

ENGLISH AS A CORPORATE LANGUAGE:  
Employees' perceptions of business English lingua  
franca

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Englannin kieli on globaalin työelämän peruspilareita ja mahdollistaa työntekijöiden sekä kansainvälisiä rajoja ylittävän että paikallisen työnteon. Nykypäivän integroituvassa maailmassa työelämän edellytyksenä on työntekijän riittävä pätevyys englannin kielessä. Englannin käyttämistä nimenomaisesti työelämäkontekstissa kutsutaan lyhenteellä BELF, business English lingua franca.</p> <p>Tämä maisterin tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään pohjoismaisen osakevälityspankin työntekijöiden käsityksiä englannin kielen käytöstä töissä ja yrityksen virallisena yrityskielenä. Tutkielma tarkastelee työntekijöiden subjektiivisia näkemyksiä ja arvioita pätevyydestään kommunikoida englannin kielellä erilaisissa työtilanteissa sekä kokemuksia englannin kielen käytöstä virallisena yrityskielenä. Se tutkii myös, millainen ilmapiiri yrityksessä vallitsee englannin kielellä kommunikoimisessa työntekijöiden näkökulmasta ja pyrkii selvittämään heidän mahdollisia kielitaidon kehittämiskohteita.</p> <p>Tutkimukseen osallistui viisi työntekijää yrityksen pääkaupunkiseudulla sijaitsevalta Suomen toimistolta. Osallistujien valinnan perusteena oli haastateltavien toimenkuvien eroavaisuudet. Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin yksilö- ja ryhmähaastatteluista. Ne olivat luonteeltaan puolistrukturoituja teemahaastatteluja. Ensin yrityksen konttorissa haastateltiin jokainen viidestä työntekijästä erikseen, minkä jälkeen kaikki työntekijät yhdessä. Analyysi tehtiin pääosin laadullisella temaattisella analyysimetodilla. Yksilöllistä englannin kielen pätevyyttä analysoitiin muun muassa minäpystyvyyden käsitteellä.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat, että kaikki työntekijät ovat näkemystensä perusteella riittävän päteviä kommunikoidaan englanniksi erilaisissa työtilanteissa ja enemmistö erittäin päteviä. Englannin kieli virallisena yrityskielenä ei käytännössä aina toteudu, sillä pohjoismaiset kollegat käyttävät ajoittain ruotsin kieltä sisäisessä kommunikaatioissa, mikä vaikeuttaa ymmärtämistä. Yrityksessä vallitsee rohkaiseva ilmapiiri englanninkieliseen kommunikaatioon. Suurin osa työntekijöistä haluaisi kehittää erityisesti englannin kielen suullisia taitoja.</p>	
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## Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION.....	5
2 ENGLISH AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL LANGUAGE.....	7
2.1 English as a global language.....	7
2.2 English as a corporate language.....	11
2.3 Business communication .....	19
2.3.1 What is communication?.....	19
2.3.2 BELF in internal communication .....	21
2.3.3 BELF in external communication .....	24
3 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE.....	27
3.1 The concept of self-efficacy .....	27
3.2 Means to evaluate self-efficacy .....	30
3.3 Previous case study - "Nice, refreshing, excellent that [it] is our corporate language": a case study on self-efficacy and EFL in a Nordic online trading bank.....	32
4 THE PRESENT STUDY .....	33
4.1 Research questions and participants .....	33
4.2 A qualitative interview.....	34
4.3 Semi-structured interview questions.....	35
4.4. Methods of analysis .....	39
5 ANALYSIS .....	41
5.1 How do employees' competences in BELF manifest in work-related operations?.....	41
5.1.1 Employees' background with the English language .....	41
5.1.2 Confidence using BELF .....	43
5.1.3 Applying BELF in everyday work .....	46
5.2 How do employees perceive English as a corporate language in practice?.....	47
5.2.1 Contextual effects on BELF use.....	47
5.2.2 English vs. Swedish.....	50
5.3 What kind of environment is the workplace to use BELF?.....	52
5.3.1 Encouraging work environment .....	52
5.3.2 Improving BELF skills .....	53
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	56
6.1 Obtained results vs. previous research.....	57
6.2 Scrutinizing the results.....	62
7 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	65
APPENDICES - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	75
Appendix 1 - Individual interview questions.....	75
Appendix 2 – Group interview questions .....	77



## 1 INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, English has become a vital part of business life in terms of communication and competence. It enables employees from around the world to communicate on different levels. There is an increasing amount of research being conducted on BELF use in the international business setting in various parts of the world as a result of doing business across borders. What is more, the current COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift from working at the office to working remotely from home. According to McKinsey Global Institute (2021), in the most developed countries of the world, 20 to 25 percent of the labour force is able to work remotely five times more than pre-COVID-19 which means working from home three to five days per week. Thus, the repercussions on ways to communicate in BELF are, too, inevitable in the long run.

Linguistics, communication studies, psychology and economic sciences intertwine in this thesis. It focuses on the relevant issue of BELF use at work and English as a corporate language in a trading bank operating in the financial sector examining both internal and external communication. BELF, business English lingua franca, was first introduced by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) in their study on communicating in English in the business context. Consequently, more research on BELF has been conducted globally (see Kankaanranta-Planken 2010; Martins 2017; Friginal and Udell 2020) due to English gaining more dominance in integrating world commerce. For the sake of clarity, it is worth mentioning that the term BELF and English are used interchangeably in this thesis since English is mainly discussed in the context of business throughout the thesis.

The trading bank in question is a multinational company, MNC, operating in the financial sector in the Helsinki metropolitan area and globally in the Nordics where the English language plays an increasingly dominant role. The employees of the company use English, or BELF, at the workplace as it operates internationally. Furthermore, English is the company's official corporate language. Thus, it is the language to be used in internal communication between other Nordic countries in which it operates. Using English as a corporate language is a part of an increasing

number of employees in the rapidly globalising business world. As a result, using English as a second language is a daily part of many Finns or people working in Finland. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to uncover how employees perceive this crucial addition to their careers and how it affects their day-to-day work. The analysis of communicating in English at work attempts to unveil the views and opinions of the employees in regards to BELF use.

The data is collected from individual and group interviews conducted at the company's Finnish office. The semi-structured interview questions are mostly qualitative in nature. Hence, the study population of five employees constitute a qualitative case study aiming to uncover intriguing phenomena and causal connections in different data (Baxter and Jack 2008: 544). Furthermore, employees' perceptions on their competence in BELF are examined using Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy and the ILR-scale by Higgs (1984) to assess employees' proficiency in communicating in English in work-related contexts. The interview questions aim to shed light on employees' perceptions on BELF use. The data is examined using a thematic method of analysis addressing the collected data in three prominent themes: employees' BELF competence, the implementation of English as the official corporate language of the company and, lastly, the prevalent atmosphere in the company for employees to communicate in English at work.

Firstly, this thesis investigates employees' perceptions on their BELF use. Individual competence and perceptions in regards to communicating in English at the workplace are analysed by examining employees' subjective assessments on their confidence and proficiency levels in regards to using English at work. Various contexts of BELF use are discussed as well as employees' relationships with English in general. Secondly, English as the official corporate language of the company is discussed in the footprints of, for instance, Louhiala-Salminen (2002), Marschan-Piekkari (2003) and Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). Employees' experiences on how the workforce uses English at work in practice are considered. This thesis discusses the ways English is used to communicate in practice in the workplace as the official corporate language. In addition, how Swedish being the first language of the majority of the whole workforce affects the use of English as the official corporate language is examined. Thirdly, the prevailing atmosphere in the

company to use BELF is explored in addition to employees' potential aspirations to improve their language skills. Lastly, the possibilities for further research based on the obtained results are discussed as maintaining and improving employees' proficiency in BELF is important as Clement and Murugavel (2018) point out.

## **2 ENGLISH AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL LANGUAGE**

English is a dominant world language. English has been studied extensively in its various contexts. The various functions of English are illustrated in the notion of global Englishes by Kachru (1985). What is more, Crystal (2012) explains in more detail how global Englishes are divided. Proceeding from the wider viewpoint of world Englishes to the more specific status of English, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) discuss English as a lingua franca in the business context in the Nordic countries. What comes to business communication in general and using English in the business setting, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) as well as Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) acknowledge BELF as a means of corporate communication. Finally, the notion of corporate language is examined by Louhiala-Salminen (2002), Marschan-Piekkari (2003) and Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). English is present in the lives of over a billion people. Its roles are different with speakers using it as a native, second or foreign language. In the Nordics, English is a part of society in education, business and culture. Next, English as a global language and the common language of business it is today are discussed.

### **2.1 English as a global language**

A language is perceived as a global one when it is used in many countries by a significant number of people. English is spoken as a first language in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, among others. Nevertheless, a mother tongue status for hundreds of millions of people does not make English a global language. As the term suggests, a global language needs to be used as well in countries where it does not have a first language or official status. English must have some communicational purpose in non-native countries in order to be considered as a global language (Crystal 2012: 4).



Neeley (2012) estimates the number of people speaking English globally. There are over 1.75 billion people using English at a useful level, in other words, approximately one fourth of the world's population. Included in this figure are, for instance, the 385 million native speakers living in Australia and the U.S. combined and the billion English speakers in former colonies, such as India, as well as millions who study it as a foreign language. The number of people learning English in the world is estimated to be 1.5 billion and the Nordic countries are represented at the top of the list of countries with the highest proficiency in English among the adult population, Finland at number five with over 65 percent of adults speaking English at a high level (Europe Language Jobs 2018). According to Cogo and Dewey (2012), English is the most common language used in an intercultural context. Martins (2017: 61) identifies specific ways in which English has globalised. English is, for example, evident in the number of English publications. In the 1990s, 75 percent of international social science releases were already published in English, the figure being 90 percent for natural science periodicals. Additionally, the disciplines of physics and chemistry, among others, use English as their main working language.

Kachru (1985) developed a circle model of the functions and roles of global Englishes, which consists of three circles: the expanding, the outer, and the inner circle (see Figure 1). According to the model, the expanding circle refers to countries such as Egypt, Korea, Saudi Arabia and China. These are countries where English is spoken as a foreign language and does not have an official role in society. The outer circle includes, for instance, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Singapore, where English is spoken as a second language. Crystal (2012) explains the role of English in the outer circle in detail. English has some official status in society in these countries, for example, being the official language of academic institutes or some jurisdictions. English can also be the main language used in some parts of countries in the outer circle. The inner circle, as one might deduct, covers countries such as Canada, The United States and Australia as well as New Zealand in which English is spoken by the majority of the population and used in society, having either an official or non-official status (Kachru 1985). It is a common misconception that English is the official language of the United States but the country does not have an official language, even though the majority of the population speaks English.

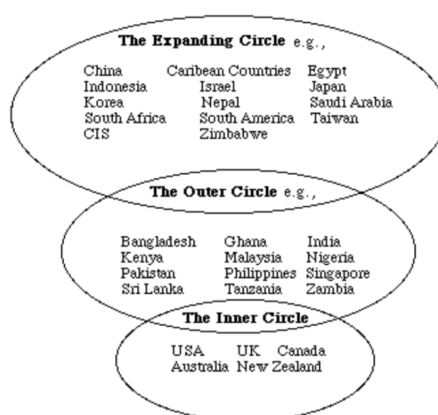


Figure 1. Kachru's circle model of World Englishes. (Kachru 1992: 356)

What is more, Kachru (1988: 3) has divided communication in English into three different types: a native speaker communicating with another native speaker, a native speaker communicating with a non-native speaker, and a non-native speaker communicating with another non-native speaker. When two individuals do not share a common native language, most often the language of communication is English. What is more, there are more non-native speakers of English in the world than there are native speakers and non-native speakers use different varieties of the language in different kinds of contexts at an increasing level Kachru (1988: 3).

Crystal (2012) divides the process of English becoming a global language into two. First, English can be given an official status by the government so that it is used as the official language of communication, for example, in the field of education, law and/or the media. English has such a specific role in over 70 countries including India, Nigeria and Vanuatu. Second, English can be a priority in the foreign-language teaching of a country. This does not require English to have an official status in the country in question. In Finland, English has such a role, which means that, nowadays, as young as 7-year-old first-graders start learning English in primary schools. In 2019, English was chosen as the first foreign language studied by the majority (83%) of all primary school students (Vipunen 2019). Thus, it is studied most extensively out of all foreign languages in Finnish schools which reassures its status as a second language in Finland.

What is more, Crystal (2012) lists other aspects that can affect English being chosen as the primary second language: historical, political, commercial, cultural as well as technological. In Finland, government resources have been devoted into giving people easy access to the English language and learning it. Libraries and bookstores offer English books and newspapers, schools provide quality teaching and courses at different levels by competent teachers. One of the biggest influences of English is the Internet and its free use. As a consequence, English is used at an increasing rate. Thus, services in the private and public sector are important to be offered also in English.

Pinner (2016) explains that English has numerous variations, not only one native or standardized variety that is regarded as proper English and, therefore, English can be defined as a *lingua franca*, a shared common language. The term *lingua franca* derives from traders from various countries using a shared language in the Southeast coast of the Mediterranean from the 15th to the 19th century in order to commerce (Knapp and Meierkord 2002). What comes to the term globalisation, Pinner (2016: 35) points out that it was first introduced in the 1930s by economists after which it was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in the early 1950s. Furthermore, Pinner (2016: 35) discusses the effects of globalisation on English. Firstly, it influences commerce and speeds up the growth of worldwide populations. Secondly, economies of scale relates strongly to globalisation as it describes the demand for everyone to have access to everything, which is largely possible through English. Thirdly, people using English as a *lingua franca* do not necessarily want to be integrated into an English speaking community or in a broader sense, an English speaking culture. English is nowadays commonly used as a means to communicate whether it be joining daily conversations, discussing global issues or agreeing on a business deal. In terms of this thesis, the use of English as a business *lingua franca* is of great importance since it is a medium for employees between Nordic countries to communicate in a shared language to achieve a common goal.

What is then the role of English in the Nordic countries? Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) ponder on the *lingua franca* status of English in the Nordics. In fact, a varied version of Swedish, Scandinavian, was long the *lingua franca* of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Finland. Excluding Finnish, the languages of all the countries

are closely related and can be understood quite well by Scandinavians. Swedish being the second official language of Finland has helped Finns communicate in Swedish or, Scandinavian, to some degree due to its history as a mandatory school subject. Consequently, the influence of English-speaking countries on the Nordic culture was not nearly as strong before as it is in the 2020s. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) explain the influence of English in the Nordics. English has a strong role in communication thanks to pan-Nordic businesses, which means Nordic businesses including other Nordic countries in their operations. These companies often choose English as their corporate language. English is still, however, often regarded as a foreign language in Nordic countries even though many have a rather high competence using it since it is studied extensively in schools. Using a language that is not one's first language increases working requirements and may cause stress among employees. To conclude, the situation of having to adopt a new corporate language emerges particularly in company mergers when two Nordic companies adopt a common language, it often being BELF.

## 2.2 English as a corporate language

Corporate language is a language that companies have chosen to use in order to reach communicative goals. According to Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012: 5), there is not an exact definition for the notion of corporate language but organisations that have operations internationally apply a corporate language in their international communication, whether a corporate language is part of an explicit language strategy or constitutes a rather spontaneous use of a chosen lingua franca for the company, often being English. A company uses this common language to speak with internal and external audiences. Internal audiences generally mean staff while external audiences consist of clients, customers, affiliates, other companies, shareholders, the media and the government (Delin 2017: 660). Nowadays, the role of English in the business context is evident. Especially in cross-national business exchanges it is most often presumed that both of the foreign parties can speak English adequately enough to do business together in an efficient way. This means that English has broadened its role from a foreign language to a frequently used corporate language as well as the language of business and management in a broader sense. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) detail the characteristics of business English. For one, English is at the

same time a linguistic code and a complex system of associations and beliefs related to its usage. What is more, in a multilingual setting, companies need to be concerned about the message translating to every branch properly. To avoid confusion and misinterpretation in internal communication between, for example, Nordic co-workers who are studied in this thesis, it is beneficial and straightforward to choose a common business lingua franca to use at the office.

Referring back to the earlier mentioned circle model of global Englishes by Kachru (1985), business English as a lingua franca, or BELF, consists of communications in all the three circles intertwining different kinds of speakers and settings. BELF was first introduced by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) when studying a merger between a Finnish and Swedish company. Ultimately, the company decided not to use either country's official language but chose to implement English as a corporate language. According to Martins (2017: 62), most business English communication takes place among the expanding circle with its non-native speakers. In particular, BELF is often used in businesses that are striving to make profit (Friginal and Udell 2020: 304).

Martins (2017: 62) explains the role of BELF in detail. Most importantly, the main purpose of BELF is to enable effective and productive communication in multicultural contexts and to achieve mutual understanding. What is more, this form of English does not aim at specific native-speaker standards, which are nowadays considered an outdated perception of language learning and instruction. Rather than focusing on the grammatical correctness and pronunciation, a person's competence in BELF can be assessed based on, for instance, the accuracy of specific business terminology and the exactness of the content. To conclude, BELF users are often competent to participate in business meetings where much area-specific lexicon is used. In time, one can become an expert in communicating in a specific area of business.

Nowadays, employees are often expected to communicate in English at work. Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) study BELF competence in a multinational corporation. On the one hand, BELF has a vital role in an international business institute. English is perceived as something with which one can work efficiently. Without BELF some actions cannot be performed. On the other hand, employees do

not regard English as a native-like version of a country's language, for instance, as the English spoken in Australia, but as an international code to be used in order to communicate successfully with colleagues across borders. It is simply a straightforward and clear tool for getting the work done. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) point out some distinctions of BELF. Its grammatical rules and structures are not restrictive, understanding and conveying ideas being the most important goals. When speakers are familiar with the professional context they are communicating in, BELF functions smoothly.

What is more, BELF has changed the perception of native English speakers who have been perceived as using correct and proper English as Martins (2017: 62) explains. He adds that BELF users can, in fact, reach an advanced knowledge of business English through obtaining various goals. The baseline for communication is that speakers possess different kinds of competences and cultural backgrounds having functional communication as their main object (Martins 2017: 62). In addition, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013) suggest that BELF as a form of English can and should be learnt also by native English speakers in order to communicate better with non-native speakers with whom they are often communicating in global business.

In addition to globalisation, developments in technology affect language use and contexts in many ways. Pathi (2008: 139) acknowledges this issue. Firstly, in today's business communities, communication is produced increasingly using technological tools, such as internal chat forums and online dictionaries. Still, competence in English is very much required by employees. Inevitably, especially topic-specific vocabulary is acquired during work. The workplace, however, is not perceived as a place to learn English but as a place to enhance one's skills. Secondly, English is effective and powerful as a means of communication and some degree of fluency is required at least in global interaction. Thus, lacking proficiency in English may lead to a blockade in partaking in global economics for an employee. Thirdly, English gives access to a set of global skills, such as leadership, global knowledge and economy, which leads to enabling employees to construct and maintain relationships in order to act efficiently in a global economic environment.

Having a corporate language is a fairly recent development in business. It has been a widely discussed topic in integrating commerce for twenty or so years (Louhiala-Salminen 2002). Having a common corporate language is analysed by Marschan-Piekkari (2003: 59). For one, language simplifies communication and enables employees to understand each other when their respective first languages are different. As a result, informal communication between domestic and departments abroad becomes smoother. Furthermore, a common corporate language helps achieve social cohesion on many levels: cultural, geographical and linguistic. Ultimately, all these prepare businesses of all sizes to face global communication and function efficiently. Koester (2004: 7) examines business English in a more linguistic viewpoint. To note, the linguistic register of the financial sector is different from that of, for example, medicine. Moreover, the business lexis emphasises both personal communication such as taking notes and writing memorandums, and interpersonal communication between colleagues. Additionally, the business lexis extends to a number of common business activities, including meetings, presentations and travelling.

What is interesting, Koester (2010: 127) explains how BELF users may accommodate their speech to reflect each other's level of competence. Firstly, an employee speaking BELF often rather formally can decide to downgrade the level of fluency in order to be on the same proficiency level than a colleague or customer to make communication smoother. Secondly, from a sociological viewpoint, a colleague might not want to reveal one's superior skills to a colleague to avoid them feeling inferior as BELF users. What is more, BELF interactions include various communications strategies such as clarification of vague communication and paraphrasing as in using one's own words to formulate others' ideas (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). In addition, the use of potentially incoherent and disruptive idioms and metaphors is characteristically minimal in BELF communication even if a native speaker participated in the conversation (Rogerson-Revell 2008). As a negative aspect regarding BELF use, Lauring and Klitmøller (2015) recognize that employees might sometimes attempt to avoid communicating in their second language.

English often used as a so-called neutral business language. It is note-worthy that when communicating in BELF internally in a company, three different languages can be in contact (Marschan-Piekkari 2003: 60). Thus, using other languages besides the corporate language should be a choice when appropriate for the sake of equality. Approximately 85 percent of operators in the corporate sector use English as their official language, English being the main language of global e-commerce, meaning commercial transactions conducted electronically on the Internet (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). Consequently, English changes the scope of business. Doing business without country borders in the Nordics is a phenomenon this thesis attempts to shed light on. It has been reported that almost 91 percent of employees working in an international company perceive English as being extremely relevant in their performance in work-related situations (Martins 2017: 61).

According to a study on Finnish-based internationally operating businesses by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010), employees of the companies use Finnish fractionally more than English, some reporting that communicating in English is so frequent that it is perceived as more proficient than using Finnish. The results indicate that approximately 70 percent of these interactions take place with non-native speakers of English. What is more, knowing the colleague, their status in the company, as well as their English skills help make communication more fluent. Additionally, knowledge of the context at hand makes it easier to understand one another even if some topic specific words were lost. To conclude, employees feel equal in situations where both speakers are non-natives, which is not the case when communicating with native speakers who are sometimes considered as teachers of the proper way to use English.

An enquiry on the use of English in various Finnish contexts (Leppänen et al. 2009) examines Finnish citizens between the ages of 15 to 79 using English at the workplace. Based on 1500 responses, English is used at the office minimum once a week by less than a half (46%) of the respondents. What is more, men (52%) use English at the workplace more than women (40%) (Leppänen et al. 2009: 105). The most frequent users of English are 25- to 44-year-olds in, for instance, writing emails and discussions. Acquiring information is the most common task performed in English by about one third of the participants at least once a week. In addition,



reading emails (24%) and documents (24%), writing emails (18%), discussing with colleagues (13%) and customers on the phone (12%) are performed in English (Leppänen et al. 2009: 105). If the study were conducted today, the results would likely indicate greater use of English since business operations have globalized drastically in the past ten or so years. Thus, this thesis aims at revealing a more recent role of BELF in the Nordic business context.

Lesk et al. (2017: 270) examine implementing a corporate language. Deciding on a corporate language is part of a company's language policy. This policy can include other linguistic issues manifested in, for instance, the company's mission statement. What is more, a company might not have a distinct language policy but at least has an indirect one that has an effect on language-associated operations. To emphasise, the core of language policies (see Figure 2) lies in the linguistic needs of the workforce, which, in turn, affect language practices. These three concepts have a strong connection in all corporate communication. Additionally, the linguistic needs that are achieved in a company are called *lived linguistic practices* whereas unachieved needs *desired linguistic practices*. All in all, in order for a business to achieve an organised language policy, an extensive analysis to expose actual language needs should be conducted. Thus, studies on corporate language use are useful in determining prevailing communicative conditions in companies.

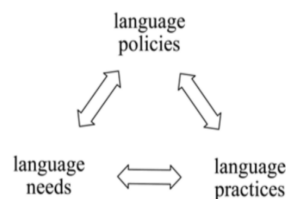


Figure 2. The intertwining relationship of language policies, practices and needs.  
(Lesk et al. 2017: 270)

Many large multinational companies want to implement BELF into their corporate communication and policies. Neeley (2012) gives examples of such companies and the reasoning for their decisions. The French car manufacturer Renault and the European plane manufacturer Airbus have adopted the use of English as their corporate language. The purpose of using English as a common language is, first and

foremost, to give employees who do not share a first language an opportunity to communicate in an operative sense and to enhance performance in processes related to different geographical areas. In another point of view, the European Union regulates the operations of European companies with commandments and directives, which are typically documented in English. Member states apply these regulations into their national legislations in their official language(s). For instance, a set of regulations for new companies, MiFID II, Markets in Financial Instruments Directive II (Finanssivalvonta 2019), aims at protecting the positions of investors and monitoring financial markets by making costs more transparent and enhancing documentation of transactions. Finnish equivalents for some legislative expressions used in official documenting do not yet exist. Consequently, English terms are at first adopted into the Finnish financial vocabulary.

Thus far, having only one corporate language has been discussed. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) study the disadvantages and benefits of having multiple corporate languages. A company decided to use four different languages at the workplace, which was not positively received among employees. The goal was to create equality among employees from different linguistic backgrounds but the end result was rather unclear. The situations in which a particular language was to be used were ambiguous and inconsistent. In addition, the reason for having multiple corporate languages was unclear. English, still, had a dominant role compared to the other corporate languages especially at the company headquarters. In contrast, companies that adopted the use of only one corporate language, BELF, were perceived fair and equal since many of the employees were non-native English speakers. Besides, not having a native speaker among them created a relaxed atmosphere.

Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012) point out that companies need to take into account the possibility of having to use a common foreign language even if the company mainly served domestic customers and staff shared a first language. Having to interact with potential international business affiliates or future colleagues might, however, prove difficult without BELF. In addition, BELF enables smoother expanding of operations abroad if and when necessary. Neeley (2012) exemplifies the aforementioned situation of using English as a corporate language even if the

majority of the employees shared a first language. A case in point is the Japanese company Rakuten, which is Japan's largest online marketplace. Its CEO insisted that the company started communicating only in English even though the workforce was speaking mainly Japanese. This decision was heavily criticised for being foolish and unnecessary. Today, the company is fruitful and the strategic move has proved to be a correct one. Three out of six senior executives of the organisation are not Japanese, let alone speak the language. The company can function globally with the English language being an enabler rather than Japanese being a barrier to performance and success.

In relation to the analysis of this thesis, Neeley (2012) examines problematic issues of having English as an official corporate language. It is not by any means a straightforward concept. For one, some employees are more capable of learning to use English as a tool for business communication than others who might fear that their English is not on a sufficient level or compare themselves to colleagues' skills. This can lead to the weakening of group dynamics along with lower satisfaction towards the work itself and the atmosphere at the office. What is more, national pride might even play a role. In the Finnish context, this is unlikely to be a significant issue since the country is small and needs the collaboration of other countries and decision makers in order to thrive economically and be on the world map, so to speak.

Kankaanranta et al. (2018: 12) divide English as a corporate language to front stage corporate language and back stage corporate language. The back stage refers to the use of corporate English as *a working language* and is always in connection to the situations it is used. The speakers' individual BELF competence is emphasized in back stage English while professional and cultural backgrounds as well as speakers' communicative skills are mirrored in this type of working language. This form of English use relates to company-internal communication as in among the workforce and is further discussed in section 2.2. The front stage regards English as an official language, which is affected by the rules of more native-like English and the regulations set up by the management of the company. The more standard-like English communication in the front stage is vital to corporate image as it communicates to, for example, shareholders that the company is a prominent operator in the field in question. In other words, employees' competence in English

gives the company more value. Front stage corporate English is used in public communication on, for instance, company websites, media releases and on corporate intranets (Kankaanranta et al. 2018: 13). This type of language use relates to company external communication, which is discussed in more detail in section 2.3.

## 2.3 Business communication

Communication has become intercultural due to the integrating world. Thus, more and more people use English in communication in various domains of life. The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in late 2019 and is still powerful in spring 2021, has made people around the world understand the importance of communication and being able to express oneself to others.

### 2.3.1 What is communication?

Viswanathan (2010) defines communication simply as creating and transferring meanings. Moreover, Moll (2012: 4) explains that communication always consists of some form of source, message and recipient and that at least two entities are always involved in the communication process, whether they are individuals, classes of students, various organisations, countries or the parliament. Viswanathan (2010) discusses communication in the context of business. Communication has a particularly important role in the business setting as it may often correlate to whether a particular function has been done successfully or whether it is perceived as insufficient or a failure. What is more, in the digital work community, business communication is seen as such a significant part of an employee's competence that in many universities courses dedicated to business communication are nowadays highly recommended or even mandatory. Delin (2017: 657) defines business communication as a function that gives a framework to a company to coordinate internally and externally in an effective way to create and maintain a certain reputation of a company as well as reflecting its image to possible stakeholders. Mautner and Rainer (2016: 41) emphasise the importance of language and business communication. Written as well as spoken language must be perceived as an integral part of any kind of work performed in a business setting. In particular, written communication has grown in the past decade for many reasons. Firstly, there is an

increasing interest to document knowledge in new fashions. Secondly, the desire to use technology in communication as a method of standardising various work tasks, processes as well as results is prevailing. Thirdly, Europeanization, the integration of Europe, creates demand for written communication.

In order for a company to operate efficiently, communication needs to be fluent. Moll (2012: 105) discusses what constitutes successful business communication. Employees communicate on many levels, not only talking business but, using body language in making decisions. Business contexts are constantly changing their forms. At the same time, colleagues become aware of each other's cultural expectations, which are manifested in their communicative behaviour and learn to act accordingly in those situations. Dignen and McMaster (2016) divide the integral skills of BELF communication to listening, speaking, taking part in meetings, speaking on the phone and constructing a business network using English, among others. They explain that, on the one hand, listening is a way to be persuasive and make others listen. Speaking, on the other hand, enables one to communicate in an optimal and desired way. Additionally, writing is an essential part of work routines and it is one key criterion in doing good business. Talking on the phone in a foreign language can be stressful to some but is nowadays a frequent task for many employees. Moreover, working in international teams can have its challenges but is an integral part of building and maintaining social networks at the workplace.

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, millions of workers have had to quickly adapt to new methods of working, which has affected how employees work and communicate with each other. According to an electronic survey including the member states of the European Union by Eurofound (2020: 31), numerous companies have resorted to work from home, or WFH, operations after the forced lockdown of offices. The results indicate that 48 percent of employees have worked from home during the pandemic at least partly, while 34 percent have kept their office solely at home. According to Kniffin et al. (2021: 65), many employees have started to WFH for the first time during the pandemic and, therefore, new ways of communicating with colleagues online using digital platforms, such as Microsoft Teams meetings, have been introduced to employees. In today's society, a business does not have to be a large one for it to have international operations thanks to

digitalisation and collaboration across borders. Mehra (2014) discusses communication as a major asset in achieving an effectively functioning business whether it is a small, middle-sized or large company. First, communication is critical in the sense that a large amount of information and data streams through different departments to individual employees reaching various offices, domestically and overseas. Second, without proper communication skills, a majority of the information could not be analysed and used for personal and, ultimately, company benefit.

Another method of communication is market, or external, communication which Mautner and Rainer (2016: 45) examine. Generally, it is mainly directed to an outside audience of the firm in marketing strategies and other actions. On the one hand, it has a persuasive role in reaching potential customers and competitors in addition to maintaining relationships with, for instance, suppliers. On the other hand, in order for a company to maintain a positive prestige in society, public relations are used to perform strategic actions targeted to the public. Koester (2004: 85) points out that in external company-to-customer communication customers have more power than businesses themselves in communicative relationships due to the fact that customers can decide whether to use the provided services of a company or turn to another operator. Consequently, the communication tends to be rather positive on the company's end incorporating positive politeness, which can mean showing that the company and customer have things in common (Koester 2004: 85). Internal and external communications are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.3.2 BELF in internal communication

Internal communication in English is part of everyday business life for a growing number of employees. In global terms, Finnish is spoken by a fraction of people in comparison to many languages of the world, such as Chinese, Spanish, English, Arabic and Russian with hundreds of millions of speakers. In today's internationally operating companies, the chances of Finnish being the official corporate language are becoming more unlikely year by year. As in many other areas of life, the small players need to adapt to play by the rules of the big ones. In more cases than not, this means Finnish-speaking employees having to communicate in English at the office

in order to be an active part of the community. Whether this aspect of global business is egalitarian or not, can be endlessly debated.

Gobal (2009: 7) classifies business communication in different ways. For one, it can be regarded as something that relates to all communication forms in one company or between two or more. In a broader sense, it can be divided into internal and external communication. In more detail, internal communication occurs mainly inside a firm and is used in order to plan and implement strategies with detailed plans. This type of communication can strengthen employees' motivation and ability to perform.

Koester (2004: 82) discusses company-internal communication. On the one hand, employees attempt to create a positive atmosphere and communicate interest in what others are saying which is evident in their language use at the workplace. On the other hand, employees' roles and status in a company have an effect on how communication is manifested, for example, a person in a superior position giving orders and instructions to subordinates affects language use.

English has a predominant role in business as it does in numerous other sectors.

Vuorela (2008) presents the English skills needed in these multicultural business environments. Firstly, getting used to co-workers' way of using BELF and listening to one another actively can reduce ambivalence, for example, in formal business meetings as well as chit-chatting in the mailing room while filling up the empty paper tray in the copying machine. Secondly, using humour to help resolve conflicts is an important skill in a multi-linguistic environment. Thirdly, phatic communication, more commonly known as small talk, is used to maintain relationships at work. Small talk focuses on expressing feelings and moods as it can be wishing a co-worker a good morning, expressing understanding to one's opinions or being polite to one another (Malinowski 1923). Holmes and Stubbe (2015) examine the functions of small talk in more detail. It is used to fill silent moments and in boundary-marking communication, as in the beginnings and endings of a discussion. In other words, it is easier to enter and exit a conversation politely using small talk. In addition, it is used to lighten stiff and heavy work-related discussion, for example, during a long workshop.

Janet Holmes (2006) discusses the role of humour at the workplace and how it affects building and maintaining social relationships. On the one hand, everyone at the workplace, regardless of gender, shares amusing stories and tells jokes. The nature of these humorous communications is affected by business culture, particularly the tone of the community. Often humorous situations at the workplace occur in informal interactions. On the other hand, humour is used to alleviate tense situations and relationships as well as constructing gender identities. In particular, female leaders use humour to integrate gender identities with the high demands of professional identities. Mikkola (2020) ponders on the effects of supportive communication. It creates an encouraging atmosphere and, therefore, helps maintain work-place relationships. Listening to colleagues' problems, giving emotional support in stressful situations and offering informational assistance to provide control in uncertain situations are ways to communicate support. Additionally, supportive communication can improve the outcomes of work-related tasks and positively affect motivation, commitment and satisfaction at work. Additionally, communicating correct information as well as sharing open and honest opinions is important in maintaining operative relationships (Mikkola and Nykänen 2020).

The significance of communication can be substantial to a business. Smith and Mounter (2005) underline that if a business aims at thriving or, at least, surviving in the competitive and integrating world of commerce, effective internal communication is a mandatory asset. Fortunately, the Finnish education system enables future employees to study English at an early age, from the first grade onwards. The selection of English courses ranging from upper secondary school courses to university level studies is extensive. Thus, the Finnish workforce is by and large prepared to operate internationally in terms of competence in English.

The European financial service group Nordea serves as an example company using internal and external business communication. Being also a Nordic bank, it can be somewhat assimilated to the company under examination in this thesis. They both are financial sector operators as a result of company mergers. Louhiala-Salminen (2002) discusses the formation of Nordea and how a company merger affected its corporate language. Nordea was formed after the Finnish Merita bank merged with the Swedish Nordbanken. After this, Swedish language courses were offered to



employees in order to improve communication in the international community in order for the most skilled employees to be placed in organisational positions most beneficial to Nordea. After purchasing more banks from Norway and Denmark, Nordea started to use English as its corporate language. Nowadays, Nordea is a listed company being one of the largest banks in Europe and leading the Nordic market with its over 9 million consumer customers (Nordea 2021).

### 2.3.3 BELF in external communication

The department of internal communication often has the responsibility of executing a common corporate language in a company. Besides internal communication, this business lingua franca is often used in external communication to customers, other companies or, for instance, stakeholders. The aims of external communication can range from maintaining public relations, reaching target markets, informing of a profit warning, probing future changes and developments in industries or society, as well as, maintaining company brand.

One form of external communication is business-to-business, or B2B, communication. This means the interaction between two companies, often being a marketing or sales relationship. Today, the B2B communication setting is more international than ever (Koponen et al. 2019: 238). Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017: 19) analyse B2B communication in detail. The quality of communication is affected by how the customer, as in another company, perceives the value they are receiving in the transaction. When the perceived value is high, so is the value of the communication process. Consequently, the more information is received in effective communication, the better is the communicative quality, equalling to customer loyalty. Many Finnish publicly traded companies use English in their external communication. External communication is explicit as it is accessible to the outside public. As stated earlier, there are various functions of external public relations. Illustrations of these functions are presented next.

One method of communication through which a company reaches a wider public is its corporate social responsibility report, the CSR. It is beneficial for businesses to report on their sustainability and stakeholders often demand such action in order to

be well informed of a business's environmental or social activities (Conaway and Laasch 2012: 89). The report includes both positive and negative effects the company has daily on society, economics and the environment. Let us examine Nordea's sustainability report (Nordea Sustainability Report 2019, see Figure 3 and Table 1) as an example. Approximately half of Nordea's workforce is between 30 and 50 years of age. As an international corporation, Nordea has an extensive range of languages spoken by employees. Still, English is not an official language of the main countries Nordea operates in, including Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia, but it uses English as one of its languages in external communication. The sustainability report is available only in English. Thus, it can reach a large audience at once. In general, a sustainability report is targeted at a wider audience, as in private customers, not only stakeholders or competitors.

Conaway and Laasch (2012: 102) point out that once a company's reporting on sustainability has become standardised, it communicates actual commitment to sustainability in its operations to shareholders who can then objectively measure how the company is performing. The goal of a sustainability report is to also acquire international investors whose interest towards the company can increase its market value. Extracts of Nordea's sustainability report of 2019 are introduced next as an illustration of its external communication.

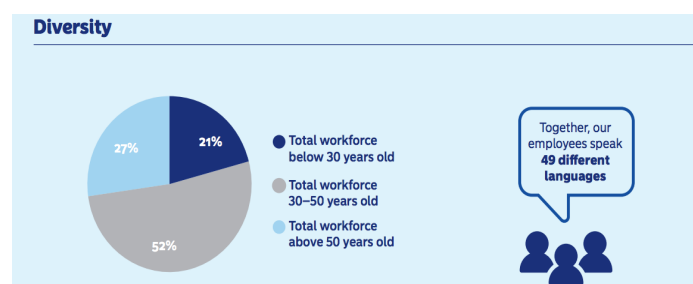


Figure 3. Demographics of Nordea's workforce. (Nordea Sustainability Report 2019: 25)

Table 1. Nordea's sustainability targets. (Nordea Sustainability Report 2019: 9)

**Sustainability targets**

As part of our future direction, the Principles for Responsible Banking will be our main guiding framework. Sustainable finance will enable Nordea to be a strong bank and a positive contributor in society. A selection of our targets for 2020 and follow-up on our targets for 2019 are presented below.

**Targets 2020**

Perform an impact analysis in accordance with the Principles for Responsible Banking.	Significantly increase AuM in Sustainable Selection.	Decide on a climate strategy for the fund offering.	Develop and launch targeted sustainability training to establish stronger local expertise amongst advisors.
Develop ESG risk data in the Group, taking account of industry data availability and the materiality of lending portfolios.	Analyse climate risk in the large corporate lending portfolio as part of the UNEP FUC TCFD Phase 2 Banking Pilot.	Identify and assess climate risk exposure in the mortgage portfolio.	Launch a Position Statement on Tax and sector guidelines for the Extractive Industries and for Agriculture.
For each recruitment to leadership positions, there should be at least one female and one male candidate shortlisted.	Introduce diversity and inclusion unconscious bias trainings for people leaders.	Decrease air travel for internal meetings with 30% compared to 2019.	Revise the company car policy to reduce our carbon footprint.

Many of Nordea's targets of sustainability relate to climate issues. They aim at reducing the company's carbon footprint by changing the car policy of employees as well as determining a climate friendly strategy for the offerings of funds. This means launching a fund in order for the company to raise capital for securities purchasing. What is more, diversity is an issue taken into account. In higher position recruitments, at least one female and one male candidate have to be chosen in the next phase of recruitment.

Social media is nowadays an important channel of marketing. There were almost 4.14 billion global social media users for company communication to target in 2020 and in the beginning of 2021, the figure had increased to 4.2 billion (Finances Online 2021). These figures indicate the number of people in the world using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. Therefore, social media reaches customers more efficiently than many other communicative channels. English has an apparent role in social media marketing. Using English helps reach a bigger target market online at once, especially if the business operates internationally (Tuten and Solomon 2015). Many Finnish companies operating only domestically, however, have decided on a multilingual strategy using both Finnish and English in

social media marketing since it is perceived as trendy. Thus, it enhances the company brand. In addition, the number of non-Finnish speaking individuals in Finland is increasing which means that using English is vital in reaching more potential customers.

To sum up, this thesis examines how BELF is used in practice as the official corporate language of the trading bank in question. Furthermore, it discusses how and in what contexts employees use BELF in both internal and external communication. Finally, it considers the workplace as an environment to use BELF.

### **3 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE**

Included in the frame of reference of this thesis is the notion of self-efficacy, which functions as the method for self-assessment in the interviews conducted. Self-efficacy was first introduced by Albert Bandura (1977) and is discussed next in detail.

#### 3.1 The concept of self-efficacy

*“Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments”*

Bandura (1977: 191).

Albert Bandura began using the term self-efficacy in his theory of social learning (1977). According to the theory, self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief in his/her ability to carry out a task at a certain level (Bandura 1994: 74). It can also refer to an individual’s perception of their capability to perform a task to reach a certain objective (Uitto et al. 2011: 169). Bandura (2006) points out key issues relating to self-efficacy. Individuals cannot be proficient in everything they do since humans are not omniscient and do not have the knowledge and means to accomplish everything at a high level. As an example, a person can have extremely effective managerial talents in an organisation but lack the skills to prepare a three-course dinner. In other

words, the system of self-efficacy beliefs consists of various sets of self-beliefs that relate to certain spheres of functioning, for instance, reading the annual report of a company in English. Thus, it is not a universal entity that covers all actions.

According to Lent and Fouad (2011: 74), humans have a tendency to be motivated and interested in performing various school or work-related tasks and actions when they believe they have the capabilities to perform them well, in other words, have the necessary abilities to achieve the desired outcome.

Bandura (1994) explains that an efficacious perception of one self has many benefits as it can prevent depression, reduce stress as well as help produce accomplishments. In contrast, not having a strong sense of efficacy can result in low-level stress management. Individual self-efficacy has also shaped the development of entrepreneurial intentions, actions and behaviour (Bandura 1994: 76). What is more, efficacy beliefs act as a determinant of how an individual thinks as Bandura (2006) explains. Firstly, according to the level of self-efficacy one has, one can act optimistically or pessimistically, for instance. Secondly, being holistic in nature, self-efficacy can even determine the paths people take in their lives as in what challenges they embark upon and which ones they disregard. Thirdly, self-efficacy affects people's emotional wellbeing and stress management and has an influential role in human development as a whole.

Self-efficacy has various roles in a person's life depending on the circumstances in which one is at a particular moment. Hacket (1995: 232) ponders on the decisions made as adults. Choosing the field one wants to work in and building a career are some of the most important aspects of an adult's life, which are heavily influenced by self-efficacy. On the one hand, one uses a significant amount of time working. Besides sleeping, no other activity takes one's time as much as it does. On the other hand, the nature of work has an impact on one's way of living as well as future choices. Nowadays, there is much discussion on people's wellbeing and mental health, to which the work environment with its tasks, colleagues and management, is linked. To conclude, one needs to enjoy oneself to a certain extent while working.

According to Hacket (1995: 234), interests and occupational self-efficacy are often intertwined, which is unsurprising since people tend to aim at doing what they enjoy

in life. She points out that some are able to work in a more enjoyable way than others depending on the field or particular tasks carried out. Working, however, is not perceived only as something one needs to always be fond of but rather a mandatory part of life. Additionally, the more one perceives oneself to be capable of performing a particular work-related task, for example, writing a formal email to the staff in English, the stronger one's self-efficacy beliefs are.

Past experiences have a role in strengthening occupational interest and, therefore, self-efficacy. Hacket (1995: 245) analyses success in performing work-related tasks. Success in career pursuits can enhance self-efficacy whereas failing in a task can weaken it as interest towards similar assignments lowers. What is more, positive feelings towards accomplishments and encouraging feedback from colleagues or management can have an unforeseen effect on an employee's sense of self. Additionally, self-efficacy has been found to affect realistic self-appraisal skills in regards to work. To exemplify, an employee who is uncertain of one's ability to carry out a group discussion in English can, in fact, be relatively proficient in communicating in the language but assesses oneself unrealistically as only a moderate speaker. Thus, this factor can affect studies of assessing employees' work skills. It is, however, important to note that the purpose of this thesis is not to assess employees' actual skills or whether one's perception of one's abilities correlates to their actual performance. The aim is to uncover how employees perceive their skills, in other words, what their levels of self-efficacy are at that moment.

Reliability on self-efficacy perceptions varies. Schunk (1991) remarks that beliefs on self-efficacy evaluate future success more reliably compared to assessing past achievements. In regards to linguistic self-efficacy, linguistic self-confidence has been introduced to analyse language acquisition (Dörnyei 2005). According to him, it is a socially defined notion relating to one's abilities to communicate as well as identify with a second or foreign language community, in this thesis being the workplace. In addition, various self-concepts have emerged in regards to language acquisition, one of them being language-specific, for example, English learning self-concept (Mercer 2011) which is further divided into specific domains of language skills, for instance, the self-concept of writing in English. In this study, self-efficacy related to communicating in English, or BELF, is divided into the domains of

speaking, listening, writing and understanding. As Mills (2014: 11) explains, self-concepts differ from self-efficacy beliefs in that they refer to individuals' feelings towards performing a task, for example, how one feels when speaking in English. Self-efficacy, in turn, tries to uncover individuals' perceptions of how confident they are in carrying out a task, as in how competent one perceives oneself to be in speaking English.

Hsieh and Kang (2010) examine self-efficacy beliefs among ninth-graders in Korea. Self-efficacy is a major forecaster of foreign language achievement. According to the various tests and analyses they conducted, stronger self-efficacy in performing assignments in English lead to better scores in the tests. In general, the way to understand the concept of self-efficacy is to also understand what it does not measure. According to Hsieh and Kang (2010), a common misconception is that self-efficacy is similar to self-esteem, a personality trait of some sort. Self-efficacy relates to beliefs about personal capabilities while self-esteem is related to feelings of self-worth in general (Bandura 2006). Self-efficacy is not a stable and an unchanging human trait but always context-based and can vary much when assessed in different situations (Hsieh and Kang 2010). It is, therefore, constructed of beliefs related to performing a specific task and can be affected by other people and, for example, contextual factors.

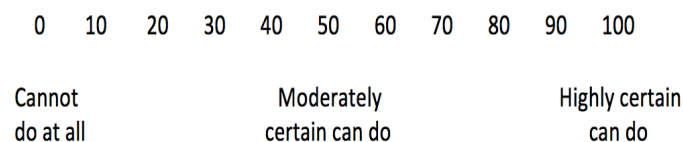
### 3.2 Means to evaluate self-efficacy

Sherer et al. (1982) characterise scales as a means to measure self-efficacy. Scales are perceived as problematic as they can be restrictive in nature, not being straightforward enough to explain the issue at hand. Furthermore, scales can be formed using terms that are separated from their context. The measured entity and the contextual demands can be, therefore, left quite ambiguous. To sum up, the method to measure self-efficacy must be designed taking into account the area of functioning in question, in this thesis being employees' competence in English.

What is more, the items that are evaluated using self-efficacy methods need to reflect the proper constructs. Bandura (2006) explains what kind of questions should be used in data collection. Firstly, all the data gathered from the examinees must be

more or less subjective. In an interview or a questionnaire attempting to uncover an individual's self-efficacy towards a specific task, the questions should be formed using verbs of capability, such as *can* or *be able to*, not verbs that denote intention, as in *will* or *intend to do*. Secondly, the notion of self-efficacy needs to be separated from other notions, as it is a concept of one's capability. It differs from, for example, outcome expectancies, which are estimates of what might be the outcomes of a specific task performed. Therefore, it is important to know what one aims to discover through research. Additionally, the scales used need to be targeted at elements that have an actual impact on the actions under the microscope in order to present a predictive and reliable relation between the performances in question and examinees' perceptions of themselves.

Some methods to assess self-efficacy have become a norm. As Bandura (2006: 313) remarks, one common method is presenting examinees with various assignments or tasks of different standards. After this, the participants are asked to assess and rate their ability to carry out such a task. The assessment can be done without the interviewees actually performing the task at hand as is done in this thesis. Often, a 100-point scale (see Graph 1) is used to assess these beliefs with 10-unit ranges - 0 indicating that the employee feels unable to perform the action in question, 50 equalling to moderate competence in performance, and 100 referring to a high belief in accomplishment. There is, however, a 0-10 scale in use as well which has the same structure and descriptive elements as Bandura (2006: 313) points out. If the scale does not have more than a few intervals in it, the scale might indicate distorted results due to the tendency of humans choosing an intermediate figure instead of either a low or a high one (Bandura (2006: 313)). Thus, the data gathered is not differentiating enough to carry out viable analysis. languages.



Graph 1. The 100-point scale assessing self-efficacy (Bandura 2006: 313).



### 3.3 Previous case study - "Nice, refreshing, excellent that [it] is our corporate language": a case study on self-efficacy and EFL in a Nordic online trading bank

A case study was conducted at the same Nordic trading bank (Oksaharju 2017) that is under examination in this thesis. The study strived to analyse employees' self-efficacy in using BELF at work and the frequency and purpose for its use. The survey included multiple-choice questions and one open question. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) presented earlier functioned as the underlying theory for self-assessment and his proposed 100-point assessment scale was applied to a question related to employees' level of confidence using English at work. The employees taking part in the survey were 20- to 49-year-olds, majority of who had Finnish as their first language.

The results reveal that English is perceived as a positive part of work and enabling a chance for development regarding BELF use. What is more, the negative aspect of BELF is using specific finance vocabulary. The confidence level of BELF is the highest (93) in the oldest age group (40-49 years) and the lowest (74) among the youngest age group (20-29 years). Evidently, English has a clear presence at the bank since almost 90 percent of the respondents use English daily. All respondents use English in writing e-mails and making phone calls. Using English in meetings (82%), writing documents (79%), chitchatting with a customer or another colleague (71%) are the main contexts BELF is used. Additionally, employees communicate in English to co-workers in other Nordic countries where the bank operates. The least common situations English is used are different kinds of events, giving presentations and designing various campaigns.

The open question of the questionnaire gives much insight on employees' perceptions on English use. Many enjoy the role of English perceiving it as a positive and refreshing part of work (see Example 1). More negative thoughts are also mentioned (see Example 2).

Example 1. Employees' positive perceptions of BELF use (Oksaharju 2017: 11).

- (1) Can handle everything in English. No problem at all.
- (2) It's natural part of my everyday work so I enjoy using English.
- (3) Nice, refreshing, excellent that is our corporate language
- (4) Confident, easy. I have lived 6 months in the United States.

Example 2. Employees' less positive perceptions on BELF use (Oksaharju 2017: 11).

- (1) En löydä oikeita sanoja oikeaan aikaan
- (1) 'I can't find the right words at the right time'
- (2) Awkward

## 4 THE PRESENT STUDY

This thesis aims at uncovering how employees of a Nordic trading bank perceive themselves as BELF users, BELF use at work in general and English as the official corporate language. To analyse these perceptions, qualitative and thematic methods of analysis are applied to the data gathered from individual and group interviews conducted in the Helsinki metropolitan area in February 2017. Interviewing is the most common method to collect data in qualitative research (Cassell 2005: 167). Next, the research questions, participating employees, conducted interviews and methods of analysis are discussed in more detail.

### 4.1 Research questions and participants

The research questions of this study address BELF use in a trading bank that operates in the Nordics. As previously mentioned, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) first introduced the notion of BELF in their study of English as a corporate language in a company merger. Now, it is interesting to examine how a more recent company merger in the bank under investigation has affected the company's utilization of BELF according to employees' perceptions. The research questions are the following:

1. How do employees' competences in BELF manifest at work?
2. How do employees perceive BELF as a corporate language in practice?
3. What kind of environment is the workplace to use BELF?

The background assumptions of this thesis are, first, that all the employees perceive themselves as rather competent and proficient enough in English to manage their work, some having an even higher level of proficiency. Second, the use of English as the corporate language is expected to be rather flexible and lesser than using employees' native languages in practice. Third, the atmosphere is expected to be neutral in using BELF. The interviewees are employees of the bank in question including both men and women of different ages, working in different departments and positions in the organisation with various linguistic and educational backgrounds. All the participants already know each other to a various extent, which potentially aids the group interview to run rather smoothly. Next, the interview questions and means used to measure self-efficacy in this study are presented.

#### 4.2 A qualitative interview

An interview can be defined, according to Maccoby and Maccoby (1954: 449), as “a face-to-face verbal exchange, in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons”. Mayo emphasizes (1933: 65) that the interviewer should follow specific guidelines while interviewing: give your whole attention to the interviewee, do not talk but listen, never argue or give advice, make sure you understand the interviewee correctly, and finally, remind that everything said is considered confidential.

A qualitative interview was chosen as the method of data collection for this study. It is nowadays a major means to reliably gather information for academic studies, particularly in the human sciences, which have a long history in humans acquiring knowledge about other people and the surrounding world (Brinkmann 2013). Additionally, as the issue studied in this thesis is employees' perceptions of BELF use at work, qualitative interview questions are suitable in attaining data needed for multidimensional and reliable analysis. Alsaawi (2014: 152) points out that when choosing interviews as the method of data collection, a small number of interviews is usually conducted.

As King et al. (2018: 45) point out, confidentiality is of key importance while conducting an interview ethically. The interviewees identifying information are to be removed and the data kept only in the hands of the researcher. The information needs to be managed discreetly using some form of separating personal data, for example, implementing numbering or pseudonyms. In this thesis, the five interviewees are coded as E1, as in employee 1, E2, E3, E4, and E5, on the basis of the order in which the individual interviews were conducted. Consequently, anonymity is secured as the identities of the participants remain undisclosed.

All the interviews were recorded with two recorders in case one of them would not have functioned properly or had been misplaced. First, each employee was interviewed individually at the company's office starting from E1 and finishing with E5, after which all of the five employees were interviewed together in a group interview. The interviews lasted between 13 to 47 minutes, depending on how much discussion the questions aroused (see Table 2). After the interviews were conducted, the data was uploaded and saved properly. Following the transcription of all the interviews, the data was analyzed according to the research questions. The interviews conducted are confidential following the principles of research ethics. The identities of the employees and the company in question remain undisclosed.

Table 2. The date and length of the conducted interviews.

DATE	15/2/2017	15/2/2017	15/2/2017	15/2/2017	15/2/2017	15/2/2017
INTERVIEWEE	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	Group
DURATION (min.)	29	26	13	47	18	42

#### 4.3 Semi-structured interview questions

Before conducting the interview, the researcher must be given permission by the participants to interview them. This can be either a verbal or written consent. Studies involving humans as subjects require voluntary consent as Gregory (2003: 35) emphasises, and continues that without a consent, the research is not adequately ethical. Thus, the research should not be pursued at all, without extremely compulsive reasoning.

This mainly qualitative study incorporates a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are adjustable according to the context and can include open-ended as well as theoretical questions (Galletta 2013: 45). In this thesis, more theoretical questions were applied in the individual interviews, which also included quantitative questions in addition to the majority of qualitative questions. These semi-structured interviews consisted of both questions that had been formed beforehand and impromptu discussions that arose during the interviews. These types of questions are used to enable the interviewer to add or rephrase questions in the moment if a certain issue proves to be a fruitful one to be discussed in more detail or if a completely new idea emerges (Galletta 2013: 75). Owing to the participants, the group interview, in particular, raised unforeseen and interesting phenomena relating to BELF use, which are presented in the next chapter. In addition, a qualitative semi-structured interview gives the researcher the possibility to study the interviewee's subjective perceptions and detailed reviews on functions (Flick 2009). In addition, it enables the researcher to weigh in on the participant's reality and past experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006: 77). The majority of the questions were open-ended. This means that the questions were structured so that they could not be answered merely in a few words. The interviewees were able to answer questions in Finnish as elaborately as they wished.

The individual interviews were divided into four themes based on the theoretical background of this study as well as the proposed research questions. These interview themes would later serve as a basis to forming the themes for thematic analysis discussed in detail in section 4.4. The themes of the individual interviews were employee demographics, English and education, assessing competence in English, and English at work and leisure time (see Appendix 1). In more detail, the interview questions concerned each employee's background regarding their education, work career and possible time spent abroad in addition to self-assessment of English skills and discussion on the role of English in leisure and in the context of work. The questions were to familiarize the employee with the many roles of English in one's life and one's competence using English, particularly, in work-related contexts.

The first individual interview questions concerned the demographics of the interviewee. The study of demographics relates to participants' social entities

regarding various attributes (McCain et al. 1983: 627). In this study, the attributes are gender, age, job title, mother tongue and relationship to English (a first, second or foreign language). As this thesis is mainly a qualitative one in nature and the sample is composed of five participants, extensive observations regarding the whole workforce of the bank in question cannot be concluded on the basis of demographics but they potentially give interesting insights on BELF use among employees with different backgrounds and in various contexts and how English as the corporate language is viewed.

Self-efficacy, as Bandura (1994) defines it, is a person's belief in individual capability to perform a certain task at a certain level. As stated before, the purpose of this thesis is to find out how employees perceive their individual skills regarding work-related communication using BELF. These perceptions determine employees' self-efficacy. As Bandura (2006) highlights, all the gathered data needs to be as subjective as possible. In the individual and group interviews carried out for this study attempting to uncover individual's self-efficacy using BELF, the questions were structured using as neutral language as possible. For instance, a question investigating feedback employees' have received regarding BELF use was formed as *Millaista palautetta olet saanut englannin kielen käytöstä työelämässä? (jos olet)*, (transl.) *What kind of feedback have you received on using English in work life? (if you have)*. The question did not include vocabulary denoting positive or negative feedback but neutral wording.

The individual interviews consisted mainly of qualitative questions, but also some quantitative questions to which the Finnish school grading, scales measuring self-efficacy and competence are applied. As the gathered data aims to be as reliable as possible by presenting a predictive and reliable relation between the examinees' perceptions and their performance, scales applied to the quantitative questions must be targeted at elements that affect the task at hand, in this case using BELF at work (Bandura 2006). The quantitative questions of this study are further discussed next.

Question 8 in the individual interview asked for the interviewees to assess their English language skills - speaking, writing, reading and understanding - with the

school grading used in Finnish comprehensive and high schools, on a scale of 4 to 10.

Question 8. Arvioi kouluarvosanoin (4-10) englannin kielen osa-alueet: puhuminen, kirjoittaminen, lukeminen, ymmärtäminen.

*Assess different areas of English in school grades (from 4 to 10): speaking, writing, reading, understanding.*

This scale was chosen for the assessment since it is a common method of grading in the Finnish context. Thus, the basis for a specific grade is rather familiar and distinguished. Furthermore, the assessment is likely to be quite reliable, albeit always prone to subjective criteria. As a disadvantage regarding the scale chosen, one's perception of one's capabilities might stem from received school grades, potentially affecting one's self-assessment and, in some cases, distort the answers. Still, the scale was considered suitable for this interview. Dividing competence in English into different areas regarding self-efficacy is important since Bandura (2006) emphasises that the scale used must be targeted at factors that have an actual effect on the examined issue in order for the employees' perceptions to best correlate with their actual competences. What is more, this interview question examined the competence in general English, not yet BELF, which is further examined in the subsequent questions and the group interview. Question twelve regarded evaluating the level of confidence using English on a larger scale of 0 to 100.

Question 12. Arvioi itseluottamustasoasi käyttäessäsi englantia asteikolla 0 (erittäin epävarma) – 100 (erittäin itsevarma).

*Evaluate your level of confidence in using English on a scale of 0 (extremely insecure) to 100 (extremely confident).*

As Bandura (2006: 313) explains, a 100-point scale is one method to examine self-efficacy beliefs using ranges of 10 units. It is important for the scale to include an adequate number of intervals in order for the respondent to have a wide enough range of options to choose from. This aims to prevent resorting to a midpoint figure. Consequently, differentiating data is more likely to be received for analysis.

Finally, the last quantitative section related to BELF use. It asked the interviewee to assess his/her professional English skills on the ILR-scale (Higgs 1984).

Question 13. Arvioi englannin kielen osaamistasosi: alkeellinen osaamistaso, rajallinen osaamistaso, ammatillinen osaamistaso, täysi ammatillinen osaamistaso, natiivi tai kaksikielinen osaamistaso (ILR-scale).

*Assess your level of English skills: 1 star for elementary proficiency, 2 stars for limited working proficiency, 3 stars for professional working proficiency, 4 stars for full professional proficiency, or, 5 stars for native or bilingual proficiency (ILR-scale).*

After all the individual interviews were conducted, the five employees were interviewed together to discuss freely about the following in-depth themes: the contexts of using BELF at work, confidence using BELF at work, the workplace as an environment to use BELF, and improving one's BELF skills. For the group interview questions, see Appendix 2.

#### 4.4. Methods of analysis

This study aims at answering the research questions presented earlier by analyzing the gathered data in relation to the themes discussed in the interviews. It strives to uncover how employees regard themselves as BELF users at the workplace. The mainly qualitative study makes use of a thematic method of analysis to uncover relevant phenomena in the data.

After the interviews were carefully recorded and stored, all the data was transcribed in order to analyze it in detail. Transcribing means “to record something written, spoken, or played by writing it down” (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). Analysing data begins from transcribing it. The transcription process changes the spoken word to a written form while retaining the content as whole (Bryman 2008: 453). In this research, the main agenda was to collect merely subject matter in order to answer the research questions that concern employees' perceptions and thoughts about BELF use and their competence to use it. Thus, the transcription process needed not be carried out as rigorously as, for instance, in discourse analysis in which the linguistic structures, sequences and relationships in communication are studied in detail (Merriam-Webster 2021).



Recording and transcribing are methods for collecting data on interviewees' perceptions. In this study, the transcription was conducted retaining the content of the utterances omitting repetitive and unclear words and phrases. In parts where utterances are presented only partially, they are marked with (...) when appropriate. Each extract is illustrated both in English and Finnish in which the interviews were conducted. The translation was carried out using a free, sense-for-sense approach in which the content of the source language was translated, not the original form (Munday 2016: 32). In other words, the English translations are not word-for-word translations but in keeping with the meaning of the source language.

The framework for this analysis is thematic. Thematic content analysis, TCA, is used to report the identified and analysed themes, or patterns, in the collected data in order to answer the proposed research questions in an in-depth manner (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). According to Anderson (2014: 1), TCA is a fundamental method of analysis in qualitative research in which the researcher's theory of knowledge is objective and, more importantly, it allows the researcher to classify and filter themes in order to bring forth participants' communal voices, as in their expressions from a shared perspective on the matter examined. Clark and Braun (2016: 297) explain how TCA functions in more detail. First, thematic analysis enables the researcher to create codes, which are the smallest units of analysis, which, in turn, constitute themes and larger patterns by identifying interesting phenomena in the data and finding answers to the proposed research questions. Second, TCA gives a framework for reporting on the researcher's observations, after the researcher has identified and interpreted the data. In this study, the theoretical background addressing BELF, corporate languages and self-efficacy in addition to the acquired interview data served as the basis for forming the themes for analysis. In addition, the themes helped formulate and answer the proposed research questions regarding employees' perceptions of BELF. In this study, the analyzed themes are employees' confidence using BELF, the contextual effects on BELF use, and the workplace as an environment to use BELF.

## 5 ANALYSIS

This chapter presents and analyses the relevant data collected from the conducted individual and group interviews. The purpose of the analysis is to answer the previously proposed three research questions. Each research question is discussed separately and illustrated with relevant data from the interviews. The first research question examines employees' background, competences and contexts in using BELF. The second research question brings forth employees' perceptions on English as a corporate language in practice. Finally, the third research question examines the kind of environment the workplace is to use BELF.

### 5.1 How do employees' competences in BELF manifest in work-related operations?

In this section, the first research question is analyzed using excerpts from both individual and group interviews. This research question aims at uncovering employees' confidence and self-efficacy in using English in work-related situations, the kind of situations in which BELF is used, and how contextual changes affect communicating in BELF. The analysis is divided into three major themes: employees' confidence and self-efficacy in regards to using BELF, applying BELF in everyday work, and finally, the contextual effects on BELF use.

#### 5.1.1 Employees' background with the English language

For the sake of analysis, it is useful to first discuss the employees' history regarding the English language and how they perceive English in general before analyzing how BELF is considered as the official corporate language used in the company. All the employees have a history of studying English starting from primary school. All but one of the respondents (E1, E2, E4, E5) have studied English after secondary school, up until university level studies. Additionally, three of them (E1, E4, E5) have studied abroad at some point during their studies. Furthermore, one employee (E5) has studied in an international upper secondary school in English and received a university degree in an English speaking country. Thus, E5 has the most history in

using English. All in all, the majority of the employees interviewed have had much experience in studying English before starting their careers at the company in question.

Employees were asked to evaluate their competence in different English skills: speaking, writing, reading, and understanding using the Finnish school grading of 4 to 10 (see Table 2). All in all, the grades given are generally rather high. E3 has distinctly the lowest grading whereas E5 the highest. There is not, however, much dispersion in the grading for different skills but to draw some conclusions, employees are most competent in understanding and reading while less competent in speaking and writing.

Table 3. Employees' grading of their English skills.

Employee	Speaking	Writing	Reading	Understan -ding
E1	8	8	9	9
E2	9	7	8-9	10
E3	6	6	7	7
E4	8	9	9	9
E5	9	10	10	10

The employees' perceptions on communicating in BELF in general can be summarised as mainly favourable. It is regarded as a rather positive addition to various parts of everyday life. The useful nature of the language is highlighted and E5 explains using English when communicating at home with one's children. The following comment is made by E3 who has the least experience out of the five employees interviewed in studying English and the lowest level of confidence and proficiency in regards to communicating in English according to subjective assessment.

- (1) Mä tykkään englannin kielestä ja must ois tosi tärkeetä et kaikki osais puhuu sitä ja itekki haluaisin osata puhuu sitä koska se on niin semmonen tiedäks käyttökelponen kieli. (E3)

*I like the English language and it would be really important if everyone could speak it and I would also like to speak it since it is such a, you know, useful language. (E3)*

As disclosed in the previous remark, it is important to be able to communicate in English. The next excerpt illustrates English as a positive part of leisure time in addition to investing which is also a work-related activity. E4 expresses willingness to develop and make use of one's skills whenever possible.

- (2) Positiivisesti suhtaudun siihen jos vaikka ajattelee sijoittamista mikä kiinnostaa itseään vapaa-ajalla muutenkin ja pitää itseään ajan tasalla niin samoin suhtautuu enkuun että jos joku turisti vaikka kysyy tietä Senaatintorille niin kyllä mä sen mielelläni englanniksi neuvon ja oikeestaan oon innostunutkin kielestä, suomalaiset ei ole smalltalk kansaa ja jos joku vielä tulee puhumaan englanniksi suomalaiselle niin se on sitten ihan nounou yleensä suomalaisille. (E4)

*I regard it as positive if I think about, for instance, investing which interests me also in leisure time and I keep myself up to date, so I regard English the same way that if a tourists asks me the way to the Senate square I happily explain it in English, and I am actually interested in the language, Finns are not small talk people and if someone speaks English to a Finn, it is usually a no-no for Finns. (E4)*

### 5.1.2 Confidence using BELF

In the individual interviews conducted before the group interview, the interviewees were asked to assess their confidence levels in regards to communicating in English in general on a scale of 1 (the lowest) to 100 (the highest), a means measuring self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, Bandura 2006: 313). This question regarded English use in all aspects of life, not only BELF use. In addition to this, the employees were to evaluate their linguistic proficiency using BELF in work-related contexts. For this, the ILR-scale (Higgs 1984) incorporating a one-to-five grading was applied in order for the employees to assess their proficiency levels using BELF (see 4.3). Both of these scales were previously applied in the case study on self-efficacy in regards to BELF (Oksaharju 2017) conducted on the same bank. Thus, it was straightforward to apply them to this study as well. The results of the two studies, however, are not to be compared due to their different natures. The previous study is mainly quantitative and incorporating the whole workforce, while the present study is a qualitative one, including only five employees.

The confidence levels of the five employees range from 60 to 92: E3: 60, E5: 80, E1: closer to 90, E2: 90, and E4: 92 (see Figure 4). The competence level of E1 is rounded up to 90 for the sake of graphical comparison. It is important to note that the evaluation is subjective since the employees were not given any specific descriptions to the figures on the 1-to-100-scale that was applied. Thus, the requirements for a specific competence level are subjective, as one employee's prerequisites might equal to 60 whereas similar prerequisites could equal to 80 to another. All in all, the confidence levels of the employees interviewed are rather high.

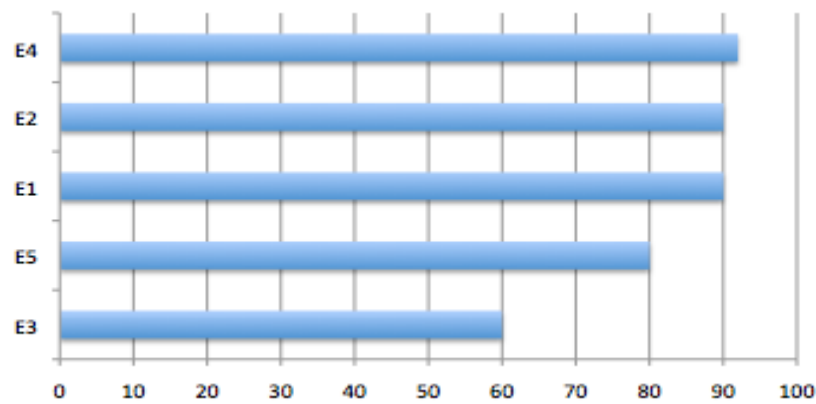


Figure 4. Employees' confidence levels using English on a scale of 1 to 100.

What comes to the question of using the ILR-scale, three of the five employees (E1, E2, E5) reported to being on level 4, *full professional proficiency*, one (E4) on level 3, *professional working proficiency*, and, finally, one (E3) on level 2, *limited working proficiency*, on the ILR-scale (see Figure 5). Again, the results indicate that the employees' proficiency levels of using BELF is quite high. Again, these assessments and perceptions are all subjective and based on the employees' individual perceptions on their abilities to use BELF.

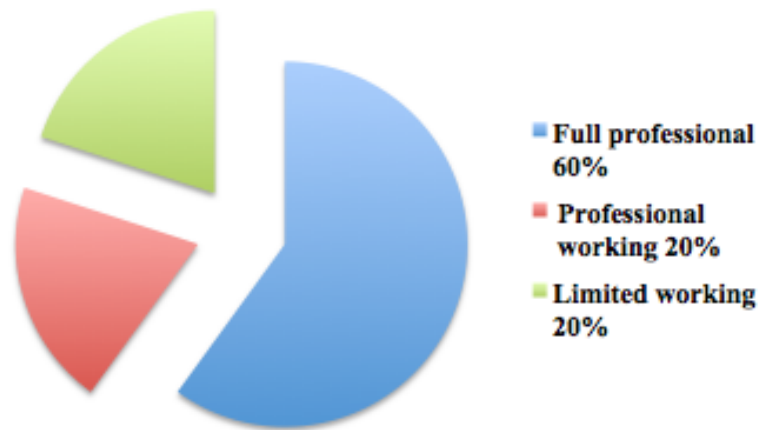


Figure 5. The distribution of employees' proficiency levels according to the ILR-scale (Higgs 1984).

E3 regards asking questions in English more difficult than in Finnish. What is more, the organisational positions of the employees taking part in the communication affect how comfortable one's communication in English is, according to E2. If management level personnel are present in a work session, the threshold to ask a question in English in such a situation is higher. Additionally, E4 mentions that the bigger the audience, the more stressful speaking English is at the workplace. In other words, it is easier to communicate with colleagues in small groups. If the group is bigger, it can create social pressure to express oneself in English or make comments.

- (3) On siin isompi kynnys kysyy jossain vaik jos on englanti se kieli siinä mulla ainaki. (E3)

*I for one have a higher threshold to ask if English is the language used. (E3)*

- (4) Mul on sillai et jos on asiakkaan kanssa tai puhelimessa tai sit kollegan kaa nii silloin se on niiku aika itsevarmaa mut mä oon huomannu et vaikka hotspoteissa mä en ehkä hirveen helposti lähe enkuks kysyy, siis sillei et jos pomo tulee tänne niinku Suomeen kuuntelee et mitä meil on mielipiteitä. (E2)

*If I am with a customer or on the phone or with a colleague I am rather confident but I have noticed that in hotspots I do not ask questions in English if, for example, the boss comes here in Finland to listen to our opinions. (E2)*

- (5) Joo ja sit ainaki ite ajattelee et mitä isompi se ryhmä on niin siinä tulee sellasta niinku sosiaalista painetta tai niinku kynnystä avoimesti sitten kertoa mitä mieleen tulee oli se sisältö tai kieli kyllä se että pienemmässä ryhmässä enkun käyttö on helpompaa. (E4)

*Yeah, and I think that the bigger the group, the more social pressure or threshold there is to openly tell what comes to mind whether it is content or language, it is easier to use English in a smaller group. (E4)*

Additionally, employees regard content to be more important than how something is uttered. It does not matter if an employee speaks English with a strong Finnish accent, also called “rallienglanti”. What matters, is the content one brings to the task at hand. According to E1, colleagues who are very proficient in English might dominate the situation in meetings by constantly speaking and sharing their thoughts but the added content to a specific issue might be minimal. Additionally, the employees find it beneficial to communicate relevant issues in a clear manner and at a slow pace. E5 points out that sometimes one notices that a colleague has missed an answer to a question resulting in, for example, the boss having to repeat the answer. E5 regards this as people concentrating on the question they are about to ask so much that they do not notice that it has already been answered.

### 5.1.3 Applying BELF in everyday work

The employees use BELF either daily or at least weekly with colleagues and customers. Tasks that are conducted in English are, for instance, solving technical problems with Swedish colleagues, e-mails in internal communication with colleagues from other Nordic countries, and talking to customers on the phone regarding various work-related issues. In addition, BELF is used in meetings where employees from other Nordic countries are present. On occasion, BELF is also used with visitors.

The results indicate that using a foreign corporate language affects the ways in which employees operate at the workplace and execute work-related tasks. On the one hand, when an employee is not using one’s native language it can result in a bigger workload. On the other hand, for more fluent users of English the effects are lesser. The following comment by E1 illustrates how BELF affects the employee’s workload.

- (6) Se työllistää mua enemmän on se sitten mitä hyvänsä niin mun pitää tehdä paljon enemmän sitä valmistelua, mutta suomeks mä voin vaan mennä, enkuks mun täytyy tehdä bullet pointseja ja käydä sitä läpi, en mä sano et se on negatiivista mutta se työllistää... (E1)

*I have to work harder for whatever it may be so I have to prepare much more but I can just go when using Finnish, I have to make bullet points and go through them when using English, I am not saying it is negative but it is more work... (E1)*

Additionally, BELF sometimes causes added stress before the beginning of a work-related task. In particular, performing in front of a bigger audience causes additional stress or having to communicate in a situation where there are more than a few colleagues present or co-workers from other Nordic countries in, for instance, staff meetings. E2 comments on the issue as follows.

- (7) ... kyllä sitä vähä ujostelee sen käyttöä, sellanen alkujännitys, ja jos vaikka pitäis pitää joku esitys englanniks niin tulis pieni lisäjännitys mutta muuten ihan positiivinen mielikuva ja hyvin luonnollinen. (E2)

*... I am honestly a little shy using it, it is stressful in the beginning, and if I should give a presentation in English there would be more stress but otherwise a quite positive and very natural image. (E2)*

## 5.2 How do employees perceive English as a corporate language in practice?

This section analyses the second research question, which brings forth employees' perceptions on English as the corporate language of the company in practice. The first theme by which the data is divided explores the contextual effects on using BELF. The second theme examines the practical role of English as the official corporate language comparing it to the use of Swedish, which has a distinct role in the Nordic countries in which the company operates and can be called the common language, or *lingua franca*, in Scandinavia.

### 5.2.1 Contextual effects on BELF use

The employees regard that it is more comfortable to use English with colleagues who do not speak English as their first language either. According to E1, this is due to the fact that, in those situations, the colleague might not always be aware if one makes a mistake. In such situations the colleagues are on an equal level in a sense that the other one does not have the upper hand in using one's first language. Moreover, the use of Swedish in communication is discussed. E4 mentions not wanting to use Swedish in internal communication with a colleague whose first language it is. The discussed issue relates to the level of confidence in using BELF, which was previously discussed in section 5.1.1. Next, the views of E1 and E4 are illustrated.



- (8) ... mä tykkään puhua sellasten kanssa enkkua joiden äidinkieli se ei myöskään ole, sillon jos sä oot vähän epävarma ilmaisustas niin se toinen ei välttämättä tiedä et sanoiksä jotain väärin. (E1)

*... I like to talk to ones who do not speak English as their first language either, then if you are a bit uncertain of your utterance the other one does not necessarily know if you said something incorrectly. (E1)*

- (9) ... mielellään sisäsesti en käytä ruotsia koska mielummin käyttää kieltä, joka on molemmille vieras kieli. (E4)

*... I prefer not to use Swedish in internal communication since I rather use a language that is foreign to both. (E4)*

Another contextual effect on BELF use was discussed in the group interviews. Employees have the tendency to sometimes vary how they communicate with colleagues, depending on how fluent the colleagues are in English. In other words, if the employee notices that a colleague or customer is fluent or less proficient in English they adjust their own level of difficulty while speaking English. The contextual effect is illustrated in the following excerpt. E2 reports using more fluent English in a situation where the recipient is rather proficient in English. E2 is a confident English user having evaluated one's skills at a confidence level of 90 and at a full professional level of proficiency (see 5.1.1). Thus, one is capable of adjusting the degree of difficulty of the language in this scenario.

- (10) No sillei voi tulla et jos sä heität jotai juttuu ja joku vastaa sillai et se oikeesti ymmärtää enkkua tosi hyvin nii sä saatat heittää sillei vähä niinku ei nii yksinkertast juttuu enkuks. (E2)

*Well, if you say something and someone replies in a way that shows they actually understand English really well you might use English that is not that simple. (E2)*

The situational effect on an employee speaking English can also be the opposite. This excerpt illustrates how the context affects E5 who is also very fluent in English and uses it daily both at work and at home. In this situation, the other party is not as fluent in English as the employee as opposed to excerpt 10. Thus, E5 adjusts the level of difficulty downwards in order to be more easily understood by the other party.

- (11) Joo ja must tuntuu et ainaki itellä käy sillai et se vaan meneeki et emmä pysty puhuu brittii jos toinen puhuu semmosta tönkköö et se on jotenkin hankalaa. (E5)

*Yeah, and I feel like I for one cannot speak British if the other one speaks rather stiff English, it is somehow difficult. (E5)*

As discussed in 2.3, in all communication, the aim is to transmit a message properly to a receiver. This notion emerges in the group discussion as one important characteristic of communicating in English at work. In the employees' opinion, it is not relevant how well one communicates in English but how well the receiver, as in the colleague or customer, understands the message. The main objective is that the communication runs smoothly and, most importantly, that various tasks are performed properly. Next, E4's thoughts on the issue are presented.

(12) No ehkä jos ajattelee nyt työasioiden suhteen nii ei sitä niinku kielellistä vertailua tee et monesti miettii... et se asia tulee ymmärretyks ja niinku asian ilmasun suhteen miettii enemmän kun sen niinku kielen puitteis. (E4)

*Well, I do not make linguistic comparisons regarding work-related affairs but I often hope... that the issue is understood and think more about how to express something more than the linguistic aspect of it. (E4)*

Additionally, E1 regards using BELF as something that takes one's time and effort in work-related tasks. At the same time, the fact that the employee is understood and that the message is received in the correct way is important in using BELF. Sometimes the topic specific matters that relate to the industry in which the business operates in are rather difficult to explain to others even when communicating in one's first language. The pressure of having to explicate these types of matters in a foreign language understandably employs one more as E1 points out.

(13) Nii mä oon ihan samaa mieltä et kyllä täytyy välillä keskittyä tosi paljon siihen että saa itsensä ymmärretyksi siis asiassa joka ei oo tuttu toisille ja vaikka sitä selittää ekaa kertaa suomeksikin toisille ja ei ymmärrä siltikään niin sit ku sä selität sen englanniks niin siinä saa tehdä kyllä tosi paljon töitä... (E1)

*I agree that sometimes I need to really concentrate in order to be understood regarding a matter that is unfamiliar to others and explaining something for the first time even in Finnish results in others still not understanding it, so explaining it in English is a lot of work... (E1)*

The aim of this section was to answer the first research question regarding how employees' competence in BELF is manifested in work-related operations. This section analyzed the collected data dividing it into three main themes: employees' confidence and self-efficacy in using BELF, applying BELF in everyday work, and the contextual effects on using BELF. It can be concluded that four of the five employees are relatively proficient BELF users, one having limited competence to

perform the needed work-related tasks based on the employees' subjective assessments. Additionally, BELF is used everyday or at least weekly and sometimes the workload is bigger and stress levels higher when BELF is used. Moreover, English is preferably used when it is not either party's first language. Finally, the competence of a colleague or a customer in English affects the level on which some employees speak English.

### 5.2.2 English vs. Swedish

The fact that the company in question operates in other Nordic countries has an effect on the actual implementation of BELF according to employees' perceptions. This means that internal communication between these countries and the Finnish branch is sometimes conducted in Swedish, which results in difficulties in understanding and frustration among the employees who are not as fluent in Swedish as they are in English. At times colleague abroad need to be reminded that the official corporate language is, in fact, English. The views of E2 on this important issue are illustrated next.

(14) ... mä vihaan ehk sisäses kommunikaatios sitä et jos sä niiku ruotsiin kommunikoit niin sä oot CC:nä jossain listas, jossa ne puhuu pelkästään ruotsii, koska sä et tajuu yhtää mitä ne puhuu, ne saattaa antaa sellasii esseevastauksii johki keissiin ja sit yhtäkkii tulee et *did you get it*. (E2)

*... in internal communication, I hate the fact that when I communicate to Sweden I am a CC on some list in which they only speak Swedish because I do not understand anything they are saying, they might give you essay-like answers to a case and then suddenly ask in English if I got it. (E2)*

This particular topic is extremely interesting both to the employees interviewed and the interviewer arousing much discussion. The feeling that colleagues in other Nordic countries might not necessarily acknowledge that not all Finnish colleagues understand Swedish is shared by the respondents. According to the following comment, E5 has to apply intermediary software in order to translate the content into the official corporate language in order to understand it. In these types of situations, the practical implementation of BELF would make it easier for the employee to do their job more proficiently.

- (15) Mä joudun tosi paljon tekee Google Translatorilla hommia. Mä joudun ihan oikeesti heittelee vähän väliä. Et jotkut pitkät partnerikeskustelut joutunu sen kautta sit kääntelee enkuks ku eihän se suomeks toimi. (E5)

*I have to do much work with Google Translator. I honestly have to use it repeatedly. I have had to translate long conversations with partners into English using it since it does not function in Finnish. (E5)*

Next, a comment on BELF use in the neighbouring country, Sweden, is presented. It reveals that being in Sweden is a recurring part of E1's work. E1 does not speak Swedish so BELF should be used to communicate with E1 in this context.

- (16) Tää on mun ihan arkipäivää kun mä olen siellä ruotsissa et kokous ja materiaalit oikeastaan on enkuks mutta kun lounasaika tulee tai jotain muuta niin kyllä ne aika monesti vaihtaa sit ruotsiin ja sit mun täytyy olla ja lähtee keskusteluun jonkun kanssa ja yleisesti ihmiset lähtee sit siihen mukaan ja sit ne ymmärtää et ainii joo pitäis puhuu enkkua mut ei läheskään aina... (E1)

*This is an everyday occurrence to me when I am in Sweden that the meeting and materials are actually in English but during, for example, lunch break they quite often switch to Swedish and then I have to start a conversation with someone and, in general, people join us and understand that they should be speaking English but definitely not always... (E1)*

Evidently, the first language of the majority of the employees present in a particular situation can dominate the aforementioned types of situations. On a more positive note, more favourable views on BELF in practice also emerges in the data. The following comment made by E4 demonstrates a context in which the official corporate language is applied in an expected manner.

- (17) Joo on sitä et kaikille ei oo itsestäänselvyys että enkkua käytetään mut sitte taas viime viikolla täällä oli ruotsista vieraita niin ne sanoi että ne kommunikoi toimistolla enkuks vaikka olisi pelkästään ruotsalaisia siinä. (E4)

*Yes, it is not clear to everyone that English is used but last week there were guests here from Sweden who said that they communicate in English at the office even if there were only Swedish employees present. (E4)*

Referring back to the previous comment, according to the employees' interviewees, if there are only Finnish speaking employees in attendance, the language used is usually Finnish. What is more, some interviewees regard speaking English with other Finnish colleagues present as more difficult than with colleagues who otherwise would not understand them. Implementing English in this type of context could be a future development for the corporate language policy of the company. This is

discussed in the next chapter. The following comment by E1 relates to BELF use in the Swedish office. It expresses understanding towards the fact that it is sometimes difficult to communicate in the corporate language, in this case, at the Swedish office.

- (18) ...jos kaks kolme ihmistä puhuu keskenään niiku siinä et jos meil on vaikka puolen tunnin lounastauko niin ne puhuu ruotsia mikä on toisaalta ymmärrettävää että mekin joskus jopa sitten no mä monesti siis puhun suomalaiselle kollegalle siellä englantia mut kyllä mä sit rupeen puhuu sille suomeks ku muut puhuu ruotsia että vaikka pitäis puhuu sitä enkkua niin helposti sitä ihmiset lipsuu. (E1)

*... if two or three people are speaking in Swedish during, for example, a 30-minute lunch break it is understandable in a way and I often speak English to a Finnish colleague there but then I switch to Finnish since others are speaking Swedish, so even if English should be spoken people easily slip. (E1)*

To conclude, this section aimed first to uncover the contextual affects on BELF use. Second, the actual role of English as the official corporate language of the company was analyzed. It can be concluded that Swedish dominates English on occasion as the lingua franca at the workplace, which causes added work and difficulties in communication and understanding.

### 5.3 What kind of environment is the workplace to use BELF?

The work environment has an influence on how employees enjoy themselves at the workplace as it affects how pleasant the surroundings are to spend time and perform assignments. This section aims to answer the final research question of the kind of atmosphere there is at the office by exploring the themes of receiving feedback and future improvement. The interviewees' perceptions on the possible feedback they have received at the workplace from colleagues or customers and the employees' wishes to improve their English skills are examined.

#### 5.3.1 Encouraging work environment

The following comments illustrate employees' views on what kind of environment the workplace is to communicate in English. The company is perceived as encouraging and reassuring when it comes to communicating in BELF. E1 acknowledges that the environment demands employees to use BELF but that everyone can communicate freely on their own level of competence. No one is

valued as an employee based on English skills but based on everything one can accomplish and do as E1 emphasises. What is more, E5 mentions that no one is made fun of because of the way one speaks English. Everyone speaks the way they speak. Moreover, E1 points out that individual competence in BELF improves when one has experience in using English in different work-related contexts repeatedly. Working in the company allows this possibility for self-improvement which is perceived as a richness by E1. Next, the aforementioned comments are illustrated.

(19) Mä luulen että se ilmapiiri vaikuttaa siihen et täällä tavallaan joutuu käyttää mut täällä saa käyttää sitä omalla tasolla. (E1)

*I think that the atmosphere affects the fact that here one has to use it but here one can use it on one's own level. (E1)*

(20) Ei täällä niin kun kiusata ketään et kaikki puhuu niiku puhuu. (E5)

*No one is teased and everyone talks like they talk. (E5)*

(21) Ketään ei arvoteta kielitaidon perusteella vaan ihan se kaikki muu mitä sä saat aikaseks ja mitä sä osaat. (E1)

*No one is valued based on language skills but rather everything else you can accomplish and what you can do. (E1)*

Furthermore, E1 points out that there are always ways to complement one's BELF communication as communicating in BELF is often discussing a particular issue. One can refer back to the discussion later after one has produced some more material by themselves as E1 regards that the company's BELF communication occurs on such a general level that the actual work in BELF is done afterwards. There is, on the one hand, positive pressure towards using English by someone occasionally emphasising the fact that it is the corporate language as E4 points out. In addition, E2 has sent many messages to Sweden, a couple of them rather firm in nature, reminding that the corporate language is English and that it would be good that only English was used in, for example, email conversations that include Finnish colleagues as well.

### 5.3.2 Improving BELF skills

The feedback one receives at the workplace can have an effect on one's BELF use and future improvement targets and goals. Employees have various needs to improve

themselves whether it is language skills or knowledge on another relevant area of expertise. The illustrated comments below were made in the individual interviews addressing possible feedback received regarding BELF use at the workplace. The employees mention that they have not received much feedback per se at the workplace. According to E3, the colleagues are so kind that they have not given E3 any feedback. E4 mentions paying more attention if someone communicates very fluently in English or speaks Swedish, which is a more infrequent occasion.

- (22) Emmä kyl varmaan oo palautetta saanut siitä... ainakaan ens siis mitää negatiivista... kaikki on ollu niin kilttejä hehe. (E3)

*I do not think I have received feedback on it... at least nothing negative... everyone has been so kind, haha. (E3)*

- (23) Ei tuu kyllä mieleen että olis mitään kautta sillä lailla palautetta saanu, siihen kiinnittää huomiota ite enemmän jos joku puhuu toimistolla lähes yhtä hyvin englantia kuin suomea, mutta jos ”perus enkulla” puhuu englantia niin ei siihen kiinnittää huomiota jos joku puhuu yllättäen ruotsia niin siihen kiinnittää enemmän huomiota että se on ehkä isompi meriitti asiakaspalvelussa, koska enkulla lähtökohtaisesti olettaa että kaikki pärjää. (E4)

*I cannot think of a situation in which I have received feedback, I pay more attention to if someone speaks English at the office almost as fluently as Finnish, but if one speaks so-called basic English than I do not pay attention, if someone speaks Swedish all of a sudden I pay more attention to that which is probably a bigger merit in customer service because one is automatically expected to get by with English. (E4)*

In addition, the communicated content is perceived as important, not the way something is uttered in English. E1 has occasionally received indirect feedback when E1 is has not been properly understood by a colleague. Then, E1 has been asked to clarify what is meant by the utterance. Additionally, E2 has received positive feedback on the clear way E2 communicates in English and the fact that customer service is, in general, offered in English at the company.

- (24) Ei ole kovin montaa kertaa sanonu että osaitpa sä ton hienosti sanoa mutta enemmänkin että hyvä kun nostit ton asian esiin ettei mun englannin kielitaitoa oo kukaan töissä kehunu, varmaan siksi myös koska koska täällä on muita jotka ehkä puhuu paremmin ja johtoryhmässäkkin on sellasia jotka pystyy todella sujuvasti puhumaan sitä, toki joskus joku kollega kysyy että mitä sä tolla tarkotat että sehän myös kertoo sitä et mä en oo osannu sanoa jotain että varmasti se osittain liittyy siihen et mä oon selittäny sen vähän huonosti englanniksi. (E1)

*Not many times has someone said that I was able to say something fluently but more like that it was good that I brought the issue up, no one has praised my*

*English skills at work, probably also because there are others here who can maybe speak more fluently and, in the management team, there are ones who can speak very fluently, although sometimes a colleague asks me what I mean by what I say which also indicates that I have not been able to say something, so it partly relates to the fact that I have explained it a bit poorly in English. (E1)*

- (25) Ehkä jotain sellasta et enkunkielinen kollega on sanonu et se on hyvä ku sust saa selvää, ja jotkut asiakkaat on ollu positiivisesti yllättyneitä et me annetaan asiakaspalveluu myös enkuks, ovat kiitelleet tosi paljon. (E2)

*Perhaps an English-speaking colleague has said that it is good that I communicate clearly, and some customers have been positively surprised and very thankful that we offer customer service also in English. (E2)*

Additionally, further improvements regarding employees' English skills are discussed. The individual views vary from specific to more non-specific goals. E1, E4, and E5 mention that they would particularly like to improve their speaking skills. More specifically, the goal behind speaking better English for E1 is to communicate more fluently in order to express oneself better in general and, in particular, in situations where the issues at hand are difficult to communicate even in Finnish. Speaking English in a native-like manner is considered a possible future goal by E4. Finally, E5 would like to practise speaking with Brits in particular. These different reasons for E1, E4, E5 to develop their speaking skills are illustrated next.

- (26) Puhuminen koska se on se mikä tuottaa eniten vaikeuksia, välillä on vaikea ilmaista itseään ja tilanteissa jossa puhutaan sellasista asioista joita ei suomeksikaan tiedä niin se on aina vähän haastavampaa. (E1)

*Speaking because it is what causes the most difficulties, sometimes it is hard to express oneself, situations in which topics that I am not familiar with even in Finnish are discussed are always a bit more challenging. (E1)*

- (27) Puhumista mä kehittäisin, sitä ei pelkää mutta et se olis enemmän lähellä sitä natiivin englannin kielen käyttäjän, enemmän se on niinku sellasta et haluais puhua samalla tavalla suomeks ku englanniksi, mun puhetapa muuttuu kun mä puhun englantia, sellasta hitaampaa ja harkitsevampaa. (E4)

*I would improve speaking, it does not frighten me but I would like for it to be closer that of a native English speaker, I would like to be able to speak English the same way as Finnish, but when I speak English it is slower and more cautious. (E4)*

- (28) Varmaan puhumista saisi treenata brittien kanssa. (E5)

*I should probably practice speaking with Brits. (E5)*



E2 expresses the want to participate in various international projects to be able to use English in multifaceted contexts. These include speaking, listening, reading or writing. E3 explains that it would be of great interest to develop one's English skills in general to better understand communication at work. E3 tries to learn while performing work-related tasks and would be willing to participate in a language course if such course was offered by the employer at some point.

(29) Ei välttämättä suoraan et tavoite ois englanti mut et haluan osallistuu kaikkiin projekteihin joita tulee vastaan et erityisesti et saa maiden välisiin joissa saa kuunnella ja käyttää kieltä, päämäärä on joku muu mutta englanti on se väline jolla kommunikoidaan, se että aktiivisesti käyttää sitä et puhuu, lukee, kuuntelee, kirjottaa. (E2)

*The goal is not necessarily specific to English but I want to participate in every project that comes across especially international ones in which I can listen and use the language, the objective is something else but English is the medium used to communicate actively in speaking, reading, listening, writing. (E2)*

(30) Haluaisin kehittyä ja kiinnostaa lähinnä sen takia et ois kiva ymmärtää paremmin, et ois helpompi lukee sähköpostit ja helpompi kuunnella ja kaikkee, mä yritän tehdä sille et just ku tulee sähköpostia ja muuta niin jos mä en ymmärrä jotain sanaa nii mä yritän katsoa sen jos vaan kerkeen ja oppii sillä tavalla lisää ja jos mä työn puolesta saisin jonkun kurssin niin osallistuisin. (E3)

*I would like to develop mostly because I would like to understand better, so that it would be easier to read emails and listen and everything, I try to look up words I do not understand in, for example, emails if I have time and learn more that way and I would participate in a course if the employer offered one. (E3)*

To conclude, this section strived to answer the research question on the kind of atmosphere that lies at the workplace dividing the data into the themes of the work environment and improvement goals. The employees have not received much feedback on their communication in BELF, only positive feedback if at all. The workplace is perceived as an encouraging one to use BELF. What comes to developing one's English skills, the majority of the employees wish to improve their speaking. Additional goals are using English as much as possible in various contexts and to develop understanding English.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter summarizes the results of the study reflecting and comparing them to previous research conducted in the same framework, that is, confidence using BELF

and employees' perceptions of English as a corporate language. It also discusses how the results can be utilized and how they are considered as a basis for possible future procedures in regards to implementing English as a corporate language in everyday tasks in practice. Moreover, the challenges of the applied research methods, reliability of the results and the overall significance of this study are weighed. Finally, the possibilities for further research based on the obtained results are discussed.

### 6.1 Obtained results vs. previous research

The aim of this study was to uncover how the five employees of the company operating in the Nordics conceived English as the official corporate language. The employees were chosen based on their various job descriptions and linguistic backgrounds in order to possibly receive some dispersion in the results, although that was not the main objective of this study. The three research questions were to shed light on the topic at hand by dividing the collected data into prominent themes on the basis of previous research on BELF and self-efficacy as well as the proposed research questions. Next, the results for each research question are discussed reflecting them to previous research where applicable.

Firstly, how employees' competence in BELF manifested in work-related operations was analysed dividing the data into the themes of employees' confidence and self-efficacy in using BELF, applying BELF in everyday work, and the contextual effects on using BELF. The analysis applied the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977) as a theoretical construct for employees' perceptions of themselves as BELF communicators. The five-level Interagency Language Roundtable scale, or ILR-scale (Higgs 1984), was incorporated in order for the employees to evaluate their English proficiency specifically in work-related assignments. The results indicated that all but one employee were relatively proficient in using English. One employee evidently had a lower proficiency but was able to perform the required work-related tasks. Additionally, BELF was reported to be used daily or at least weekly at work. Sometimes the workload was considered bigger and stress levels higher while communicating in BELF. Lastly, the contexts in which BELF was used occasionally

affected the level on which employees spoke English and how comfortable speaking English was.

In comparison to the results of the previous broader study encompassing the whole personnel of the concerned company (Oksaharju 2017), the recently obtained, more narrow and in-depth results were somewhat in-line. The lowest confidence level of the workforce was 50 and the highest 100, while in this study, the confidence levels of the five employees ranged from 60 to 92. Additionally, the presence of English at the workplace was clear in both results as, according to this study, the five employees used English everyday or at least weekly while almost 90 percent of the whole workforce applied English in their work daily, according to the previous research. In both studies, English was made use of in various contexts, for instance, in meetings and communicating with customers. The results cannot, however, be reliably compared due to the varied samples of the studies and the different methods of analysis applied. Furthermore, the present study uncovered that some employees sometimes tried to sidestep communicating in BELF in certain situations, which was in accordance with Lauring's and Klitmøller's (2015) findings on employees avoiding communication in their second language.

The employees perceived content to be in a more important role in communication than linguistic correctness in BELF. This finding corresponded with the results of Martins (2017: 62) who pointed out that the purpose of BELF is not to aim at dated native-like standards but to allow effective and fruitful communication in multicultural contexts in order to achieve mutual understanding. Pronunciation and grammatical accuracy can be disregarded since an employee's competence in BELF can be evaluated based on the communicated content, for one. Additionally, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) elaborated that BELF is an international code used in the business setting enabling straightforward and clear communication, being most importantly a means to operate at work.

What is more, the outcome of this study revealed that employees sometimes alter their level of communicating in English depending on the other party's, as in a colleague or customer's, proficiency in English. The similar phenomenon was characterised by Koester (2010: 127) as, according to her, BELF users can

accommodate their speech in order to correspond with the level of competence of others, for example, lowering the level of speech if the opposite side is less competent in English, or vice versa. Also Franceschi (2019: 68) pointed out that BELF is simplified as main points are emphasised and alternative words used when necessary in order to prevent misunderstanding.

As opposed to the findings of a study on Finnish-based internationally operating businesses by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010), according to which the employees used English almost as frequently as Finnish and that some were more proficient in English than in Finnish, the employees in this study did not report using English that often, although many of them used it daily, nor being as fluent in English than in Finnish. Additionally, the results in the present study were in agreement with the results of Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) in that employees perceived themselves to be equal when using English with colleagues whose first language English was not either.

As a natural transition in the continuously globalising world of business in recent decades, the dominance of English in the workplace has become stronger as this study suggests. Judging by the data of the present study, many of the employees used English in various contexts daily. Communicating with colleagues and customers as well as using English in meetings was frequent. Furthermore, English was perceived as a mandatory skill in order to do one's job. These results were somewhat contradictory to the findings of the quantitative inquiry by Leppänen et al. (2009) on the use of BELF in the late 2000s incorporating 1500 respondents as BELF was used at the office at least once a week by only less than a half (46%) of the respondents while the less frequent tasks were speaking with colleagues (13%) and customers (13%) and speaking in meetings (7%). The results of these two studies cannot be reliably compared since they are conducted over a decade apart and are different in nature. The findings, however, suggest that the status of English in Finnish business life has strengthened.

Employees in this study regarded using BELF as more comfortable than using Swedish with Nordic colleagues since the language is neither party's first language, a phenomenon which Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) noted studying the merging of a

Finnish and Swedish company. English was chosen as the new corporate language since the decision was not to use either country's official language as the company's lingua franca. Additionally, BELF in internal communication can have the influence of three different languages at once as Marschan-Piekkari (2003: 60) explained. In the present study, it was a clash of Finnish, Swedish and BELF. Consequently, the results of this study indicated that the implementation of English as the official corporate language was lacking since employees in Sweden sometimes tended to communicate in Swedish with colleagues at the Finnish office, which made communication and understanding difficult at times. This was perceived as challenging and sometimes resulted in an employee feeling like an outsider in the work community. To support this finding, Cogo and Yanaprasart (2018: 103) revealed that when two European banking sector companies implemented English as the official corporate language, many of the employees first perceived English as a useful and effective language and regarded English as the main language of banking. Therefore, it was to be the official language of the company. In practice, however, employees used many languages at work rather loosely and intertwined other languages against corporate policies (Cogo and Yanaprasart 2018: 112) as the present study also uncovered. This could have been a result of a let-alone language policy, or an emergent strategy as Louhiala and Kankaanranta (2012: 11) defined, meaning that the language used in a given situation is based on impromptu decisions rather than strict guidelines of language use. Using Swedish in internal email message chains between countries caused difficulties in understanding for Finnish employees in the present study, a finding that was opposed in Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's (2012: 14) research as employees' first languages were always used at the home office when colleagues shared the same mother tongue, but English used in emails if they were potentially forwarded to colleagues in other countries.

Moreover, the atmosphere in the present company allowed employees to use English on their own level with the support of colleagues whenever needed, also noted by Mikkola (2019), who explained that supportive communication enabled an encouraging atmosphere while maintaining collegial relationships manifesting in supporting colleagues in stressful situations and helping in information retrieval. According to the present study, when colleagues did not understand each other in BELF, it indicated that one of them might not have been able to convey the message

in a fluent enough manner and clarification strategies were used as Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) identified. In these types of communication contexts, however, the misunderstanding can also be a result of the recipient not being fluent enough to understand BELF in a given situation, not necessarily indicating the speaker's lack of proficiency. In addition, Vuorela (2008) regarded that when employees were familiar with each other's way of using BELF, it helped make communication more fluent. Moreover, the atmosphere in the present company allowed employees to use English on their own level with the support of colleagues whenever needed, a phenomenon that was also noted by Mikkola (2019) who explained that supportive communication enabled an encouraging atmosphere while maintaining collegial relationships which manifested in supporting colleagues in stressful situations.

The willingness to participate in language courses provided by the employer was revealed in the present study. At that moment, there were no courses offered in the company although there could have been operational benefits in doing so as Louhiala-Salminen (2002) pointed out analyzing the Nordic-based Nordea bank. Nordea implemented Swedish language courses for employees in order to improve the corporation's international communication. The most skilled employees were placed in organisational positions according to their individual skills to make Nordea's operations as efficient as possible. Moreover, the survey of Clement and Murugavel (2018: 13) on corporate employees revealed that language studies offered online were perceived as necessary in order to maintain their linguistic skills and working efficiently.

The background assumptions of the study are discussed next. First, the results revealed that one out of the five employees had a limited working proficiency against the expectation that all would be at least proficient enough to manage tasks in BELF. Second, the use of English as the corporate language was in accordance with the expectation that its use was perceived as flexible and that using employees' native languages, in this case Swedish, was sometimes more frequent. The occasional repercussions as a result of not using the corporate language in communication and social situations were not, however, considered before the analysis. Third, the atmosphere was encouraging using BELF at work in addition to being neutral as in the expectations.

## 6.2 Scrutinizing the results

The results of the present study were based on individual and group interviews of employees working in a Nordic company operating in the financial sector at the Finnish office. All of the data gathered was comprised of subjective perceptions of the employees and did not represent the opinions and views of the whole workforce of the company in question. Thus, this research needs to be considered as a small-scale case study to understand the perceptions of the chosen individuals for the interviews conducted. The results are not to be generalized since the research is a case study, which aims to uncover emerging phenomena (Baxter and Jack 2008: 544). Thus, the interviewees' perceptions shed light on BELF use in the various day-to-day work operations on an individual level.

On the one hand, the benefit of having multiple interviewees present at the same time was that it awoke much discussion and changing of views also on issues that did not emerge in the individual interviews. On the other hand, the presence of five employees in the group interview session, however, could have affected how individuals responded to topics discussed and what kind of comments they made while others were present. Furthermore, the dynamic of the group might have had an influence on the nature and flow of the interview in terms of social factors, for example, each employee's personality. One employee might have been more outspoken and contribute more to the conversation while another one might have been listening to the opinions of others rather than sharing one's own thoughts. This could, in part, have affected the reliability of the data. The interviews themselves were effortless to schedule and organise and the interviewees were excited to participate in the study giving much interesting and relevant information in regards to the topic at hand.

The challenge conducting the interviews was keeping the interviews in schedule. As it happened, the individual interviews in this study ran late, many lasting for over 30 minutes against the fifteen minutes originally scheduled for them. Fortunately, all the employees were adaptive and had flexible timetables and, therefore, all the interviews were successfully completed. On a positive note, the fact that many of the interviews lasted much longer than anticipated was evidence of rewarding and

productive conversations. Thus, more data was available for analysis. In hindsight, some of the interview questions were redundant and directed to themes that turned out to be irrelevant in relation to the chosen themes for analysis. As a result, some topics should have been more thoroughly examined for the sake of interest and acquiring evidence such as the actual implementation of English as the official corporate language. This, however, illustrates the nature of a qualitative study as its data and results can be rather unpredictable compared those of a quantitative one.

As mentioned in 6.1, the implementation of English language courses might benefit the company's operations if it aspired to diversely enhance or unveil employees' linguistic skills and potentially place more skilled employees in specific positions in the corporation. To examine the linguistic competences of the workforce in more detail, an extensive analysis to expose actual language needs could be conducted in order to uncover prevailing linguistic conditions in the company as Lesk et al. (2017: 270) emphasised. The linguistic needs of the employees should be assessed with, for instance, questionnaires or interviews conducted during working hours or in development discussions with a supervisor.

As the most intriguing finding of the present study was Swedish sometimes dominating international internal communication as the lingua franca, the implementation of English as the official corporate language could be further analyzed in the company in question. Whether an actual detailed language policy exists and what the role of English is in it would be of great benefit to examine, for instance, by interviewing management level personnel. In the future, the company could gradually move from a laissez-faire language policy to a more standardised implementation of BELF. First, all written communication, such as emails and official documents, could be written in English moving towards having meetings only in BELF in the future.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has changed the scope of working at home and made communication across borders effortless as online platforms have been forced to rapidly develop and businesses adjust to enable working remotely. Thus, another possible research topic for the future could be analysing whether the use of BELF has increased and how the nature of BELF has changed since currently



communication happens mostly online and not face-to-face. Additionally, employees' current perceptions of BELF communication in the unprecedented state of the world could be assessed.

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## APPENDICES - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Appendix 1 - Individual interview questions

#### Taustatiedot:

1. Sukupuoli
2. Ikä
3. Titteli/osasto, jolla työskentelet
4. Äidinkieli ja suhde englannin kieleen
5. Oletko asunut ulkomailla? Missä? Kuinka pitkään?
6. Työkokemus vuosina (kyseinen firma + aiemmat)

#### Englanti ja koulutus:

1. Luettele kaikki suoritettut oppiasteet ja mahdollinen kielellinen suuntautuminen (kaksikielinen linja ym.)
2. Kuinka monta vuotta olet opiskellut yhteensä englantia?
3. Oletko ollut vaihto-oppilaana tai jollakin kielikurssilla? Missä? Kuinka pitkään se kesti? Miten kuvailisit englannin kielen käyttöäsi siellä?
4. Oletko suorittanut ylimääräisiä englannin kielen kursseja (esim. työnantajan mahdollistamana. Haluaisitko osallistua englannin kielen kurssille? Miksi?
5. Mistä olet mielestäsi oppinut eniten englannin kieltä (elokuvat, tv, pelit, lehdet, kirjat, työ, matkailu?)
6. Englannin kielen ylioppilaskirjoitusten arvosana ja viimeisin arvosana englannin kielen kurssista (jonka muistat).

#### Osaamisen arviointi

1. Arvioi kouluarvosanoin (4-10) englannin kielen osa-alueet: puhuminen, kirjoittaminen, lukeminen, ymmärtäminen.
2. Mikä englannin kielessä on helppoa?
3. Mikä englannin kielessä on vaikeaa? (jokin em., työhön liittyvä asiasanasto ym.)

4. Koetko, että puhut jotain tiettyä englannin kielen aksenttia/murretta?
5. Arvioi itseluottamustasoasi käyttäessäsi englantia asteikolla 0 (erittäin epävarma) – 100 (erittäin itsevarma).
6. Arvioi englannin kielen osaamistasosi: alkeellinen osaamistaso, rajallinen osaamistaso, ammatillinen osaamistaso, täysi ammatillinen osaamistaso, natiivi tai kaksikielinen osaamistaso (ILR-scale).
7. Mitä ajatuksia englannin kielen käyttö yleisesti herättää?
8. Valitse yksi kielenkäytön osa-alue, jota haluaisit kehittää. Miksi näin?

Englanti töissä ja vapaa-ajalla:

1. Kuvaile suhdettasi englantiin vapaa-ajalla (harrastukset, perhe, media, matkustus).
2. Mitä vierasta kieltä käytät mieluiten töissä?
3. Pystyisitkö kuvitella työskenteleväsi yrityksessä, jossa ainoa käytettävä kieli olisi englanti? Miksi, miksei?
4. Millaista palautetta olet saanut englannin kielen käytöstä työelämässä? (jos olet)

## Appendix 2 – Group interview questions

1. Missä tilanteissa käytätte englantia töissä?
2. Kuinka usein käytätte englantia?
3. Mikä on yleisintä, mitä täytyy tehdä englanniksi?
4. Omat tuntemukset ja ajatukset, joita englannin käyttö herättää töissä?
5. Itseluottamuksenne toimia eri työtilanteissa, joissa käytätte englantia?  
Lähdetkö mukaan keskusteluun helposti vai oletko taka-alalla?
6. Kumpi on parempi, se että työntekijä osaa ilmaista asiansa ns. rallienglannilla vai se, että hän osaa lausua hienosti, vaikka kieli ei välttämättä olisi sisällöltään yhtä upeaa?
7. Huomaatteko ympäristöstä vaikutusta tai kommentteja englannin kielen käyttöönne? Painetta ym.?
8. Koetteko, että työntekijät muissa maissa ei ota huomioon välttämättä sitä, että suomalaiset ovat ainoita, jotka eivät automaattisesti jollain lailla ymmärrä muita pohjoismaalaisia?
9. Miten olette ajatelleet kehittää itseänne englannin suhteen töissä? Onko tavoitteita?