksi osaa sitä niin hyvin ja kertoo kuinka hyvin osaa ja kertoo että puhuu sitä kuin äidinkieltään niin siitä on etua

In an interview situation then a job applicant with high proficiency level should clearly tell how well they know English and why and only then it would be a clear advantage compared with other job applicants. In a company such as this one where English skills are expected from the beginning, one must truly emphasize one's language skills in order to make a difference or otherwise one is on the same line as the others. This is an interesting observation as one of the goals of this thesis was to discover whether English was still seen as an asset and this example shows how only by clearly highlighting one's high proficiency level can it be seen as an asset. However, this is only one company in question and the area of IT business has an impact on this, as knowledge of English may be more common than in some other areas of business.

In addition, when discussing how to prove one's language skills, CEO 1 stated that she sees practical experience of using foreign languages as more important than language courses or degrees. Therefore, if an applicant says that he/she has high language skills, it is better evidence if they have, for example, lived or studied abroad as it is then more likely that their language is fluent and they are more used to using it in practice.

5 CONCLUSION

My first research question was how important employees' competency in English is considered to be in these companies. I discovered that they should know some English but high proficiency level was not required, and employees with particularly good language skills could attain the role of a language specialist. In addition, English was seen more as a communicative tool in doing one's job rather than a special skill. My second research question was how important job applicants' competency in English is considered to be in the recruitment process. I found out that professional knowledge surpasses language skills in importance even if language skills are expected from the applicant, and that one should clearly highlight and prove one's language skills in order for them to make a difference in the application process.

Therefore, in this study, it was seen that two Finnish companies in different areas of business both required knowledge of English but in different ways. In company 1, employees should know the language, but it was not seen as a definite obstacle in doing one's job or acquiring it. This could be interpreted that people with good command of the language still have some sort of an advantage in being able to do their work without help. In company 2, knowledge of English was required from everyone but a very high competency level was not necessarily required. Knowing the terminology of their field and having the courage to use the language were seen as more important, as language was seen as a tool for doing one's job. This could be seen in both companies, as mastering grammar or pronunciation were not the most important factors but instead the main idea was to be able to communicate comprehensibly.

These results were in accordance with previous research as it showed some similar points, such as that English is used as a business lingua franca (Lehtonen 2004, Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). It therefore provided more evidence that English is being used as a tool in Finnish companies and that even smaller companies (that had not been studied extensively before) use English daily in their work and thus require these skills from their employees and job applicants. This may imply that the English language has truly spread even to the smaller Finnish companies and even more people are required to know the language, even though a high proficiency level might not be needed. Therefore, people with especially good command

of English can still have an advantage in work and in the recruitment process if they can clearly indicate their skills.

However, this is a very small-scale qualitative study on the matter and thus only shows how English competency is perceived in these two companies. As it could be seen, the requirements can differ according to the area of work and thus more research is needed from different businesses to discover whether English is required to this extent also in other fields.

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APPENDIX

The interview questions in English

- What languages do you use in practice here in your company?
- What is depends on which language you use?
 - Does the use of languages differ between different job descriptions?
- How much English (or other languages) do you use in your work? How often? In what kinds of situations?
 - Do you need more speaking, writing or understanding English?
 - Which of these you see as the most important area to know?
- What is your own background when it comes to studying languages? (What languages do you know, where and how long have you studied them?)
- Is there a possibility to get additional training in languages through the company if needed? Is there a need for training or does everyone just manage using the language skills they already have?
- Does using English (or other foreign languages) cause any misunderstandings or problems during work?
- Does the company have an official language?

Recruiting:

- When you are hiring a new employee, what kind of an importance does language skills have? (Is it only one skill among others or do you draw some special attention to it?)
- If an applicant has an especially good knowledge of English, is it seen as a great advantage? (For example if one has a degree from English)
- Do you think everyone is nowadays expected to know at least a bit of English or do you still see it as an asset in job search?
- Which do you find as a better indication of knowledge of English: official education (courses, degree) or practical experience (living abroad)?