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# Discursive identity work and interculturality during blue-collar work practice abroad: Finnish engineering students as language learners and users

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## **Abstract**

This chapter addresses foreign language learners' and users' discursive identity work and interculturality in the context of blue-collar work practice abroad. It focuses on Finnish engineering students who were working in Germany with the aim of learning about their field of study. The participants had learnt English as a foreign language at school but had little or no previous knowledge of the local language of the host country. The study aims to find out what discourses the students draw on, how they orient to sameness and difference and what identities they make relevant in these discursive processes. The data used for this study are interviews collected at the beginning and after the students' four to six months' stay abroad and analyzed from a perspective that combines ethnography, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. The findings show that the students' interculturality is connected to language policies and choice, discourses of global and local language, the ability to use one's communicative repertoire, and identity struggles caused by the challenges posed by languages during the stay abroad.

## **Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is on questions of identity and interculturality during work practice abroad. It complements earlier applied linguistic research on study abroad that has largely documented second language learning outcomes (Benson et al. 2013: 35; see Kinginger, 2009 for an overview). The present study concentrates on engineering students who intend to learn about their field of study in Germany, where English has the role of a foreign language. Although the students have their first extensive experience of using English as a lingua franca with speakers of different L1s while working abroad, they cannot manage only with English but instead need to use

other communicative resources, develop their repertoires and (re)negotiate their identities. Importantly, although the students have little or no earlier experience in the local language, German, they are expected to learn and use it at work (cf. Benson et al., 2013: 35-36). Such situations represent contemporary, late-modern working life, increasingly characterized by migration, mobility and hybridity (Canagarajah, 2013a; Duchêne et al., 2013; Messelink et al., 2015). As people need to work with others with different biographies and histories of socialization, and different values and norms, competence in dealing with interactions becomes a key issue. People from different linguacultural backgrounds may not have very much knowledge about cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in general (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015: 2; see also Jackson, 2014) and therefore working in such environments poses various challenges and requires a particular kind of professional communicative repertoire (Räsänen, 2013; see also Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011).

Student mobility can take various forms, among them student exchange, study visits, practical training, and different types of internships. All of these share the element of a stay abroad, which is used here as an umbrella term to refer to various types of programs involving students studying, working and living outside their countries of origin as part of their education. Staying abroad is a temporary form of migration and a site for identity development, socialization and the learning of various skills, linguistic, cultural, social, personal, intercultural and professional (Benson et al., 2013: 35; Messelink et al., 2015). Migration here refers to any “mobile citizen who migrates or is mobile for various reasons” such as work and leisure (Duchêne et al., 2013: 6-7). Staying abroad is commonly seen as an essential tool to develop various competences needed in professional life (e.g. Kinginger, 2009; Lewis, 2009; Paige et al., 2009). In particular, a stay abroad is part of the education of future professionals to face the demands of competitive job markets, to become global citizens in the multicultural world (Jackson, 2008) and to earn ‘mobility capital’ (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). As a learning context within higher education, it has grown in popularity over recent decades as part of institutions’ internationalization attempts (OECD, 2015). For instance, student mobility within the European student exchange program, Erasmus, has increased enormously. For example, in higher education the number of students leaving Finland for a period of more than three months’ mobility was fewer than 7,000 in 2000, while in 2015 the number had increased to over 10,000 students (CIMO, 2016).

Language and intercultural learning during a stay abroad have been popular topics of applied linguistic research. The following section outlines the major foci of earlier research and situates this chapter in the tradition.

## **Stay abroad research: Language learning and intercultural communication**

### *A brief outline of earlier research*

Within applied linguistics, research on staying abroad as part of educational studies, labelled as ‘study abroad’ (SA), has developed rapidly over the past few decades along with the increasing popularity of various study abroad programs. Since the first studies were published in the 1990s (Freed, 1995; Pellegrino, 1998; Polanyi, 1995), SA research has been concerned with capturing language learning outcomes and the kind of personal and social factors that contribute to the (non-)success of the stay (e.g. Dewey et al., 2013; Isabelli-García, 2006; Llanes et al., 2012). Increasing attention has also been targeted at individual students’ different and unique development and changes during the stay abroad; for example, how students construct diversity (Dervin & Layne, 2013), identities (Benson et al., 2013; Jackson, 2008, 2010) and an intercultural mindset (Jackson, 2016). On the research agenda have also been intercultural learning (see Beaven & Borghetti, 2016) and the development of intercultural competence (e.g. Holmes & O’Neill, 2012), and intercultural communicative competence (e.g. Boye, 2016). For example, Bennett’s (1993, 2004) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity has been utilized to capture student sojourners’ trajectory of intercultural development along the continuum of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism (Anderson et al., 2006; Jackson, 2009, 2010, 2011).

Most study abroad research on language learning and intercultural development has focused on students in target language contexts and host cultures (e.g. DeKeyser, 2010; Jackson, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Kinginger, 2008, 2013; Martinsen, 2011). Findings have revealed major variation between individuals and their learning outcomes (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016: 350). Fewer studies have looked at students with little or no knowledge of the host language but with a history of learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, previous studies have principally been interested in students of a second language and students studying through the medium of a second language abroad. This study adds a new dimension to research by focusing on non-language specialists whose primary purpose in their stay abroad is to do a compulsory internship, and to do

this partly in a language that they had not previously studied. It is important to study such contexts because they also shed light on the communicative challenges faced by transnational workers (see e.g. Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015; Roberts, 2010; Zhu, 2014), who need to get their job done regardless of their level of language proficiency (cf. Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Räisänen, 2013). As this chapter shows, workers require a particular kind of communicative repertoire and need to reconstruct their identities.

### *Competence, culture and interculturality*

In SA research, students' encounters with locals and other students during a stay abroad are usually viewed as intercultural, and in relation to these, students' intercultural (communicative) competencies and their development have been of interest. This has given rise to two important notions in terms of the present study: competence and culture.

Intercultural competence is a popular concept used to refer to the skills and attitudes needed to communicate successfully with people from different backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> These skills include the ability to interact with others, mediate between difference perspectives, acceptance and sensitivity towards other people and cultures and their perceptions of the world, and awareness of one's own cultural positioning (Byram et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 2012). However, the notion of competence is somewhat problematic because it presupposes knowledge of a set of dispositions, attitudes, abilities and skills that can be compartmentalized and evaluated and that progress neatly, linearly and cumulatively (Canagarajah, 2018: 35). This dominant assumption of competence as perfect mastery of a set of skills has been challenged with a call for a more practice-based and spatial approach and a view of 'competence' as success in situated encounters with the use of one's full repertoire (ibid.). This includes translanguaging, that is, the process of making meaning and producing knowledge by moving not only between languages but also beyond them and beyond semiotic modes and modalities (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Li 2016: 3-4). The notions of translanguaging and translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2013b) highlight the use of a whole range of resources (linguistic, embodied, material) used by people when communicating and aiming at achieving their goals, and at work, to handle their everyday tasks. Moreover, competence in this framework relates to being sensitive to communicative resources needed in a particular context. Knowing how to do this in an intercultural encounter where one needs to use a foreign language is particularly important in working life.

Before elaborating on interculturality, we need to look at the second notion, culture. Static and essentialist conceptualizations of culture and cultural membership, which characterize much of traditional intercultural communication research (e.g. Hofstede, 1983), have been challenged by scholars influenced by the poststructuralist paradigm (e.g. Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2014). A great deal of intercultural communication research has sought to compare distinct cultural groups' behavior and communicative practices (the term 'cross-cultural communication', see Scollon & Scollon, 2001), or has studied cultural differences between distinct groups from an interactional perspective (labelled as 'intercultural communication', *ibid.*). Studies have taken as a starting point that intercultural communication occurs between distinct cultural groups and, as Piller (2011: 14-15) notes, in such studies culture and cultural identity are treated as something that people have, and which thus inherently influence how they approach communication and actually communicate.

The concept of interculturality problematizes the static notions of culture and cultural identity and emphasizes the *inter* nature of interactions.<sup>2</sup> In communication, individuals produce and interpret subjective and intersubjective constructions of cultural identities (e.g. Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013). Interculturality refers to individuals' cultural affiliations as emergent in interactions – the core idea is that cultural differences are salient only if participants make them relevant during interaction (Higgins, 2007; see also Mori, 2003; Zhu, 2015). Therefore, cultural identities are not necessarily relevant if the focus is on other identities (e.g. professional, gender, etc.). Cultural identities are avowed, ascribed, reworked, or resisted at the level of interpersonal interaction and relationships. They are situated, practical accomplishments in interactions and emerge through both the interplay of self-orientation and ascription-by-others, and the interplay of language use and socio-cultural identities (Zhu, 2015). As cultural identities and cultural memberships are discursively constructed, “culture thus exists only insofar as it is performed, and even then its ontological status is that of a pointedly analytical abstraction” (Baumann, 1996: 11). Hence, culture in intercultural communication should not be seen as something that people have but rather as something that people construct, do and make relevant (see also Piller, 2011: 15). According to Dervin (2010), the notion of interculturality highlights the presence of the other (her/his language proficiency, age, gender, etc.) in intercultural competence; it does not solely focus on the individual and measure her/his abilities.

In interactions, then, individuals orient to identities and cultural frames of reference in different ways and co-construct their understanding together by managing and working through not only their differences but also their similarities, using processes of adequation and distinction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2003). In English as a lingua franca (ELF) interactions in particular, which are relevant for this chapter, people are seen to bring together their own linguacultural backgrounds and repertoires in order to achieve their goals in whatever activity they are engaged in (Baker, 2009: 581-582). In his study, Baker (2009, 2011, 2016) focused on conceptualizations of culture in ELF by drawing on empirical data from L2 learners and users of English at a university in Thailand. His findings show that ELF users draw on multiple cultural frames of reference, moving between and across local, national and global contexts in dynamic ways (Baker, 2009). In another study, Kalocsai (2009) studied Erasmus exchange students' socialization into newly emerging ELF communities of practice. The students successfully learnt to use ELF but experienced challenges in socializing with locals due to problems in their language proficiency and language choice (Kalocsai, 2009: 42-43). Virkkula and Nikula's (2010) and Räisänen's (2016) studies on Finnish engineering students' identity construction before and after staying abroad show that as a result of their increased contact with other ELF speakers, students' identities change from EFL learners to ELF users, with national culture an important resource for identity construction. This highlights the constructed nature of culture and identities as situated, fluid and changing, as understood in social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1999; Hall, 1996). The present study sheds further light on foreign language learners' and users' identity work as they orient to discourses of sameness and difference during work practice abroad where they need to use English as a lingua franca.

## **The study**

### *Participants*

This chapter draws on a longitudinal study which has followed a group of Finnish engineers for over 14 years, since 2003 when, as students at a university of applied sciences,<sup>3</sup> they enrolled in a four- to six-month internship at a factory in Germany. Their work consisted of working on machines, assisting the permanent personnel and handling of manufactured material. The students' L1 is Finnish, they were born in Finland between 1977-1981, and they had lived in Finland all their lives before the stay abroad. They had studied English as a school subject (a foreign language)

for over ten years since third grade, and Swedish since eighth grade, and some of them had taken a course in German either in high school or higher education.

Before their stay abroad, all the students except one had travelled abroad for a holiday for only two weeks; only one had been abroad for a month. They reported having used English very little in Finland apart from at school, reading news on the Internet and occasional encounters with tourists on the street. The students saw the use of English principally in terms of speaking and mentioned the lack of opportunities to speak English in Finland (Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). Thus, for them the stay abroad manifested itself as an opportunity to use English in out-of-school contexts because English was the only foreign language they knew before going to Germany.

The students lived in a student dorm in a small town in Germany, where they interacted with local residents and other students from Germany, Greece, China and India. The students had blue-collar jobs in a factory and colleagues from Germany and Portugal. Company policy advocated for the learning and use of German on the job rather than English. Since the students had little or no knowledge of German, they preferred English but over time learned some German. This chapter focuses on five participants: Pete, Tero, Oskari, Risto and Simo (the names are pseudonyms). As a researcher I was able to gain an ethnographic and insider's perspective on the participants' lives, experiences and communicative situations since at the same time I was doing my own compulsory period of language practice as a student of German; I travelled with them to Germany and lived in the same dorm for five months.

### *Ethnographic and discursive approach*

This chapter combines ethnographic and discursive perspectives to try to find out what discourses the students draw on, how they orient to sameness and difference, and what identities they make relevant in these discursive processes.

Here, ethnography functions both as a methodology and an approach; it is 'a way of seeing the world'. Ethnography makes it possible to see connections between specific micro-level instances and macro-level societal issues, policies, practices and ideologies (Blommaert & Dong, 2010). Combined with a longitudinal approach, it makes it possible to trace how individuals' prior



socialization to discourses, learning biographies and histories plays a role in their current practices, such as orientations to sameness and difference (cf. Duff, 2008; Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002). Thus, ethnography can account for the important historical aspect of a stay abroad, as biographies and individual histories facilitate understanding of the changes that occur (Benson et al., 2013: 3). Ethnography also ensures that the place and space of practices will be incorporated into understanding both human practices and their development (see e.g. Weisner, 1996), as findings are contextualized, situated, and conceptually and empirically connected to the properties of the social settings in which they are studied.

When individuals talk about their experiences and language use abroad, they draw on discourses. Discourses are people's "socially accepted association[s] among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and of acting [...]" (Gee, 1990: 143). They offer individuals resources for identity work (Bamberg et al., 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007), that is, ways to understand one's relationship to the world. Hence, by drawing on discourses, individuals position themselves as certain kinds of people and project a certain identity. A discursive approach makes it possible to explore individuals' interculturality because, in drawing on discourses, people construct their reality, and reject and embrace aspects of that reality and their own (changing) place within it.

Discourses are not merely handed down to individuals, but individuals have agency to orient to certain discourses and identities in talk (Bamberg et al., 2011). From a non-essentialist standpoint, identities are discursive, dynamic, changing and context-dependent. Thus, identities and discourses do not just exist as given notions, but they are discursively constructed by individuals and made relevant by them (see also Piller, 2011: 3; Zhu, 2015). As Bamberg et al. (2011: 188) argue, "it is typically through discursive choices that people define a sense of (an individual) self as different from others, or they integrate a sense of who they are into communities of others." In interactions, participants do contextualization work, establishing relationships between the context and identifications (Gumperz, 1982). According to Piller (2011: 172), a key question in intercultural communication is: "who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?" It is thus of interest to see how culture is drawn on in our participants' interviews to define the self and the other and to explain behavior.

### *Interviews as interaction*

The study presented here utilizes interview data and my ethnographic knowledge to study the participants' discursive identity work and interculturality. Interviewing is a key method in qualitative research (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2012; Rapley, 2001). Often, however, the interviewee's talk is taken as the sole focus of analysis and is isolated from the local context of interaction in which the talk originally occurred, i.e. the interaction between interviewee and interviewer. This silences the interviewer's talk, questions, comments and requests, which are not considered in the analysis (Rapley, 2001: 304). However, in solely extracting the interviewees' accounts as versions of reality, we may actually misinterpret that reality since it may have been introduced or invoked by the interviewer, not the interviewee. It is, after all, the interviewer who introduces topics and guides the interview in the desired direction, thus inevitably influencing the interviewees' answers (Dervin, 2011: 47). Interviews should be seen as interactions in which the interlocutors co-construct reality (Dervin, 2013: 92 citing Shi-xu, 2001: 285; Rapley, 2001) and jointly orient to interculturality.

In this study, the thematic interviews were conducted in Finnish (see Appendix 1 and 2). Every participant was first interviewed in May 2003 (at the beginning of the stay) and then for the second time either in August or November 2003 (after the stay) depending on the length of each participant's stay (four to six months). They each lasted about one hour and they were transcribed and analyzed in their totality to identify emergent themes across the interviews and participants' orientations to interculturality. Based on close reading of the transcripts, recurrent themes emerged and were grouped together into codes: language learning, language use, surviving with English at work, language competence, English as a global language, German as a local language, and adjustment to German culture. Based on these codes, the following main categories were identified: language policy at work, discourses of global vs. local language, translanguaging, and identity struggle.

The extracts in this chapter include the interviewer's questions and feedback in order to illustrate the co-construction of reality. In addition, pauses, stress, and laughter are included since analysis should consider not only what the participants say but also how they say it (see Appendix 3). Due to space restrictions, the extracts are translations from Finnish to English but the analysis draws on the original versions. I acknowledge that translations are never full presentations of the original data but representations by the researcher. Moreover, some expressions and word choices are

difficult to translate; therefore, transparency in the research report is important. As an illustration, Appendix 4 includes two samples of the original Finnish versions.

## **Findings**

### *Language learner and user identities*

This section provides an overview of earlier studies on the participants' identity construction in relation to using English (Räsänen, 2012, 2013, 2016; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). This is complemented with a focus on their identities in the framework of interculturality. Before their stay abroad, these students had constructed language learner identities by drawing heavily on discourses of schooling and education, which is understandable, given their background and histories. They felt that opportunities for speaking English in Finland were rare, which partly explains their feelings of anxiety and fear about using English. At that time, they held a very compartmentalized view of language as consisting of specific elements to be learnt, such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and they considered native speaker competence the target of learning. Their discursive work points to their backgrounds in very monolingual towns in the 1990s and early 2000s, where they would encounter foreign languages mainly through the media and at school where they focused largely on learning language structures.

The stay abroad contributed to changes in students' identity construction, moving them toward a view of themselves as legitimate (Norton, 2000) users of English as a lingua franca in relation to other ELF speakers with whom they interacted abroad. They all described increased confidence in speaking English. A collective aspect of linguaculture strengthened in their identity work, as the participants talked about themselves as Finnish users of English and drew on their national culture.

While earlier studies have focused on participants' identity construction in relation to learning and using English abroad, this chapter focuses on their identities in the framework of interculturality, also in relation to German and from the point of view of overlapping themes: language policy at work, discourses of global vs. local language, translanguaging, and identity struggle.

### *Language policy at work*

This section addresses the role of the official language policy and situation at work in the participants' orientations to interculturality and identity work. Most of the permanent workers followed the company's language policy, according to which everyone must speak German. Those who knew some English but did not want to speak it may have been afraid of their German boss and possible sanctions. Some of the workers showed little knowledge of English while others spoke it despite the policy (mostly workers of Portuguese origin). This situation caused major challenges for the students who did not know enough German. In Example 1, Pete elaborates on the challenge.

#### **Example 1.** Pete (May 2003)

- Tiina well do you think you'll survive with your English proficiency here in Germany?  
if you think about how you felt before leaving and maybe now? [---]
- Pete no I'll survive no problem (.)  
but I've noticed that (.) with English yes there's no problem  
but then you imagine that (.) you hear your colleagues  
and almost none of them are speaking English and only you are speaking it  
so it is (.) it would be nice to work with a guy (.) in the same workstation who speaks English  
so it would be good (xxx)
- Tiina yeah
- Pete but I would like to learn German (.) it would help after all

First, I ask Pete's opinion about how well he will survive with his English skills in Germany. Pete's position as a competent English speaker is rather obvious as he says that he will survive with English without any problems (the words survive and English are stressed). However, this identity is challenged at work. Pete first makes a contrastive move ("but") and then verbalizes his experience: hearing his colleagues not speaking English and only himself speaking it. There is a clash between his expectations and reality as English skills do not guarantee success in workplace communication. Although Pete would like to communicate in English at work, he would also like to learn German. Risto expressed similar challenges and drew on a discourse of life without language, positioning himself as speechless. In Example 2, Simo draws on the same discourse and an undesirable identity as someone willing to speak but unable to do so, and thus feeling "stupid" (*tyhmä*).

### Example 2. Simo (May 2003)

- Tiina so how does it feel at work when you can't survive with English?  
Simo heheheheh stupid (.) I would like to talk all the time  
I have the kind of personality who kind of talks all the time  
Tiina mm  
Simo and then you can't (.) or you can talk there but they label you as crazy  
if you start speaking Finnish or English to yourself and they don't understand

Simo is forced to align to a new identity, which prevents him from being true to himself. This identity is also ascribed to him by others, as Simo illustrates when referring to being “labelled as crazy” (*leimaa hulluksi*) if he starts speaking English to people who do not know it. Interculturality and orientations to difference emerge both from the company's language policy and from the workers' differing language proficiency. For the students, just as for mobile people and migrants in general, knowing the local language may be crucial for fitting in, and it has symbolic power in identity construction processes (see also Angouri, 2013).

As mentioned above, not all workers followed the German-only rule during the Finnish students' work practice. Tero (Example 3) explains that to begin with his colleagues did not speak English at all and demanded that Tero should learn German, but by the end they had started to say a few words. This could be the result of a change either in their attitude towards the language policy or in their actual English proficiency.

### Example 3. Tero (August 2003)

- Tiina do they like speaking English with you?  
Tero well they do now (.)  
but at first they wouldn't speak it at all  
but now they have started to say a few words  
and those who know English do speak now  
Tiina yeah  
Tero yes at first they thought that I have to learn German  
Tiina right so they noticed that  
Tero that it's better to speak English  
Tiina yeah  
Tero since that guy will never learn German heheh

In the final part of the extract, we jointly construct an explanation for the Germans' willingness to speak English in the end: after Tero's colleagues had noticed that “that guy will never learn German,” they decided that they had better speak English. Also Pete explicitly mentions how local

workers changed their orientation to the Finnish students' repertoires by starting to speak English after claiming for five months that they could not speak it at all. Hence, a grassroots policy gradually emerges that challenges official policy (see also Angouri, 2013). Interestingly, as shown in Virkkula and Nikula (2010), nationality is given as one reason for people's (un)willingness to speak English: Pete, for instance, said that the threshold to speak English was probably lower for Finns than for the locals. This relates to discourses of global and local language.

### *Discourses of global vs. local language*

In discussions on language policy and proficiency, a dichotomy emerges between discourses of English as a global language and German as a local language. This global-local distinction closely relates to interculturality and the participants' construction of themselves and Germans as speakers of English.

In Example 4, when I ask Simo to explain what language proficiency means to him, he mentions communication "with people in different languages," for instance Finns using English.

#### **Example 4.** Simo (May 2003)

- Tiina so then the term language proficiency (.) something that is used a lot  
Simo mm  
Tiina so what do you think it means? can you explain?  
Simo language proficiency (2.0) well to be able to communicate (2.0)  
with people in different languages (2.0)  
like (.) Finns in English  
Tiina mm  
Simo and also that (.) in quite many countries it surely is taught so that  
people can communicate through it  
so that they don't have to (2.0)  
like I haven't studied any German so (2.0)  
I can speak with Germans a little bit  
although they don't seem to be very willing to speak English heh

English is offered as an example of a global language, taught in "quite many countries" and utilized by people in communication. After this, Simo begins with "so that they don't have to," interrupts himself and gives himself as an example who has not studied any German. Therefore, for Simo, English seems to be the best foreign language for people to choose to learn: since it is a global

language, one does not have to use and learn other languages. Interestingly, Simo positions Germans as rather unwilling to speak English. Thus, by drawing on a discourse of English as a global language, he orients to differences between Finns and Germans, assigns them different English-speaker identities, and identifies himself as a Finnish person speaking English more willingly than Germans do.

Pete in Example 5 draws on the same discourse. Before the following exchange occurs, Pete has described his feelings about learning German with the adjective “hopeless” (*toivotonta*). Then I ask him whether he thinks he should know German or other people should know English. I thus topicalize the aspect of difference between Pete’s and local people’s language proficiency, which then forces Pete to continue with that orientation. His word choices reveal his position.

**Example 5.** Pete (May 2003)

- Tiina well do you think that you should know German here or that (.)  
other people should know English? now?
- Pete (3.0) it is really that when in Rome you do as the Romans do (2.0)  
so I should know German (.)  
but since I don’t I of course hope that they would speak English hehe
- Tiina yeah so after all you’re here so the language too
- Pete yeah yes and at least a little bit
- Tiina mm
- Pete but after all English in my opinion is the kind of language that everyone should know (2.0)  
at least a little bit

Pete draws on a popular, shared discourse of ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ (*maassa maan tavalla*), which is linked to both acculturation to Germany and respect for local customs. Here, Pete orients to the language of the nation and newcomers’ need to adopt, learn and use the national language, and he shows sensitivity towards other people’s culture and language. However, after this, a contrastive discourse, English as a global language, is introduced (a language “everyone should know, at least a little”). Judging by these two representative examples, a definite tension exists between local and global discourses, which then plays a role in how interculturality emerges. Interculturality has to be understood in relation to both micro-level matters, such as the individual’s language skills, attitudes and opportunities to speak, and macro-level ideologies and widely circulating discourses. While for Pete English has value as a global language, his interlocutors align with more locally valued discourses.

Oskari in Example 6 demonstrates similar discursive work. Before our discussion, Oskari has explained how he should have taken some German classes before coming to Germany. Then I ask the same question I asked Pete earlier.

**Example 6.** Oskari (May 2003)

- Tiina     well do you feel that you should know German here?  
           or should people here know English?  
           so that you could survive with English
- Oskari   well (6.0)  
           well I should know basic things in German too  
           I can't require them to know English  
           but English is after all such a common language and it is taught here  
           so yes (.)  
           I think it is not rude  
           I mean kind of arrogant to demand that they speak English if they can (.)  
           so (.) it's difficult to understand if they are insulted by it  
           at least for me it feels quite odd

Here Oskari, too, demonstrates sensitivity towards the local language, the basics of which he thinks he should know, and expresses the opinion that he cannot require Germans to know English. Then Oskari's orientation changes. He draws on a discourse of English as a global language, including notions of a common language and a language taught in German schools. This, then, works to justify Oskari's views: he says that it is not rude (*töykeätä*) or arrogant (*röyhkeää*) to demand that Germans should speak English if they know it. Finally, Oskari puts himself in the same position as someone being required to speak English and not feeling offended by that. Interculturality lies in these discourses and in identity work as Oskari ascribes identities to himself and Germans as speakers of a local language and a global language. These co-constructed discourses and orientations in the interview provide a window to processes involving interculturality.

Although the dichotomy between the discourses is obvious, contextual factors need to be acknowledged in understanding interculturality. Whether English should be spoken by everyone is a situated notion. For instance, Simo refers to his workstation colleagues (older than him, approximately in their fifties and sixties) who do not speak English. Due to their being 'old men', they cannot be expected to know English. While it may be difficult for the students to accept a situation in which a global language has no currency, they are able to show alignment and sensitivity towards the other.



The students' stories from the shop floor naturally raise an important question: how were they able to handle their work without any knowledge of German?

### *Translanguaging*

The interviews illustrate that in the face of diversity people are creative in inventing survival strategies, orienting to similarity and aiming to find common ground. This points to the importance of interpersonal relations in interculturality. Strategies for coping include humor and playfulness, learning German and using one's full communicative repertoire, including translingual practices (Canagarajah, 2013b) and translanguaging (García, 2009; García & Li, 2014; Li, 2016), which draws on spatial repertoires. A spatial repertoire refers to the resources available in the particular space-time in which the activity occurs (Canagarajah, 2018; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015: 84). These resources include the use of languages, ways of speaking, semiotic resources and modalities (e.g. Virkkula-Räsänen, 2010; Räsänen, forthcoming).

Example 7 points to the use of one's full repertoire at work. Risto explains how he has been able to solve issues at work so far by resorting to embodiment ("hands-on"). However, this is not a long-term solution, since a great deal of the work has to be left undone and remains to be learned because of Risto's failure to understand. In responding to the question about his colleagues' reactions, Risto confirms their positive attitude although he is embarrassed (*nolona*) by his inability to speak.

#### **Example 7.** Risto (May 2003)

- Tiina    well have you been able to handle your issues or kind of-?  
Risto    well yes so far at least I have  
          if not in any other way then hands-on  
Tiina    mm  
Risto    but yeah a lot of work is left undone (.)  
          jobs not learned since you just simply can't understand so  
Tiina    mm  
          so how have your colleagues taken it now at the beginning?  
Risto    ye:ah they have taken it really nicely (.)  
          although I can't help but be embarrassed since I just can't speak

This example shows how the availability of non-linguistic resources does not necessarily overcome any embarrassment caused by a lack of language proficiency. Language is a powerful device in identity work and in excluding and discriminating others at work (Lønsmann, 2014). For example, Simo described how one colleague would use gestures to facilitate meaning making, and another showed dislike of Simo's lack of German proficiency. Simo was able to 'read' this immediately from people's looks and their way of speaking, which was "sort of snapping" (*semmosta tiuskimista*). Interestingly, Simo justifies this and shows his intercultural awareness by pointing out that everybody is entitled to have their own opinion. Interculturality in relation to language choice is also illustrated by Tero (Example 8).

**Example 8.** Tero (August 2003)

- Tiina    how about in those offices have you been able to survive in English or?  
Tero    well yes after all in English  
         very seldom have there been situations in which I haven't been able to (.) speak  
         or been able to solve things (.)  
         I can't think of anything now (.)  
         only in English and then I've tried to say a few German words in between  
Tiina    yeah (.) have there been situations that you just haven't survived at all or have they always  
         been somehow?  
Tero    (3.0) yeah well (.) maybe at work if a colleague has come and spoken German or (.) asked  
         me to do something so then it hasn't necessarily been solved until he has come along to show me  
Tiina    yeah right (.) have you learned German?  
Tero    well yeah I've been forced to learn a bit although I haven't necessarily always wanted  
         to learn it heh  
Tiina    yeah  
Tero    but yeah I have learned some

At work, Tero's strategy has been to use English along with a few German words. Elsewhere he describes this as "a kind of mixed language" (*semmosta sekakieltä*). The choice of using German indicates Tero's sensitivity and respect towards the local language and an orientation to mutual alignment and sameness. He also refers to embodied resources at work when there is no shared language: a work matter was solved only after the co-worker himself demonstrated the task. However, when I ask Tero about his German learning, he says laughingly how he has been forced to learn it. Tero thus treats the matter humorously. Nevertheless, compared to his orientation to sameness, here, by adopting a humorous and somewhat reluctant stance to learning German, he orients to difference. While translanguaging and using a full repertoire demonstrate mutual

alignment and joint construction of meaning, reluctance to learn a local language points towards resistance to alignment. Thus, a tension exists between these orientations.

Oskari's talk, too, points to translanguaging in Example (9). He explains that he has tried to explain things in English "mixing it up with a few German words" that he knows. Learning German and translanguaging indicate an orientation to sameness. However, the Finnish word choice *sotkea* ("mix up") has a somewhat negative connotation and indicates slight resistance towards mixing languages. Possibly, for Oskari, using one language at a time would be more appropriate, and the right way to perform as a competent language user. Despite using all he knows, Oskari has "encountered a wall," by which he means the inability to communicate and running out of resources. Oskari describes this as "frustrating" (*turhauttavaa*).

**Example 9.** Oskari (May 2003)

- Tiina     can you think of situations in which you had to spend a long time explaining something  
           or has it just been that you haven't
- Oskari   well yeah a few times  
           at work there have been kind of situations in which I've tried to explain something in  
           English  
           mixing it up with a few German words that I know  
           but then I've encountered a wall that I just couldn't  
           that I ran out of means so that it was just better (.) to let it be
- Tiina     so how does it make you feel when you really want to say
- Oskari   well it's frustrating  
           so that you just couldn't (.)  
           but you can't do anything about it
- Tiina     mm
- Oskari   because they know it so poorly at work

During their stay abroad, all the participants developed their individual repertoires and learned some German. Risto even said that his German dictionary was probably his most read book during the past five years. Overall, the spatial repertoire, in which co-workers' linguistic repertoires did not meet those of the students, initially posed a major threat to the students' identities.

*Identity struggle*

Piller (2011: 146) notes that “[w]ho we are in intercultural communication is to a large extent a function of our linguistic proficiency. You cannot ‘be’ an educational expert or a competent shopper if you do not sound like one.” This is reflected in the participants’ identity work in relation to the languages they needed during their stay abroad. They constructed different identities in relation to different foreign languages (see also Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016); for example, in using English, one of them had difficulty participating in a conversation in English because thinking what to say takes time and he did not know how to use fillers. Another student when speaking English asked for and received information without making any small talk. Pete explicitly frames small talk as a feature that is somewhat foreign for Finns in general. As discussed in Räisänen (2016), this points to Sajavaara and Lehtonen’s (1997) study reflecting on a discourse of Finns’ national, and stereotypical, perception of themselves as untalkative northerners.

As regards the German language, the participants first aligned with identities as outsiders. They were asked about how they felt living in a country without any knowledge of the local language. Pete (Example 10) claims to be like “Alice in Wonderland,” for example in stores where everything is labelled only in German. This creates a barrier, influencing one’s daily life and shopping practices. In such a situation, knowing and learning German are essential.

#### **Example 10.** Pete (May 2003)

- Pete      well yeah you are kind of Alice in Wonderland even when visiting stores when you don’t (.)  
if you don’t see that it is cheese so no although it is packed somehow and so forth  
so that it says in German only that it includes cheese
- Tiina      mm
- Pete      there are certain difficulties
- Tiina      mm
- Pete      and (.) threshold to buy things when you don’t speak German
- Tiina      do you feel that you sort of have to know or learn it?
- Pete      well really I have to sort of in order to handle these daily errands

Pete’s stressed *really* in response to the question about learning German shows his strong orientation: he really has to (*pakko*) know German in order to handle daily life. Like Risto, Pete also used dictionaries to learn the German words he needed at work and to communicate with colleagues. Also Tero aligns to an outsider identity, describing his life without any knowledge of German as “a bit of an orphan” (*tuntuu vähä orvolta*). What helps Tero to survive is the large

number of Finns around, the gradual establishment of a daily routine and simply getting used to life in Germany. When explicitly asked about their adjustment to Germany and German culture, the students hold different viewpoints. Although the interviewer orients to the existence of a German culture to which the students need to adjust, the students themselves choose to adopt a particular position. Risto and Pete describe their adjustment in positive terms, despite the language problem they face at work. Particularly helpful for Risto is culture, which is “after all similar to that in Finland,” and thus he did not experience any ‘culture shock’. Risto thus draws on the popular discourse and potential difference between one’s own and the target culture (Furnham, 2012). Although language complicated Risto’s adjustment, he was always able to overcome any problems and move on.

In contrast, Tero explicitly says that he had not anticipated such big differences between Finnish and German culture. When elaborating on the differences, Tero mentions shopping, handling issues in offices, and people’s behavior, and comments that “it just doesn’t seem to work” because of “the language barrier” or because “the culture is a bit different” (this example is discussed in Räisänen, 2016: 168). In Example 11, I invite Tero to discuss his overall journey and his satisfactions and dissatisfactions with his experiences in Germany.

**Example 11.** Tero (August 2003)

- Tiina     well what are the things you are satisfied with and what you are not and why during this trip?  
           can you give some examples?
- Tero     mmm (.) well I’m satisfied with the fact that I came here  
           I would certainly have regretted it if I hadn’t come and  
           saw that Finland is after all a good place to live  
           worldview expanded a little  
           then of course a little (2.0)  
           got bored by the way things are handled here in Germany  
           here not everything goes the way it does in Finland necessarily (.)  
           nothing works for the first time you always have to do it at least twice  
           preferably maybe six times (2.0)

First, Tero explains his satisfaction with having gone to Germany. Then he contrasts life in Germany with life in Finland: things are handled differently in Germany, not solved on one’s first attempt, and one has to work at something at least twice, even six times. For this reason, Finland and life there are framed as better, life in Germany as poorer (for similar results, see Kinginger,

2015). This kind of ethnocentrism is also visible in Example (12), where Simo discusses his adjustment to German culture.

**Example 12.** Simo (November 2003)

- Tiina well if we think about adjustment to this German culture so how did it succeed?  
Simo (3.0) heh yeah can you adjust to it heheh  
I don't know (.) *quite* well  
Tiina what helped for example and what hindered it?  
Simo (3.0) hhh. yeah well it was at first an overall culture shock when going there (2.0)  
I don't know how to take it  
Tiina did language proficiency affect it?  
Simo it did affect it heh  
Tiina how?  
Simo well first of all since I didn't know any German  
and then well with English of course (.) I coped (.) to some extent but (2.0) not too well  
mainly because (.) Germans didn't really (.) feel at all enthusiastic about speaking English (.)  
do they have some kind of firm belief stuck in their head that their own language is  
the most important language

Simo's way of speaking is significant here. My question is followed by silence, then Simo laughs and asks whether one can adjust to German culture. His laughter implicitly signals a somewhat negative stance towards German culture, which is portrayed as distant from Simo's own culture. After this, Simo continues on a more serious note: "I don't know, quite well" and then explicitly illustrates how moving to Germany was overall a culture shock partly because of his lack of German proficiency. Although Simo coped with English to some extent, he did not cope too well. Interestingly, in the discourses of culture shock, Simo draws not only on his own language proficiency but also on that of the other, positioning Germans as not enthusiastic about speaking English. Simo clearly distinguishes Germans as a cultural group and as people with a possibly immovable belief (*iskostuma päässä*) that their own language is the most important one. This view was indeed shared by all the participants. As mentioned earlier, Germans' reluctance to use English was partly attributed to people's age. Willingness to speak also explains this reluctance, as is shown in Example 13, where Oskari is asked to discuss the differences between young and old people's language proficiency.

**Example 13.** Oskari (May 2003)

- Oskari well yeah young people clearly

they do know English  
 but some people seem to have a threshold for speaking but  
 Tiina mm  
 Oskari here if you ask do you speak English  
 they are kind of uncomfortable and say a little  
 [---]  
 then then during the conversation you notice that after all they understand everything  
 Tiina yeah  
 Oskari so I don't know (.)  
 I guess so I am kind of  
 so it is not necessarily  
 Tiina mm  
 Oskari easy I mean if you think about situations in Finland that I've encountered  
 so I'm not very keen to engage in conversations in English either

In Oskari's view, young people clearly know English but seem to find it difficult to start speaking it; they feel embarrassed and reluctant to speak. Nevertheless, they seem to understand everything. Interestingly, Oskari uses the same strategy as in Example 6: by imagining himself in past situations at home in Finland, Oskari aligns to the identity he ascribes to others, as also being not very keen to speak English. Here he is somewhat hesitant in his orientation ("I guess I don't"), but elsewhere he explicitly constructs the identity of an incompetent speaker, someone who is very reluctant to start speaking it (Räsänen, 2012, 2013, 2016; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010). This example illustrates discursive work in finding similarities between intercultural encounters abroad and those at home.

The examples reveal how the participants establish a clear relationship between nationality, culture and language, which functions as a resource for ascribing identities to oneself and others (see also Räsänen, 2016). Participants' identity work thus emerges as associated with interculturality and discourses of difference and sameness. Importantly, the participants' discursive work must be related to the context: the interview, the interactions to which the participants orient and spatial repertoires at work, and the macro context of place, language policies, ideologies, attitudes and societal discourses.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter has discussed Finnish engineering students' discursive identity work and orientations to interculturality in the context of blue-collar work practice abroad. The students begin to use English as a lingua franca abroad after having learned it as a foreign language at school. Using interviews, this chapter has given voice to the students and contextualized their voices in the interview interaction. The voices reflect the challenges that mobile workers encounter in contemporary, transnational working life. Despite the role of English as a global language, the findings point to the need for local languages, use of one's full repertoire and alignment to new identities in order to manage an internship abroad. The students' stay abroad manifested itself as a "potentially 'critical' experience" that contributed to changes in their identities as language users (Benson et al., 2013: 3; Kinginger, 2015).

The participants' earlier socialization was visible in their discursive work when they constructed English language learner identities at the beginning of their stay abroad, drawing on discourses of English as a global language to justify their own repertoires and language choice. Although legitimate ELF user identities were available for the students who, as a result of being abroad, no longer felt any anxiety about speaking English or resorted to native-speaker models (Räsänen, 2013, 2016; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010), discourses of English as a global language lacked the expected currency in the workplace. At work, the local language and company language policy functioned as resources that enabled the hosts to retain power (see also Dervin & Layne, 2013; Lønsmann, 2014), strongly affecting the students' identity work and interculturality. Towards the end, however, some of the students could communicate with their colleagues in English.

The findings show how discourses about language use, proficiency and choice contributed to orientations to difference and sameness that were important in defining the self and other. Interculturality emerged in these discourses, being related to both widely circulating discourses and everyday encounters and spatial repertoires at work. Nationality was a valuable resource in collectivist identity work and the participants constructed themselves as Finnish speakers of English with symbolic power.

The outcomes of the stay abroad were both positive and problematic. The stay did not lead only to all of the imagined outcomes (see also Härkönen & Dervin, 2015) and automatic success (see Kinginger, 2009). For example, the students had expected to learn more English and some of them would have liked to have a more demanding job than they had, which led them to downplay the



gains of their stay abroad. In many ways the period was emotionally demanding for them and provoked feelings of anger and frustration. They experienced challenges both at work and in their leisure time, and some of them found it difficult to adjust to German culture.

The findings indicate that despite the problems, the students were able to work out coping strategies at work, such as learning German and engaging in translanguaging. In situations where they had no shared language, embodiment, gestures, and the material environment were important resources (see also Blackledge & Creese, 2017). Also, through working in a multicultural environment the students became more aware of the strengths of their language competence. They also became aware of the similarities and differences between people and other ways of doing and thinking, and were able to position themselves in relation to the other, which in turn led to their engaging in processes of developing intercultural competence (see Byram et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 2012). They also learned about effective and appropriate communication in intercultural interactions, were able to approach others and critically discuss what works and what does not (see Deardorff, 2016: 121-122). Overall, they seemed to move towards a more global mindset, becoming aware of the need to know languages in working life. As a result, many students wanted to go on with language learning in the future – something they had not considered before the stay.

This study has implications for both research and practice. Research on study abroad and the education of future professionals should acknowledge the relationships between identity work and interculturality and macro and micro discourses. Students should be provided with tools to both critically assess essentialist discourses about cultures and to encounter the situated nature of interculturality. This chapter has sought to make clear that in a study of this kind it is important to know the participants, their backgrounds, and the stay abroad context. A critical lens is required, one that incorporates ethnography, acknowledges the researcher's position in meaning-making processes, and considers the participants' trajectories over time.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Intercultural competence has been defined in various ways but due to space restrictions, the reader is advised to consult for example Deardorff (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For similar approaches and discussion on more dynamic views of culture in relation to workplace communication, see for example Schnurr & Zayts (2017).

<sup>3</sup> At that time the institution in Finland was called 'polytechnic'.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1.** Interview thematic structure before the stay abroad

Background information

Work

Feelings before leaving

Expectations concerning living and staying in Germany

Language proficiency, conceptions about your own language proficiency and proficiency in particular

Speaking English

### **Appendix 2.** Interview thematic structure after the stay abroad

Feelings about working and living in Germany

Adjustment to the culture

Surviving with English

Discussions in English

Speaking

Conceptions about language proficiency

Germans

Aims and expectations

Future



### Appendix 3. Transcription conventions

- [--] omitted text
- cut-off word
- text emphasis
- (.) micro pause
- (1.0) silence marked in tenths of seconds
- (xxx) unclear speech / transcriber's interpretation

### Appendix 4. Interview samples in their original version (Finnish)

#### Example 1. Pete (see corresponding Example 1 in the text)

- Tiina no uskotko sitte selviytyvä<sup>s</sup> englannin kielen taidoillasi täällä Saksassa?  
mitä just jos ajatellaan et miltä susta tuntu ennen lähtöä ja ehkä nyt? [---]
- Pete ei kyllä mä selviän ei siinä mitään..  
mutta oon huomannu sen että (.) englannin suhteen kyllä ei siinä oo mitään ongelmaa  
mutta se että ku kuvittelee että.  
sää kuulet ku työkaverit ku juuri kukaan ei puhu englantia ja itse vaan puhut  
niin se että (.) ois mukavampi olla sellasen tyypin kanssa tekemisissä (.)  
samassa työpisteessä joka puhuu *englantia*  
että siinä ihan hyvä (xxx)
- Tiina Joo
- Pete mut saksaa tekis mieli oppia (.) se kuitenkin helpottas

#### Example 3. Tero (see corresponding Example 3 in the text)

- Tiina puhuuko ne mielellään englantia sun kans?
- Tero no kyllä ne nyt (.)  
mut aluksihan ne ei ruvennu puhuu sitä ollenkaan  
mutta kyllä ne nyt sitte muutaman sanan on ruvennu sanoo  
ja sitte ketkä osaa englantia niin kyllä ne nyt sitte puhuu englantia
- Tiina joo
- Tero kyllä ne aluksi meinas että pittää mun opetella saksaa
- Tiina niin just ne huomaa sitte että
- Tero että parempi puhua englantia
- Tiina joo
- Tero ku tuo ei opi saksaa ikinä heheh