

**UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ**

**EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN FINLAND:  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND USE**

Master's Thesis  
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Kansainvälisyys ja kielitaito kulkevat tänä päivänä käsi kädessä ja molemmat nähdäänkin tärkeinä seikkoina yliopisto-opiskelijoiden tulevaisuuden kannalta. Euroopassa vaihto-opiskelusta on tullut yhä suositumpaa ja siihen kehottavat niin yliopistot kuin myös opiskelijoiden tulevat työnantajat sekä Euroopan Unioni, joka myös tukee hanketta taloudellisesti noudattaen Euroopan yhteistä kielipolitiikkaa.

Vaihto-opiskelu nähdään hyödyllisenä niin itsenäistymisen kuin myös kansainvälistymisen kannalta, unohtamatta kielitaidon merkitystä monikielisessä Euroopassa. Merkittävä osa Suomeen tulevista vaihto-opiskelijoista pitää yhtenä tavoitteenaan parantaa englannin kielen taitoaan, huolimatta siitä, että Suomi kuuluu maihin joissa englannin kielellä ei ole virallista statusta. Suomessa vaihto-opiskelijoiden opiskelukieli on Englanti ja samalla se on myös yhteinen kieli vapaa-ajalla muiden opiskelijoiden kanssa. Suomeen tulevilla vaihto-opiskelijoilla oletetaan olevan peruskielitaito englannin kielessä, jotta he pystyvät suorittamaan opintonsa ja asumaan maassa opiskelijavaihdon ajan.

Tutkimuksen pääpainona ovat opiskelijoiden omat mielipiteet heidän oman englannin kielitaitonsa kehittymisestä vaihto-opiskelun aikana. Tutkimus myös valottaa opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä omasta kielellisestä taustastaan sekä opiskeluhistoriasta ja niiden vaikutuksista heidän englannin kielen taitoonsa. Tulokset osoittavat että opiskelijoiden mielestä vaihto-opiskelulla Suomessa on positiivisia vaikutuksia opiskelijoiden englannin kielen taitoon. Kaikkien osallistujien mielestä erityisesti englannin kielen puhuminen ja ymmärtäminen olivat osa-alueita, joilla he tunsivat kehitystä tapahtuneen.

Osallistujia pyydettiin myös vertaamaan omaa kielitaitoaan niin muiden vaihto-opiskelijoiden kuin paikallisten suomalaisten kielitaitoon, jolloin poikkeuksetta osallistujat tunsivat omaavansa heikomman kielitaidon kuin muut, mutta olivat tyytyväisiä omaan kehitykseensä. Verrattaessa opiskelijoiden käsityksiä englannin kielen asemasta heidän kotimaissaan sekä Suomessa, tulokset osoittivat että maiden väliltä löytyy huomattavia eroja, mm. asenteissa vierasta kieltä kohtaan.

Asiasanat: English as a lingua franca, student exchange, intercultural communication, Erasmus-program

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## **1 Introduction**

Today, student exchange is becoming increasingly popular in Europe, mainly because of the Erasmus programme which enables students to spend a period in another European country. One of the main goals exchange students have is to improve their language skills as well as get to know a new culture.

The present study aims to find out what kind of a content Finland offers as an English language use and learning environment. Finland is a country where English does not hold an official status, but is generally spoken and understood. According to Leppänen and Nikula (2007: 7) English has achieved a special status and role in Finland as a result of a range of economic, political and historical events. In Finland, English is spoken basically everywhere in the university environment. However, this does not tell the truth about the whole country, even though many services can be found in English as well. Overall, Finnish universities offer as many services in English as possible in order to help students to survive only with English during their exchange while at the same time attracting new exchange students to the country. In other words, if a student has basic skills in English they should not have any problems with studying and living in Finland even without any Finnish skills. One could claim that overall Finns are open-minded towards English and most people master at least few words in English.

Another important factor the present study will discuss is the role of English as a lingua franca. As the exchange students come from different countries from all over the world, they need a language for their mutual communication. The exchange students in Finland study mainly in English and the lingua franca on their free time is mainly English as well. The main goal of the study is to find out how the students see the development of English skills during their exchange and find out reasons that either cause difficulties or help in the English language skills development.

The thesis will study the participants' language learning background and their opinions and views as English language learners and users. Presumably, one of the goals exchange students have is the improvement of their language skills. The emphasis here is on the word improvement instead of learning a language as students are assumed to have basic skills in

English already before starting their exchange in Finland. Therefore one can assume that during the exchange period language skills are improved in spoken interaction rather than in written which however may not be the reality for now, for language learning happening in schools.

The study takes a look of the language skills overall development made during the exchange period in Finland. Exchange students use English both at the university and on their free time as English is students' lingua franca. Furthermore, the study aims to reveal students' opinions on the factors that they think have affected their learning, such as personal attitudes and motivation. At the same time, Finland as a language environment also offers an opportunity to use other languages, such as Finnish. Further the present study focuses on the students' opinions on the status of English in their home country and Finland, the host country. All participants come from Southern European countries with a Romance language as the official language, such as Italian or Spanish.

In addition, the study aims to compare how the students regard English language teaching in different European countries. To continue, the study takes a look on how the students feel their linguistic past and language education have possibly affected their present language skills. Here, the participants were asked to compare their English skills with other exchange students' skills as well as with the language skills of local Finns. Finally, the study will take a look on participants' language learning backgrounds, national attitudes towards English in their home country and the possible effects these might have had on their present language English skills and attitudes towards English.

## **2 The status of the English language**

Nowadays, English is the first language for hundreds of millions and the most common foreign language that is being taught in the world. At the same time, English serves a purpose as an official second language for some countries and has an important role as a lingua franca for many. According to Kachru (1992:3) English serves two important functions; one represents the users of English as the first language and the other represents the users of English as an additional language. The second group where English is used as a second language is geographically widely spread and has helped English to accomplish the status of

the lingua franca of the world. Meanwhile, the competence of the lingua franca users can differ from professional competence and almost native-like language skills to broken English.

English is among the most widely used languages together with, for example Mandarin and Spanish. However, although these languages might have more users, they are not as widely spread geographically in the world as English. Pihko (1997: 57) states that in European countries the amount of non-native English speakers is not equivalent with the large numbers given for countries outside Europe, such as China, Indonesia or Zimbabwe. According to Ethnologue (2009) English has over 300 million speakers worldwide and holds the official status in 115 countries. At the same time, Mandarin might have three times more speakers, but it is an official language only in five countries, one of these being China with its huge population.

When looking at today's world one can see that English has become the world's leading language, and has a significant role as the current lingua franca of the world. According to Jenkins (2007:1) lingua franca can be described as a language that is used between people who do not share a first language. Furthermore, lingua franca commonly is the second language of its speakers. Rubdy (2006: 78) states that the most significant role of English today is as a lingua franca as the great majority of users are learning it to be enabling to communicate with other non-native speakers of English. However, Smit (2010: 50) adds that English as a lingua franca (ELF) situation is concentrated on speakers communicative and linguistic repertoires as in ELF situation where at least one of the speakers has to be bilingual, as it can not be the first language of all the speakers. In other words, English has nowadays an even more important role as a "link-language" which is why it can also be called a world language enabling people from all over the world to connect. Additionally, Kirkpatrick (2007:165) points out that one reason for the popularity of English nowadays is also its value in so many different areas, such as politics, media and education.

McKay (2002:17) points out that English is the most popular language in published books and more books are published in English than in any other language. Moreover, McKay (2002:97) continues that besides the amounts of knowledge available in English from different fields, English is also used for communication in many different modes of entertainment, trade and in international organizations. These types of discourse communities are increasing at speed which has led to the growth in the number of new learners of English in order to be able to

join these communities. At the same time, English can be seen as a challenge as a language, because of its spelling and at some points complicated grammar. Svartvik and Leech (2006:6) point out that there would have been “*easier*” languages to be chosen as the lingua franca of the world, such as Italian or Spanish which share for example regular spellings.

Next, I am taking a closer look on different aspects, such as history, media and popular culture that have affected the role of English as a lingua franca. Furthermore, European Union has been one key figure, influencing language teaching policy in Europe. Later on, I will be pointing out whom actually are English as lingua franca users and in which situations lingua franca is needed. I will mostly be concentrating on the role of English as a lingua franca from the European perspective.

## **2.1 The history of English as an international language**

During history, the status of English has changed until now and reached the position as the world’s leading language. The importance of English as an international language has increased especially in countries where it is not the first or even the second language. According to Greenbaum (1985: 207), today there are more non-native than native speakers of English all over the world. Both the exact number of non-native speakers and the level of their competence of English are open to a discussion as there has not been a research to a wider extent so far.

Crystal (2003: 189) claims that there has never been a language before spoken by so many people and spread to as a great extent as English. Therefore there are no previous examples to be found either to show what the consequences are for a language when it reaches an actual world status. English serves an important purpose as a global lingua franca; in other words it offers a common language for communication almost everywhere in the world. Kahcru (2009: 292) describes the spread of English worldwide with his three circles framework; the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. The inner circle represents countries, such as the UK and Australia where English is the dominant language while the outer circle describes countries, such as India and Nigeria where English is only one of the multilingual society’s languages, but serves also as an official or legal language. Finally, the expanding circle refers to countries, such as China and Brazil where English is learned as a foreign language in order to be used in international communication.

According to Saxena and Omoniyi (2010:76) several factors such as economics, history and political science have been shaping the world that we live in now with all of these being linked strongly to the international spread of the English language. Svartvik and Leech (2006:6) state that there are two main historical reasons behind the success of the English language; firstly, British colonial domination together with the power of the British monarch in several parts of the world and secondly, the role of the United States as a leader in many different important fields, such as military forces and economics. Crystal (2003:59) adds that other historical events, such as migration from the UK and the World Wars have had their straight effect on the role of English as a lingua franca in today's world as well.

There are several reasons for the use of a lingua franca. Throughout the history there has been a need for a common language for people coming from different linguistic groups. According to Arends and Muysken & Smith (1995:17) in some cases different groups have communicated by using a pidgin. Holm (2000: 5) describes a pidgin as a simplified language that results from contact between groups of people with no language in common. Kirkpatrick (2007: 13) states that pidgins were born especially during the colonisation periods with the one of the languages being a European language, such as French or English. Many pidgins have stayed alive, but only to a small extent as pidgins are not native languages in any speech community.

Throughout the history England has had several colonies all over the world. The strong status of English as an official language in the old colonies of Great Britain has maintained until today, as Greenbaum (1985:212) agrees that the language that used to be seen as a threat in the colonial times is nowadays being used and spread by the earlier colonial subjects. In fact, thanks to the non-native speakers of English it has reached the status it holds today as the international world language. At the same time, the non-native speakers also affect and change the language. Greenbaum (1985:212) adds that non-native speakers have brought variation to the pronunciation; usage and vocabulary. Countries, such as Australia and India are examples of how English has maintained its position next to official first languages of these countries. However, in countries such as India, English serves more the role of a second language (ESL) than lingua franca. Kachru (1985:207) continues that in India, the English language is seen as an "associate official language" while for example in some African countries, such as Nigeria or Kenya it is considered as a "link language".

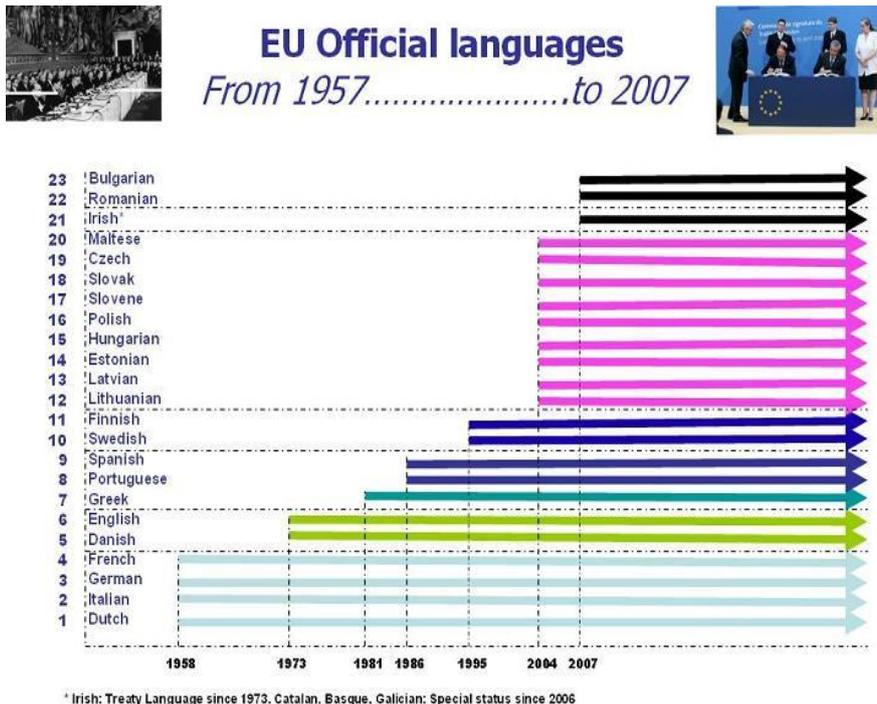
When taking a closer look on the effects of the World Wars, Greenbaum (1985:228) points out that French held a strong status as an international language in Europe until the World War I. However, after the First World War English became the first foreign language in many European countries. In addition, Kirkpatrick (2007: 164) states that Germany's loss in the Second World War had also an impact on the status of the language as it decreased the number second language speakers of German. Especially northern European countries preferred English to German after the war and the situation has maintained until today. Furthermore, before the war German held a strong, a lingua franca status in the Eastern Europe which it however lost. As French and German were the biggest rivals to English before the World Wars, afterwards English has taken control of Europe as the leading language. As Crystal (2003:11) states, different kind of political, economic and religious influences caused by a foreign power can make a community to accept a foreign language, such as English.

Furthermore, one additional reason to the dominance of English is its use as the official language of the United Nations (UN). Britain succeeded to maintain power in the League of Nations which was later replaced by the UN where English maintained its position as one of its official languages. Crystal (2003: 87) states that United Nations has many functional and regional commissions and committees which means that a lingua franca is needed for the international political gatherings, in all the parts of the world.

## **2.2 The position of the English language in the European Union**

The European Union (EU) is a political and economic union that consist of 27 member states and which has 23 official languages. Even though the most important documents are translated to all of the official languages, Houwer and Wilton (2010: 137) point out that although EU presents itself as a multilingual institution with over 20 languages in total, in the end most of the international organisations in Europe, such as European Commission, the United Nations and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) actually use mostly only English to communicate. However, in big organizations, it is common to maintain a common lingua franca in order to facilitate the communication between participants from different nations, as it would be time-consuming and economically challenging to translate from and to all of the languages of the participants.

Nevertheless, according to the official website of EU (2012) regardless the number of speakers a certain language has, all languages have equal rights and admissions to the legislations of the EU. In other words, EU aims to maintain linguistic diversity and it is not seeking to erase national or regional cultural features and replace them with a shared ‘European’ characteristics.



Website of the European Commission, Speaking for Europe: Languages in the European Union (2011)

When looking at the statistics, one finds that English is not the oldest or even one of the oldest official languages in the EU. English got its official language status in 1973 and since then it has taken the leading role from the former main language, French. However, nowadays the headquarters and the administration of the EU is in Belgium and according to the European Commission (2011), English is not the dominant language in the European Commission’s political decision-making centre, Brussels, even though it is the place where decisions that influence whole Europe are being made. The official working languages of EU are French, English and German.

However, according to Phillipson (2003: 1) all the other European languages are losing their status more and more, because of not only the domination of English, but also because of the

globalization and the European Union (EU). However, English holds a key role in both, globalization and in the work of the EU which aims to integrate the whole Europe. According to the website of EU (2012) English holds a strong status with 51% native and non-native speakers inside the union even though EU promotes the learning of other languages as well for example with a program called the *multilingual policy*.

According to European commission website (2012) the EU together with the member states and the European Parliament has set a joined goal called the *multilingualism policy* which aims to give a possibility for each citizen to learn two foreign languages from an early age, emphasize the role of languages in the work market together with competitiveness and form friendliness and co-operation between different communities and individuals. EU has also several on-going surveys on language matters as language policy is seen as one of the most important tools for unifying Europe. Furthermore, EU is providing a student exchange program, Erasmus which supports financially and celebrates language learning, intercultural communication and the unity of Europe. One of the main reasons for EU to encourage language learning is the opportunities it can offer, such as mobility; possibility to work and live in another country which means sharing education, knowledge and skills that one has. At the same time, the mobility in the work markets creates new jobs and increases growth.

*“The ability to communicate in several languages is a great benefit for individuals, organizations and companies alike. It enhances creativity, breaks cultural stereotypes, encourages thinking “outside the box”, and can help develop innovative products and services.”*

(Leonard Orban, Member of the European Commission, Speaking for Europe Languages in the European Union, European Commission (2.6.2012)

In addition, through time along with other changes, the EU has changed circumstances in lives of ordinary Europeans'. Berns et al.(2007: 16) states that not only the increase in mobility of work and studying, but also open borders and chances in economic developments in Europe have increased the need for a common lingua franca. However, as English is nowadays seen as a common lingua franca which is used at least all over Europe, it has led to a decrease in the amount of learners of other big European languages, such as French, Italian and Spanish which are still commonly used in different industries and administrations and one should not forget the millions of people who use them as their first language. Nevertheless, Phillipson

(2010:5) points out that competence in English is seen useful, when at the same time, proficiency in other languages can not be seen as a similar advantage, for example in the business world. Nowadays it is the common truth that most of the employers' invariably require English skills rather than skills in other language.

The European Commission has also developed a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which aims to help set language skills on different levels of common framework that is the same for the whole EU. According to EF English Language Index (2011) the aim of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to enable all the EU citizens to have a curriculum vitae that can be used everywhere in the EU as the categorization of language skills follows the same framework. In addition, it offers a way for the employers' to make sure a candidate has language skills that are required for the job.

In fact, internationally-minded behaviour has affected the status of English. Houver and Wilton (2010: 138) continue by saying that English has been moved from native speaker ownership to common international use, since as a lingua franca it is not seen as the other European languages. In other words, English is seen as part of every European citizen's life, enabling them to communicate with other Europeans and non-native speakers of English. Thus, English does not serve a purpose in one country alone, like some other European languages.

### **2.3 English as the language of the popular culture and media**

Nowadays, with the development of technology and education systems, English is gaining increasingly more ground also on these areas. Svartvik and Leech (2006:7) add that an outcome from modern technology is the need for international communication which in other words means a need for a common language, a lingua franca. Besides technology and other major influences on the popularity of English, also the affect that media and entertainment has had in the role of English is significant.

According to Crystal (2003:97) BBC TV launched a world service in 1932 and today broadcasts programs in English to over 153 million people worldwide while BBC radio reaches over 42 million listeners every week. The popularity of external broadcasting increased after the World Wars in many big European countries, such as Italy and Germany.

This being said, USA is still the leading power of English in media thanks to numerous TV programs and movies which it produces every year worldwide. For example, Crystal (2003:101) states that USA dominated the film industry in the 1990's with 80% of all films being made in the country. Kirkpatrick (2007:164) states that the American entertainment industry has in fact had a huge influence as the major part of films and TV-shows shown in Western Europe are originally made in the USA or Britain. Svartvik and Leech (2006:229) continue that this had led to English being seen as a trendy language, on account of its popularity among the youth.

In addition, Berns et al.(2007:116) points out that it seems that young people prefer music presented in English rather than in their own national language. Berns et al.(2007: 30) points out a good example of the domination of English in the music culture in Europe; in year the 2001 in the Eurovision song contest, all songs were performed in English, apart from one participating country while previously it has been popular to perform using one's own national language. Crystal (2003:100) continues by stating that dominance of English in the music scene can be easily heard everywhere in the world in the radio as English songs are played continuously. However, McKay (2002:18) adds that because most of the popular music and movies are in English it actually motivates young people to study it.

The English language has held the power in advertising since 1950's when according to Crystal (2003:95) the potential of television was realized by the advertisers. The leading role of English was noticed also in many expressions in other languages. For example, the Italian verb *cocacolonizzare*, formed from the words coca cola and colonize, symbolizes the English domination. Nevertheless, the English slogans of the advertisement companies might appeal to the younger and "hip" audience, but at the same time, Berns et al.(2007: 21) states that older people tend not to like them because of their lack of understanding the language and the fact that they were not brought up surrounded by English, like the younger generation now is. According to Saxena and Omoniyi (2010:78) many of the leading figures and brands in the popular culture are from the USA or the UK, that seem to be all know everywhere such as Hollywood, Coca Cola, David Beckham and Madonna. All mentioned earlier, in their own way strengthen the phenomenon called *Americanization* and can be seen as ambassadors of the English language.

English has opened many doors in networking and with sharing interests in the internet-however, most of all for young people who grew up with having internet and using English for several purposes. Crystal (2003: 115-116) continues that English keeps holding on to its status as a lingua franca of the internet as around 80% of electronically stored information online is in English. Svartvik and Leech (2006:230) add that around half of the linguistic data on the internet is in English. In other words, to be able to really understand most of the popular culture, one needs to know English.

In conclusion, Berns et al.(2007: 115) states that the phenomenon of having English basically everywhere has lead to a combination of language being learned both in school and from computer games, TV and music. In other words, it is clear that school is no longer the only source of English for language learners and this has to be also taken in to consideration when planning teaching, as it is highly important that students stay motivated which can be done by including topics close to them in the teaching.

#### **2.4 English language teaching in Europe**

In the report of Berns et al.(2007: 23) point out that the reasons for learning English have changed. Formerly, it was considered important to gain proficiency for interacting with native speakers while now more conversable skills communicating with other multicultural Europeans, using English as a lingua franca, are preferred. According to Crystal (2003: 5) the English language is now the most commonly taught foreign language- in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Spain and Brazil- and in these countries it is emerging as the leading foreign language to be taught in schools, usually replacing other languages in the process.

Svartvik and Leech (2006:7) state that already inside the European Union over 90% of the students study English as a first foreign language either as a compulsory subject or as an elective. Berns et al. (200: 24) continue by stating that in most of the European countries learning English is mandatory. Thus, English holds a strong status in European countries education. As Kirkpatrick (2007:164) adds, English is taught to a greater extent than all the other languages summed up together. Crystal (2003: 4) points out that a language can be made a priority in a country's foreign language teaching, without having any official status. One of the main reasons for such a high popularity can be the fact that without English in today's world it is almost impossible to pursue an international career. According to EF EPI report

(2012), governments around Europe are progressively acknowledging that English proficiency is an essential skill for all their citizens to participate in a global economy.

According to Berns et al.(2007: 112) English language teaching in Europe is seen increasingly more in the light of an international language rather than only a foreign language. Moreover, the constant demand together with the popularity of English according to Crystal (2003:112) has made the language teaching one of the biggest growing industries in the past decades. The particular area of growth has been the former Soviet Union countries where around 50 million people are learning English for different reasons, but mainly as English can be seen as a door-opener in order to be able to work around the world.

Finland, together with many other Western European countries, is among the countries where English is taught as the first foreign language in schools and is the most available language to all ages. Houwer and Wilton (2010: 9, 135) report that offering English as a first language in primary schools in Europe is becoming increasingly popular together with the *content-and-language-integrated learning* (CLIL). CLIL-teaching is popular mainly at the secondary level where subjects, such as biology and history are taught in English instead of the mother language. CLIL-teaching offers more variability to the learning by not mainly concentrating in the grammar, but more in the content together with vocabulary and by doing so exposing the students to spoken interaction even more.

According to Svartvik and Leech (2006:230) nowadays children are exposed to the English language through TV and travelling already before even starting school. The learning from TV can however be seen mainly in the Northern European countries, where subtitles are used instead of dubbing. Houwer and Wilton (2010: 10) remind that with subtitles the original authentic English can be heard while with dubbing English is not present at all. The findings demonstrate how the children who watched English programmes with subtitles had a higher English proficiency compared with those who watched the programmes dubbed. In addition, according to Berns et al.(2007:34) watching programs in English support the language learning of children, as they are exposed to the language outside the classroom. Furthermore, nowadays there are many different foreign English-speaking channels accessible for most of the Europeans, such as MTV and BBC that enable one to hear English even if all the national channels use dubbing.

According to Görlach and Schröder (1985: 227) Central and Northern Europe are regions where the number of non-native speakers of English is outstandingly high and it seems that these regions share similar trends with the function and language teaching of English. Kirkpatrick (2007:165) agrees that the profile of English differs noticeably in different European countries for example when comparing Scandinavia with a high profile to Southern European countries, such as Spain or Italy where the profile can be seen as more low. However, different European countries vary greatly from each other when considering the role of English in everyday life and in the coverage of media. Finland can be seen in a way as an exception together with Switzerland and other European multilingual nations as according to Görlach and Schröder (1985: 227) these countries seem to give more priority to the languages spoken in the country.

Furthermore, due to the different reasons mentioned above many European universities offer increasingly more teaching in English in order to attract more international students. International students' mobility is an important factor for the popularity of English as a leading academic language as well. McKay (2002:27) adds that nowadays the role of English in higher education is becoming more noticeable in many countries. The role of English is emphasized in education as nowadays if one wants to pursue an international career in Europe one needs to master English as the competition of jobs is vital and the importance of fluent language skills inestimable.

## **2.5 English as a lingua franca**

According to Seidlhofer (2007: 138) the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is highly significant as English is rapidly becoming the second language of Europeans. English has developed into the unifying additional language Europeans need in order to be able to communicate with each other. Mauranen (2009: 2) adds that this has led into English having an essential function also in countries where it does not hold an official status. According to Berns et al.(2007:118) every European, not only the younger generation, is a user of English in some ways; whether for travel and cultural activities or employment and training. Situations where English is needed can occur also in peoples' own local environment which means English has become a part of everyday life for Europeans.

Hulmbauer (2009:325) states that people who as communicators come from a different cultural and linguistic backgrounds face the challenge of establishing a shared intelligibility through a language which is not their first. Smit (2010: 58) states that most ELF users have been introduced to the principle standards of the language through the formal English language education at some point in their lives which means ELF communicators already share some common knowledge in the communication situation. However, Seidlhofer (2007: 146) points out that the pedagogical potential of English as a lingua franca has not been adequately taken into consideration in Europe. In other words, the wide and increasing use of English as a lingua franca is not taken into account in language teaching.

Smit (2010:50) continues by saying that Europe can be seen as a good example of an “ELF area” as people rely mainly on English as their second language in their working life environment, in other words they come across ELF situations in their daily life. The rapid increase in English as a lingua franca use can be seen when comparing the views of today to the views created in the 1990’s. As Lee (1990: 7) stated that international communication is used only in small part of people’s lives. Nevertheless, though the use of English is increasing; still nowadays there are various Europeans who do not commonly come across international settings.

Nonetheless, the popularity and easiness of travelling nowadays offers a good example of the use of English as a lingua franca which occurs more often. According to Crystal (2003:104) English is also the language of tourism as not only is USA the leading earner and spender in tourism, but also most of the time English is the lingua franca between the tourist and the local. Although, this is not the case every time and everywhere in the world, examples are provided by popular package holiday destinations where restaurant menus and road signs are frequently in English. English often serves as a lingua franca also in, e.g., academic conferences, sporting occasions and business meetings.

Smit (2009:200) finds that as the most prominent language of international business, media, politics and academia, English has certainly attracted substantial interest and attention, also in terms of academic discussion and explorations. Svartvik and Leech (2006:230) continue by adding that nowadays the use of English is a must for researchers if they want their research to be acknowledged in the broad international arenas. In other words, this way the fellow academics internationally are able to access the information and communicate with each other

using English. In addition, McKay (2002:21) points out that many people want to learn English because they want to be able to access different kind of information, such as technological or scientific publications, higher education or global business.

Speech communities that use lingua franca are found for example, in international companies where English as a common language between workers is needed in order to be able to work together. Due to the globalization, speech communities like these are becoming increasingly common all over the world and the knowledge of English is seen more as a necessity than just an advantage. According to EF English proficiency index (2012) English skills can be seen as a key factor of economic success; better English proficiency goes together with higher income and wider international environment for business.

Using English as a common language in the workplace is becoming an increasingly bigger trend not only in Europe, but all over the world. Berns et al.(2007: 20) observes that business environment in Europe is noticeably international; many companies have their headquarters in different European cities and English is the common language of the company. However, Berns et al.(2007: 116) also states that while English as a lingua franca is common in bigger and multinational companies, there is not much information of the situation in smaller companies that have gone international. Svartvik and Leech (2006:229) report that nowadays many major companies such as Nokia and Toyota, use English as their lingua franca.

According to Houwer and Wilton (2010: 135), internalization of economics is the main reason why English holds an important role in the professional lives in increasing number of Europeans. This can be seen as a positive matter as Shaw (2009: 179) claims that in this sort of lingua franca communities' speakers of different languages live in quite tight groups over an extended period of time which makes them learn shared local norms to be used with each other in their language community.

As mentioned earlier the majority of English as a lingua franca users are usually non-native speakers. This can also be seen as an advantage. Hulmbauer (2009: 325) states, non-native speakers bring flexibility and a certain kind of cooperation to the use of the language. This results in a more relaxed orientation towards speaking in English and in a more approving attitude to the grammatical errors as the main emphasis is on understanding. Smit (2010: 57) adds an interesting point by stating that writing is not seen as "much ELF" as speaking,

because speaking requires more immediate and direct contribution on the other participant's arguments. In speaking usually more mistakes are allowed and they can easily be corrected by the speaker. In writing mistakes may cause misunderstandings more easily since there are no possibilities for any further explanations or corrections. According to Berns et al.(2007: 117) situations where misunderstandings and errors occur might lead to motivation for adopting English, but at the same time lead one to abandon the language altogether. However, García (1989: 8) points out that in case of a misunderstanding, the hearer actually blames him/herself more often for not understanding rather than blaming the speaker for the confusion.

According to Berns et al.(2007:118) in today's Europe, English being the common lingua franca it is necessary for all Europeans to build and maintain at least a certain level of English in order to be able to work and communicate in the future. The level of English needed depends mainly on concrete individual needs and future plans. Nevertheless, according to the Education First English language proficiency index survey (2012) countries, such as Spain, Italy and Portugal which are currently in the middle of the Euro zone crisis, are being dragged down also by poor English skills which are strongly linked with how much exports contribute to the national economy.

### **3 Student exchange**

Nowadays European students in the higher education are offered a chance as they have the possibility to go to another country to study for a student exchange. Papatsiba (2006:108) states that students who decide to go for a longer stay in a foreign country tend to be interested in new experiences and have curiosity to get to know other cultures. Furthermore, the most effective and realistic way for students to gain intercultural competence in natural context is to study abroad. Deardorff (2006:232) points out that intercultural competence can be gained in many different ways, such as through the curriculum, with intercultural interactions on campus and with other opportunities which however cannot compare to level of real life experiences in another country. While an exchange student might never accomplish perfectly fluent language skills, Crawshaw (2006:8) states that they can learn to appreciate and respect different ways of living and thinking and possibly see development in their own tolerance and humanity.

There are several reasons that have made student exchange such a popular phenomenon nowadays. These vary from increased political and cultural interaction and the easiness of travelling. According to Byram (2006:17) especially political changes, such as formation of the European Union have made student exchange easier as the Union promotes young Europeans to study in other member states. Berns et al.(2007:114) adds that not only universities, but also different institutions, again together with the European Union encourage young people to make most of the possibilities offered to take part in international student exchange- and internship-programmes. The role of English in student exchange is noticeable as residing in a new country and meeting new people from other countries mean there is a need for a common language to communicate, in many of the cases this being English.

When looking at the globalization today, it is obvious that even the universities can not afford to becoming getting more international. Vincent (1990: 71) points out that it is impossible to concentrate only on national contacts and exchanges, but it is necessary nowadays to maintain and increase the contacts with foreign universities as well. In other words, as Europe gets more united; the co-operation between different countries increases. This offers numerous opportunities, not only for the universities, but also for the students and citizens of different European countries.

Student exchange has been a popular topic for research for the past few decades. Most of the researches have concentrated on language, cultural differences or motivation. At the same time, authors such as Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003) have taken into consideration in their studies the different areas of competence that exchange students gain such as improvement in social, cognitive, strategic and personal skills.

There have been several findings to back up the idea of student exchange having various positive effects on one's language skills. Previously, authors such as Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009) and Jackson (2008) have studied the impacts of student exchange from a cultural perspective as well as from a linguistic point of view. These authors have made several research projects in order to find out more about the pros and cons of student exchange. Moreover, Jackson (2008:31) also explored the concept of cultural and social identity in student exchange together with English language learning and use.

As exchange students are facing change, unfamiliarity and individual adjustment during their exchange these have also been popular research topics. Cultural distance and cultural shock have been subjects for investigation in the past decade, for instance, Papatsiba (2006) has studied the experiences in cultural distance and proximity in student exchange. Meanwhile, research on actual intercultural experiences; attitudes and language learning are becoming increasingly popular nowadays. Twombly, Salisbury and Tumanut (2012: 13) illustrate in their study the overall experience of student exchange; the aims and outcomes that exchange students tend to have, such as language development and improvement in academic performance. Anyhow, there has not been any previous study of the development of skills in a language that does not hold an official status in the country of the exchange, such as English in Finland.

Nevertheless, Byram (2006:6) points out that the number of students studying abroad will continue to grow which is why it is highly important that research on study abroad programmes continues. For example, more information is needed on effective studying in a foreign language and in a foreign environment that a host country offers. When looking at studies in the area of student exchange there are several studies to be found which deal with study abroad in general.

### **3.1 The Erasmus Programme**

“Studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches a student’s life in the academic field

but also facilitates the acquisition of intercultural skills, language skills and self-reliance. A cross border mobility period is a key asset on every CV that enhances the employability and job prospects of graduates.” (Erasmus: I am one of the two million who did it! 2010)

The Erasmus programme was established in 1987 and it soon became the biggest and best-known exchange programme in terms of popularity. According to Franjou (1991:17) already in the year 1990 the Erasmus programme sent 40,000 students to another European university for an exchange.

According to *Erasmus Suomessa* (2012) Erasmus student exchange program is open to all higher education students studying in European universities and universities of applied sciences. There is also possibility for the university staff and for the professors to take part.

For students, the exchange period with Erasmus programme can be done only once and it can last from 3 to 12 months in another European university. Programs which offer financial support for student exchange from outside the universities are one of the key factors in making the exchange period possible for many students as universities are many times able to provide exchange programs only to few of the students. The Erasmus-programme is provided by the European Union and it is the most common exchange programme in Europe. The statistics show that 75% of the exchange students coming to and from Finland received the Erasmus grant in year 2010.

As the Erasmus programme is provided by the European Union (EU) it is particularly designated for students studying in Europe who want to go for exchange period for one or two semesters in another European university. This is made possible with partnerships between different European universities. CIMO (2011) states that the goals of the Erasmus programme are to raise the mobility of students, to contribute new innovations and to increase the collaboration between European universities and the working-life, just to mention few. According to European Commission, E&C (2010: 9) over two million students have taken part in the program since the launch in 1987. Nowadays the program can be found in 31 countries and covers most of the universities in Europe.

The Erasmus programme is becoming increasingly more important as employers appreciate studies from abroad in one's degree. This can be explained by the fact that multiculturalism is seen more important in today's world. The demand on the job market is increasingly towards applicants who understand intercultural communication and have good language skills. Regan, Howard & Lemée (2009:21-22) point out that student exchange improves one's oral language skills and can help one to speak language more freely while surviving with the foreign language in a foreign country. Freed (1995: 271) agrees that studying abroad for a short period is extremely important and highly desirable for boosting one's academic language skills. Nonetheless, Papatsiba (2006:109) claims that the European Union tends to emphasize academic expectations together with future work market while forgetting the importance of language learning or cultural experiences which are major practical parts of the Erasmus programme. Although when looking from a political point of view, one understands the importance of future professional benefits, but can not forget the importance of international experience and language skills which are a significant part of one's international expertise and life experience.

According to Franjou (1991:15) the higher education in European countries differs in many ways, such as in the statutes of the universities, length of studies and in the ways of financing one's studies. Still one of the most important factors since the beginning in the exchange programs has been the recognition of studies carried out in different European countries. In other words, when one studies abroad, the courses completed in the host university will be recognized also at the home university and added to one's degree. As Franjou (1991:17) points out, European Credit Transfer System is part of the Erasmus programme and enables the credit transfer.

Since the EU is aiming for an international Europe the way of recognition of different European degrees have developed. As Franjou (1991:22) remarks, since 1992 there has been free movement of the European citizens in the member countries of the committee, later on in the countries of the European Union. In other words, one should be able and allowed to pursue a career of their choice in any member state.

To make the student exchange experience possible there are programmes such as Erasmus that belongs to the Bologna Process that are supporting the student mobility. According to the European Commission (2013) the Bologna Process was launched in year 1999 to make European higher education more equal, competitive and appealing for the Europeans as well as for students outside the Europe. Keogh and Russel-Roberts (2009: 108) inform that the main aim of the Bologna Process is to improve the mobility of students within the European Union. Finland has been working together with the other member countries in order to create a common European Higher Education Area EHEA.

*“The envisaged European Higher Education Area will facilitate mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff; prepare students for their future careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development; offer broad access to high-quality higher education, based on democratic principles and academic freedom.”*

The official Bologna Process website July 2007 - June 2010 (26.10.2011)

As mentioned earlier, the importance of student exchange is emphasised in working life as in education itself which is why it is becoming increasingly popular. Reasons on going to

exchange to another country can differ from just going on a holiday abroad for six months to going abroad as a personal challenge. Improving or maintaining one's language skills can also be seen as an important motivation. Freed (1995: 4) states that most students go to another country to study see results in their language development. This could be interpreted that also students who do not consider language skills improvement as their main goal or reason for exchange, end up coming back with more confident and fluent language skills.

Considering all the facts mentioned above, Erasmus programme can be seen as a key element in the internationalisation of EU. This can be seen even more clearly later on as the next generation will move on to the working life. *Erasmus Strengthens* (2007: 1) says that around 80% of the students participating now in exchange are the first ones in their families to do so. As these young people are the children of the post-war baby-boom, this is not a surprise. Crawshaw (2006:7) points out that the Erasmus program has enabled for the first time a whole generation of young people to experience the cultural diversity of Europe at first hand, especially from an educational perspective. Furthermore, student exchange and mobility in higher education has become a possibility for everyone while not being dependent for example on material privilege.

It has also been proven that Erasmus can be seen as more than just a program as it opens doors for students; for many it is the first time to live abroad alone, be independent and learn a new language and a new culture. Byram (2006:5) points out that previous research has shown that in the working life after the exchange the most important skills were the sense of an international identity and intercultural competence which they achieved during the exchange. Furthermore, during exchange one has to be able to adapt to new circumstances fast which can be seen as another advantage in the up-beating working life. Even if one is not aiming for a job in the international market or setting, skills and attitudes learned during the exchange can be seen as an asset in one's home country as well. Anyhow, while there are many success-stories on the Erasmus-program, there are those who feel a student exchange period is difficult. This might lead one to change one's career or to seek for another kind of life.

Erasmus is indeed a good example of a well-planned and organized European action and in the end each European country will presumably gain a lot from it in the near future by having work force with language skills, intercultural experience and an open mind. At the same time,

the Erasmus project has had positive feedback also personally from the students who say that it changed their personal life and made them feel more like an EU citizen.

### **3.2 Student exchange in Finland**

Nowadays the amount of students participating in international exchange has increased year by year due to several reasons, one being the globalization. At the same time also Finland has become a popular destination for exchange in Europe due to its reputation as a good place to study, its clean nature and a possibility to survive with English. According to CIMO (2011), an organisation for international mobility and cooperation, in 2010 Finland reached the 10<sup>th</sup> place on the list of the most popular destinations for student exchange in Europe.

CIMO (2011) continues that in year 2010 Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences together received 8990 international students from all over the world while almost 7000 Finnish university students went abroad to study. The amount of incoming students increased with around 200 students from previous year. Nearly 2/3 (64%) of the outgoing exchange students chose to go to another European country when at the same time a whopping 85% of the incoming exchange students were from another European country. Majority of the students came from big European countries such as Germany, France, Spain and Italy. In contrast, the most popular destinations for Finnish Erasmus students were Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom.

When looking more closely at the University of Jyväskylä, in year 2010 it received 384 students which meant the amount decreased with 27 students compared to the previous year. The decline could be explained with overall uncertain economic situation in Europe, but also with the fact that Finland is not a forerunner in offering teaching in English anymore. The most popular faculties for incoming exchange students were Faculties of Economics and Science.

When comparing different European countries on student exchange issues, Finland is very active. There are different reasons why students choose the northern and exotic country as their exchange destination. Study in Finland (2011) points out that Finland is often seen as an organized and efficient country in many different fields, whether considering technology,

education or safety and public services overall. Finland offers world-known high-quality teaching with many different languages, sufficient student services and it has a good reputation as a safe and uncorrupted country. Well provided welfare services are also seen as a major reason to apply to study in Finland, even though exchange students tend to spend only one or two semesters in Finland.

Like all the Scandinavian countries, Finland offers a different and unique culture and people when comparing for example with the southern Europe where most of the exchange students are from. In recent years Finland has been ranked on top spots in the comparisons between countries of the world where factors, such as health, education and quality of life have been taken into consideration. In addition, Study in Finland (2011) claims that Finnish expertise and professionalism are strongly present in the higher education teaching. Areas of Finnish expertise are such as biotechnology, forestry and environmental sciences, architecture and design, just to mention few.

In the light of the International services of the University of Jyväskylä (2011), Finland is a country where incoming exchange students get a tutor who helps them with everything from registering to courses and showing where the nearest supermarket is. In most countries students are left to do everything by themselves. Also most of the universities in Finland provide an orientation week to inform students about studying in Finland. All this help students in the beginning, but is also the first test of their English skills which shows whether or not their language skills are good enough to survive in a foreign country. The tutor system has been launched in order to attract more exchange students to Finland.

According to Levine and Adelman (1982: 109) when arriving to a new culture exchange students have to adapt to the norms of classroom of the host university to be able to fit in the studying community. Finland as a country itself offers different surroundings for many exchange students, but also the way of studying can differ significantly when comparing to the home countries of the exchange students. According to Suomen Kuvalehti (2010) exchange students feel they are provided with more academic freedom in Finland and that they personally are in control of their studies more. This can be seen in the methods used in the classroom which encourage students to learn more by themselves and with each other, instead of only listening to the lecturer. The high amount of group work offers an example of this kind of learning. However, at the same time a different way of studying can also mean more work

for some students as they try to adapt to the new way of studying. New ways of studying might include studies in English and the independent role of the student. Study in Finland (2011) points out that English is frequently used over the campuses and elsewhere in Finland and that the relationships between teachers and students are more relaxed, teachers can be seen as easily approachable.

In addition, there are other cultural differences to be found such as cheating on tests and plagiarizing which are strictly prohibited in Finland while in some other countries the regulations might not be as strictly followed. A good example of a potential cultural difference in studying and working environment is also the concept of time. For example, entering a lecture hall late in Finland can be seen as irresponsible and unreliable while in Italy it might not have any influence. Furthermore, like in many other countries, also in Finland it is highly important to respect the deadlines.

According to Leppänen and Nikula (2007:23) in professional and educational contexts English is today used as the language of communication, although English does not hold an official status in Finland. In addition, Finnish universities offer a wide range of courses and programmes in English, in order to make the country more appealing for the new exchange students. However, according to Houwer and Wilton (2010: 76) many of the courses offered in English in different European universities are by non-native lecturers. This is not necessarily a disadvantage as it still offers the students lingua franca situations. Especially in countries such as Finland or Sweden where English does not hold an official status, it is quite common to have non-native lecturers giving lectures in English. However, at the same time then student exchange is getting more popular also teacher exchange is increasing. This means that the universities will become more international also from the teaching point of view.

In countries, such as Finland where English is not the official language, the exchange students are encouraged to learn at least the basics of the country's official language. However, for many students the exchange period is seen as a time for brushing up their English skills, instead of learning a new one. According to CIMO (2011), Finland offers an Erasmus Intensive Language Course (EILC), in Finnish and in Swedish for the new Erasmus students. The EILC-courses are free of charge and open for all the new Erasmus students. The aim of the course is to learn basics on the official language of the host country. The most active in this case are German, Spanish and Dutch students. However, every year only around 500

Erasmus students apply and only 250 are accepted to EILC course in Finland. According to *Erasmus Suomessa* (2012) survey only 14% of the students participated in a language course provided by the university and while only 5% took part on separate EILC-language course in Finnish or Swedish. This means only a small amount of the incoming exchange students are interested in improving or learning Finnish and are determined to use English instead of the main language of the country. The same phenomenon can be seen also in other countries. The main reason for this might be the fact that all studies are made in English which could indicate that exchange students tend to take English language course instead of Finnish or Swedish one. However, *Erasmus Suomessa* (2012) continues by stating that over 20% of the incoming exchange students finished at least parts of their studies in the host country's language.

Even if one knows the basics in Finnish, it is very likely that the lingua franca will still be English with the other exchange students who do not have language skills in Finnish. As one learns only the basics in the language course it seems the main goal is to use Finnish in everyday situations, such as in the supermarket or in the restaurant which refers to "tourist skills". Furthermore, as one of the main reasons for coming to Finland is the possibility to live and study only by using English, it maintains a more popular language role in the exchange student communities than Finnish as all the exchange students are mainly able to communicate with English.

When exchange students enter the host country they are facing a new culture, with new cuisine, faces, foreign language and customs that they might not know about beforehand. In addition, they all have their own expectations which are based on their view on the country. Papatsiba (2006:119) points out that many times incoming exchange students' views on the host country are mainly based on tourist-guide type of information which often includes stereotypes together with a desire to understand another culture from within. However, information read from a book or online cannot be compared to real individual experiences that one can only have in reality. Jackson (2008:223) states that students should find out about differences in communication styles and politeness norms as well as prepare themselves for formal language which is used in the lectures.

However, not every time one's expectations meet with the reality which means one might experience problems with adapting into the host culture, have a cultural shock or suffer of homesickness. According to Levine and Adelman (1982:195) newcomers might get anxious as

they for example do not know the customs or speak the language of the country. For example, statements meant to be serious might be in reality intended as jokes or “yes” not meaning “yes” every time. Problems that exchange students might face are for example understanding and adopting transport system, the university life and how to make new friends. In the case of Finland, adaptation problems can be caused for example, because of the cold weather, the difficulty of meeting local people or the constant darkness in the winter time as well as lack of English skills.

#### **4 Language use and improvement in study abroad context**

When making the decision to live in a foreign country as an exchange student one tends to have brushing up one’s language skills or even learning a new language as one of their goals. Most common language to brush up is English as it is spoken almost everywhere in Europe, also in countries where it does not hold an official status. Even if one is not a language student, one has to be able to survive in a foreign country with a foreign language which means most of the language learning situations in fact are social encounters with other non-native speakers of English.

Exchange students who are non-native English speakers have limited skills in the language. The problems that occur in foreign language use can be caused by various reasons, such as teaching methods which have been mainly based on written communication and grammatical correctness or only on lack of confidence in second language speaking. Bialystok (1990:2) states that these are common problems for adults who try to speak a foreign language which they however do not master completely. At the same time, according to the EF English Proficiency Index (2011) non-native English speakers find communication easier in English with other non-native speakers as native speakers tend to be less tolerant of grammar errors and differences in pronunciation.

According to Bialystok (1990:1) the fluency and easiness of expressing ourselves that we master in our first language does not necessarily exist in our knowledge of the second language. There are many different matters to think about while speaking in a foreign language which all come naturally in one’s first language, such as a tense, a word, a structure or an idiom, not forgetting pronunciation. All this together can cause problems in getting the

message through. These problems occur particularly in the beginning when the learner is not used to using the language and it demands more effort.

At the same time, as technology has started to play a major part in people's everyday life, people staying in contact with each other through social media as well. Nowadays it is ordinary to write to your colleagues and make new friends in social media, such as Facebook or Twitter rather than meet up or make a phone call. While writing in social media offers a possibility to use dictionaries and spend more time on the content of the message, at the same time misunderstandings are more likely to occur in an environment where the other person is not present and both rely only on written communication.

#### **4.1 Exchange students as a lingua franca community**

When exchange students arrive to their host country they are not only facing a new culture, but often also a foreign language, English, which will become their lingua franca for the time of their exchange. Exchange students form their own group with the help of English as a lingua franca and with a shared attitude of being a foreigner in their host country. Many of lingua franca communities are groups where all language users are non-native speakers of English and have different kind of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such are, e.g., workers in international organizations or exchange students in a foreign country. Regan (2009:3) states that fixed language based communities usually serve for a certain amount of time for one person as one moves in and out of the community. At the same time, the communities are dependent on whatever is happening at the moment. In the case of exchange students this usually means that they live in the English as a lingua franca community for the time of their exchange and then return to their home country and restart using their first language while in the next semester new exchange students arrive and form a new lingua franca community.

As Shaw (2009: 179) observes, groups of exchange students that can be nowadays found at the universities all over Europe are good examples of lingua franca communities. It is increasingly popular to teach exchange students in English also in countries that are non-English-speaking. Examples are Scandinavian and Eastern European countries, where the local language is a "small language", such as Finnish, Danish or Latvian, spoken mainly in the country itself. On the other hand, the lingua franca of the exchange students is dependent on the decisions of host country itself as well; for example in bigger European countries, such as Italy or in Spain most

of the courses in the universities are held in the national language which means students have to have language skills already before the exchange in order to be able to participate in the courses. At the same time, smaller countries such as Finland and Norway offer courses and services in English and do not demand Finnish or Norwegian skills from the incoming exchange students also because it would probably remarkably decrease the number of the exchange student coming to the country.

There has been a general assumption that the most effective way to learn or improve a language is to go to a country where the language is spoken as the first language. However, only recently it has been argued by Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009:2), that the environment and context, although important in language learning, do not mean that one has to reside in a country where English is the native language in order to improve one's English skills. Furthermore, Jackson (2008: 1) claims that an informal speech community together with formal classroom language learning form the ideal surroundings for foreign language learning.

According to Danesi (2003:20) it is commonly known that people develop higher level of language proficiency when they are exposed to real-life situations, especially in the real language surroundings rather than only in the classroom settings. In other words, student exchange is a type of experience that offers students an opportunity to use English in normal life. Even if the host country of the exchange does not have English as an official language, still English is used everyday as a lingua franca in the students' natural language environment. The classroom being the context that the exchange students are mostly used to using English, it might be challenging for them to use the language in a new culture, but also to survive with the language as their own language is not usually spoken in the country of their exchange.

Moreover, in today's world it is even more usual for exchange students to have English as their most fluent second language which leads to the fact that the students tend to use more English than the host country's language during their exchange. There can be several reasons for this. However, one most important reason may be that exchange students form their own groups and find it difficult to make friends with local students. Even if exchange students have friendships with locals, English tends to be the lingua franca as well. In case the exchange students do not make any local friends or adapt to the "normal" life of the host country, can studying the host country's language be un motivating and challenging. According to Regan (2009:44) in some cases difficulties in cultural adaptation occur which affects the

opportunities of making local friends as well. As a result, this can encourage using only English as a lingua franca with other exchange students who also tend to be non-native speakers of English. Shaw (2009: 178) finds that an English as a lingua franca situation can be defined by extra-linguistic criteria where a group is communicating in English, but at the same time English is not the native language of any of the speakers. However, sharing a common language does not mean that misunderstandings do not occur as all in-coming students come from different backgrounds and are used to different cultural norms. These norms interact with the other cultural norms and factors that are related to the host culture.

According to Houwer and Wilton (2010: 87) because of different levels of language competence and learning history of English, communication in English between non-natives from different European countries can be demanding at times. The speakers are not only using a foreign language, but also using it in the way they have been taught in their home country which can differ from the others in many ways. Besides, when none of the speakers are native speakers of English misunderstandings occur easily. Nevertheless, EF English Proficiency Index (2011) points out that the communication between non-native speakers of English usually accepts non-standard grammar and pronunciation as long as the message and communication remains clear between the participants. Furthermore, many non-native English speakers claim that communication is easier with other non-native speakers than with native speakers. In this case one has to remember also that students who come to Finland do not usually come to study the English language itself as it is not one of the official languages. Due to that they are assumed to already have the basic knowledge of the English language.

The non-native speakers of English all bring their own variation to lingua franca, as speakers from different nations have for example diverse accents. According to Smit (2010: 55) ELF interactions feature a language culture, but not only the local one, as it is also an exchange between the different language cultures of each participant. In other words, each of the participants brings one's own cultural lingual features, such as accent and way of speaking to the conversation. Misunderstandings can occur in every communication situation, but especially when none of the speakers is a native which is the case in many lingua franca situations. There are several reasons that might lead to a miscommunication between non-native speakers, such as strong accent, lack of fluency and different linguistic backgrounds overall. Danesi (2003:12) points out that there are two common types of errors that occur with the second language users, *interlinguistic* which are created by a negative transfer and

*intralinguistic* which result from general learning actions, such as simplification. Both error types are common and only make understanding a bit more difficult, but not impossible for the listener. In addition, Greenbaum (1985: 221) points out there are different kind of linguistic features that the non-native speakers use such as lexical and collocation changes as well as functional and stylistic changes and also *code-switching* which indicates the use of more than one language in a conversation, a phenomenon which takes place usually in multi-lingual communities. Moreover, code-switching can occur during exchange especially if one belongs to two diverse language communities, such as one's own national and ELF language community. In code-switching the speaker not only might use vocabulary from one language in using another but also make grammatical changes.

All of the features being diverse, the step of joining this type of ELF interaction can be lower as there is no "right way" of speaking while errors are acceptable as all participants are non-native speakers of English. Nonetheless, in some cases exchange students tend to stick to their own national speech communities where the only language used is their own native language. This could be the case if the student is not confident about her/his English skills or completely lacks them. Isabelli-Garcia (2006:231) points out that learner's motivation and behaviour together with attitude play a significant role in language development. After all, only being surrounded by the target language does not make anyone a fluent speaker of a foreign language; however, host environment provides a possibility to build informal relationships which can take place outside the classroom. Twombly, Salisbury and Tumanut (2012:14) agree that a study abroad period enhances experiences such as foreign language use and cross-cultural learning which are not many times possible at the home campus. As social situations are in a key role in language learning for the exchange students, learners are most likely to increase their understanding in listening, spoken interaction and production.

According to Regan (2009: 39) students with advanced language skills tend to seek contact with other lingua franca speakers while less advanced students might think they would have to face too many difficulties with the language. Nevertheless, some students can feel more confident to brush up their language skills in an environment where none of the other speakers are actually native-speakers of the language. In addition, Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009:39) point out that the ones who are confident about their language skills are also more likely to seek contact with native speakers while less advanced speakers might try to avoid situations where communicative problems may occur.

Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003:104) state that a capacity in the foreign language enables the access to intercultural contacts and can be seen as a crucial element, especially at the beginning of the exchange when communication is difficult and stressful. However, problems in language adaptation can occur as student's foreign language learning background might have been emphasizing the opposite way; actual language use in real social situations may cause problems if a student is only used to using language in classroom environment through grammar and texts. According to Schauer (2009:211) foreign language learner's grammatical knowledge might develop earlier than his/her pragmatic knowledge since in typical foreign language context, in the classroom, grammatical correctness has the tendency to be emphasized.

Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009: 21) state that usually the linguistic development made during student exchange has been divided to general skills in listening, speaking, writing and reading. As predicted, some areas are more emphasized than others, especially as in student exchange the significance of oral communication is seen as a key figure of the language development; because of the endless opportunities that study abroad context offers to use a foreign language. Schauer (2009:19) points out that exchange students receive a significant amount of foreign language input and have to use the language in diverse contexts on a daily basis. According to Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009: 22) several previous studies have demonstrated that the majority of students felt their skills in listening and in speaking improved during their stay abroad while less than half saw similar improvement in their writing and reading skills after the exchange. Nonetheless, it seems that the results can be dependent on the personalities and the attitudes of the students, as well as on the language competence level before the exchange period.

Furthermore, according to Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009: 34) previous studies have shown that students who went to exchange tend to speak more fluently, with higher speech rate and are able to maintain longer conversation after their exchange. In other words, the exchange period was seen in a good light as well as useful when considering foreign language fluency and use. Reasons can be found on everyday use of the language and new found motivation to foreign language use as it serves a meaning abroad where one cannot use one's own mother language. Regan, Howard and Lemée (2009:23) mention those specific aspects, such as increase in sociolinguistic competence and fluency are outcomes of study abroad. However,

writing and reading are lacking the same attention as spoken interaction when most of the communication is made in social situations.

Lastly, Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003:103) point out that in addition to linguistic development exchange students improve their knowledge in social and strategic areas as well.

According to Jackson (2008:1) the study abroad experiences could be divided to a design that aims to focus on cultural and foreign language learning or to ones that focus on native language use and acquisition of professional skills. In practise, this means that there are students who make their study abroad plans according to what they are told by the home university while the others have freedom to study voluntary courses possibly even with local students. Most of the European exchange students tend to belong to the first category with the language of exchange being most of the times English, instead of the national language of the country.

In most of the cases, English is seen as most common second language for European citizens. In some countries, such as Spain, Switzerland and Finland there are at least two official languages which one might use on daily basis, this making English one's third language. Anyhow, Jorda (2005:40) mentions that there are indications that knowing a second language supports the development of a third one and can be seen as an overall advantage in foreign language learning. On the other hand, in some cases one might not even need the second language, but is learning the language due to the geographical reasons, language regulations or policy of the country. For example, in Spain one might have Catalan or Bask as their first language which is spoken in one's local area while Spanish is spoken throughout the country and needed to be understood outside the local language area. On the whole, Jorda (2005:21) adds that there are differences in second and third language acquisition processes which need to be further researched.

#### **4.2 Exchange students' different language backgrounds**

As exchange students come from different countries and cultures, they also share different kinds of linguistic backgrounds. As an example, according to Berns et al.(2007:24) Italian and Spanish pupils start studying English at the secondary level which starts around at the age of 11 while fellow Belgian students begin learning a foreign language already in primary school. This demonstrates that there can be remarkable differences in the language history, just based

on one's home country. According to Singleton (2004: 227) based on previous research generally those who are exposed to foreign language in the childhood have better results later on in foreign language learning. The report of Eurydice (2012) agrees by stating that several studies have provided information on how one learns a language more effectively at an early age while as older one tends to learn in a slower pace.

Holliday (2010) points out that learning of a foreign language is closely linked to one's identity and culture. Jackson (2008:32) adds that *ethnicity* is connected to a feeling of belonging to an ethnic group, because of emotional or historical bonds. *Ethnicity* based on language can be strong and it ties one to a culturally similar group which can be challenged by the foreign language learning. In addition, a strong feeling of belonging to a cultural group during exchange can lead into isolation not only from the host country's culture, but from exchange students' own *lingua franca culture*. Nevertheless, Jackson (2008: 203) points out that globalization might have an important role as well on one's identity and motivation to learn a new language. Globalization can motivate in English language learning if the students are eager to feel a sense of being European or a part of a worldwide culture.

There are numerous theories and findings on second language learning from all over the world. However, according to Danesi (2003:3) many teachers have abandoned these theory-into-practise theories as none of the scientifically-designed pedagogical theories have ever been universally successful. Certainly European countries have different kinds of education systems characteristic for that particular country which can mean differences in the language skills of the pupils as amount of time and resources are used in different ways in the foreign language teaching. Nevertheless, Seidlhofer (2007: 146) states that though there have been several attempts to reconsider the teaching of English in Europe, there have not been major changes made on the mainstream curriculum. Moreover, even though it is an increasing trend to invest more in foreign language teaching, some countries have difficulties in reaching the language proficiency of some other European countries.

Reasons for variation in language proficiency can also be explained with differences in pedagogical practices and classroom discourse. In the end, teachers aim to follow guidelines given to them by the government of the country. According to Pihko (1997: 59) all European nations have national curriculum which they follow. However, all of them should have the same aim; make sure that students develop a proficiency in spoken language comprehension,

regardless of the emphasis being on writing, spoken interaction or understanding. As Phillipson and Kellerman (1991:290) observe, the role of the teacher is still generally remarkably important in the classroom discourse which means that the interaction style of the teacher has a great influence on the students.

Pihko (1997:43) states that the teacher and the learner in most cases share the same first language which helps the intelligibility between both sides. At the same time, the teacher is in many cases the most comprehensible speaker for EFL learners. Even though if students would have teaching from a native speaker as well they would hear the most authentic language without accents and errors in speech which all non-native speakers tend to make from time to time. Nevertheless, Pihko (1997:46) adds that proficient non-native speakers can come close to native-like pronunciation while less proficient speakers may borrow patterns and structures to pronunciation from their first language.

According to Danesi (2003: 14) one of the most popular approaches at the moment is *communicative language teaching* which emphasizes the importance of real-world social interaction. Currently the method is the common trend especially in Northern European countries where the importance of oral communication in the classroom is emphasized, while in Southern Europe the emphasis is still on written and hardly at all on spoken interaction. Phillipson and Kellerman (1991:253) mention that the use of activities of spoken interaction is linked to the fact that there are also social goals in addition to the teaching goals in the classroom. At the same time, different countries still share some aspects in the classroom.

In addition, one radical reason for differences between countries in English language learning can be found on attitudes and on the overall atmosphere towards the language. Not only do European countries differ culturally, but all of them have faced their own problems inside the country, such as economical, political and bureaucracy difficulties. However, education has been considered important through time. In addition, wars, history and relationships between different European countries are all factors that have had an impact on how a certain language is perceived in different countries. Smaller countries might see English as an opportunity to operate with other bigger influential countries while powerful European countries, such as Spain, Italy and France can see the reflections of English in their own language. These reflections can be seen in for example, as borrowed words from English, *Anglicisms*.

For example, when taking a closer look at Italy one can find problems that only Italian education system is facing. According to Monaci (1991:105) Italian universities are currently having consequences of economic and scientific changes and at the same time facing problems with requirements of graduates which do not meet with the needs of business and working-life and have been forced to develop new teaching programmes. In other words, the problem in Italy has been that the education and training have only prepared students to a single profession rather than how to progress and work professionally. Another problem typical only for Italy has also been the inequality of the rich north and the poor south. However, nowadays it seems Italy has overcome many of the problems, as Pandolfi (1991:89) states that even though Italian schools have had noticeable problems they have been able to provide high standard teaching or at least the standard of not much lower of the other European countries.

#### **4.3. Views on intercultural communication**

As the globalization is a growing trend nowadays, at the same time, the importance of knowledge in intercultural communication arises. Pinto (2000:11) remarks that as people associate with persons from other cultures more than ever, is intercultural communication becoming increasingly more important. For exchange students intercultural communication is part of their daily life as they tend to socialize with people from various cultures. In other words, exchange students face situations where intercultural awareness is highly important as they need to be able to acknowledge cultural differences.

When two people from different cultures meet, one can have cultural stereotypes of the other person and even without noticing the stereotypes might affect one to presume things about the other person when meeting for the first time. However, according to Papatsiba (2006:117) stereotypes can be changed by personal experience. As a result, once people get to know each other, acquaintance would encourage personal contact while decreasing social isolation and prejudice. Although stereotypes are many times seen in negative light, Holliday (2010:25) states that cultural stereotypes can be also positive. Forming stereotypes is a natural way to understand foreign cultures, to help one to understand the unknown. However, when looking at European students, most of them tend to have some basic information on the other European cultures and might have already their own experience on them. In addition, European cultures, as neighbouring cultures, do not tend to clash significantly as they are not remarkably different when it comes to attitudes, habits and communication.

While exchange students might have stereotypes of each other, they have them of local people as well. Papatsiba (2006:118) points out that the number and the quality of friendships made with locals is influencing the attitudes towards the locals in a positive way. At the same time, friendships with locals can be more challenging to build and most of the time exchange students' closest friends tend to be co-nationals or other exchange students. Reasons for this can vary from differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds to isolation from the host culture. At the same time, Papatsiba (2006:117) continues by stating that superficial and occasional acquaintance might not inevitably bring along understanding which can be the case when one's stay is temporary, as in the case of an exchange student.

Pinto (2000:11) states that the culture in which people grow up has a remarkable influence on their views and behaviour. However, Levine and Adelman (1982:179) point out that it is more common that misunderstandings between people from different cultures arise rather because of personal reasons than cultural. In other words, two non-native speakers of English are more likely to face misunderstandings, because their poor language skills rather than because of their cultural differences. Levine and Adelman (1982:44) continue that there are universal emotions, such as happiness, sadness and fear that are expressed in similar ways in different cultures. However, there are also several nonverbal actions that can be seen inappropriate in different cultures while in others they can be considered as normal. Examples are different type of hand gestures, use of space and eye contact. Even though one would know something of a certain culture, problems may still occur as, according to McKay (2002:83), each culture has different range of national characteristics, such as ones related to social class, age or gender.

According to Levine and Adelman (1982: 43) a study reveals that high percentage of a message is communicated through facial expressions and tone of voice. In other words, in many communication situations people might express their feelings more with nonverbal acts, such as facial expression, gestures and body movements than actually verbally with words. In addition, Danesi (2003:21) points out that learning a language is not simply about articulating new sounds right or knowing how to use word-making patterns to form a useful sentence, but is in contrast also about learning how to for example non-verbal and conceptual patterns interact in everyday use of the language.

For example it is natural for Mediterranean people to have small personal space and look in the eyes when talking while in some northern countries this kind of behaviour can be considered intruding or even rude. At the same time, it does not mean that a Spanish person and a Finnish person would necessarily have cultural misunderstandings in a social conversation as according to Levine and Adelman (1982:47) other factors, such as personalities, relationships and contexts influence the nonverbal communication together with culture values. In other words, one can not have the exact same nonverbal behaviour as the others.

#### **4.4 Attitude and motivation in language learning**

According to DuFon (2006:231) learners' attitudes, motivation and behaviour in the host environment and the contrast of them to a linguistic development show that language learners might not become fluent language users just by being surrounded by the target language context. This shows that it depends also on the student itself whether his/her language skills will improve during the exchange. Moreover, Regan (2009: 44) states that usually students who decide to go study abroad tend to be already quite motivated when it comes to language learning. However, one has to keep in mind that the context of studying abroad is not as straightforward as one might think.

On the report of Bartram (2010:57) recent surveys have proven that student exchange has a strong valuable influence on foreign language learning and on attitudes related to it. Moreover, Isabelli-Garcia (2006:233) points out that there can be several reasons that motivate students such as identifying with the foreign language community or belonging to a certain group. These reasons can be related to lingua franca community that exchange students form in the host country. On the other hand, one can be motivated to improve language skills because of personal reasons as well, such as future career. According to Macaro (2005: 103) a recent survey revealed that cultural enrichment, travelling and a better outlook on employment were mentioned as the most motivating reasons for foreign language learning.

Despite everything, motivation might not maintain the same through out the exchange. One can face difficulties, but also success in one's language learning. Isabelli-Garcia (2006:233) claims that this type of motivation based on result can be seen as an outcome of learning too. Attitudes towards foreign language, the host country and the foreign language community can

have their own input in the motivation as well. Overall, on the report of Macaro (2005:103) spending time in the target country helps to increase students' motivation together with language proficiency and positive attitude.

Nevertheless, attitudes are not ever-lasting and can change through personal experience which means attitude change can help one's motivation towards language learning. Bartram (2010:56) mentions that students' positive attitudes towards language learning can be sustained by continuous assessment which provides a sense of achievement and progress that is seen as an important factor to help to keep a student motivated. In student exchange it is meaningful that students reach the feeling of progress and success by themselves every now and then. In other words, when a student experiences feelings of success in language use, at the same time, it helps her/him to stay motivated to learn more.

Furthermore, exchange students tend to have requirements from their home universities, such as gaining a certain amount of credits from the exchange, a fact which can increase their motivation as well. However, in a case of external motivation it is more likely that the student is not learning for him/herself, but because of a pressure that comes from outside.

## **5 Methods and data**

In this section I will focus on the methods and data of the present study. Firstly, I will take a look on the participants, followed by presenting the methodological framework. Later on, the research questions and method of analysis will be introduced. In the present study, exchange students were interviewed on their English language learning and use during the period of exchange. The interviews were analysed using the content analysis.

### **5.1 Participants**

When collecting data for the present study the main focus was to concentrate on the exchange students' personal views on their English language development during their exchange period in Finland.

All four participants were exchange students at the University of Jyväskylä during the spring term in year 2012. The participants were students from Spain, Italy and Portugal. They all

spoke a Romance language as their mother tongue. At the same time, Southern European countries are culturally diverse with some similarities between them. The study was based intentionally on these three nationalities in order to give an insight on the Southern European perspective where English does not hold a significant status on people's daily lives. Furthermore, it was important for the study that English is the first foreign language for all the participants and that in neither of these countries English holds an official status. While the participants do not need English in their home countries, the student exchange was the first time for them to use English as a lingua franca on daily basis. Although the study was limited only to these three countries it will still shed light on some differences in language teaching and cultural backgrounds.

All of the participants were studying abroad for the first time and had no skills in Finnish language before coming to Finland. In addition, neither of the students was either language students or had studied English in the higher education level. Nevertheless, students had studied English in school, therefore had some level of knowledge in English. Before coming to exchange in Finland all of the participants felt they had some level of English skills already and were able to understand English. This being said, it is possible to use them as examples on how to survive and improve one's English in a foreign country, such as Finland.

Table 1. The participants of the study

Name	Nationality	Age	Sex	Subject
Maria	Spain	24	F	Economics
Francesco	Italy	26	M	Political Science
Luca	Italy	23	M	IT
Ana	Portugal	21	F	Psychology

The participants' ages varied from 21 to 26. Two of the participants were studying their first bachelor's degree and were on their third year of studies at the university while the other two were studying for their master's degree. The other master's degree student had enrolled to a master's program in English in his home university while the other participants studied in their mother language in their home universities. All were first time on exchange and living in a foreign country. For all participants it was also the first time in Finland.

Two of the participants were male and other two female. Two of the participants came from Italy; one was from Spain and one from Portugal. This makes four the total number of participants while three different nationalities were presented. Participants came from different fields of study, such as IT, psychology, political science and economics. Participants mainly chose courses targeted only to exchange students which however was dependent on the subject of study as faculties receive different amounts of exchange students which reflects the number of courses targeted to exchange students as well. Ways of teaching and learning in different subjects vary and offer different ways of language use and communication. Nonetheless, all of the studies made by participants in Finland were in English. In contrast, all their studies in their home universities are in their own mother language. Overall, the contrast gave English an important role on their exchange period as it was their first time to study in a foreign language. As mentioned earlier, one participant was an exception as he was enrolled in a master's program in English at his home university. Still, all of the participants mentioned brushing up English skills as one of the main goals of their exchange.

The exchange period of the participants was one semester so the time frame was around four to five months (January-May). One semester is the most common duration of an exchange, so the participants' interviews may give a fairly representative idea of how students on average regard the language use during exchange period. Due to time limits the present study is focusing only on exchange students that stayed in the host country for one semester.

## **5.2 Method of collecting data: Interviews**

Before starting the interviews the questions were divided around the following themes, the role and status of English in the life of the exchange students' in their home countries, the role of English during the student exchange, the comparison of English skills and students' views on their English language improvement during exchange. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002: 79) point out that in interviews which are built around themes the questions are based on the existing knowledge. In the present study the questions were divided to different themes in order to clarify the most important ideas and topics that stand out as well as to find common themes and repetitions that appear in the answers. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2001: 173) state that at the time of analysing the study the main focus is given to the themes that are common to many of the participants and are repeated in many of the answers.

As the main aim of the study was to study the participants' own views and opinions, in their own words, interview seemed to be the most appropriate way of collecting data. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2000: 41) the main aim of an interview as a method of collecting data is to give an insight on the experiences, feelings and thoughts of the person that is being interviewed. There were several reasons why I chose to use interviews as a method of collecting the data.

Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002: 75) state that the best thing about interview method is its flexibility. Interviewing is a flexible method as it offers the possibility of being in a straight linguistic interaction with the interviewee which for example helps to clarify or translate misunderstood questions or terms. Possible clarifications are highly important in this kind of interviews where none of the speakers, the interviewer or the interviewees are native speakers of English and do not share the same mother language. At the same time, interviewing gives the possibility to make more deep and challenging questions, but also to find out more about the motives behind the answers as well as to get deeper answers. Nevertheless, according to Dufva (2011: 133) it is important that the interviewer does not try to highlight his/her own opinions in the questions forming process; the main goal is to bring out the interviewee's own ideas and opinions. For this particular reason is meaningful that the interviewer aims to maintain objective during the interview. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002: 76) point out that interviewing gives the interviewer also a possibility to observe not only what the interviewee says but as well how different things are said and reacted to.

Furthermore, while all the interviewees were non-native speakers of English and the interview was held in English, there were moments in the interviews where additional explanations were needed in order to clarify an answer to the questions. Occasionally, there were misunderstandings of the questions. Overall, at times clarifications on pronunciation and word choices were needed as well to avoid misunderstandings and to simplify questions in order to help with understanding. Moreover, in interviews there is a possibility to add questions that seem important and interesting when considering the study. Additionally, interviewing makes it possible to have an authentic conversation situation where to share opinions or values as in this particular data the main emphasis was on interviewee's own opinions and point of view.

In addition, while finding out personal views and opinions it seems more natural to find out about them in a face-to-face interview rather than via email or survey as participants are able

to express themselves in their own words. During the interview all of the participants were aware that they were asked to express their own opinions and viewpoints on their language development during the exchange period.

When considering the answers one can imagine that as the interview was made with a foreign language it has an affect on the length and in the diversity of the answers. The participants answered with the capacity of their own vocabulary and language skills which however can mean that things were left unsaid simply because of lack of understanding and knowledge in English. Moreover, interview as a method of research enables to observe non-verbal communication as well. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2000: 48) add that without a common language the communication made during an interview would be based only on facial expressions, movements and gestures.

Nevertheless, the interview situation differs from a normal social interaction situation as it is planned and led by the interviewer. All the questions are open in the interview and by so give the interviewee a possibility to answer without restrictions, however with the instructions given by the interviewer in mind. All participants seemed to be quite relaxed through the interview even though some were a bit nervous in the beginning due to the recording. However, all of the participants answered all of the questions they were asked to and understood most parts of the interview without any problems.

All of the interviews were made separately, but all included the same questions which can be found in appendix 1. In most of the cases small additional questions were added during the interview due to the turns of the conversation in the interview, for example misunderstanding or to get more info and explanations. The questions gave the respondents a possibility to answer freely and with more than few words which they were also encouraged to do. Each of the participants was interviewed one by one during two months time frame, close to the ending of their exchange period for them to be able to reflect on their language development as much as possible. Only problems that occurred with the interviews' were problems with schedules as interview requires a certain amount of time, space and preparation.

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002: 77) the main aim of a research interview which is built around themes is to find out answers that are functional for the purpose of the study. The present interview was build around themes, such as students' own English language learning

process and language learning experiences during the exchange, the comparison between different linguistic backgrounds and influences of them with the main stress on the interviewees' personal attitudes, thoughts and experiences. In other words, an important aspect in the interview was how the participants' see and interpret different aspects of their own language development. In the present study the main importance was to find out students' own perspective on one's English language learning during their exchange period in Finland.

### **5.3 Content analysis**

In the present study, the qualitative approach was used, because the main aim was to study different types of themes and factors that were highlighted in the present data. Kalaja, Alanen & Dufva (2011: 134) point out that by using the qualitative approach one enables to search for essential themes and factors that are repeated in the data and which can be seen important when considering the study. Interviewing is one appropriate tool of qualitative research. The aim of the study was, instead of statistical generalizations, to find out patterns and describe events.

The analysis began with reading the interview materials carefully one by one in order to find out which are the common themes that are repeated in the answers. Furthermore, the way the participants reacted to some of the questions was taken into consideration as well. Overall, the answers followed the themes that the questions were built around quite nicely.

In the present study content analysis was used to give an insight look on the language development during the student exchange in Finland as seen by the participants. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002: 105) add that making a content analysis helps to picture the study in more general and condensed form.

### **5.4 The research questions**

As the study concentrates on exchange student's own opinions of their English language development during their exchange the main research question of the study would be the following:

1. How and in which ways do the English language skills of the incoming exchange students develop in their own opinion during their exchange in the University of Jyväskylä?

In order to find more info behind the language development, on the participant's opinions and to help the participants to point out reasons to their language use and improvement as well, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

2. How do the research participants describe their learning background in English?
3. How does the status of English differ between Finland and participants' home countries, as described by participants?
4. How do the English skills of the participants' differ when compared to local Finns and to other exchange students, as described by participants?

## **6 Results and discussion**

In this section I will present the results from my study. Based on them, I will consider the main questions one by one and present some examples of the answers. Firstly, I will start by focusing on the use of English in participants' home countries from students' point of view, followed by the participants' English learning background and later concentrating on the overall status of English in the countries itself. Secondly, I will take a look on the on the participants' national identities and attitudes towards English. Followed by the role English has during the exchange period in participants' everyday lives as a lingua franca.

Later on, I will present the participants' opinions on the comparison between their own language skills with local Finns and other exchange students. In the last section I will present the students' opinions on their own English language overall development during the exchange period and factors that have affected their language improvement. As mentioned earlier, the main emphasis of the study is on participants' own personal views on their own language background and English language skills. All of the participants were aware of the

main emphasis of the present study which was to find out their own opinions and viewpoints on their language development during the exchange period.

All of the participants come from a Southern European country where a Latin-based mother language is spoken. This being said, the participants have language backgrounds that share some similarities, but are diverse in the end. After all, differences can be found already inside countries as well. In addition, there are as many diverse language backgrounds to be found as there are participants. There are numerous facts that can affect language skills history, such as national history and the national way of teaching just to mention a few.

Firstly, I will take an insight look on the language background of the participants, concentrating mainly on their own interpretation of their English language history and possible thoughts that arise with it. In this case all of the exchange students know the English language, but to which extent and in which ways will be found out as well. After this, continuing by finding out what kind of role English plays in participants' lives back home or whether it has any part at all. As all of the participants are from Southern European countries the culture as well as the national identity, including the mother language, are seen important and valued.

## **6.1 The use of English in the home country**

When asking about the participant's opinions and views on the status of English in their home countries, they all found the status of English was not as strong as for example in Finland. As mentioned earlier, none of the participants came from a country where English would hold an official status, but instead is used as a foreign language.

- 1) In my opinion, English has very low status in my home country. (Maria, 24, Spain)

On the other hand, Crystal (2003:104) states that usually English is the common language between the locals and tourists. English being the language of tourism and countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy being few of the most attracting destinations for tourists in Europe, tourism does bring English to daily lives for people who live in the touristy areas. However, in the present study none of the participants mentioned tourism or its connection to English language use in their surroundings.

Furthermore, all participants mentioned that there are only few people who actually are able to speak English and that the mother tongue of the country is the only language used in their language area while English is not generally understood or used. Luca mentioned that only a few speak proper English by which he meant that people do speak and understand some words, but they do not speak the language fluently and are not able to have long conversations.

2) In my country just a few speak proper English. (Luca, 23, Italy)

According to Welch-Ross (2010: 5) studies show that the amount of vocabulary and its growth are related to the quantity and complexity of the language people hear in their daily lives. The daily input of English in students' lives is low which can be directly linked to a more limited vocabulary in the language. Furthermore, according to Houwer and Wilton (2011: 10) previous studies demonstrate that having subtitles instead of dubbing has a positive impact for foreign language learning. One of the participants mentioned the fact that all of the movies and TV-programmes are dubbed in their country which means that participants do not hear or learn English even through TV or media. Houwer and Wilton (2011: 10) continue by stating that favouring subtitles would give the necessary external support for English teaching in schools.

3) Everything in TV in Italy is in Italian. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Luca admits using subtitles is unfortunate, but thinks that one of the reasons for it is the fact that in the Southern parts of Italy can still be found people who are illiterate and without dubbing it would be impossible for them to follow the programs. However, the participant believed having subtitles instead of dubbing had probably affected the language skills of the Finns in a positive way as well, but at the same time wished to keep dubbing used in his home country. According to Leppänen and Nikula (2007:7) English has had a significant presence in Finland for decades as English films and TV programmes have been subtitled rather than dubbed. Whether dubbing is favoured because of the national attitude of the country or because of its convenience, it does seem to have a positive impact on students' language skills.

### **6.1.1 English at school**

When asking for reasons for almost non-existing use of English in the participants' home countries, one of the participants, Maria, mentioned that in school the emphasis of learning a

new language is in the written communication and due to this reason people are not confident enough or do not have enough tools to actually speak English. According to Twombly (2002:84) emphasis on language learning should not be limited only to classroom study which is formal and based on achieving. In other words, variability and practicality could be seen as key factors in foreign language learning and later on, use.

- 4) In school we don't learn to speak--- we never do conversations, but just to read and write English. (Maria, 24, Spain)

Covering all areas of language learning would make students more prepared for the language use in real life. According to EF English Proficiency Index (2011) different studies suggest that English teaching needs to change the main emphasis from memorizing grammar rules towards teaching successful communication strategies as communication based learning will suit better to tomorrow's workplace.

When inquiring the language background of the participants the main focus was on their own interpretation on how they felt they had learned English at school. As one can imagine, there were as many different language backgrounds and attitudes to be found towards English as there were participants. Furthermore, as school systems around Europe differ, the answers were diverse as well, but additionally shared some similar features. However, there were differences to be found inside the countries as well. Nevertheless, all the participants were eager to be more fluent and competent in English which was one of the main reasons for their exchange period. Twombly (2002: 84) agrees that improvement in foreign language competence has been the main goal of student exchange through time.

An interesting feature can be found between different parts of just one country as in Italy students start learning English at different ages depending on the area where they were born. For example one of the Italian participants, Luca, told that he started learning English at school at the age of 8 while at the same time another Italian participant, Francesco, had started at the age of 12. The difference is quite significant, not only when measured by years, but especially as one learns new languages at an earlier age in more effective manner. According to EF English Proficiency Index (2012) studies show that children aged between 8 and 12 are on average faster at learning English and tend to maintain their advantage even after many years of study.

Luca believed that the difference can be explained with different home regions, as in the North of Italy learning English starts earlier than in the southern parts of Italy. According to Gattullo and Pallotti (2000: 52) in the early 90's foreign language teaching in Italy experienced many important changes and investments. However, still there are children especially in Southern Italy who have not been taught a foreign language. Reasons for the difference are for example the amount of tourism and mobility possibilities in the area, but also historical and economical reasons as northern part of the country is wealthier and emphasises the importance of language education more. Meanwhile, the southern part of the country puts more emphasize on other subjects and such languages as Latin.

Houwer and Wilton (2011: 8) remark that there are differences between European countries on the exact procedures they choose for teaching a second or a third language. For example, in Northern parts of Italy pupils are given the choice at young age to choose whether they want to study English or French as the first foreign language. Gattullo and Pallotti (2000: 53) point out that foreign language is a compulsory subject, however Italian pupils are allowed to choose the language within the limits of teaching. However, the Northern Italian participant mentioned that regardless of the geographical closeness of France majority of pupils tend to choose English as their first foreign language as it is considered to be more useful in the future.

- 5) In the North we start studying English when we are 8 years old. But it was only one hour a week -- we can choose if we want English or French – of course I choose English. (Luca, 23, Italy)

Furthermore, another matter that was highlighted in most of the answers was the amount of English lessons participants had in school. Many of the participants felt that the small amount of lessons was not enough to develop fluent language skills. According to Gattullo and Pallotti (2000: 51) in Italy one normally starts to learn English at the age of 8 and has three hours of lessons in a week. Portuguese and Spanish participants mentioned they only had one lesson per week although they started the language learning process at an early age.

Schauer (2009:194) points out that the usual foreign language context is a language classroom where the learners' input is generally fairly limited. For all of the participants learning in school had consisted mainly of reading, writing and listening. In addition, intentionally or not

there was no mention of cultural studies either. Not until last years of school, in high school did they have also spoken interaction in the classroom which can easily explain lower confidence in the language use and difficulties on starting to use English in different situations.

- 6) I studied English grammar mostly in the first years with some reading and writing. We also have listening. In the last years at high school I studied some English literature and we had some speaking sessions. (Luca, 23, Italy)

According to Howatt (2004:151) many schools still nowadays tend to use teaching methods that are based on translating and grammar while there is a lack of spoken communication. Based on the answers, the main emphasis seemed to be more on grammar and on written communication rather than on the spoken communication. Schauer (2009:194) adds that in the classroom context the grammatical knowledge develops earlier than the pragmatic awareness. Moreover, there was no mention of practical real-life exercises used in the classroom in any of the answers. The results show that even though foreign language teaching is constantly rebuild with new innovations, the aims of learning should be revised as well. Howatt (2004:151) remarks that earlier one reason why English was learned was to be able to access its literature. However, nowadays English is seen and used more in the role of communication. Furthermore, the latter is the one exchange students tend to need from the beginning of their exchange in order, for example, to build social relationships.

- 7) I learned mainly by reading, not much writing. I started to learn English when I was 12 years old (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Furthermore, both of the Italian participants wished there would have been more emphasis on the spoken interaction as later on it relieved to be the form of communication they needed the most in their lives, for example during their exchange period, in the communication with other exchange students and the university staff. Howatt (2004:151) continues by stating that it should always be acknowledged carefully what type of language ability the student needs to reach at the end of the course and for what purposes the language is learned.

- 8) We had to study a lot in writing and reading, but not speaking that much. I wish we had more speaking sessions so I would be better expressing what I want to say. (Luca, 23, Italy)

When analysing the answers on the language background of the participants there are a few common thoughts in all of the answers. Firstly, the participants share similar language learning backgrounds which were mainly concentrated on writing, reading and listening, but hardly or not any on spoken interaction which gives the idea that the teaching has been strongly under the baton of the teacher. Gattullo and Pallotti (2000: 54) point out that teachers maintain a freedom to decide in which areas the teaching concentrates, even though they have to respect the national curriculum.

The ones who actually had spoken interaction in foreign language classroom only had it on the last years of school, instead of from the very beginning when it would have been more ideal. This could be a result from the contemporary recommendations to move the emphasis from written communication towards spoken communication and highlight the importance spoken communication in the future.

- 9) In school we just write and read, not talking ever. (Maria, 24, Spain)

None of the participants mentioned having pronunciation lessons or native teachers in their classrooms which however was not seen as a problem by the participants. Additionally, one of the participants felt that English was not seen as the most important subject in school, as the language is not much used in everyday life in their home country. Furthermore, the participant admitted that she noticed the real importance of English when she arrived to Finland for her exchange period, that being the first time she needed English in the real life.

- 10) I don't use English in Portugal -- but when I arrive here everyone is speaking (English) and it is useful. I was shock, everyone is so good. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

The participant was surprised to realize that the common lingua franca of the exchange students was actually English and that everyone else seemed to be more fluent speakers of English. Even though all of the exchange students are aware that their language for studying in

Finland will be English, one might be surprised when put in to a real-life situation to use English, some cases for the first time in their lives.

### **6.1.2 English in everyday contexts**

When looking more at the background of the participants, such as the use of English language in their daily life, many of the students said that they do not normally use English in their daily surroundings and prefer speaking in their mother tongue. In other words, English is not present and does not serve a purpose to a great extent in participants' daily life in their home countries. Houwer and Wilton (2011: 11) remark that the use of English in different European countries is influenced by several factors such as cultures, languages and on-going situations which are all also in interaction with each other.

On the other hand, the importance of English as a common language of communication technology can be seen in the results. The use of English via internet, computer games and social media was mentioned in many of the answers, as they belong to the participants' everyday life and English being the language of the social media. At the same time, in situations where possible, participants preferred their own mother language also in this case, when compared to English.

11) Yes, I use it, especially when I use internet and I talk with other people (in facebook) or I play with English games. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Apart from one participant, the participants wanted to meet people from other countries and use English during their exchange. The communication made through social media does involve English language for all the participants; however it mainly concentrates on written communication, instead of spoken which many participants found difficult, mainly because of the lack of practise and high amount of errors.

Furthermore, one of the participants, Luca, said that he has international friends and speaks English with them also in his home country. Additionally, another participant studies in a master's program in English so he mentioned he uses English everyday and occasionally speaks English with exchange students at his home university as he has exchange students in his courses as well. Situations with international surroundings are many times situations that

do not occur on everyday life, unless one seeks for them and is willing to get to know people from other countries.

12) I use English everyday: My Master's programme is taught in English. Sometimes I go out with foreigners and I speak English. (Luca, 23, Italy)

Three of the participants live in their home countries in a big international city, such as Madrid or Milan, but still English does not have a daily basis status in their lives as the national language usually is the lingua franca. In addition, at times countries such as Italy and Spain attract people who already master the country's national language. This means if they meet locals instead of using English they use the national language with them. In other words, even if one is surrounded with different nationalities one most likely still will use one's mother language as it is the common lingua franca.

13) I only speak Spanish in home. --- I live in Madrid where is many foreigners, but we always speak Spanish. (Maria, 24, Spain)

When analysing the results, it became quite obvious that the participants use English only when it is needed or mandatory, such as in situations where the other participant does not share the same mother language, is English used as a lingua franca. At the same time, if one does not have acquaintances outside his/her language "zone", is mother language naturally used between the speakers, instead of English. However, all of the participants were willing to brush up their English and open to occasions where they could use the language.

## **6.2 The status of English in the home country**

Next, closer look will be taken on the national aspects of the participants' home countries on the English language.

### **6.2.1 Spain**

When taking a look at the opinions of the Spanish participant, Maria, strong views and attitudes can be found. Maria mentioned that overall the attitude in Spain towards English

language is not very welcoming as the national identity in Spain is extremely strong with the language playing a significant part on it. She continues by stating that in Spain family values are important, with one of these values being from the former generations, the strong language attitude about one's mother language whether it is Spanish, Catalan or Basque. For the ones who speak for example Catalan as their first language at home, Spanish is the second language that can be used for example in school while making English one's the third language already.

- 14) I am happy I am learning English-- in Spain my parents don't speak English and we speak Catalan at home, but when I go to university or out I speak Spanish with my friends who are not Catalan. (Maria, 24, Spain)

In addition, Maria mentions that her generation is the first one to be pushed to learn English, mainly because of the European Union language policy and the globalization. Houwer and Wilton (2011: 136) state that in some countries English is seen more as a threat to the national languages rather than as a way of integrating Europe. Maria feels it is an advantage to learn English and sees it as a door-opener in the future, but at the same time understands the strong national view; Spanish are very proud of their country and language heritage. However, she feels only a small part of the generation actually learns and uses English in the end, most of them being exchange students and people who are willing to work abroad, as inside Spain English is not needed. She adds that no one should be pushed to learn use English as some want to stay permanently in Spain. At the same time advantages of knowing English should be more highlighted especially when considering the economic situation in Spain right now.

- 15) My friends who live in Spain never speak English, because they want to stay in Spain so its not useful. --- I want to learn better English and I can find work in other countries. (Maria, 24, Spain)

When taking more of an insight to her answers, it looks like as she thinks that English does not serve a function in Spain, it is seen almost completely unnecessary unless one wants to go abroad. However, Europe becoming increasing more multi-lingual, it is highly important one has at least the basic skills in English which is spoken to some extent in all of the European countries. In other words, basic knowledge in English makes life much easier while travelling, searching for work or everyday life with increasing immigration and tourism. Especially in a country such as Spain where tourism has extended all over the country and has millions of

tourists entering the country every year, the locals are dealing with English whether they are willing or not.

Not only does the official language, Spanish, have a strong status inside Spain, but as well through out most of the Southern American countries. Furthermore, According to Ethnologue (2009) the number of people studying Spanish all over the world is increasing as we speak while Spanish is holding its place as the third biggest language in the world. There have been several speculations about Spanish actually threatening the status of English as the world language which however nowadays does not seem very likely.

Overall, the results give out the image that one of the reasons affecting language skills of the Spanish people is their attitudes that seem to reflect the national attitude of Spain. One should treasure one's cultural heritage and language, but only to a certain extent and not to the point when it starts to limit one's possibilities and choices.

### **6.2.2 Portugal**

When looking at the national aspect and the attitudes of the Portuguese participant, Ana, there is a strong national identity to be found, as there was with Spanish participant earlier, but mainly for different reasons. Ana mentions Portugal being a small country at the edge of Europe, it has been seen as the "little brother" of big and powerful Spain. Portugal can be seen as a smaller country in the aspect of tourism, media interest and population when comparing for example to Spain.

- 16) Portugal people are --- proud of Portugal. Spain think it is best and we always have competition on football and everything... (Ana, 21, Portugal)

Being next to a one of the biggest countries in Europe, Portugal also shares a strong national attitude, especially when it comes to the official language. Ana mentions that maintaining their own language is seen as important and that could be one reason why Portuguese people tend to speak and prefer only Portuguese. In addition, it seems that the cultural heritage plays an important role on why Portuguese people respect and are so attached to their own national language. As in other European countries as well in Portugal students of the present generation study English, but it is not seen as a great importance as some other subjects. The fact that

Ana, mentions that she feels Portuguese is more important for her than English could be interpreted from few different perspectives; whether she feels that English is threading Portuguese and she needs to make a choice which one to use or simply she feels there is no need for English in her life and Portuguese being enough.

17) I love my language and I think it is very beautiful. I think for me Portugal is more important than English. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

At the same time, Portugal being part of the EU, the importance of language skills does play a role on young people's life today as it does in all of the member countries whether the locals want it or not.

### **6.2.3 Italy**

As mentioned earlier, based on the opinions of the participants it looks like most of the countries where Romance languages are spoken share a strong national attitude. As national attitude goes together with language attitude it reflects strongly the attitudes and the use of English as well. In this case Italy is not an exception; both of the Italian participants, Luca and Francesco, say that Italian language maintains a strong national status. However, as a contrast to the other participants, the Italians mentioned that they are willing and open-minded to learn and brush up their English, however mentioning this does not reflect the situation and attitude in the whole country. For example the ones who actually go on exchange are eager to learn better English while a huge part of the younger generation is willing to stay in Italy and maintain poor English skills.

18) I wanted to come to Finland, because I wanted to speak better English. In Italy people only speak Italian and it is very important to Italians, because it is part of our history and identity. (Luca, 23, Italy)

In addition, Latin is an obligatory subject in Italy which students start learning already from an early age, instead of English. Latin being a “dead language”, Luca mentions it would be useful to put more emphasis in learning English instead of Latin. However, none of the Italian participants were eager to give up Latin, as they saw it as an important language heritage and helpful when it comes to learning other languages. However, the importance of English is still

a fairly new phenomenon in Italy which can be one reason for its current low status in the country. Gattullo and Pallotti (2000: 51) state that during last ten years in the teaching of foreign languages Italian schools have taken more into consideration different aspects, such as ability to have simple, but practical conversations and ability to understand everyday texts. The future shows whether the foreign language teaching in Italy starts to answer to the demands of daily lives.

As a difference to the countries mentioned earlier, it seems that the Italia participants do not consider English as a threat, but English does not have a function in the Italian society either. Different dialects are a way to show from which part of the country one comes from and usually Italians are very proud about their dialects, not that much of the actual Italian language. There are differences to be seen based on whether one comes from North or South of Italy; in the North Italian language is seen as the builder of national identity while in the South for example the Sicilian dialect is considered more as a part of being Sicilian and after that Italian.

- 19) Sicilian is important for me because it is the language of my family and my grandparents. I want to teach it to my kids also. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

In addition to the national identity, in Italy the national identities are divided regionally as well. Italian is the official language, however there can be found several dialects which are like different language when it comes to understanding, such as Napolitano and Sicilian, in other words dialect used in Naples and in Sicily which are strongly connected to the area where they are used.

### **6.3. The use of English during the student exchange in Finland**

There are different reasons that influence in the decision where one goes on exchange which can vary from cultural difference to personal interests and everything in between. Nevertheless, all of the participants mentioned similar reasons on why they chose Finland as their exchange destination, such as different and exotic country where one can study and live having only English skills. Finland was known to them as a country where education is appreciated and is technologically advanced.

The possibility to study in English instead of Finnish makes Finland a much easier destination and does attract students that would not probably choose Finland otherwise. Furthermore, as Finland starts to provide more services in English, it seems to become more appealing as the increase in the number of courses held in English is related to the increased number of incoming-exchange students. At the same time, it is not only the universities that emphasize the importance of English, more and more public services can be found in English nowadays as well while most of the younger generations speak English in Finland. However, whether countries, such as Finland offer the optimal language environment for English skills improvement shares opinions. According to Freed (1995: 5) real fluency in a language can only be reached in a country where English is the main language of the country. On the other hand, English is the lingua of the exchange students during their exchange in many countries where English is not the official language. Furthermore, Dufon (2006: 32) states that even though it is assumed that exchange students have a fruitful environment to interact with the native speakers of English, yet actually students generally do not interact a lot with the natives. Thus, it seems that the official language of the host country may not have such a significant role in exchange students' English language development after all.

One participant mentioned that for her improving English seemed easier and more care-free in a country where the other speakers are non-natives, such as Finland rather than in an English-speaking country where the level of English could be too high for her.

20) I don't want to go to England, because my English is very bad and everyone speak so fast there. (Maria, 24, Spain)

In other words, an environment where English is not the official language, but is generally spoken in one's language surroundings, such as used as a lingua franca, can encourage one to start using English in social situations. Exchange students are having conversations with each other; mainly with other non-native speakers which can be easier than speaking with natives for someone who is not confident with one's language skills. In the end, exchange students usually do not tend to associate much with natives whether the country at issue has English as an official language or not.

According to Twombly (2012: 68) in study abroad there are several educational aims, such as language fluency, better communications skills and intercultural knowledge. All participants

knew beforehand that they would be using mainly English during their studies and mentioned that all of them had a goal to improve their English skills during the exchange which shows that English language has had an impact in the choosing process.

21) I came to Finland because I can study in English. I wanted my English to get better.  
(Francesco, 26, Italy)

Even though all of the exchange students were aware beforehand that their lectures will be in English during their exchange in Finland, in the end it at times it still came as a surprise to some how challenging studying in a foreign language can actually be. At the same time students' face a completely new situation for the first time when the lingua franca with everyone is English, instead of their own mother language which they are used to. Even though all are aware of this beforehand, it still might cause a cultural shock in reality as students realize how exhausting can it be to use a foreign language all the time, before one gets used to it. Although it is possible to keep using one's own mother language at some points during their exchange, this can lead to isolation from the lingua franca group that exchange students form together.

According to Papatsiba (2006: 122) usually students meet for the first time during the exchange, yet at times students knew each other before the departure from their home country. Most of the participants arrived to their exchange alone and started the experience of student exchange on their own while one of the participants arrived together with a friend, another student from the same nationality. However, there can be numerous reasons for deciding not to come alone, as for example it can be seen as helpful to have support from someone if one is not confident enough with one's language skills or even lacks fluent language skills. However, at the same time it can again lead in to isolation and lack of foreign language use as it offers a possibility to use one's national language instead.

Papatsiba (2006: 122) continues that a student who arrives with someone from the same nationality tend to stay with co-nationals throughout the exchange. In contrast, when a student arrives alone to a new country, one tends to speak with strangers and seek out for new friends, this case in English as it has the role of lingua franca between the exchange students. Furthermore, in ideal situation for language development one finds international friends and continues to use English with them. One participant saw having a friend around purely in

positive light as she sought for comfort and support in the cases of cultural shock or misunderstandings from her. However, the participant did mention improvement of English skills as one of her reasons for exchange while the reality of using English to a wide extent during the exchange came as a surprise for her.

### **6.3.1 The significance of an English language course**

Most of the exchange students start their experience alone, in a foreign country with a foreign language without knowing anyone beforehand. When students start their exchange in Finland they are offered an English language course which is not obligatory, but useful if one is not confident enough with his/her English skills. At the same time, a course full of exchange students is a great way for one to meet new people who are in the same situation and even make friends. Next, I take a closer look on the results on how an English language course can affect one's motivation and attitudes towards English.

All participants were pleased they were offered the chance to do an English course, even though most of them felt they would have needed more help on deciding whether they needed the course or not. As the language course was voluntary and for this reason in most of the cases did not already belong to student's study plan. A course which does not belong to a study plan can mean changes in the plan and a need for confirmation from the home university. In other words, extra work for the student which can be seen as a one reason why some students decide to skip the course even though they might need it which can lead to problems with understanding later on during the exchange. The course itself can be considered as extra work as not only it is not included in the study plan, but it might not be recognized later on to one's degree, no matter how useful it might be for the student.

Firstly, Ana stated that she did an English language course in her home university before coming to exchange, as she felt her language skills might have been too poor to cope only with English. She felt that the English course was helpful and made the upcoming exchange period more realistic for her. At the same time, the course classroom being the only time and place where she used English while being still in her home country does not give a realistic view on the reality of the exchange experience that was ahead. She continued by saying that when she arrived in Finland, everyone else seemed to speak English more fluently than she did which made her feel unsure about her skills.

22) When we came to Finland everyone speak so well English. I only know words. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

Secondly, three of the participants mentioned that they were planning to do an English language course during their exchange since they did not do one in their home country. In addition, two of them felt that it was more useful to do a course in Finland where they would be using English anyway and it could help them in their daily lives. The answers do give an insight on the fact that the students have been aware that English would be the language they use during their exchange while there was no mention on Finnish language courses at all. Furthermore, the students already saw Finland as a language environment where English would be their lingua franca instead of for example their own mother language or Finnish.

Furthermore, one of the participants mentioned that she did not give much thought to the language course beforehand and chose it because her university told her to. Surprisingly she was the only one of the participants that was told by her university to choose an English language course during her exchange. At the same time, none of the students mentioned that their language skills would have been tested before coming to Finland which most of the time leaves the decision of taking a language course to the student. While students have their obligatory courses they have to choose, it is most likely they first leave out the ones that are voluntary, such as a language course.

One could say it is the sending university's responsibility to make sure a student leaves to exchange in another country with at least basic skills in English which the students could brush up during their exchange instead of starting to learn a language from the beginning. Gonzalez and Garcia (2009: 55) point out that it is highly important that the English teaching in higher education follows the European requirements, both practically and theoretically, in order to support the student mobility. This kind of thinking could make it also easier for the students to start their studies in English. Some of the participants felt disappointed that their language skills were much weaker than students from some other countries and that they did not know how actually to prepare themselves better before the exchange.

23) Others speak better English. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Nevertheless, Maria told that she never finished the language course as she found it too time consuming and it did not fit in her schedule, even though she would have probably needed it as later on she had problems with studying in English.

24) I didn't finish my language course, because it takes so much time, but I think I am stupid to stop it. (Maria, 24, Spain)

For someone who is not used to using English or lacks confidence there might be a bigger chance not to finish a language course as one is put out of their comfort zone while using a foreign language. Especially if one feels everyone else is in more advanced level and one is not motivated enough, can giving up the course feel like the easiest option at the moment.

The participants that did an English language course during their exchange all agreed that it had positive effects in their language skills and in their confidence to speak English which is why they saw the course as useful. In addition, they thought the timing was excellent as the course was in the beginning of their exchange which helped them to start using English in their everyday lives and at the same time meet new people who to use it with. Papatsiba (2006: 120) adds that also sharing the temporary "status" of a foreigner does bring exchange students together.

25) It was good to have English course when I came to Finland, because it helped me start to use English all the time and I met new friends. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Furthermore, only one participant, Luca, felt his language skills were good enough and that there was no need for an extra language course before or during the exchange period. However, Luca pointed out that if needed he would have had the possibility to do it in Finland as well. In the end, he did not feel the need for the course even though many of his friends decided to do so.

26) I felt my English was good enough, but many of my friends did English course. (Luca, 23, Italy)

The results show that the English skills of the participants differ significantly already before their exchange. However, one must remember that the results are based on participants' own

views of their skills, not statistics. Fortunately, most of the exchange students decide to brush up their English with a language course. Overall, an English course in the beginning of the exchange was seen as an advantage and as a good way to meet other exchange students who are in the same situation. At the same time, fluent language skills can not be build during a few weeks course which means exchange students should have basic language skills at least in English already before coming to an exchange. Students should get some type of advice if their language skills are not good enough and if there is a possibility they will face difficulties with too poor language skills during the exchange. By doing this, it would offer them a possibility to prepare themselves and brush up their language skills beforehand.

In the end, the language course was seen as well as a good way to adapt to a new country and to use of English as a lingua franca. In other words, finding people who share similar language skills and life situation makes it more comfortable for one to start using a foreign language in a new environment.

### **6.3.2 Language environment in student exchange**

When taking a closer look on the different areas of communication in English, most of the areas are well-covered in the everyday life of exchange students. All of the participants shared similar rhythm when it comes to their lives in the university surroundings and studying. The lectures for the exchange students were in international groups and in English. All of the participants came from different fields of studies, such as economics, psychology and IT which reflect the results as well.

Spoken interaction was the area of communication that was mentioned in all of the answers more than the other forms of communication. In addition, the participants felt spoken communication was the most important for them during the exchange as well as the most developed area of communication. According to Freed (1995: 9) previous studies have shown as well that majority of students improved their oral skills remarkably during the exchange while less than half saw similar progress on their writing skills. Barron (2003: 2) agrees that spending time in the host country can be seen an opportunity for language learners to receive pragmatic proficiency, such as authentic language use. For three of the participants it was the first time to use English continuously on daily basis.

Firstly, when a student goes to a lecture, sometimes the only one who speaks in the lecture hall is the professor while the student's role is to listen and make notes of the lecture. This means during the lectures writing skills together with understanding develop. In economics this is quite normal principle as the following extract shows:

27) In our lessons students only listen. (Maria, 24, Spain)

According to Freed (1995: 15) occasionally problems can arise as exchange students may not be conscious of the culturally different communication in a foreign classroom. Uncertainty on the discourse of the foreign classroom together with foreign language use might affect the amount participation during lessons. However, the ways of communicating and teaching differ as the way of proceeding is dependent on the subject studied. Ana, the participant studying psychology states that the students are invited to join the conversation and ask questions during the lecture which can be seen as a good point also when looking at the development of oral skills. However, participation on class conversation is dependent on the student if one lacks confidence in speaking English or speaking in public one might not take part in the conversation. According to Dufon (2006: 181) studies show that students with lower foreign language competence are more hesitant to ask for further explanations or clarifications in case of misinterpretation.

28) We talk in group and listen professor. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

Secondly, once the course is coming to an end students usually have some type of an exam or a project to proof what they have learned during the course. An exam can also be seen as a breaking point for exchange student as latest by then one realizes are his/her English language skills good enough to pass the exam or whether one is able to understand the literature for the exam or the exam questions. When a student is preparing for an exam the most important part is reading; in other words, the fact that the student understands the text written in English. Finally, in the exam student trains one's writing and understanding.

In the ideal situation, the exchange student is able to understand and follow both, the lectures and the material for the exam; however this might not be the case every time. The Spanish participant, Maria, mentions that she had problems with understanding during the lectures and even more with the material for the exam. Despite the help of the other exchange students who

translated and explained certain misunderstandings to her she was unable to pass the exam in the end.

- 29) I understand some words in the class -- but the economics book was difficult to me. My friends help me; we study together and translate words in Spanish. --- I was very sad when I didn't pass the test. (Maria, 24, Spain)

Such negative results might have an influence on one's willingness to learn more English; either one is motivated to brush up one's language skills even more or one loses motivation as the results are not what wanted, despite the hard work.

As seen earlier, the forms of communication in the studying context can be mainly just reading and writing. Dufon (2006: 178) reminds that formal learning together with practical language use form the optimal context for language learning. When looking at the development of practical oral skills, the role of free-time becomes important. On their free-time students are in a more relaxed environment with their friends while the pressure of accomplishing is missing. Most of the participants actually considered their free-time more useful as that is when they got to practise their oral skills.

Based on the findings it seems that the beginning of the exchange period is quite crucial when it comes to the use of English. According to Papatsiba (2006:119) after leaving one's home country, family and friends, exchange student faces a physical distance which drives one to seek for companions in the host country. Whether the student chooses to be part of the exchange student group where the lingua franca is English or makes an easy decision to stay with people from same nationality and share the same mother language. Papatsiba (2006:119) agrees that commonly the new relationships are build with other exchange students or compatriots. It looks like students who had courses together with other exchange students from different countries were more likely to stay with a multinational group while the ones who arrived together with someone else tended to stay in a monolingual group. Altogether, when considering the language development point of view, the ones who stay in a multinational group get the most out of the experience as English becomes a part of their normal life and are more able to improve their language skills.

Many of the participants, despite the home country shared a similar way of dealing with problems of understanding or other problems related to the English language during their exchange. Especially in the beginning when one's language skills are not as fluent as later on, one seeks for support and companion in misfortune from the other exchange students, many times from the students from the same country. Papatsiba (2006:120) states that all exchange students tend to face similar challenges which can build relationships and develop ties between them. As many participants mentioned this type of "family feeling" way of thinking is typical for their Southern European cultures where they are not used to eat or spend their free time alone.

- 30) We (Italians) always make food and eat together. It's more fun. -- Why will someone eat alone? (Francesco, 26, Italy)

Maria mentioned that during the exchange she had a native English-speaker as a friend who was an exchange student as well. When looking back on the possible affects that the native speaker might have had on her English skills, Maria points out better pronunciation and spelling. Dufon (2006:232) remarks that a learner usually notices new and correct structures in the opponent's language during interactions with a more expert speaker. In this particular case, the participant probably paid more attention on a strong and different accent, yet possibly learned new vocabulary as well.

- 31) We Spanish people have strong accent-- we speak English and my English friend told me how to say some words in right way-- because I sound funny and say them wrong. (Maria, 24, Spain)

The student's attitude and motivation are critical points when considering the language improvement during exchange. However, there are differences to be found on the perception of the exchange period by the students. Some participants saw exchange period as a *holiday* from normal life rather than studying while others might saw it as an opportunity to improve one's language skills and international competence, later on useful as a door-opener to a future career. Many of the participants mentioned that the exchange period is *fun* and time for enjoying new experiences. It seemed some of the participants have not really given much thought to the effects that the exchange period might have, but were more interested in only having the experience. Whether the perception of the exchange period is directly linked with

motivation and attitude towards language learning is unclear. However, all of the exchange students in Finland have to use English in order to survive whether they have planned or are motivated to do so or not.

## **6.4 Students' views of English language proficiency**

In the following part the participants were first asked to compare their English language skills with the language skills of local Finns. Later on, they compared their language skills with other exchange students from other countries. The results are based on participants' own opinions and interpretations and they were not given a common framework for comparing which means there was some variation to be found in the answers.

### **6.4.1 English proficiency: Finland vs. home country**

When asking the participants to compare people's English skills in participants' home countries with the language skills of local Finns answers shared similar views. Based on statistics of EF English proficiency index (2012) Finland holds a status of very high English proficiency while countries, such as Spain, Portugal and Italy maintain on the group of moderate proficiency in English. When taking a closer look on the comparison on the English skills of local Finns and the locals in the participants' home countries the answers were only based on the interpretation and images that the participants had formed during their exchange in Finland. Papatsiba (2006: 111) states that many times the first contact with the new culture is made via tourism and cultural reading. In other words, students can act more like tourists in the beginning of the exchange, before creating a more in-depth view on the host culture through time.

The participants said they use English mainly with the university staff and in daily services, such as shops, post office and transport. Without any doubts, all of the participants agreed that Finns tend to have better and more fluent English skills than the people in their own countries. According to Leppänen and Nikula (2007:7) in the world of education in Finland, English quickly developed from a minor foreign language into the first foreign language of the country, as nowadays the majority of Finns study English.

Furthermore, when examining the participants' interpretations on the reasons why, the most popular reason mentioned was the difference in English language teaching. Overall, Finland has indeed been successful in forming a brand of very high level education in the media which of course is based on the success Finland has had on the teaching and learning field.

All respondents stated that in their opinion local Finns tend to have better English skills than local people in their own home countries. Görlach and Schröder (1985: 277) add that the number of non-native speakers of English is very high in Northern European countries, such as Finland. In addition, all participants mentioned that it was easy to realize how well Finns speak English as it was the only language the exchange students were using in Finland as they do not speak Finnish or neither can use their own language with other nationalities or with the locals.

32) The Finns speak a better English. (Luca, 23, Italy)

Furthermore, one participant responded that it is possible to survive only with English in Finland which would not be possible in her home country as it is not easy to find local people who would speak English as well. Nevertheless, there are always exceptions to be found and most of the participants had met Finns who did not have any English skills as well.

33) But one lady in supermarket not speak English. (Maria, 24, Spain)

As students arrive to Finland they all get a Finnish tutor who helps the students with practical matters and the tutor was seen as a big help as well by the participants. Fluent language skills of a tutor may affect the exchange student's view on language skills of Finns overall, as tutor is the first local person the students meet when they arrive in Finland and spend time with. At times the tutor might even be the only link to the local community. Tutors tend to have fluent language skills especially in English, in order to be able to communicate with the exchange students which could however lead to misconceptions on the overall language skills of local Finnish people. At the same time, only in two of the answers tutors were even mentioned which could be interpreted that the answers were not based mainly on just a few local people, but more on the overall picture of the English language skills of Finns.

34) Finland I live and survive in English. In Portugal people don't speak English. Our tutor also help us when we don't understand. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

The participants were not able to give any examples on how the education in Finland actually differs from the one in their home country, as they only have experience on the other. However, they stated that Finns are more fluent speakers and that they were left with the image that in Finland almost everyone speaks English, instead of their countries where only a few does. Houwer and Wilton (2010: 9) state that English is the most available foreign language to all ages in Finland. A few of the participants even mentioned that Finland's good reputation on the field of education was one of the reasons why they chose to do their exchange in Finland.

In addition, some participants stated that they knew that in Finland people speak English which makes it an easy destination for an exchange student as one can brush up one's English while there is no need to learn a new smaller language, such as Finnish. At the same time all of the participants were eager to learn at least some Finnish, but the answers made it clear that none of them had it as their goal to learn Finnish during their exchange more than few words.

35) I knew in Finland people speak very good English -- I don't need to learn Finnish, but I think it's interesting so I take-- took one course. (Luca, 23, Italy)

Other reasons and interpretations given on why the Finns tend to speak better English than people from some other nationalities were diverse, such as more open attitude towards new languages and Finland being a small country. As mentioned earlier, attitudes can have a strong effect on one's language learning and in learning overall.

Firstly, it is a fact that Finland is more isolated and smaller in population than some other European countries; however one can only wonder whether there is a link between smaller countries accepting English or a new language to their society more easily than bigger countries. Secondly, the size of a country is not directly connected, for example on language identity which however is closely linked to national identity. In addition, Finland being located on the "corner" of Europe one can wonder if wide use of English is a one way of showing that Finland wants to belong to Europe and is proud of it.

36) Finland is so little, I think it is easy for Finland for accept new language--- because they are far in Europe. (Maria, 24, Spain)

Furthermore, the participants mentioned that foreigners are taken in to consideration in Finland as the services of the university as well as most of the public services and announcements are without exceptions always in English together with Finnish. However, having everything in English might affect the number of exchange students willing to learn Finnish voluntarily as it is not actually needed.

37) In Italy everything is in Italian, but in Finland even in train they tell everything in English-- it is helpful and nice. (Francesco, 26, Italy)

At the same time, as most of the public services can be found in English, most of the participants also felt that Finns were more open to use English together with their own mother language and with foreigners. The participants mentioned as well that most of the Finns always at least tried to speak English which for example the Portuguese participant saw as a difference to her country.

38) Finland people are very nice. They always try speak English--- in Portugal people don't. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

This statement is complete opposite to the old stereotype and to the overall image that Finns might have about themselves as shy, quiet and afraid of using a foreign language. However, the opinions are only based on the experiences that the exchange students had, those often being with other students of higher education and people who are eager to meet people from other countries as well as speak English. At the same time, it does not make any of the opinions misleading as it tells promising news on the younger generations language skills, open-mind and internationality.

When asking for participants' opinions on reasons why they found such a significant difference on the English status between Finland and their country, there were several different reasons that came up. Overall, some participants felt that English is not "needed" in their country as everyone already speaks the mother language, but did see the advantages if a young person has good language skills. Furthermore, the participants mentioned that lack of English skills is not a problem if one does not leave the country, however in today's global world they saw English as an important tool for young people as it enables one to live and

seek for work abroad as well as to meet people from other countries. All the answers reflect very closely the attitudes and opinions the participants have learned and formed during their exchange, as the participants wished more people would go abroad and brush up their English.

#### **6.4.2 English language proficiency: students vs. other exchange students**

When the participants compared their own language skills to the English skills of the other exchange students the answers were diverse. Many of the participants felt that their English skills were not as good as the others' while some felt their English skills were in a similar level with the other exchange students. Different reasons were given in the comparison. Such reasons were being able to have a conversation with the others, understanding most of the things said and a feeling of being able to survive with using English. None of the participants mentioned any particular nationality which they were referring themselves to; however it was pointed out that the comparison was made with people from other language areas. Schauer (2009: 203) points out that it would be important to include certain areas of language teaching into all national curriculums, such as pragmatics. Differences in foreign language teaching may be one reason for major differences in English language fluency between different European nationalities.

Nonetheless, only one participant felt confident about his English skills and did not face any major difficulties with speaking in English with the other exchange students. Participant mentioned he had problems with vocabulary which however did not cause any problems during conversations as the others tried their best to understand.

39) I think --in average-- my skills are comparable to the ones of the other exchange students, we were able to have conversations. (Luca, 23, Italy)

The participants compared their language skills to the others' in different ways as one felt that her English skills were not as good as the others'. Even though she was able to understand and participate in the conversations, at the same time she felt the others were more fluent and competent in the language.

- 40) I think my skills in English are not so good than other exchange students' because that they speak better and faster --- but I am Spanish --- and I think that because many of them travel around Europe much more. (Maria, 24, Spain)

Overall, most of the participants were satisfied with their English skills, as they felt they were able to understand and join conversations even though at times they felt the other students' English was more fluent. At the same time, if one lacks English skills one can become motivated to improve them, in order to reach the level of competence the other exchange students might already have.

Dufon (2006: 233) states that if a student has some type of goal or a special reason to improve one's language skills it can also act as a motivator. Besides being able to communicate with others, students can be motivated to improve their English skills for several reasons, such as future international career or travelling. None of the participants mentioned studies in this particular question and it seemed the interpretations were based more on social communication that took place on free time rather than for example success on studies.

## **6.5 Students' views on their overall English language improvement during exchange**

All participants thought their language skills were satisfactory or good already before coming to exchange while none of them saw their skills were excellent. The exchange period was the first time to live abroad as well as to use English as a lingua franca, for all participants. Participants mentioned having problems to speak English in the beginning, simply because they were not used to it and were out of their own comfort zone as one might be with a "new" language in unfamiliar surroundings. According to Dufon (2006: 231) previous researches have shown that study abroad can be seen as a great value especially in the development of oral skills. In fact, three out of four participants said that with time they got used to using English and it became a part of their normal life. Schauer (2009: 1) agrees by stating that studying abroad has beneficial influences in foreign language learner's cross-cultural and communicative proficiency. Finally, when asking whether the participants thought their language skills had improved during the exchange period in Finland all agreed on the fact that they had.

Maria stated that her English skills had improved remarkably when comparing to the beginning of her exchange. When she arrived she was able to say only few words in English while at the end of the exchange she was able to have conversations and be understood. On the report of Freed (1995: 26) studies have shown that students who studied abroad were able to speak English more effortlessly and with a faster rate than those who did not study abroad. It remains as a mystery how much more students' language skills would have improved with a longer stay if significant results were gained during only a short period of time. Twombly (2012: 86) states that in order for one to increase practical language ability would a longer stay abroad be the most gainful. Barron (2003: 242) agrees that learners' pragmatic ability to increase demands time, as more processing capacity will grow over time, enabling learners to use more complex structures.

Nevertheless, the participant admitted feeling intimidated in the beginning as she had serious problems with understanding the others who spoke only English. However, there were also other students from her country who were able to translate for her which helped her in the beginning.

41) Now I can speak English with my neighbours and new friends.--- My English is better than in start. (Maria, 24; Spain)

In this case, despite the difficulties in the beginning Maria was motivated and felt she improved remarkably her English. This particular participant is an example of how much the student's own attitude and effort to meet new people actually impact the possibility to improve one's language skills during an exchange period. According to Papatsiba (2006:119) studies show that those who made the effort to communicate with others, regardless of difficulties in language use, were successful in creating relationships. Meeting and spending time with new people from other nationalities and choosing to go on exchange alone seem to be the key factors on improving one's English skills during an exchange. In addition, it seems that for lower proficiency learners the development made during the exchange could be seen more easily in practise. Alternatively, Twombly (2012: 85) adds that based on previous studies advanced learners do not improve their language fluency remarkably during exchange.

Furthermore, also another participant, Ana, felt that her English skills had improved during her exchange in Finland; however, she admitted that she searched for the company of people who

spoke her mother language as well. In fact, Ana arrived and lived together with two other people from the same nationality which she saw more as an advantage than disadvantage as her English skills were quite poor when she arrived.

42) When I arrive I was understanding some things, but all were speaking so fast so I was feeling scared. Everyone was really nice so I was feeling better. I arrive with other Portugal people so they also help me. (Ana, 21, Portugal)

Nevertheless, also Ana mentioned that probably her language skills would be more fluent in case she would have been the only one from her country or spent more time with people from other nationalities. As mentioned earlier one's motivation and attitudes have an influence whether one actually improves language skills during exchange or maintains on what one has by grouping with students from the same nationality. According to Dufon (2006: 231) previous studies agree that attitude and motivation during the exchange are directly connected with linguistic development made. A student who already has basic English skills, is open to learn and improve his/her English and willing to meet new people from different cultures is in the ideal situation. Dufon (2006: 233) adds that motivation can be an outcome of learning as well. However, English being the lingua franca for the exchange students, the results show that students improve their English almost without noticing in their daily lives. In other words, the main reason for language skills improvement seems to be the constant exposure to English.

43) Yes, of course, because during my stay in Finland I always was with strangers. (Maria, 24, Spain)

When asking in which situations did the participants mainly used English all answers were sharing the similar features. All of the participants were students of the university and came to Finland to study. Besides the university, the participants used English when problems occurred, such as when they got sick or when they went out to watch a movie which had subtitles in Finnish, but the audio was in English. One of the participants had a friendship family which she enjoyed having conversations with. She mentioned the main reason why she liked it so much was because with them she felt more relaxed to speak as felt she had equal language skills with the family.

The difference Finland offers as an exchange destination compared to English-speaking countries is that in Finland the whole population does not speak perfect English, but at the same time most of public services are provided in English. The fact that the locals do not speak perfect English might lower the step to start speaking in English also for the exchange students as they are not expected perfection with their language skills. Of course Finns do not speak English with each other which can mean that exchange students are more likely to hear Finnish spoken on the streets than English.

Finally, as mentioned earlier exchange students tend move in the international surroundings where the common language usually is English. Even though Finland is not an English-speaking country, the results show that it is possible to improve one's English as long as one spends time in international surroundings where English is the lingua franca. Schauer (2009: 1) points out that it has been noted that regardless of the host country, overall study abroad has positive impact on students' personal development together with cross-cultural awareness and language skills. On top of everything students will have an experience of a lifetime.

## **7 Conclusion and discussion**

The aim of the present study was to find out exchange students' perceptions on their English language development during their exchange period in Finland. Students' views on improvement made during exchange in a country where English served the purpose of lingua franca without being the official language of the country was also emphasized. The reason for taking a closer look on this particular topic comes from personal experiences on the importance of English skills in today's multicultural Europe and motivation for improving one's language skills as the main goal of an exchange period.

The results of the present study show that all participants share a similar English learning background. The language backgrounds concentrate mainly on written communication together with reading while spoken communication lacks almost completely. At the same time, the reflections of national attitudes can be seen in the attitudes towards foreign language learning as English was not seen among the most important school subjects by the participants. Therefore, the attitudes towards foreign language learning are quite strong and living and can be tied up closely to the national attitude of the country. One important factor is that all

participants mentioned English not serving a purpose in their home country as there are only a few who speak fluent English. However, majority of participants saw the importance of having English skills outside their native country. Even though EU does its best in order to unify Europe and encourage to foreign language learning, it seems national attitudes are still stronger than the joined European attitude. Naturally, globalization is a slow process and attitudes do not change overnight.

In future, all European countries should invest in diversity in English teaching and learning, in order to make foreign language learning more inviting for everyone. Since globalization is directly linked with economical and political matters, it would be beneficial for all the countries if they could secure having citizens with language skills for the future labour markets. In the long term, it appears that the knowledge of English can offer new opportunities, such as possibility to work and live in another country which means sharing education, knowledge and skills that one has. Meanwhile, the mobility in the work markets creates new jobs and increases growth. Overall, EU emphasizes the importance of having English as a lingua franca while one of the goals of EU is the diversity of languages. In the end, English can be seen as a threat to other European languages on the account of its convenience.

The results show that students' attitudes, choices and motivation are key factors in language development during the exchange. Firstly, participants who decided to make an effort and seek for other international students and form friendships with them were more likely to increase their use of English. In other words, open-mindedness together with positive attitude towards new experiences and people can be seen as beneficial factors also in language development.

Secondly, those participants who maintained or formed groups with people from the same nationality tended to use their own national language instead of English. Needless to say, the use of English can be seen as commensurate with the improvement of language skills. It seems that it is an easy solution for one to stay with other students from same nationality, even though all participants stated English language skills improvement as one of their goals for the exchange period. Nevertheless, the usual reason for staying in a group with one's own nationality was the lack of one's English skills and confidence. A new foreign environment offers many challenges as well which can lead one to seek for support from people who share the same nationality. Lastly, one should recall especially one cultural difference as for

Southern-European students the social situations are important as they tend to be more comfortable having others around rather than doing errands alone. Thus, it might also lead to a situation where these students seek company from people who share the same national habits and language rather than other foreigners.

When considering the studies at the university, optional English language course was seen as one of the milestones of the exchange. Naturally the course was held in the beginning of the exchange when everyone is in a new situation, culture and surrounded by new people. In other words, it offers an outstanding opportunity to make new friends as well as improve English skills. The three participants who took part in the language course all saw it as more important to their social life rather than English skills. Nevertheless, participants felt that during the course both aspects improved. The friendships built during the language course were mostly between students from different nationalities which in the long term helped to carry on multilingual behaviour throughout the exchange. Furthermore, when exchange students form groups including people from different nationalities, it seems to be more likely that English remains as the lingua franca of the group, instead of the students' national languages.

When taking an overall look on the studies, two of the participants mention not having faced any problems while the other two felt they were struggling. The two participants who had problems with passing exams and understanding during lectures in English, said the main reason were their poor English skills. Since passing exams and progress in one's studies is significant also during exchange, in the future these types of difficulties should be acknowledged more carefully. In this case, neither of the students struggling with the language took part in the optional English course, even though in retrospect it would have been crucial for both of them. Thus, in the future universities should emphasize the possibility of an English language course even more at the time of applying as it can offer a more steady start for one's studies in English.

The results show that choices made on free time were affecting the English language use. Free time was the time when spoken communication was used the most. Even though all of the participants studied in English was the main emphasis of the language improvement in the free time, as it was when social relationships were mainly built. Another connective factor was the fact that all of the exchange students were in the same situation which made them seek for support and companion in misfortune. It appears that the first weeks were seen as the most

crucial time to make international friends as it can be seen linked to the amount of English use during whole the exchange. Meeting new people from different countries and socializing in English were seen as the most developing factors of practical language skills improvement. Thus, to encourage students to use English more freely outside the classroom it would be useful to pay attention more to real-life spoken communication already in schools.

It was a common wish that the teaching in schools would change the emphasis towards real life spoken communication as the participants saw it more important than learning grammar rules by heart. In other words, it would be highly important to update the aims and the contents of national curriculum's' to meet the needs of today's multicultural Europe. By doing this, it would be ensured that students develop a proficiency in spoken language comprehension, despite the emphasis being on writing, spoken interaction or understanding. All participants wished there would have been more emphasis at school on the spoken communication. Spoken communication was seen also as the most important way of communication during their exchange period for three of the participants. At the time, the Portuguese participant felt her language skills were not fluent enough for her to participate in all of the conversations that took place. However, the role of student's own attitudes and expectations should not be forgotten here either.

All participants saw the status of English as more strong in Finland than in their home countries. On the other hand, one must remember that the participants were only introduced to the life which has been designed for exchange students; most of the services and surroundings in English. None of the participants mentioned to been introduced to the real life of the local Finns, it seems their views can be interpreted only from the exchange students' point of view. In other words, the students would have to spend a longer period of time in the target country, in order to be able realistically to compare the status of English between the two countries. After all, the present study focuses on exchange students who stay only a semester in the target country. A longer term observation would offer a possible future research topic.

In the end, all of the students agreed that their English skills had improved during their stay in Finland. As the results were based on students own interpretations of their language skills there can be differences on the ways one sees improvement in her/his language skills. In the present study, common features of language improvement were for example being able to have longer conversations, understanding text books and passing exams in English. All of

these features mentioned above describe moments when a student has feelings of success which are also important in the language development process. This offers a possibility for future research where the language development could be researched statistically and with higher amount of participants in order to give more insight on the matter.

The present study gives only suggestive on the matter, as the amount of time and participants were limited. Additionally, the present study concentrates on participants' opinions and feelings on their English skills development and not on actual language tests. However, the study provides inside information from the exchange students' point of view the on aspects they found useful for them and on the contrary which caused difficulties. This type of information can be used to improve language development during student exchange in the future. Therefore, similar researches could be made with a larger amount of participants and with several interviews that would take place in the beginning, middle and at the end of the exchange. Continuous observation could give more detailed information in the effects student exchange has on one's language skills.

In the long term, as one of the main goals of EU is to extend the language capacity of the European citizens, taking a closer look on the differences in countries national education systems and differences between countries in language proficiency could be intriguing and profitable themes for a research.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Theme interview structure**

#### **The general information**

Age, nationality

#### **The learning background**

How did you learn English in school in your home country?

(Emphasis on reading/writing... what age did you start...?)

#### **The role of English in participants' everyday life in their home countries**

Do you use English in your everyday life in your home country?

If yes, how often and in what kind of situations? If not, which could be the reasons for it?

What kind of status English has in your home country in your opinion?

#### **The importance of an English language course in language development in exchange**

Did you choose an English language course in Finland? Why/ why not?

Did your home university encourage you to do so?

#### **The language environment in exchange**

In which situations and with who do you use English during your exchange?

#### **Comparison of Finns and the exchange students' English skills**

What do you think about the English language skills of local Finns if you compare it to the English skills of the local people in your country?

#### **Comparison of English skills with other exchange students**

What kind of/In what level English language skills you feel you have when comparing to the other exchange students coming from different countries? (Better/similar/... in what ways?)

#### **Students' own views on their English language improvement during exchange**

Do you feel your language skills have improved/ changed during your stay in Finland?

If yes, how and which are the reasons in your opinion?