

**English Language Proficiency in  
Multicultural Teamwork:**  
Student Perspectives

Master's thesis  
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Nykypäivän maailmassa monikulttuurinen tiimityö on yleinen ilmiö, jota voi kohdata sekä korkeakouluissa että yrityksissä ympäri maailmaa. Viestinnällä oletetaan olevan kriittinen rooli tiimityössä ja kansainvälisissä ympäristöissä englanti on yleisesti hyväksytty lingua francana. Tutkimuksessa on alettu hitaasti kiinnittää huomiota kielierojen vaikutuksiin monikulttuuristen työtiimien suhteisiin ja tiimin suoritukseen, mutta yliopistokontekstia sekä englanti lingua francana -näkökulmaa ei ole vielä tutkittu riittävästi.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella opiskelijoiden käsityksiä kielitaidon roolista englanniksi työskentelevissä monikulttuurisissa tiimeissä suomalaisessa yliopistossa. Tätä on selvitetty tutkimalla osallistujien asenteita standardikieli-ideologiaan sekä heidän näkemyksiään erilaisista kielitaidon tasoista tiimityössä ja heidän strategioistaan kielisteiden käsittelemiseksi. Lisäksi tutkielmassa valaistiin kielitaitoerojen vaikutuksia luottamuksen muodostumiseen ja valtasuhteisiin. Monimenetelmällistä lähestymistapaa käytettiin, jotta oli mahdollista löytää kattavia vastauksia tutkimuskysymyksiin yhdistämällä ilmiöiden yksityiskohtaiset kuvaukset tilastollisiin havaintoihin. Aineisto koostui sekä kahdeksasta haastattelusta, joita analysoitiin laadullista sisällönanalyysia hyödyntäen, että 51 osallistujan online-kyselylomaketiedoista, jotka edellyttivät kvantitatiivista analyysia.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että tiimin jäsenten kielitaidon eroilla voi olla kielteisiä vaikutuksia tiimin sisäiseen viestintään ja tiimin työskentelyyn. Kielisteiden negatiivisia vaikutuksia voidaan kuitenkin minimoida erilaisten strategioiden avulla. Lisäksi havainnot paljastavat joidenkin tiimin jäsenten englannin kielen taitojen korreloivan positiivisesti sekä koetun luotettavuuden että vallan kanssa. Opiskelijoilla näyttää edelleen olevan jonkin verran perinteisiä standardikieli-ideologian mukaisia näkemyksiä. Vastakkaisten ja epävarmojen mielipiteiden määrä kuitenkin kyseenalaistaa tämän asenteen hallitsevuuden. Tulosten perusteella ehdotetaan tapoja parantaa opiskelijoiden monikulttuurista tiimityökokemusta, kuten lisäämällä tietoisuutta kielierojen mahdollisista vaikutuksista tiimityöhön ja konkreettisempien ohjeiden avulla.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Teamwork is in most disciplines an essential part of today's working life. In international comparisons, Nordic societies and their leadership style are usually characterized by low power distance and flat hierarchies (Andreasson & Lundqvist 2018). These horizontal organizational structures are also prevalent in Finnish companies, which increases the importance of social relationships, networks and teams (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018). Group projects belong also to the student life, as they are a common work method and form of learning used at many universities and a useful preparation for the labour market. Nevertheless, I noticed during my studies that the opinions on teamwork vary greatly among students as both positive and frustrating experiences have been gained, which is in line with the literature that has identified various benefits and problems related to collaborative learning (e.g. Feichtner & Davis 1985; Colbeck et al. 2000; Roberts 2005). Stressful experiences may lead to a loss of motivation or a negative attitude and affect also future team projects or intercultural encounters. Even though cooperativeness is an inherent feature of the social nature of human beings (Nowak 2006), it is something that can be learned and developed.

In addition to their academic knowledge, team members also develop interpersonal relations and thereby their social skills. While various personal attributes and external circumstances may affect the team dynamics, communication has been found to be crucial in fostering team performance (Marlow et al. 2018). This is particularly significant in team constellations including members with different linguistic backgrounds. Global migration and the internationalisation of corporations and higher education institutions have led to an increasing number of multicultural teams. Even local students and workers without international career aspirations may be exposed to multicultural environments, in which English has been widely accepted as the lingua franca. Despite the advantages of the heterogeneity of multicultural teams, such as the development of innovative ideas, these teams may also struggle with misunderstandings, uncertainties and imbalance of power due to varying degrees of English language skills among the members. In other words, the diversity entails linguistic and communication challenges for the teams, since the effective performance of assignments is mainly based on functional and unambiguous understanding. Effective team communication does not only deal with work content but concerns

also relationships. Hence, the effects of language diversity on team relationships are a relevant topic worth studying.

The purpose of this study<sup>1</sup> is to explore students' perceptions of the role of language proficiency in multicultural teams working in English at a Finnish university. In addition to attitudes towards native English, the study examines how the participants deal with differences in language skills and the effects on different aspects of the team relationship, such as trust formation and power relations. Research in this special context has the potential to provide new insights and contribute to the existing body of research by suggesting practical ways of applying the findings. A mixed methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in one study, will be used to compare trends noticeable in statistical survey results with detailed descriptions of the phenomena gained through interview data. This research deals with a real-world issue, since successful multicultural teamwork in one's student life is important for both one's study performance and as preparation for a career in today's globalized world of work. Comparisons with previous studies on teams in business contexts will reveal if there are indications of similar issues among the students.

The role of language diversity in multicultural teamwork has only since the turn of the century gained slowly increasing attention among researchers in the fields of communication and business (Piller 2012; Stahl & Maznevski 2021). English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) is a similarly new research field, which has evolved within the last two decades from a minor interest into a major focus (Jenkins 2014). To my knowledge, previous research on the role of language in teams has focused on different business settings whereas the higher education context as well as the perspective of ELF onto teamwork have been widely disregarded, except for Komori-Glatz's (2017a, 2017b) study on a business educational context and some research, such as Björkman (2008), on the linguistic features of spoken English in student group work. Higher education students and soon-to-be graduates are interesting research subjects, because their attitudes and actions might be different due to their little work experience in multicultural environments as compared to participants in research studies on business environments. Furthermore, research on students, who will enter the labour market soon, is important, since it has the possibility to identify early on issues that may increase during work life. Subsequently,

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counteractive measurements to tackle these potential issues may be developed in order to enhance the students' wellbeing and their employability, such as by equipping the students with an open-minded view and tools to deal with diversity. Thus, more empirical studies on student attitudes towards language and the effects of language diversity on multicultural teams are needed, particularly from a linguistic perspective. Higher education institutions are also an interesting research context, since they constitute a meeting place for people from very diverse backgrounds. The fact that the number of English learners is steadily increasing entails a need for more studies on ELF usage in various contexts (Björkman 2013). The circumstance that more non-native than native English speakers use English at universities in non-English speaking education systems also raises questions concerning standard language ideology and language policies and practices in the particular context of international higher education (Jenkins 2014).

The thesis is structured in the following way. In the background chapter, the research field of ELF will be introduced with a special emphasis on the context of the internationalisation of higher education and language proficiency will be defined. Moreover, an overview of concepts related to multicultural teamwork and team dynamics and processes will be given, including a review of previous research. Next, the research questions and data collection will be described together with the methodological approach and ethical considerations. The analysis chapter contains the examination and comparison of the data from the questionnaire and the interviews. The findings will be interpreted and discussed in the light of previous studies. Based on the results, ways to enhance students' multicultural teamwork experiences will be suggested, such as by raising awareness for the effects of language and through proposals for effective team building and cooperation with equally participating members. In the conclusion, the main findings will be summarised and potential implications will be discussed in addition to suggestions for further research.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research needs to be led by theory, meaning it is essential to draw on the experiences and findings of other researchers, in order to make progress in our understanding and knowledge (Mayring 2010). Thus, this chapter describes the theoretical framework of the thesis, which is composed of several parts as the research topic touches different research fields. In the first part, the study will be located in the broad research field of English as a lingua franca and different definitions of language competence and proficiency will be contrasted. Moreover, previous research on the internationalisation of (Finnish) higher education will be reviewed. The second part deals with relevant concepts and studies related to multicultural teamwork. The majority of the literature on this topic, especially with regards to language, can be found in the fields of management and organisational research and in intercultural communication studies. Taking into account the different conditions of professional environments and university settings, these studies will be reviewed too in order to see if student teams face issues that are typical for the business world.

### 2.1 English as a lingua franca

Many different languages as well as pidgins have functioned as a contact language between people with different mother tongues. As Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey (2011) note, plurilingualism as well as hybridity have always been characteristic for the composition of lingua francas. English has its origins as a lingua franca in the former British colonies of the 16th century. Since then, the number of English speakers has steadily grown so that today native English speakers form a minority (Crystal 2008). However, the phenomenon of ELF only began to attract the attention of independent scholars in the 1980s and only became a focus of interest at the start of the 21st century (Jenkins et al. 2011). Seidlhofer's (2011) definition of ELF will serve as a basis for the present study, as it has been accepted and used by numerous ELF researchers. She defines ELF as "*any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option*" (Seidlhofer 2011: 7). One can infer from this definition that ELF communication takes place in both spoken and written form and that native speakers are not excluded.

Two phases of empirical research into ELF have been identified by Jenkins (2015). Early research work on ELF communication was mainly concerned with form and coding attempts, including pronunciation and lexicogrammar (see Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer 2001). While this first phase was influenced by the World Englishes paradigm, which explores localized varieties of English, increasing empirical evidence, based on the establishment of several corpora, shed light on the central role of variability in ELF communication. The second phase of research was, therefore, initiated by a shift in orientation towards function and the underlying processes, concentrating on the language user and viewing ELF as social practice (e.g. Björkman 2013; Cogo 2009). Jenkins (2015) also suggests a third phase of reconceptualisation, which places special emphasis on the multilingual nature of ELF.

Business and higher education settings belong to the research domains that have been studied the most in relation to ELF (Jenkins et al. 2011). Due to the large number of professionals from around the world that are engaged in both business and academic collaborations, the mainstream English use in both domains is characterized by lingua franca English rather than native English. A consequence of the large size of the group of non-native English users is their powerful role in language change and in the development of ELF (Seidlhofer 2011). Both research domains are of importance for the present study, because it deals with students who use English as an academic lingua franca and who prepare to use English as a business lingua franca in working life. Corpus-based research on academic ELF (ELFA) has identified some features that show that the language use of non-native speakers differs from native usage, for example, in the function of certain grammatical structures (Ranta 2006). These unconventional forms do not seem to diminish the effectiveness of communication.

According to Jenkins et al. (2011), most ELF researchers share the view that non-native English varieties are on a par with native varieties despite their differences. Moreover, the multilingual resources and intercultural experience of non-native speakers of English are even considered to be an advantage over native speakers in ELF situations. However, Seidlhofer (2011) points out that this advantage is not yet generally recognised. Likewise, Björkman (2017) calls to disseminate the insight that high proficiency in English alone does not make one an effective ELF speaker, as one's language also needs to be adapted to the interlocutors in a particular situation and their levels of proficiency. The importance of accommodation skills, particularly in

spoken interaction, has been identified in studies on both business ELF (BELF) and ELFA as well as on other contexts (e.g. Mauranen 2009, 2010; Cogo 2009, 2010; Kaur 2009; Ehrenreich 2009; Kankaanranta & Planken 2010). Accommodation strategies in a way substitute linguistic or cultural knowledge that speakers with different native languages do not share with their interlocutors. Thereby, these interactional practices function as a tool to avert problems of understanding.

Jenkins (2014) notes that diversity in international universities is founded on economic and reputation-seeking interests rather than on fascination with diverse English language use. In her research on English language policies and practices in international universities, Jenkins (2014) investigated the perspectives of management, staff as well as international and home students with the help of three empirical studies using data collected via website analysis, a questionnaire and interviews. The results demonstrated that a strong standard native English ideology is prevailing among all groups involved in the higher education context, in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries. Furthermore, there are not many signs of an internationalisation of academic English, which would resemble the reality of English use. Supporters of the standard language ideology regard the standard variety of a language as the only legitimate one even though there are, even among native speakers, several or many other varieties (Seidlhofer 2011). Standard English is a special case due to its global status that crosses borders. Representing ELF(A) research, Jenkins (2014) and Seidlhofer (2011) argue that the problem in this ideology is the unequal power relationship that privileges native speakers despite their numerical minority in the totality of English users around the world.

Both researchers propose, therefore, to reconceptualise English in its use as the global lingua franca, and as the academic lingua franca respectively, and treat it as a property of all its users, i.e. a phenomenon separated from English as native language. The unique role of ELF, as opposed to other foreign languages, should be considered when designing English as a subject or language assessments, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which traditionally compares one's language use with native speakers (Seidlhofer 2011). Taking into account the characteristics of ELF usage, appropriate pedagogical strategies and academic language policies, such as adapted writing and editing conventions, could be developed. Jenkins (2014) detects that the fact that influential decision-makers disregard language issues acts as the

driving force behind the persistent status quo. Moreover, the ignoring of ELFA research in mainstream literature is regarded as a problem. The unfamiliarity of her research participants (outside the ELF research community) with the topic indicates the need to raise awareness although arousing interest could already be noticed. Jenkins et al. (2011) remark that the words of researchers will not have a great impact if the attitudes and perceptions of individual non-native speakers do not change. The present study will, therefore, contribute to this question of the changing language attitude with a valuable and recent insight into the perspective of students studying in an international university setting.

Some studies have already noticed a shift from standard language ideology to a more favourable orientation towards the use of ELF among university students from various countries (e.g. Kalocsai 2009; Erling 2007; Sung 2018). Similarly, Gao (2012, cited in Wang & Jenkins 2016:40) reports how the language attitude and identification of Chinese university students changed through intercultural work experience: the students “develop from imitators of native English speakers to legitimate speakers of their own English and further to communicators engaging with intercultural communities on the equal footing with native English speakers”. The findings of Tsou and Chen’s (2014) comparative study of local Taiwanese students learning English in traditional EFL (English as a foreign language) settings and international students using ELF during their studies in Taiwan suggest that a speaker’s notion of acceptable English may be related to their direct experience of ELF communication or the lack of exposure to such environments.

### **2.1.1 Language competence and proficiency**

In combination with different preceding words, such as language, linguistic or communication, the terms competence, proficiency and skill appear frequently in publications, but often with different meanings, sometimes without any further definition and sometimes used interchangeably. In various theoretical approaches from the field of linguistics, the notion of language competence has been conceived and defined in different ways (e.g. Chomsky 1965; Hymes 1972; Canale 1983; Lehmann 2007; Day & Kristiansen 2018). Different models differ in the structure of competence, meaning the sum of components that competence is assumed to be composed of. A central question of the debate that emerged among linguists in the 20th century

and continued into the next millennium has been the distinction and interplay of language knowledge and actual language use. The most prominent views are summarized in the following.

The foundation of the discussion around language competence was laid by Noam Chomsky's frequently cited work *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* in 1965, whose main theoretical points the author still advocates (Chomsky 2015). In his theory of a generative grammar, which refers to a set of rules that can generate an indefinite number of sentences and which is thought to be part of an innate universal grammar, Chomsky (1965) introduced the concepts of linguistic competence and performance. A clear distinction was made between the former, defined as an ideal speaker-hearer's tacit knowledge of grammar in a homogeneous speech community, and the latter, which is supposed to be the practical application of language in concrete situations that is often flawed due to various factors.

Besides other criticism of this conceptual separation of theoretical language knowledge and actual language use voiced by representatives of different research areas (e.g. Labov 1971, cited in Hymes 1992; Lakoff 1973; Lyons 1977; Romaine 1982), Dell Hymes (1972) questioned the integrity of Chomsky's (1965) theory and particularly the lack of sociocultural aspects in his conception of linguistic competence. Furthermore, Hymes (1972) and others (cited before) reject the idea of ideal and homogeneous competence, since it seems to contradict empirical data. For the same reason, this notion also does not pertain to the present study about ELF users. Instead, it is believed that just as the other abilities of the members of a community vary, language competence is also both differential (Vorwerk 2015) and relative (Lehmann 2007). In fact, the relativity of language competence appears to play a rather important role in teamwork, as will be seen later in this study and in references to other literature.

As a counter-model, Hymes (1972) developed the idea of communicative competence. This competence is thought to be acquired in a heterogeneous community and it comprises also sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge in addition to grammatical knowledge, such as needed for mastering the appropriateness of an utterance according to the context. In addition to appropriateness, effectiveness is another core criterion of communicative competence, according to Vorwerk (2015). By referring to "both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use", Hymes' (1972:

282) notion of competence is, thus, broader than Chomsky's (1965). Vorweg (2015) explains that the controversy between proponents of linguistic competence and those of communicative competence is linked to the question of the nature of language as well as to different epistemological stances. The theoretical framework of communicative competence elicited further research, such as Canale and Swain's (1980) refined three-part model and later on Canale's (1983) four-part model, as well as a change in language education towards a communicative approach.

Despite no specific references, the works by the aforementioned scholars also serve as a basis for conceptualisations in the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001). The Council of Europe (2001: 9) takes an action-oriented approach and defines competences as “the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform action”, while distinguishing between two kinds of competences. Firstly, general competences, encompassing declarative knowledge, skills, existential competence and the ability to learn, are utilised for language and other kinds of activities (Council of Europe 2001). Secondly and in congruence with the functional-communicative approaches, communicative language competences comprise linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components, which in turn consist of knowledge, skills and know-how (Council of Europe 2001). Based on the findings of an experimental language test, Lehmann (2007) proposed that the same general concept of competence underlies native and foreign language competence, since differences mostly occur only in degree and not in essence.

In contrast to these theoretical linguistic considerations, the present empirical study conceives competence and its perceptions in a similar way as Day and Kristiansen (2018: 91), who examined it as a lay member's concern – as opposed to language professionals –, saying that “linguistic competence is locally constituted in and as participants' orientation to and assessment of own and others' conversational contributions”. In their ethnographic study of four different multilingual settings, Day and Kristiansen (2018) showed how the participants used assessments and demonstrations of linguistic competence in mundane work situations. It was pointed out that these assessments contribute to the formation and negotiation of expertise and status. The assumption that the assessment of one's competence in mundane work is probably more

meaningful than a language test result (Day & Kristiansen 2018) is also the reason why the focus in the present study is on the perception of language skills. The participants' self-evaluation of their skills and of their team members are subjective and may be flawed, as Rubin (1992) revealed in an experiment with native English speaking students whose perception of their lecturer's language was influenced by ethnic and cultural factors. However, the participants' perception of their own skills and the skills of others is what affects their feelings, behaviour and relationships. Another concept dealing with similar ideas as the approach just described is interactional competence. According to Kramsch (1986), interactional competence presupposes intersubjectivity and is therefore not owned by a single individual; instead, the competence is thought to be co-constructed by all interlocutors involved in a process of communication.

Another term that is often used in the context of measurement or testing in second language learning is proficiency, which is commonly divided into the following skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing (Stern 1983; Council of Europe 2001). Rating scales, such as for the learners' self-assessments, and standardised tests grade one's command of a language and indicate the corresponding level of proficiency, which may range from very low to very high (Stern 1983). Further complex, theoretical perspectives that interpret and define the components of proficiency in a similar way as the conceptions of competence will be omitted here in order to minimise confusion.

While the fundamental assumptions of the present study are in line with the notion of communicative competence, both the name and the holistic concept of competence appear too complex and ambiguous to be used in a laymen context as in the data collection of this study. For this reason, it was decided to use the, assumingly more precise and definite, terms language skills and proficiency, which did not raise any questions during the interviews. In order to make the responses of the participants comparable, four different levels of language proficiency were described using terms that are loosely based on the scale of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2020): proficient, advanced, intermediate and elementary.

### **2.1.2 The internationalisation of Finnish higher education**

This section provides background information about the context and research setting of the present study. Internationalisation is a key strategy of universities reacting to the impact of globalisation, which concerns the teaching, research and service functions of higher education (Maringe & Foskett 2010). Likewise, in a study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, De Wit et al. (2015) describe internationalisation not as a goal but as a tool to improve the quality of education and research and to contribute to society in a meaningful way. Moreover, they explain that a dynamic mix of political, economic, socio-cultural and academic influences is the driving force of internationalisation. These rationales occur to varying degrees in different regions of the world, which is reflected in the differences between institutions. In fact, rising political tensions also pose a challenge to international cooperation, but, at the same time, these problems, such as migration issues, underline the relevance and necessity of intercultural understanding (Teichler 2017).

When analysing the internationalisation in Europe and comparing it to the rest of the world, De Wit et al. (2015) showed that European higher education benefits from an effective regional policy, which was initiated with the ERASMUS programme and continued with the Bologna process. According to the analysis, other regions lack a comparably uniform and strategic approach. It is, therefore, not surprising that in almost all other parts of the world Europe is prioritised as a very important cooperation partner for institutional internationalisation activities (De Wit et al. 2015).

The medium of English used by diverse university populations is a significant component of the process of internationalisation (Jenkins 2014) and therefore a relevant object of investigation. In their study on the state of play in English-taught programmes (ETP) in European higher education, Wächter and Maiworm (2014) ascertained a considerable rise in the number of ETPs provided compared to previous studies. Furthermore, ETPs were found to be the most common in the Nordic region. Finland belongs to the growing number of countries that offer, due to the small national language, study programmes in English in order to attract international students and to internationalise local students. Saarinen and Nikula (2013) provide a detailed overview of the

historical background of the internationalisation of higher education in Finland. According to their description, foreign language study programmes were introduced around the turn of the century and English language programmes became dominant soon. English plays a strong role in the Finnish society considering the fact that it is the most widely studied foreign language, the high presence of English in the media and the Finn's positive attitude towards the language (Saarinen & Nikula 2013).

Looking at the figures related to international student mobility in Finland, there has been a clear upward trend over the past two decades. The number of foreign degree students in Finland increased from less than 7,000 in 2001 to more than 21,000 in 2018 (Garam 2016; OPH 2019). The number of Finnish students that study for a degree abroad is lower but has also doubled to 9,000 in the same period of time (Garam 2016; OPH 2019). Moreover, the numbers of exchange students from Finland and coming to Finland, completing a mobility period lasting longer than 3 months, increased steadily in the early 2000s, and over the last few years they remained around 10,000 per year (Garam 2018). Regarding the rising numbers both in Finland and elsewhere, however, De Wit et al. (2015) also note that the focus needs to be shifted from quantity to quality and this is already partly happening in some countries.

According to the current *Policies to promote internalisation in Finnish higher education and research (2017–2025)* published by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2017: 3), graduates “should have the ability and willingness to be involved in international, multicultural environments and understand diversity, global challenges and the principles of a sustainable society”. As international mobility is limited to a small number of students and staff members, an alternative, less elitist and more inclusive way to develop intercultural competences and perspectives at the home institution, targeting also students with low international awareness, has gained increasing interest. The concept called “Internationalisation at Home” has been defined by Beelen and Jones (2015: 69) as the “purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments”. Placing emphasis on the curriculum, the researchers stress that all of the activities and measures need to take place in a purposeful way and that simply adding random elements, such as changing the language of instruction to English without internationalising the content or

learning outcomes, is not sufficient. A similar conclusion was drawn in a study on the current state of internationalisation at home in Finnish higher education institutions carried out for the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Weimer, Hoffman & Silvonen 2019). Especially academic participants were not familiar with the practical implementation of the concept and assumed that an English working environment as well as international students and staff automatically mean internationalisation, without explaining how this is related to the development of intercultural skills. While recognising promising practices, the researchers ascertained that the lack of a strategic approach causes unequal opportunities for the students. Additionally, clear language policies to regulate multilingual working environments with international staff appeared to be missing, which caused avoidable tensions.

An older study from 2013 on the role of language in the internationalisation policy of Finnish Higher Education shows with similar findings that the state of affairs has not changed much in the last few years. Saarinen and Nikula's (2013) discourse analysis revealed that the learning environment and study methods were portrayed as intercultural and global in the programme descriptions, which shall prepare the students for labour market needs. Apart from the language-related entry requirements, however, the study programmes did not include any content on language learning and the enhancement of cultural awareness. Moreover, most programmes were described with the label "foreign language" even though English was the language of instruction in the majority of the cases. Hence, Saarinen and Nikula (2013) criticised that other languages and their function in different study contexts remain unnoticed due to the marginal role that English or language plays in the learning objectives of the programme descriptions. These findings also confirm Jenkin's (2014) observations with respect to other countries where the internationalisation of higher education does not automatically implement processes of intercultural engagement, as the emphasis is on economic issues and national academic cultures remain dominant.

Proficiency in English was identified by Wächter and Maiworm (2014) as the second most important selection criterion in European higher education after the academic potential of applicants, and yet varying degrees of language skills were perceived as a salient issue. According to Wächter and Maiworm (2014), teachers tend to struggle with the heterogeneous

English skills of their students in the classroom and are in need of special training to develop the ability to deal with this linguistic diversity. The requirement of an English test appears to be the most common in the Nordic countries (Wächter and Maiworm 2014). When examining the entry requirements of the international study programmes in Finland, Saarinen and Nikula (2013) noticed that only some English varieties, namely from the core Anglosphere, were accepted as a demonstration of English proficiency. Students from other countries where English is an official language were required to provide an additional proof of their language skills. This hierarchy of English language varieties with the preference of Western varieties, which categorizes international students beyond their language skills, adds another layer to the discussion about standard language ideology and ELF started in the previous section. Saarinen and Nikula (2013) criticise that inequality among students can to some extent be perpetuated by the implicit inclusion of nationality, language varieties and higher education systems in the requirements.

## **2.2 Multicultural teamwork**

Working in teams or groups is a topic that has been researched from different perspectives in various areas. The following sections attempt to give an overview of those studies that produced the most interesting results with regards to this thesis. According to Wageman et al. (2012: 305), the traditional definition has been that a team is “a bounded and stable set of individuals interdependent for a common purpose”. This definition applies also to the present study, as the student teams fulfil the two requirements of having fixed membership for a designated time period and a collaborative task for which they share responsibility. When discussing group dynamics in the language classroom, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) remarked that the behaviours of individuals inside and outside a group differ and that despite the differences between various types of groups, some fundamental similarities can be identified and studied. These ideas are also believed to apply to teams. The benefits of working in a team are, among others, that members can contribute their diverse expertise and talents and generate new ideas together. The members can take on different roles, such as the one of a leader or a secretary. In terms of size, a team may consist of two or more people. In addition to these elements, the teams in the present study have a few other characteristic features: multiculturalism, the educational context and virtuality.

Corresponding with Komori-Glatz' (2017b) description of team characteristics, a team can be defined as multicultural if at least two members come from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as nationalities, and have differing native languages. As the world is becoming more interdependent, multicultural teams can be found in numerous organisations as well as in multinational corporations. A meta-analysis of 108 studies carried out by Stahl et al. (2010) suggests that multicultural teams may benefit from their diversity, such as through higher levels of creativity and satisfaction, but that they can also struggle with disadvantages, such as a higher conflict potential and decreased social cohesion. Thus, depending on contextual influences and how a team deals with the internal processes, cultural diversity may indirectly affect the team performance (Stahl et al. 2010). The intercultural interaction in multicultural teams usually takes place in a lingua franca, which is not the native tongue of all participants. Language problems have often been falsely interpreted as cultural problems, as the impact of language choice and language proficiency has long been overlooked in research disciplines such as communication or business and management (Piller 2012; Stahl & Maznevski 2021). The function of language as a social tool that can influence behaviours and perceptions will be examined carefully in the present study.

The educational setting is another defining feature of the teams in the present study.

Collaborative learning methods are a popular pedagogical approach, as social interaction is assumed to induce additional benefits during the learning process: for example, students may build diversity understanding through interpersonal relationships and develop critical thinking, organisational as well as problem-solving skills (e.g. Roberts 2005; Hassanien 2006). However, learning in collaboration style can also entail problems that need to be overcome. In an exploratory study by Popov et al. (2012) on multicultural student group work at a Dutch university, free-riding, insufficient command of English and other communication issues were perceived as the most difficult challenges by the students. Furthermore, these perceptions appeared to differ depending on the students' cultural background. The relatively limited previous exposure of students to multicultural work environments makes them an interesting research subject. The focus on learning and the lack of a contract and salary could be reasons for a different attitude toward the tasks among students as opposed to employees. However, the assignments relevant for the present study were graded and completing them was a mandatory requirement to pass the courses. The facts that the teamwork took place outside the classroom

and that it was independently coordinated by the students themselves make it more comparable to work teams.

Digital learning belongs to the emerging areas of focus in the internationalisation of higher education both in Finland and in whole Europe (De Wit et al. 2015). The teams in the present study worked partly, and some exclusively, virtually together. Distinguishing factors of a virtual team in contrast to a conventional team are the spatial distance and communication technologies (Bell & Kozlowski 2002). In other words, the team members are geographically, and thereby perhaps temporally, dispersed and instead of regular face-to-face contact, they make use of mediating technologies, such as email and videoconferencing, to communicate. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) explain that the advantage of virtual teams is that organisations can use them to access specialist knowledge that is not dependent on geographic boundaries, which is particularly useful when dealing with complex tasks. It was found that complex tasks that require information richness and collaborative decision making should be performed using synchronous communication, whereas asynchronous communication media are sufficient for less complex tasks (Bell & Kozlowski 2002). Virtual teamwork is also implemented in education projects that connect students from different countries in order to prepare them for the challenges of a diverse and globalized work environment. According to the Virtual Exchange Coalition (2020), “virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programmes”. They overcome physical distance via media technologies and make cross-cultural education accessible for young people from all over the world to grow mutual understanding.

### **2.2.2 Team relationships and language**

Linking the subjects of the preceding sections on ELF, language proficiency and teamwork, we arrive at the following question: What are the effects of linguistic diversity on team relationships? One aspect to be examined in this study is the connection between language and power, since “power is a basic force in social relationships” (Keltner 2003: 265) and an imbalance of power relations may impair the team outcomes as well as the general work experience of the involved members. A research agenda on the impact of language on various internal aspects of companies operating in international business was opened up only around the turn of the millennium when Marschan et al. (1997) and Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) began to investigate corporate

language policies. The researchers showed, for instance, that language skills may function in these multicultural workplaces in a comparable way as ranks or hierarchies. Even though their focus was not on teams, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), nevertheless, shed light on the power of language in the activities of a multinational corporation. Their research demonstrated how communication patterns and information flows may be influenced by language and how an individual's high language skills can become a source of power and pave the way to a gatekeeper position in a network, on which less proficient speakers rely.

Subsequent studies have revealed different challenges related to language diversity and power dynamics that can occur in international collaboration, such as that employees with limited language skills might be excluded from decision making (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta 2005). Yet the focus in these studies has been mainly on the firm level, while the particular team context has been addressed only in a few studies (Tenzer & Pudelko 2017; Stahl & Maznevski 2021). For example, in interviews with members of permanent multicultural teams of intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and business, high proficiency in the team language has been described as “the single most influential element in attaining an advantageous position” in the team (Méndez García & Pérez Cañado 2005: 101).

According to Tenzer et al. (2014: 509), language barriers may be defined as “obstacles to effective communication, which arise if interlocutors speak different mother tongues and lack a shared language in which they all have native proficiency”. Thus, they consider low language skills as the reason for language barriers. As a consequence, team members with lower language proficiency may be perceived as quieter, because they are not able to contribute much to the conversation despite their professional expertise, as Hohenstein and Manchen Spörri (2012) found. Similarly, another study reports that less proficient speakers avoid communicating with others with high power (Lauring & Klitmøller 2015) and it has been suggested that language-based power differences lead to process losses in information sharing and decision making (Janssens & Brett 2006). However, native speakers of the team language may be also involved in communication obstacles, for instance, if they are, due to their monolingualism, less aware of their listeners' potential understanding difficulties (Hohenstein & Manchen Spörri 2012; Kassis-Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen 2011).

These studies on the effects of language differences in the international business context depict language as a socially valued resource that may function as a source of power, since power has been broadly conceptualised in previous research as “an individual’s relative capacity to modify others’ states” (Keltner, Gruenfeld & Anderson 2003: 265) and through “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Magee & Galinsky 2008: 361). The present study aims to find out if similar dynamics occur in the higher education context. Due to the absence of formal ranks, it is assumed that power imbalance might be a slightly less prominent topic among students than at work. However, noteworthy research on power in university student teamwork outside the classroom, not to mention the effects of language differences on power relations in multicultural teams, seems to be rare (see e.g. Gore 1995 or Cornelius & Herrenkohl 2004 for studies on power relations in middle school classroom interactions).

In certain research fields, power and influence are assumed to belong to the same process, whereas other scholars have defined them as distinct concepts (e.g. Magee & Galinsky 2008; Lucas & Baxter 2012). In the educational context of this study and in the special case of language proficiency, the transitions are believed to be fluid and, therefore, both terms have been used in the data collection and the analysis. A linguistically proficient student might appear powerful, for example because they are able to access more information in that language and express their thoughts in a more nuanced way than less proficient speakers. At the same time, listeners may also, but not necessarily, need to adjust to the influence exercised by the larger proportion of speech in a discussion or a more convincing phrasing of ideas, for instance.

Trust building is another focus of the present study, because trust plays a significant role in integrative tasks and interdependent work, which are characteristic for multicultural teams, and because it has been found to be sensitive to language effects (Tenzer et al. 2014). Trust can be defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer et al. 1995: 712). Emotions as well as cognitive sources can serve as the basis for trust. Mayer et al. (1995) named three factors determining cognition-based trustworthiness: ability refers to the trustee’s task-related skills,

benevolence means that the trustee cares about the trustor's interests and integrity is in place when both parties share the same values. The trustor's evaluation of the trustee's trustworthiness antecedes the development of trust. Tenzer et al. (2014) conclude that this subjective perception may be influenced by language barriers. Furthermore, they suggest that due to heightened feelings of vulnerability, successful teamwork across language barriers demands especially high levels of trust.

Research has shown that trust has an important impact on team development and effectiveness (Henttonen & Blomquist 2005). However, according to Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012), the function of communication in terms of relationship building has been disregarded in management literature, as business communication issues have been oversimplified by focusing on the potentially negative economic consequences of a language barrier for a company. Likewise, the effects of language proficiency on trust building in student teamwork have not been studied sufficiently. Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012) argue that team building processes are in fact tightly connected with effective communication, as team members will only share the knowledge that lies within them if the socialization processes, carried out through verbal interaction, proceed successfully and establish mutual trust. A range of different discourse functions that build rapport in student group work have been analysed by Ädel (2011), for instance, but multiculturalism and language proficiency did not play a role in her data. Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012), on the other hand, studied the influence of language use on rapport building in a tandem program, in which international management students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds participated in order to gain intercultural awareness. Similarly to the accommodation skills mentioned in ELF studies, Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012) point out that intercultural communication requires in addition to foreign language capability and knowledge of cultures other affective and behavioural competencies that are significant for relationship development, such as adapting to the listener's level of understanding.

Another perspective on student interaction and research on the academic genre of teamwork in ELF was contributed by Komori-Glatz (2017a, 2017b). Based on both research on business and on ELF, Komori-Glatz studied multicultural student teams at the Vienna University, majoring in marketing. Business studies constitute the discipline with the highest number of English-taught

programmes and are often subject to research in the field of ELFA. In order to widen the research focus and due to the increasing demand of language and teamwork skills in other fields, the research participants of the present study were invited from various disciplines. The purpose of Komori-Glatz' (2017b) study was to examine how the students viewed ELF in multicultural teamwork and how they used it to optimise team performance and satisfaction. The data consisted of audio and video recordings of two teams, their Facebook group conversations, their written case studies as well as reflective interviews. The findings deal with the development of team cohesion and the construction of meaning regarding business content. A combination of two sorts of talk with different functions in the student teams was identified: "casual talk" was found to enhance rapport and create a positive environment for the "work talk", which was perceived as more challenging by the students. This finding is somewhat contrary to previous research on international management teams who face no problems when talking about technical matters but who struggle with informal small talk, the importance of which has, nonetheless, been emphasized in terms of the team performance (Kassis-Henderson 2005; Kassis-Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen 2011). A possible explanation for this could be the different contexts – education versus business – and the mindsets of the teams – socialising students as opposed to work-focused managers. The topic of relational talk will be also addressed to a certain degree in the discussion of the present study.

In a meta-analysis of 52 studies on trust and team effectiveness, Breuer et al. (2016) demonstrate that trust plays also a significant role in virtual teams. The analysis shows that virtuality increases the positive relationship between trust and team effectiveness, which implies a greater need for trust in virtual teams. Similarly to research on traditional, co-located teams, it has been underlined that social communication is also in virtual teams a crucial part that complements task communication and that facilitates the development of trust (Henttonen & Blomquist 2005; Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999). Moreover, response behaviours appear to be particularly important due to the prevailing uncertainty in electronic communication, where irregular and unpredictable answers impair the trust relationship (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999). However, the documentation of team interactions, such as the storage of emails and other online communication, has an opposing, moderating effect by reducing perceived risks and feelings of uncertainty (Breuer et al. 2016). Additionally, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) note that features of cultural and linguistic

differences, such as accents, nonverbal cues or language errors that tend to occur in spoken communication due to the faster pace of interaction, remain unnoticed in written communication, which raises the perceived similarity in multicultural teams. Likewise, Klitmøller et al. (2015) suggest that the use of a written medium, such as email, reduces language-related social categorisation and the associated, potentially negative effects on team outcomes.

Moving from the general observation of the connection between language proficiency and perceived trustworthiness in inter-unit relationships of multinational corporations (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman 2007) to the context of teamwork, Tenzer et al. (2014) developed a mid-range theory about how cognitive and emotional reactions to language barriers are related to the formation of trust. Their study on 15 multinational teams working for three German automotive multinational corporations showed that a high disparity in a team's language skills increased the negative impact of language barriers on trust, meaning that relative language skills are more influential than absolute skill levels in terms of trust building in teams. It was also found that the extent of language effects on the members' perceived technical competence was larger in teams with people-oriented tasks than in teams with technical tasks. Another subject of investigation comprised the reasons for incidences of code-switching as well as the consequences of this practice. Tenzer et al. (2014) determined that code-switching in their study was a reaction to language barriers and motivated by language-induced cognitive overload and by emotional impulses. Furthermore, they ascertained that this behaviour can evoke negative attributions that reduce the trustworthiness of speakers and eventually lead to mistrust.

Based on the study's findings, Tenzer et al. (2014) propose that multinational team members attribute low task competence and low reliability to colleagues with relatively lower language skills. This is assumed to be caused by reduced perceived trustworthiness due to language-based attributions of low competence and low reliability. In other words, when team members fail to approach misunderstandings in a differentiated way, they tend to attribute the problem to the team members' competence or work ethic instead of identifying disparity in language skills as the cause. Another proposition of Tenzer et al. (2014) is that anxiety can be a significant factor among non-native speakers of the team language that diminishes their intention to trust team members with relatively higher language skills. This is in line with Neeley's (2013) study on the

case of a French company using ELF where non-native speakers distrust their native English-speaking co-workers because of their superior language skills. In the present study, I want to examine whether Tenzer's et al. (2014) propositions can be applied to a different context that requires more attention, namely multicultural student teamwork. As linguistic misunderstandings were found to occur at all stages of the team development in Tenzer et al. (2014), the fact that the teams of the present study worked together only for a short-time project should not considerably reduce the validity of the findings.

Using the same data set as for the study on trust formation, Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) also examined the impact of language differences on power dynamics in multinational teams. While previous research regarded language differences as preceding power differentials, they approached language as a moderator to power originating from other sources, such as hierarchical position and professional expertise. Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) propose that similar English language skills in a team weaken language effects on general sources of power, whereas the influence of general sources of power is heightened if team members with high language skills possess power and it is weakened if the generally powerful team members possess low language skills. Thus, also in regard to power dynamics, the significance of relative language proficiency in teams is highlighted. The present study will investigate if a similar relationship between language and power can be observed in student teamwork. As mentioned before, it is possible that the power relations in student teams function in a different way and the members might draw on different sources of power due to the different circumstances of the educational context. Besides language skills, Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) also explored different language policies as well as the degree of formality in language structures with respect to the moderation of power dynamics, but these findings are of less relevance for the present study.

### 3 THE PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Research aim and questions

The purpose of my study is to examine perceptions of the role of language proficiency in the communication of multicultural student teams, working in English. While teamwork appears to be a popular method of learning and working, explicit instructions on how to collaborate and how to deal with potential issues seem rare in university courses (e.g. Hansen 2006; Hassanien 2006; Komori-Glatz 2017b). In order to gain insight into the effects of English language proficiency on the team dynamics and how the teams deal with linguistic diversity, the following research question will be answered:

What role does English language proficiency play in multicultural student teamwork?

The overarching research question of how students perceive the role of English proficiency in their teamwork will be approached from various angles and with the help of several subquestions:

1. Do student ELF users conceive native English as an ideal variety?
2. Are varying degrees of English language skills perceived by the team members as a barrier?
3. Based on the students' view, what impact do varying language skills have in terms of trust formation and power relations?

It is expected that language skills are regarded as an important aspect of teamwork but that the degree of relevance might vary depending on a few factors. The first subquestion aims to explore the participants' general attitude towards the English language and its varieties, as this attitude might affect their perception of other language users. The answers to this question will show whether the trends of changing attitudes towards standard language ideology in favour of ELF, observed in other studies, can be also found in the context chosen for this study. The second subquestion deals with the students' views on differences in English language skills in teamwork and their strategies to manage barriers. Comparisons with research on business settings will show whether students face similar challenges as work teams. The same pertains to the third

subquestion, in which the potential effects of varying degrees of English language skills are examined with regards to trust building and power relations. For example, it will be investigated if there is a correlation between the perceived level of a team member's English skills and their trustworthiness or their influence.

A mixed method research approach was chosen for this study, because it provides the possibility to benefit from the strengths of each single approach, to offset to some extent the weaknesses and to find more comprehensive answers to the research questions. As language and teamwork are complex topics, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods added insights that would have been otherwise missed when using only one technique. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explain that the precision of numbers and the meaning of personal stories and quotations can function as complementary puzzle pieces expanding the understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, corroborating findings that draw from both the detailed description of personal experiences and the increased generalisability of the results may enhance the argument for a conclusion (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004).

### **3.2 Data selection and collection**

The data for this study was collected via interviews and an online questionnaire from students studying at a university in Central Finland. This university with nearly 15 000 students forms an adequate research setting, because teamwork is a common method used in courses and because its English-medium study programmes attract a high number of international master's degree students, doctoral students and exchange students, altogether more than 1000 per year. The aim was to find as many teams as possible for the questionnaire and to select volunteers for interviews from the teams with the most interesting constellations of native languages. The research participants were from various academic disciplines and they were part of teams that worked together on different course assignments for several weeks. The team size ranged from three to six members. A suitable team in terms of multiculturalism included at least two different native tongues, i.e. usually at least one Finnish student and one or more students from other

countries. The research participants received a cinema voucher or a lunch voucher as an incentive, paid with the JYU Student Life grant.

### **3.2.1 Research participants**

The data collection consisted of several steps. The first step was to research online for suitable courses taught at this university. Eventually, students from six different courses participated in the study. The criteria for a suitable course were that the teaching language is English, that the study methods include teamwork activities, that a few international students participate in the course and that the course takes place in the spring semester of the academic year 2019/2020. I went systematically through the curricula of the 14 international master's programmes and through the teaching schedules of other English-language courses from all six faculties, which can be found on the website of the university. The next step was to contact the course instructors of the courses which seemed to fulfil my criteria in order to discuss details, to ask for permission and to make arrangements. Some problematic issues at this stage of the data collection were that some instructors did not reply to multiple requests and that some courses turned out to be cancelled for different reasons. Nevertheless, the instructors of three courses kindly invited me to visit their lectures to present briefly my research and to ask for voluntary participants. I collected the contact details of the interested students and got in touch with them via email towards the end of their courses. Moreover, the instructors shared the link to the questionnaire also with the whole course.

A more far-reaching event during the data collection process was the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications in form of restrictions on the university's day-to-day operations in order to prevent the spread of the virus. In March 2020, the contact teaching was interrupted and switched to distance learning until the end of the academic year. As a consequence, the learning methods of many courses were changed and, for example, the group work activities were omitted in the online learning environment. Since the collaboration with some courses, which had already been confirmed, was cancelled, I decided to incorporate also teamwork in the form of virtual exchange in my study in order to increase the number of research participants. Even though I invested a considerable amount of time into the search for courses and into the communication with the instructors, only two more courses agreed to participate. The response rate from these two online

courses, which I contacted only via email, was noticeably lower than from the first courses, which I could visit personally. For this reason, a virtual exchange project involving teamwork between students from the Finnish university, a Dutch university and a Polish university was included as well and, thus, some replies to the questionnaire were received from students that were not enrolled at the Finnish university.

In the following, the team tasks in the different courses will be described briefly. While the content and the particulars of the assignments differed, the working methods were somewhat similar and comparable. The precise course details are withheld in order to protect the privacy of the participants. Two courses were part of a master's programme in the field of corporate environmental management (CEM) and the team assignment was to conduct a case study. One focused on the management of the corporate strategy for a sustainable business and the other one on the analysis of the sustainable consumption and marketing of a product or service. The deliverables were a written report and an oral presentation. Three other courses belonged to a master's programme and a study module in the field of intercultural communication (ICC), welcoming also students from other departments and bachelor's students. As the first of these courses took place before the social distancing measures, the team assignment included weekly reading circles meetings, which needed to be reported in memos, as well as the analysis of a get-together outside class, which needed to be reported in written form and presented in class. The teamwork in the other two courses took place online and the teams had to work on weekly work packages, which involved the discussion of reading material and collaborative writing. The virtual exchange project (VE) was open for all students of the Department of Language and Communication Studies, regardless of their year of study, and the main task was to design a city break offer for a particular group of tourists. The teams had to report on their weekly virtual meetings and produce promotional material in a chosen format.

Completing the team assignments was compulsory in order to pass the courses. Additional individual assignments are irrelevant for the present study and are, therefore, not explained. The time period of the teamwork varied between three and eight weeks depending on the specific course. Apart from one course, all of the teams were formed by the instructors and not by the students. As some courses dealt also content-wise with topics such as intercultural

communication, those students might be more self-reflective and have a different attitude towards certain topics than students who have not dealt with this in their courses.

The survey was completed by 51 students (61% female, 35% male, 4% other) from the six courses, and eight students (50% female, 50% male) from three of these courses were interviewed (see Table 1 and 2). The voluntary interviewees were selected based on their diverse native languages and their team compositions. Their average age was 25 years. The age of the survey respondents ranged from 20 to 47 years, whereby the large majority was under 30 and the average age was 24.7 years. Eleven different native languages were represented among the survey participants and five languages among the interviewees. Finnish, the official language of the country where the data were collected, constituted in both cases the largest language group with around 50%. The majority of both participant groups, around 65%, was purchasing a master's degree at the time of the data collection whereas the remainder was studying in a bachelor's degree programme. Most of the participants studied at the Faculty of Business and Economics and at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Table 1: Profile of the interviewees

Respondent	Native language	Age	Gender	Course	Native languages in the team	Study Background
R1	Hebrew	28	Male	CEM	German, Finnish, Finnish	Master's degree Business and Economics
R2	Somali	32	Male	CEM	Finnish, Finnish	Master's degree Business and Economics
R3	Catalan	24	Female	CEM	Finnish, Finnish, Finnish, Finnish	Master's degree Business and Economics
R4	Chinese	23	Female	ICC	German, Finnish, Finnish, Finnish, Russian	Master's degree on exchange Humanities and Social Sciences
R5	Finnish	22	Female	ICC	English, Finnish, Finnish	Bachelor's degree Humanities and Social Sciences
R6	Finnish	25	Male	ICC	Finnish, Finnish, German	Bachelor's degree Humanities and Social Sciences

R7	Finnish	24	Female	VE	Dutch, Dutch, Polish, Polish, Polish	Master's degree Humanities and Social Sciences
R8	Finnish	21	Male	VE	Bulgarian, Polish, Polish	Bachelor's degree Mathematics and Science

Table 2: Profile of the Questionnaire Participants

Variables	Survey Respondents n = 51
<i>Native language</i>	
Catalan	2 (4%)
Chinese	1 (2%)
Dutch	3 (6%)
English	2 (4%)
German	5 (10%)
Finnish	27 (53%)
Hebrew	1 (2%)
Newari	1 (2%)
Polish	4 (8%)
Russian	2 (4%)
Somali	1 (2%)
no answer	2 (4%)
<i>Age</i>	
20 - 22	16 (31%)
23 - 25	18 (35%)
26 - 29	13 (26%)
33 - 35	2 (4%)
47	1 (2%)
not specified	1 (2%)
<i>Gender</i>	
female	31 (61%)
male	18 (35%)
other	2 (4%)
<i>Current education</i>	
Bachelor's degree	18 (35%)
Master's degree	33 (65%)
<i>Faculty</i>	
Business and Economics	25 (49%)
Education and Psychology	1 (2%)
Humanities and Social Sciences	20 (39%)
Mathematics and Science	2 (4%)
not specified	3 (6%)

### **3.2.2 Interview and questionnaire as data collection tools**

The data were collected with the help of two different research techniques. Interviews seemed to be the best way to gain a thorough understanding of the perception and experiences of the team members. Dörnyei (2007) states that the familiarity of interviewing as a common communication routine makes it a versatile and often used research instrument. The purpose of the interview was to let the student describe their perception of the team processes, particularly with regards to language. In the analysis of the data, the possible meaning of the described phenomena will be discussed and interpreted. Each participant was interviewed individually in a single session lasting between 22 and 44 minutes, with an average of 31 minutes. The interviewees were expected to be more willing to share personal experiences and opinions in an individual interview than in a focus group, where they could be dominated by other participants despite the potentially inspiring nature of a group setting. While the first five interviews were conducted in a meeting room on the university campus, the other three interviews had to be conducted via video calls due to the social distancing measures. The interviews were recorded with a recording device and transcribed afterwards to ensure that nothing would be overlooked and also the details of all utterances could be analysed.

The interview questions were planned in advance and consisted basically of two parts. The first group of questions dealt with some background information about the participants, their use of and attitude towards English, their self-reported language skills and their general experience with teamwork. Dörnyei (2007) points out that an easy beginning and an interested attitude are important in order to create a both trustful and relaxed atmosphere. The second part of the interview was related to the participants' specific teamwork experiences gained in the course selected for this study. This included questions regarding the team composition, the members' English skills and their impact on the team communication, the team performance, trust building and power relations. The content questions about the respondents' background, experiences, feelings and opinions served the goal of gaining insight into their overall view of the phenomenon. Following Dörnyei's (2007) recommendations, the questions were short, simple and clear, whereas leading questions and ambiguous words were avoided. Moreover, I tried to keep a neutral stance while showing an appropriate amount of empathetic understanding when the interviewee shared a personal story. The same list of prepared questions served as a guide in

all interviews in order to achieve comparability between the respondents. However, the interviews were semi-structured, which means that while the questions provided a framework, it was also possible to explore possibly upcoming issues more thoroughly (Dörnyei 2007). Probing questions were used for clarification and elaboration on details in order to deepen responses. This interview type seemed suitable, as my broad overview of the topic gained through the literature review enabled me, the interviewer, to develop questions beforehand, but the format remained open-ended in order to not restrict the answers in any way.

In addition to the profound interviews, a questionnaire-based survey was used in order to get a more general idea of the viewpoints from a larger group of students. The questionnaire is an effective research instrument, as one can collect quickly a large amount of data in a systematic way. It was created on the electronic survey system Webropol and the participants could access it via a link. An important aspect of both the questionnaire and the interview, particularly from the respondent's perspective, was to convey that my interest was in understanding the students' language use and the team dynamics and not in evaluating their proficiency.

Similarly to the interview, the questionnaire consisted of factual and attitudinal questions, yielding information about demographic characteristics and the language learning history of the respondents as well as about attitudes and opinions. The questions asked for specific information and several response options were given to choose from. There were no open-ended questions, because these would have required a more profound engagement with the topic on behalf of the participants (Dörnyei 2007). However, a clarification question was used in some cases asking for a response alternative in a multiple-choice item. Furthermore, Likert scaling was used to measure the evaluation of statements. The same wording advice concerning clarity and accessibility mentioned with respect to interviewing also applies to the language used in questionnaires. Thus, the items were short and simple without any ambiguous or loaded words or constructions. According to Dörnyei (2007), an appealing and professional design of the questionnaire influences positively the participant's willingness to answer in a reliable and valid manner. Moreover, he explains that classification questions concerning the demographic characteristics of the respondents should be asked at the end of the questionnaire, since they convey a feeling of bureaucracy and personal matters might cause a reluctant attitude.

Both the questionnaire and the interview guide can be found in the appendices. They were tested by a few volunteers before the beginning of the data collection and the feedback was used to revise them. The questions were partly inspired by previous studies carried out by Tenzer and Pudelko (2017), Komori-Glatz (2017b), Tenzer et al. (2014) and Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012). The two data collection methods were used in parallel at the end of the courses in the spring semester of the academic year 2019/2020.

### **3.2.3 Ethical considerations**

Besides searching for respondents and planning the interview and questionnaire structure and content, considering ethical issues also belonged to the preparation of the data collection. The personal data that were collected from the participants needed to be treated very carefully in order to protect the privacy of the individuals. Thus, the contact details of the participants have been stored securely and they will be deleted after the thesis has been completed. Moreover, all responses were treated as confidential and the interviewees were allocated codes instead of their actual names in order to prevent their identification. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent. The participants had the opportunity to ask questions and the right to withdraw at any time. The name of the university and the course details are also withheld in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

Three documents were prepared according to the EU General Data Protection Regulation: a research notification, a privacy notice and a consent form. All of the three documents were checked and approved by the data protection officer of the university. The potential participants were informed orally about the research project during the class visits and they received the written research notification. Moreover, the research notification as well as the privacy notice were shared with all participants via the mailing lists and the online learning platforms of the courses. The online questionnaire began with a short text informing the respondents about the data protection and their rights. It was stated that by completing the questionnaire the respondent confirms that the information can be used for the research study. The interviewees signed a printed consent form at the beginning of the interviews.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

The data were analysed from a sociolinguistic perspective. Due to the mixed methods research approach, two methods of analysis were utilised for the two data sets. The methods of qualitative content analysis were used to analyse the data generated through the interviews. This means that the interviewees' responses were categorised and both similarities and differences in the statements were sought. Moreover, different themes were identified. The findings were interpreted and illustrated with examples. The questionnaire, on the other hand, is a quantitative approach producing numeric results, which also needed to be described and interpreted. Furthermore, the statistical results provided a more general view on the topic and were compared with the other data and previous research. The two research methods are complementary, since the qualitative analysis can, for instance, shed light on the direction of causality, which may be determined based on statistical results (Pfenninger & Neuser 2019). Kuckartz (2012) notes that preknowledge is helpful and to some extent necessary to contextualise a text and to understand its meaning(s). Hence, my personal experience as an international student at a Finnish university and my studies in Intercultural Communication contributed to my understanding of the phenomena and were beneficial in the analysis as well.

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative content analysis**

Content analysis is a research technique that is used to draw valid conclusions, which can be replicated by other researchers, from texts and other visual and audio types of content, while taking into account the respective social context in which the data are embedded (Krippendorff 2019). While the origins of this research method are quantitative, Schreier (2012:3) specifies that the goal of qualitative content analysis is “to systematically describe the meaning” of qualitative material. Describing the phenomenon under study in a concise and general form serves as the basis for its conceptualisation. It is a suitable method to analyse the transcribed interview answers of the present study, since this kind of data requires interpretation (Schreier 2012). Mayring (2010) points out that the coding frame, consisting of categories that are formed to structure the data, is a central instrument of the analysis. Main categories cover the aspects on which the study focuses, and subcategories specify the information provided in the interview answers concerning the main categories (Schreier 2012). The coding frame and dividing the analysis into single

interpretation steps contribute to the comparability and reliability of the results, as it enables others to track and verify the analysis (Mayring 2010). This counteracts the risk of subjectivity, which belongs to the interpretative nature of every qualitative study.

As in every research project, the research question is also central to qualitative content analysis, and the objective of the analysis, i.e. answering the research question, should be kept in mind at all times (Kuckartz 2014). Hence, only those parts of the material that reflect the interests of the research questions were examined. Many researchers agree on the point that the systematic way of working guided by explicit rules is characteristic for qualitative content analysis (e.g. Schreier 2012; Mayring 2010; Kuckartz 2014). In line with this, the same sequence of steps was followed in the analysis and the consistency of the coding was checked in order to assess the reliability. At the same time, flexibility is a key feature of this method of analysis, as the coding frame needed to be tailored to the data in addition to some concept-driven categories, which originated from the theoretical framework and the interview guide (Schreier 2012). Furthermore, reducing the data and complexity belongs to the process of qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). While concrete information on specific passages was dropped, insights on the relation of different parts of the data were gained.

Schreier (2012) points out that the coding frame needs to meet several conditions. It should be unidimensional, which means that every main category deals with only one aspect of the data. Moreover, the subcategories should be mutually exclusive so that every unit of coding falls under only one subcategory of a certain main category. Additionally, the coding frame needs to be exhaustive, meaning that every unit of coding fits to at least one subcategory. Data-driven categories are also saturated because every subcategory is used at least once, whereas concept-driven categories may remain empty.

Building the coding frame began with selecting the relevant parts of the transcribed data. The next steps were structuring the coding frame with the help of main categories and generating subcategories. As mentioned before, the categories were formed partly conceptually and mainly empirically, i.e. they emerged from both previous knowledge and the data. A provisional framework consisting of a few main categories to roughly categorise the material was derived

from the research question, the interview guide and the theoretical background (Kuckartz 2014). Schreier's (2012) data-driven way *subsumption*, which complies largely with Mayring's (2010) *content structuring* and Kuckartz' (2014) *thematic* technique, was used to create subcategories and to refine the framework after the main categories had been chosen. This strategy involves examining relevant passages and either adding them to existing subcategories or creating new subcategories until no new concepts are found. After that, the categories needed to be defined with the help of a name, a description, examples and optionally with decision rules in case categories overlapped (Schreier 2012). The final step was to revise the frame and to expand it where needed.

Before the coding frame was used, the data had to be segmented, that is divided into small units of coding fitting into one subcategory each (Schreier 2012). Thereby, it was assured that all relevant material had been taken into account and that there was a clear research focus. Moreover, it enabled the comparison of the coding later on. Each interview constitutes a unit of analysis, which contains several units of coding. The part of the surrounding data that helps to understand the meaning of a unit of coding is referred to as a context unit (Schreier 2012). A thematic criterion was used to divide the data where topic changes occurred.

Before the main analysis phase, Schreier (2012) recommends to try out the coding frame in a pilot phase. By applying the coding frame to a part of the data, it was possible to check the consistency and validity and make adjustments where needed. During the main analysis phase, all relevant parts of the data were coded, which means that every unit of coding was assigned to a category. This was done with the aid of the method described by Ose (2016), using the software Microsoft Excel and Word to structure the qualitative data. As Kuckartz (2014) and other methodological guide books suggest, memos served as a tool to record thoughts, ideas and assumptions the researcher had during the research process.

The final phase was the category-based analysis and the presentation of the results. Based on the elucidation of the material, it was possible to draw meaningful conclusions about the phenomenon. Mayring (2010) notes that the interpretation also needs to be theory-driven. The findings will be presented in qualitative style through continuous text to describe the categories

or cases, which is one of Schreier's (2012) proposed strategies. In fact, both the results from the interviews and the findings from the questionnaire data will be compared and contrasted in the text, and the different point of views of the participants will be illustrated with the help of quotations.

### **3.3.2 Quantitative analysis**

Similarly to the procedure of the analysis of the interview data, the analysis of the questionnaire data also consisted of several steps, yet in a different way. The aim of quantitative analysis is to interpret the data with numeric variables and statistics. Due to the large size of the quantitative data set, the means of descriptive statistics were used "to meaningfully describe and summarize" the basic features (Baffoe-Djan & Smith, 2019: 398). The descriptive statistics were generated with the software SPSS. Baffoe-Djan and Smith (2019) give an overview of the functions of the most commonly used measures. With the help of measures of frequencies, such as frequency distribution and relative frequency, it can be demonstrated how often particular values appear in the data. Moreover, measures of central tendency, such as the mean or the median, summarise the data in order to indicate the central point in a set of values. Measures of spread, on the other hand, indicate the dispersion of the data points, such as the standard deviation. The descriptive statistics of this study are presented in text, tables and statistical graphics, which were created with Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Different types of charts are used to visualise rankings or different groups.

Baffoe-Djan and Smith (2019) explain that there are several factors affecting the decision which descriptive results to include in the report. Similarly to the content analysis, the research question plays the most significant role in this regard, as only those statistics that are relevant for answering the question will be presented thoroughly. Furthermore, essential information provided by descriptives demonstrates transparency. Descriptive features, such as background characteristics of the participants, are also of high relevance when comparing or contrasting the findings with previous studies in the field and when using a theoretical framework for interpretation. Moreover, descriptive statistics form the basis for inferential statistical analyses, as information on relevant characteristics is necessary to confirm if the data are suitable for subsequent analysis and if the findings are meaningful.

As the present study aims to examine the effects of language skills on teamwork, the last part of the quantitative analysis deals with the evaluation of the relationship between different variables. According to Eddington (2015), a correlation coefficient assesses the strength and direction of an association between two variables. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to measure the linear relationship between interval variables in this study. In the case of ordinal variables, Spearman's rank-order correlation provided a measure of the monotonic relationship. The results were interpreted according to Eddington's (2015) explanation. A value of 0 signifies no relationship and the closer the value of the correlation coefficient is to 1, the stronger the relationship is. A positive correlation coefficient indicates that both variables increase and decrease together. If the values of the variables move in opposite directions, the coefficient is negative. In order to determine the statistical significance of a result, the typical significance level of .05 was used in this study. This means that the chance of false conclusions due to random error is 5% (or less) (Eddington 2015). Despite this high probability of a correct representation of the reality, it is important to bear in mind that statistics do not provide certainty and correlation alone does not allow inferences on the causality of a relationship. The mixed methods research approach helped to gain a more truthful understanding of the topic by investigating it from different perspectives.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The structure of this chapter largely follows the order of the survey and interview questions, which can be found in Appendix 1 and 2. In Sections 4.1 and 4.2, questions of general nature about the background of the participants are analysed and Section 4.3 deals with the participants' experiences gained in the team projects of the specific courses chosen for this study. Numbers and percentages refer mainly to the answers given in the survey, whereas examples were given in the interviews. In those cases where several interviewees shared a similar experience or view, the best phrased answer was chosen as an example for this research report. The examples are labelled with the code allocated to the respective interviewee (Respondent 1–8, abbreviated as R1–8), as introduced in Table 1 in Chapter 3.2.1.

### 4.1 English language

#### 4.1.1 Language use and skills

In addition to the general demographic information of the study participants, reported in Chapter 3, it was important to find out about their relationship to the English language in order to gain a complete picture of their background. The majority of the questionnaire respondents (64%) started learning English at the age of 8, 9 or 10. Two participants (4%) answered that English is their native language. The other answers were evenly distributed between the age of 3 and 15. Concerning their regular use of English, the large majority of the students indicated that they use English on a daily basis (see Table 3). 10% use English weekly, and 6% in each case uses English a few times a week or a month.

Table 3. How often do you use English?

	n	%
<b>daily</b>	40	78%
<b>a few times a week</b>	3	6%
<b>weekly</b>	5	10%

Table 4. In which contexts do you regularly use English?

	n	%
<b>studies</b>	49	96%
<b>work</b>	22	43%
<b>free time</b>	41	80%

<b>a few times a month</b>	3	6%
<b>monthly</b>	0	0%
<b>less than once a month</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	51	100%

<b>other, what?</b>	6	11%
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Almost all of the respondents stated that they regularly use English in their studies. 80% use English also in their free time, whereas less than half selected the option work (see Table 4). Other answers given into the free text field, such as social media, music promotion, church, foreign friends, international relationship and games, are considered to belong to one of the default answer options. The interview responses were very similar to the survey results. All of the participants use English to a smaller or greater extent in their studies and in their free-time. Likewise, English-language work experience seemed rare among the interviewees.

Table 5. Future Career

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>somewhat agree</b>	<b>neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>somewhat disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
I can see myself working in an international environment in the future.	74%	18%	4%	2%	2%	0%

Nevertheless, Table 5 shows that almost all of the survey participants can see themselves working in an international environment in the future. The interview responses were even more positive. Even though a couple of bachelor's students expressed indecisiveness in terms of their career plans, all of the participants showed interest in a workplace in an international environment. These clear results are probably related to this study's selection of courses, which are targeted at students with this kind of international interest, as the following example by Respondent 3 shows:

R3: Even if I come back to my home country, I would like to use English or some other foreign language in my daily job or work for a multinational company with colleagues from other parts of the world.

The participants were asked to evaluate their own English language skills by selecting the most suitable description out of these four options: proficient (1), advanced (2), intermediate (3), elementary (4). The overall English language proficiency of the respondents can be considered high, since the mean or average score was 1.7 (see Figure 1). A salient difference emerged between the rating of their receptive skills, namely listening and reading understanding, and their productive language skills, speaking and writing (see Table 6). While the former was assessed by more than half of the respondents as proficient and by around one third as advanced, the evaluation of the latter was vice versa. One third of the respondents evaluated their productive skills as proficient whereas the option “advanced” was selected by half of them. Furthermore, speaking appeared to be the most difficult skill, since it had the highest average value (1.9) and 4% even described their skill as elementary, which was not chosen for any of the other skill types. A weakness in speaking was also mentioned by most of the interviewees (see examples by R5 and R3 below), and two potential reasons for this were identified. Besides a lack of practice, the group context was regarded as an influential factor.

R5: Maybe in speaking, because I don't speak English that often, it kind of depends on the topic.

R3: But if I'm in a group, maybe it gets like more I don't know like you have to interact like more quickly or something. So then it gets a little bit harder for me.

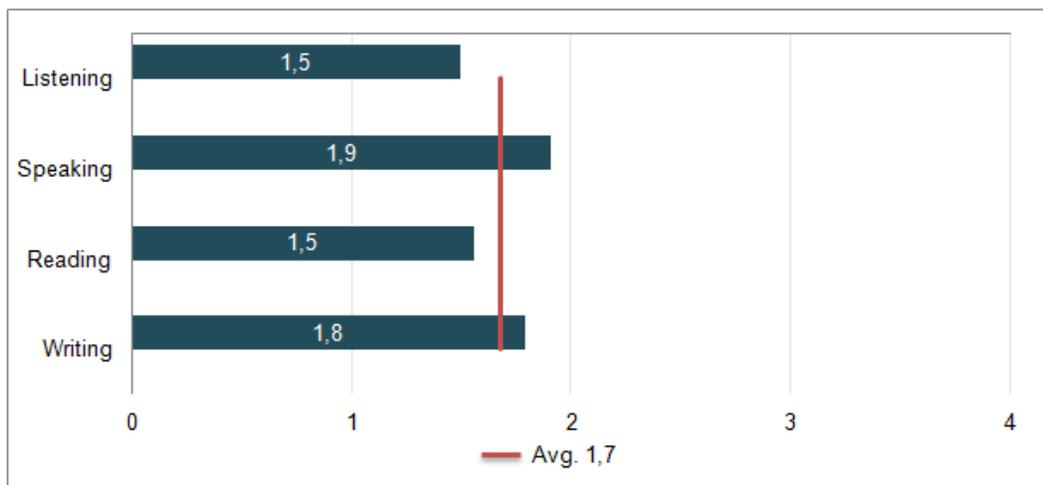


Figure 1. The respondents' self-assessed English skills

Table 6. The respondents' self-assessed English skills

	proficient	advanced	intermediate	elementary	Average
<b>Listening</b>	59%	33%	8%	0%	1,49
<b>Speaking</b>	32%	50%	14%	4%	1,90
<b>Reading</b>	55%	35%	10%	0%	1,55
<b>Writing</b>	33%	55%	12%	0%	1,78

#### 4.1.2 Attitudes towards English

In order to gain insight into the students' attitude towards English, which might have an impact on the role that language skills play in their view, they were asked to rate a statement about their goal in English language learning and another statement about a potentially ideal variety of the English language. Table 7 shows that 39% of the questionnaire respondents agreed strongly and 37% agreed to some extent that their goal in English language learning is to achieve proficiency at native level. The remainder was spread on the other answer options: 12% disagreed somewhat or strongly and another 12% had no clear opinion.

Table 7. Attitudes towards English

		Native English is the ideal variety of the English language.						Total
		strongly agree	somewhat agree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	I don't know	
My goal in English language learning is to achieve proficiency at native level.	strongly agree	8%	17%	6%	4%	0%	4%	39%
	somewhat agree	2%	16%	6%	9%	4%	0%	37%
	neither agree nor disagree	2%	2%	4%	0%	0%	0%	7%
	somewhat disagree	0%	0%	0%	2%	4%	4%	10%
	strongly disagree	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%
	I don't know	0%	0%	0%	2%	2%	0%	4%
Total		12%	35%	16%	17%	12%	8%	100%

In contrast to this rather unambiguous view of the majority of the survey participants, the answers of the interviewees were less focused on nativity; perhaps, because the interview question addressed English learning goals more generally and did not contain the word native. Apart from one person without any learning goal due to his self-reported proficiency, all of the interviewees aim at improving their skills in speaking or writing but not necessarily up to a native level, as pointed out by the following respondent:

R2: Maybe advanced is enough for me, because I already have other skills and if I can get advanced skill in speaking, so I say I will be confident.

Achieving native-like proficiency was also mentioned explicitly by some of the interviewees even though the feasibility of this goal was questioned (see examples by R1 and R3 below). Thus, it can be concluded that everyone regarded it as important to have or to acquire at least high language skills.

R1: Ideally of course to be as good as natives... If I would have enough time to practice it constantly...

R3: I don't think I can ever like speak like in this accent..., but yeah of course I would like to.

Compared to the first statement in the questionnaire, the opinion on the second statement was a little less clear and the Spearman correlation coefficient, which was computed to determine the relationship between the two statements, indicated only a moderate positive correlation ( $r_s = .422$ ,  $n = 51$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Those participants who idealize native English to some extent form a relative majority, but the dominance of this traditional view is questioned by the number of both opposing and ambivalent attitudes. The contingency table (Table 7) shows that those students who do not aim at achieving proficiency at native level also do not agree with the idea of native English as the ideal variety. Furthermore, there are some students who do not regard native English as the ideal variety despite their personal goal of proficiency at native level. However, the wide dispersion of values ( $SD = 1.5$ ) in addition to the rather large proportion of respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed or who stated that they do not know could be also an indicator of some confusion with the question or the wording.

In most of the interviews, except the ones with English minor students, the participants were not that familiar with the concepts “variety” or “Standard English” and needed further explanation to understand the intended meaning. Two kinds of opinions stood out in particular although some

students shared their thoughts on both perspectives, which shows the complexity of the question. Firstly, a few interviewees described British or American English as ideal and cited their prevalence in the media and in educational contexts as reasons for their influence on people, as seen in the following examples (R6 and R8). A standard model of the language was considered to be beneficial for learners.

R6: British or American English they're some sort of ideals that people strive for ... because they're most used in media for example.

R8: I think it's good to have a common standard [in schools] like the British English. At least that's what I gravitate towards.

In contrast to the traditional view, some of these respondents as well as the rest of the interviewees stated that intelligibility and general communication skills matter more for them than correctness according to Standard English. As illustrated in the examples below (R4 and R7), it was also pointed out that different accents are equal and that this is what they would teach English learning students:

R4: Let's say the accent what we would call Chinese accent usually influences the confidence of my students when they speak English. So I just told them actually there are different kinds of accents in America as well. ... So there is no need to feel like less confident when you speak, the main point is just to express yourself. ... When you speak something in spoken English, I don't think there is like better ones or less ones.

R7: English belongs to everyone. So no matter if it's your like second language or first language or foreign language. I think the most important thing is that you are understood and people like you understand other people.

A further point of view was contributed by Respondent 5, cited below, who did not recognise any ideal in the language of native speakers and emphasized and valued the endeavour of English learners instead:

R5: So I think there isn't an ideal. It's just the fact that if you learn it, I think that's in my opinion much better and stuff like that. Because it isn't a natural thing for you and you have to actually learn it and put thought into it versus the people who have a native tongue that is English.

## 4.2 Teamwork

### 4.2.1 Learning about teamwork

The other crucial part of the participants’ background consists of their general experiences and opinions related to teamwork. Half of the respondents have learnt somewhat about working in teams in the courses of their study programme and a little less has learnt much (see Table 8). A few students (6%) stated that they learnt only little and one person answered that they learnt too much. It is not clear if the respondents meant that they learnt through practical experiences or whether this topic was covered in guidelines or theoretical parts of the teaching. However, the latter was barely mentioned in the interviews. Apart from one student who told about a course that dealt content-wise with group work skills, the interviewees remembered only isolated incidences of guidelines or none at all, as described in the quote (R5) below. Based on the interviewees’ experiences, it is therefore more likely that also the learning of the questionnaire respondents happened gradually through practical group work activities.

R5: Like of course there have been like I can’t remember the word right now like guidelines what to do but not how to work in a group.

All of the interviewees considered teamwork as an enriching way of learning and gave examples of positive outcomes, such as learning to get along with different people, receiving and giving feedback, solving problems and developing new ideas together. One student depicted it as follows:

R6: I think it’s an efficient way of learning, because other team members kind of like strengthen your weaknesses. They can show like a good critique of your own thinking.

However, the interviewees noticed that the success depends on the team constellation, since, for example, different grade expectations or free riders may impede the teamwork.

Table 8. Learning about teamwork

	n	%
<b>too much</b>	1	2%
<b>much</b>	21	41%

Table 9. Experience in English-speaking teamwork

	n	%
<b>very much</b>	23	45%
<b>much</b>	15	29%

<b>somewhat</b>	26	51%
<b>little</b>	3	6%
<b>too little</b>	0	0%
<b>I don't know</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	51	100%

<b>some</b>	8	16%
<b>little</b>	5	10%
<b>none</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	51	100%

Regarding their previous experience in English-speaking teamwork, all of the survey respondents answered that they have gained experience to some extent. Almost half of all respondents had gained very much experience and about one third had gained much experience (see Table 9). Having gained some experience was selected by 16%, and 10% answered that they have gained little experience. In the interviews, it became clear that most of this teamwork probably took place in the university and that those students that have more English-language courses naturally have more experience in English teamwork. Teamwork experience in English outside the education context, on the other hand, was mentioned only by one interviewee. This is probably related to the fact that the research participants have in general little English-language work experience.

#### 4.2.2 Feelings in team communication

A minority of in total 18%, including survey respondents both with high and with low English skill levels (as the contingency table showed), expressed that the need to speak a foreign language in team communication makes them feel anxious to some extent. By contrast, Table 10 shows that 34% disagreed somewhat with the statement and 44% disagreed strongly. The latter group of respondents could be probably represented by statements of interviewees describing their feelings in team communication as *fine, okay, nice, natural, easy, convenient, confident, comfortable* or even *fun*.

Table 10. Feelings in team communication

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>somewhat agree</b>	<b>neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>somewhat disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
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The need to speak a foreign language in team communication makes me feel anxious.	6%	12%	4%	34%	44%	0%
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While all of the interviewees used one of these positive or neutral terms, each of them also mentioned an example of slightly negative feelings. These answers may be divided into two groups: students that focused on themselves when thinking about this question and students that focused on others. The former acknowledged feelings of discomfort and nervousness, since their limited proficiency in the foreign language, such as English or Swedish, impairs their expressiveness. Moreover, summoning up extra energy to generate sentences and ideas in the foreign language was depicted as hard and exhausting, such as by Respondent 4:

R4: The first two weeks I think it was really tiring or exhausting for me to like speak English all the day.

However, all interviewees agreed on the point that the feeling when using a foreign language in team communication depends on a couple of factors. Based on their own experiences, they inferred that their degree of familiarity with the topic of the conversation affects their confidence and that regular and frequent use of the language increases their feeling of comfort. Two students described it in the following way:

R3: Maybe at the beginning, it was like a little bit hard to like start like having fluidity. Now it's like it's become a little bit easier. Yeah, it's just practice, so yeah it's gotten a bit better.

R4: Sometimes like if they are talking about the topics I am not very familiar with, then I have less confidence to like speak my own opinion. But when we are talking about something I am familiar with, I would be confident to like share my opinion, share what I know.

The second group of answers comprises different examples that demonstrate that the speaker's feelings also depend on their perception of their interlocutors, i.e. their teammates. For example, one interviewee told that she tends to compare her own language skills with her teammates' skills and that she likes to learn from others through this. Another student (R5), on the other hand, explained that she finds conversations with native English speakers intimidating as she feels a need to speak perfect English, whereas she perceives conversations with non-native speakers as less pressuring because they also make mistakes:

R5: So speaking English with someone who is native is a bit different because you know they are like efficient in that language and you I am not in the same way.

Another perspective was depicted by two interviewees, one of them cited below (R2), who had experienced slight feelings of unease in teamwork constellations with members who had different language skills than they have, worrying whether these team members are able to understand their speech.

R2: It's not like just say what you want, but people should understand what you are saying, so that's the challenge.

The survey and interview answers showed that the need to speak a foreign language in a multicultural team can provoke various feelings among the team members. While anxiety does not seem to play a big role in this context for most of the participants, the number of negative examples should be kept in mind and perhaps be addressed in preparatory teamwork training.

#### 4.2.3 Important qualities of team members

The survey participants were asked which three features they would priorities in selecting if they had the chance to choose the participants in their multicultural team. The opinions varied and all of the suggested options except agreeableness (0%) were chosen by several participants (see Figure 2). The sum of the percentages exceeds 100%, because the respondents were asked to select three options. The number of respondents to this question is only 35, since some participants selected more than three options and, therefore, their answers needed to be excluded from the analysis.

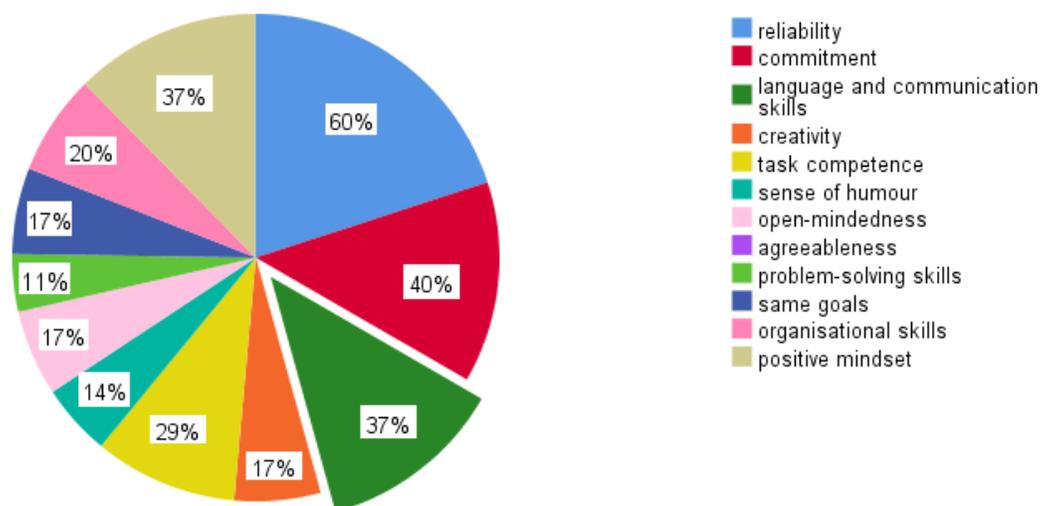


Figure 2. Important features of the members of a multicultural team

The most important feature appeared to be reliability, which was selected by more than half of the respondents. It was followed by commitment (40%), language and communication skills (37%) and a positive mindset (37%). Task competence was considered important by around one third of the respondents, while around one fifth and a little less picked organisational skills, open-mindedness, creativity and having the same goals. The least valued qualities appeared to be sense of humour (14%) and problem-solving skills (11%). The variety of answers might be related to different experiences that some participants have gained and others have not gained, since the significance of a certain characteristic is sometimes only noticed when it is missing.

Most of these qualities were also mentioned by the interviewees when asked about the most important qualities of the members in a successful, multicultural team. However, the most selected feature of the questionnaire, reliability, did not come up. The students' examples made clear that many of these features, such as same goals, task competence or humour, can play a role in every kind of teamwork. Two feature groups, on the other hand, seem to be of particular relevance for the success of a multicultural team, namely open-mindedness or respect as well as language and communication skills, which are thought to imply more facets than pure proficiency in the common language. The following examples illustrate the students' diverse, yet somewhat similar views:

R2: You need to respect different cultures, because when you are working in a team, people may come from different cultures. And what you say might hurt the other member, so the same kind of respect should be there. There should be also, team members should also be good listeners. They should listen to each member of the team, what they're suggesting and what they're saying. ... And also giving chance to others. You should give opportunity to others to say.

R6: I think openness to other people's ideas. And also I think the other important thing is to communicate clearly. So for example if you're in a team and if you have like a for example if you're speaking in English using English as the lingua franca of the team and for example you would be less proficient in English, then it would be important that you communicate this fact to the team that you are not as proficient, so they can like take it into account.

R7: And then I mean obviously you need to have some like same language how to communicate. But then kind of like how could I put this. The last thing that is very important is that you need to kind of like be aware that there might be misunderstandings and then know how to conquer those misunderstandings, how like to work with those possible misunderstandings.

It can be seen from the above that aside from having skills in the common language, communicating clearly to ensure that everyone shares the same knowledge concerning a certain topic is another essential feature of the members of a multicultural team. For example, in the case

of deficient language skills, possible solutions can be found to deal with this weakness before misunderstandings cause major issues. Furthermore, it was suggested that it is important that the team members know and employ a turn-taking strategy where all members have the same chance to speak and where everyone listens to each other during the turns. In addition to taking steps to prevent communication problems, the ability to deal with misunderstandings in case they occur was also regarded as significant.

## 4.3 Language in Teamwork

### 4.3.1 Team compositions and performance

The following part of the analysis deals with the concrete teamwork experiences that the students gained in the courses selected for this study and the role of language skills in them. As mentioned before, the teams consisted of three to six members, at least two of whom had differing mother tongues. The teams were formed by the teachers in all but one of the courses, and the team relationships had different starting points. Figure 3 shows that half of the questionnaire respondents did not know their teammates at all before the course started, while 16% knew them little and 10% knew them somewhat, such as classmates from previous courses. 21% knew their teammates well and 4% knew them very well, such as close friends. It is also possible that the respondents knew one or several of their teammates but not all, as the interviewees explained.

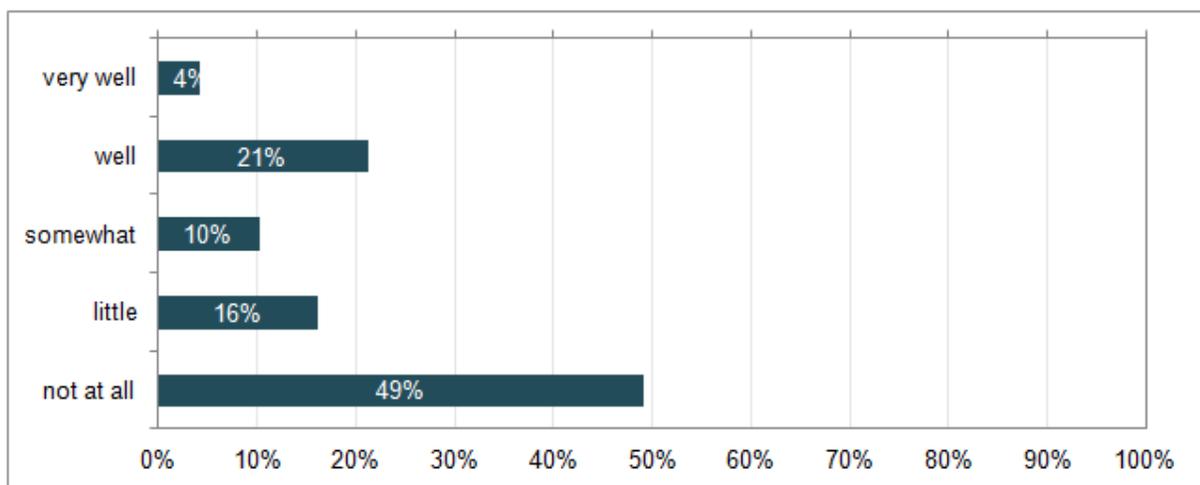


Figure 3. How well did you know your teammates before the course started?

All in all, it seems like the teamwork was a positive experience for the survey respondents, since 70% rated the performance of the team as successful and 26% as very successful. 4% found the team performance neither successful nor unsuccessful, and no one considered it unsuccessful. Similarly, all of the interviewees were positive about their team performance despite some room for improvement. Moreover, they identified several factors that affected the performance of their teams. The text matrix below (Table 11) consists of categories of the coding frame, which was prepared for the qualitative content analysis, and examples that illustrate how factors such as time, team relationship, motivation or language skills can function as a positive impact in one team and as a negative impact in another team.

Table 11. Factors influencing the team performance

	Positive Example	Negative Example
Scheduling and Organising	R3: We set our own deadlines and then we worked individually and that I think that was a good thing to do.	R1: I was personally a little busy, so I didn't I couldn't have spent too much time on it.  R5: And we were kinda a last-minute team that we didn't do anything beforehand and stuff like that.
Interpersonal Relations	R8: I think we were all kind of on the same wavelength. ... He had great jokes.	R4: Maybe we can be like emotionally closer to each other. ... I think actually I expected that we can be to some extent good friends maybe... It turned out not to be such good friends.  R5: But maybe like in the personal relationship, I'd get to know them better more the people I didn't know and stuff like that. Because in when you work as a group, it would like help to make it more even more natural and nice for everyone to like know each other a bit more.  R7: I think I would leave more room for people to get to know each other.

Motivation and Work Ethic	R6: I think we were all pretty motivated at the start, but maybe because all of us were like had a good work ethic in the start, it became like a spiral of this work ethic so like I don't know we just got the flow going. And maybe it was also some sort of pressure that, because the others are performing so well in this group, I shouldn't like start slacking off and not do my thing.	R5: But it was mostly because we had to do something we did. I think if these things would have been like not mandatory for us, we wouldn't have done them.
Language Skills	R8: And the Bulgarian girl she had perfect English, no problem at all in communicating.	R2: They understand what is going on, but you know transferring this knowledge from the Finnish concept to the English was a challenge. And for me to understand how they translate was also a challenge.

The examples show that good planning can enhance the team performance, while a lack of organisation or a busy schedule can have the opposite effect. Similarly, a close team relationship was perceived as facilitating the work and an aloof relationship was viewed as deficiency that should be remedied. Moreover, motivation and a similar work ethic functioned as driving force, whereas a low level of motivation would have hindered the progress of the work without the compulsory framework. The effects of language skills on different aspects of the teamwork were addressed only by two students in the context of this question, depicting high language skills as advantage and low language skills as disadvantage. More viewpoints will be described in the subsequent sections.

#### **4.3.2 Languages used and means of communication**

English was the main common language used in all teams. The following native languages were involved in the teams: Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Latvian, Nepalese, Neware, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, and Somali. Information about their team members' mother tongue seemed to be less relevant for some participants, as their answers appeared somewhat vague, such as when expressed with a question mark or "not sure".

The interviewees gave examples of the few situations in which other languages than English were

used during the teamwork. Some of the Finnish students used their mother tongue when they were by themselves or when talking about something not related to the task, but these minor incidents did not seem to affect the team relationship. Moreover, a common native language, such as Finnish among Finns and Polish among Polish students, was used for translations and explanations in the case of understanding problems. The only report of a slightly negative experience related to code-switching described an incidence in which Finnish students were talking “secretly” in Finnish during the speech of another Finnish team member. This happening was described as disrespectful, because the talking students did not pay full attention to their teammate’s contribution and because the international participant did not understand what they were saying. By contrast, the following example (R4) shows that Finnish as a foreign language served also as a topic of conversation in the same team and thereby perhaps as a way of developing the team relationship:

R4: When we three international students asked them like: “How do you speak this in Finnish? Or how do you look at this in Finland?”

Concerning the number of team meetings, the survey responses varied. 20% stated that they met with their team seven or eight times in total, 49% met their team four to six times and 27% met their team one to three times. Two participants answered that they did not meet their team at all. It is possible that they meant face-to-face meetings, whereas other respondents most likely included virtual meetings in their answer. Besides face-to-face meetings, the teams used different means of communication to coordinate their work. Messaging services, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, served as the popular digital communication tool, followed by the file storage provider Google Drive and video conference software, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Emails were used only to some extent.

Table 12. Means of communication

	<b>not used</b>	<b>used rarely</b>	<b>used sometimes</b>	<b>used often</b>	<b>most used</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>face to face meetings</b>	12 (24%)	6 (12%)	4 (8%)	12 (24%)	16 (32%)	50 (100%)
<b>email</b>	23 (47%)	14 (29%)	9 (18%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	49 (100%)
<b>WhatsApp</b>	8 (16%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	16 (31%)	24 (47%)	51 (100%)
<b>Facebook</b>	39 (82%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	4 (8%)	48 (100%)

<b>Google Drive</b>	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	7 (14%)	20 (40%)	17 (34%)	50 (100%)
<b>Skype</b>	45 (94%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	48 (100%)
<b>Other: Zoom, Microsoft Teams</b>	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	5 (46%)	11 (100%)

The interviews provided insight on the usage of these means of communication. The written assignment was composed by most of the teams in a shared and editable Google Document. WhatsApp or Facebook messenger was used by some teams only to schedule meetings and other teams used the chat for extensive discussions about ideas concerning the assignment. A student whose team did not choose to use an instant messenger at the beginning emphasized that the right communication channel would have facilitated the work. In the teams that worked together before the coronavirus pandemic, more detailed conversations took place in face-to-face meetings. By contrast, video conferences were used to connect team members who had to keep physical distance later on during the pandemic. As illustrated in the interview quote below (R5), the spoken communication in face-to-face meetings or video calls was perceived in several teams as more efficient and comprehensive than the group chats:

R5: It was okay, but it was kind of inefficient, because some people do not read their messages until it's too late for the other people in the group. For like we were talking about something and on one day and the next day someone answers: "Okay, works for me." ...

Interviewer: Did you like the meetings the face-to-face meetings better?

R5: Yeah, they were a bit better, because then you could speak and in communication through WhatsApp or something like that, it kind of misses out like non-verbal communication and stuff like that. So you can get your point across better I think in face-to-face communication and there is much more room for like sarcasm and stuff like that, so it can be more easily understood than in the WhatsApp.

In a couple of cases, however, written communication was preferred over speaking or meetings. One team was forced to use a chat even during their video conferences due to technical issues with the software and the internet connection. According to the interviewee cited below (R7), another reason for this preference appeared to be related to a team member's confidence and her low English speaking skills:

R7: So there was one girl that actually never like spoke during our meetings. But then if we asked her like later on Facebook, then she could write and yeah.

### 4.3.3 English skills and participation in team communication

The survey respondents were asked to rate the English language skills of their team members and indicate the extent the members were active in the team in terms of their contribution to the assignment. Moreover, the respondents evaluated how trustworthy and how influential the team members appeared to them. The latter aspects will be analysed in the subchapters related to trust and power. A detailed description of the respondents' perception of each team member is unnecessary, yet the table about the language skills is included below because it provides a general overview and forms the basis for further statistical analysis. Apart from that, the relationships between the perception of the language skills and the perception of the other three features are of greater interest.

Since the size of the teams varied between three and six members, there were missing values in the responses of those participants who evaluated less than six team members. Pairwise exclusion of the missing values was applied in the correlation analyses so that only the cases showing valid values on the variables in question were included. Hence, the number of cases per correlation differs. In addition to the correlation analyses of the evaluations of each individual team member, sum variables were computed out of the six team member values for each variable in order to receive an average score and a correlation coefficient for the teams taken as a whole. Even though each variable has four categories, the labels and the distances between them are somewhat indefinite (activeness: very active, somewhat active, little active, passive; trustworthiness: very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, little trustworthy, untrustworthy; influence: very influential, somewhat influential, little influential, not influential). This might to some extent constrain the comparability of these variables and the validity of the correlation analyses. Thus, the correlation analyses are intended to provide an approximate estimate of a potential association between the variables rather than an exact result.

Table 13. Evaluation of the team members' English skills

	proficient (1)	advanced (2)	intermediate (3)	elementary (4)	Total	Mean
<b>Member 1</b>	26 (51%)	18 (35%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	51 (100%)	1,67
<b>Member 2</b>	19 (38%)	24 (48%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	50 (100%)	1,80
<b>Member 3</b>	14 (29%)	23 (48%)	9 (19%)	2 (4%)	48 (100%)	1,98

<b>Member 4</b>	6 (24%)	10 (40%)	8 (32%)	1 (4%)	25 (100%)	2,16
<b>Member 5</b>	4 (23,5%)	4 (23,5%)	8 (47%)	1 (6%)	17 (100%)	2,35
<b>Member 6</b>	1 (17%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	2 (33%)	6 (100%)	2,67

The English skills of 197 students were evaluated and Table 13 displays how the perceptions varied. Although the majority of the students appeared to have proficient or advanced skills, the skills of 23% of the students were rated as below average, i.e. intermediate or elementary. A similar picture was conveyed in the interviews. Half of the teams had a similarly high level of English skills, and the skills of the members in the remaining teams varied from moderate to fluent, partly with deficits in one particular skill such as writing or speaking (“It was a variety.” R6).

With regards to the team members’ participation in the communication, the majority of the questionnaire respondents perceived it as somewhat equal (61%) or entirely equal (12%) (see Figure 4). A smaller part of the participants found the participation in the communication somewhat unequal (17%) or very unequal (6%). 4% did not have an opinion. The interviewees reported a few reasons for the cases in which participation in team communication was not equally shared between the members. One reason appeared to be a member’s knowledge or opinion on the topic of discussion, and in connection with this, the amount of time a member could devote to the task was mentioned as well. Moreover, a speaker’s personality was considered to be influencing their contributions to conversations. While the only interviewee who worked together with a native English speaker did not experience any inequalities with regards to the team communication, a couple of other students (e.g. R6) commented that a team member contributed less due to their low English skills.

R6: But maybe me and the two more proficient English speakers spoke more and the one who was the least proficient she didn’t speak as much. But she also said that was because of her English skills, because when she speaks in Finnish, she said she's a very talkative person.

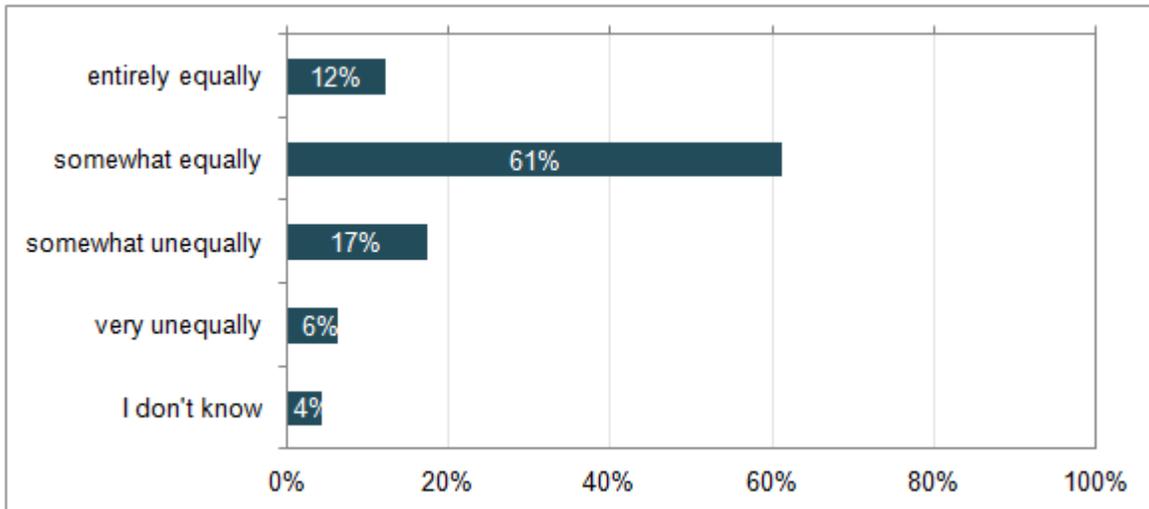


Figure 4. Participation of team members in the communication

The perception of this potential correlation between the team members' language proficiency and their participation in the communication was also investigated through statements that were rated in the survey. The opinions varied and 22% stated that they neither agree nor disagree with the first two propositions in Table 14. However, a slight tendency can be noted. In total 60%, which is more than half of the respondents, agreed somewhat or strongly that team members with relatively high language skills spoke more, whereas in total 18% disagreed somewhat or strongly. In contrast, only 43% in total, so slightly less than half, agreed that team members with relatively low language skills spoke less, while 35% disagreed somewhat or strongly with the statement.

Table 14. Participation in team communication and language skills

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>somewhat agree</b>	<b>neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>somewhat disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
Team members with relatively high language competence spoke more.	29%	31%	22%	16%	2%	0%
Team members with relatively low language competence spoke less.	19%	24%	22%	29%	6%	0%
Language was a barrier in my teamwork.	2%	12%	14%	19%	53%	0%

The outcome of this rating is consistent with the Pearson correlation that was run to assess the relationship between the perception of the English skills and the degree of activeness that the team members showed (most likely also in the team communication). The correlation analysis of these two variables for the teams as a whole, using the sum variables, revealed a weak, positive correlation ( $r = .346$ ,  $n = 50$ ,  $p = .014$ ). The Spearman correlation coefficient of this association run for each individual team member indicated in some cases a similar and otherwise a higher correlation. This means that a member or an entire team that was perceived as having relatively high English skills appeared more active and vice versa. The dot chart (Figure 5) illustrates the tendency of the relationship between these two variables.

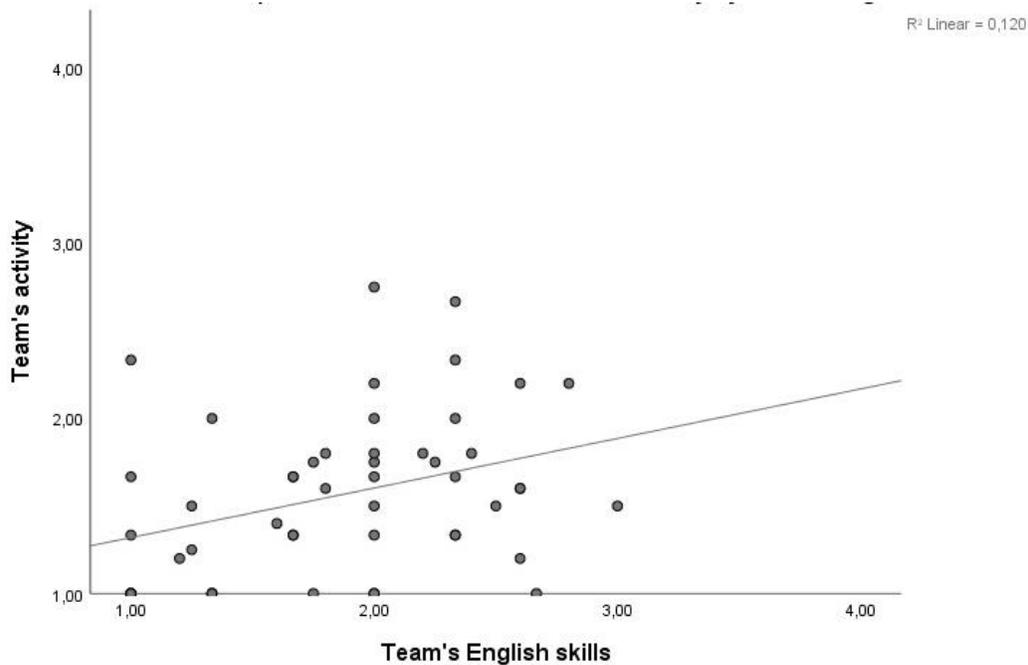


Figure 5. Simple Scatter with Fit Line of Team's activity by Team's English skills

#### 4.3.4 Challenges and conflicts

The majority of the respondents disagreed somewhat or strongly with the statement that language was a barrier in their teamwork (see previous Table 14). The minority of 14% who reported to have experienced language barriers consisted of participants who had evaluated their teams' English skills as relatively low, as the cross tabulation and Spearman's correlation ( $r_s = -.573$ ,  $n = 51$ ,  $p = .000$ ) showed. Yet when asked more concretely what kind of problems the potential differences in their team's language skills caused, only 35% of the participants repeated that their team had no language barriers (see Figure 6). Misunderstandings and slowdown of the work process were experienced by 35% in each case. While 18% noticed a hindering effect on the development of the team relationship, exclusions were observed by only 6%. Besides the default answers, participation in speaking and dissatisfaction with other team members' writing skills were named as problems in the free text field.

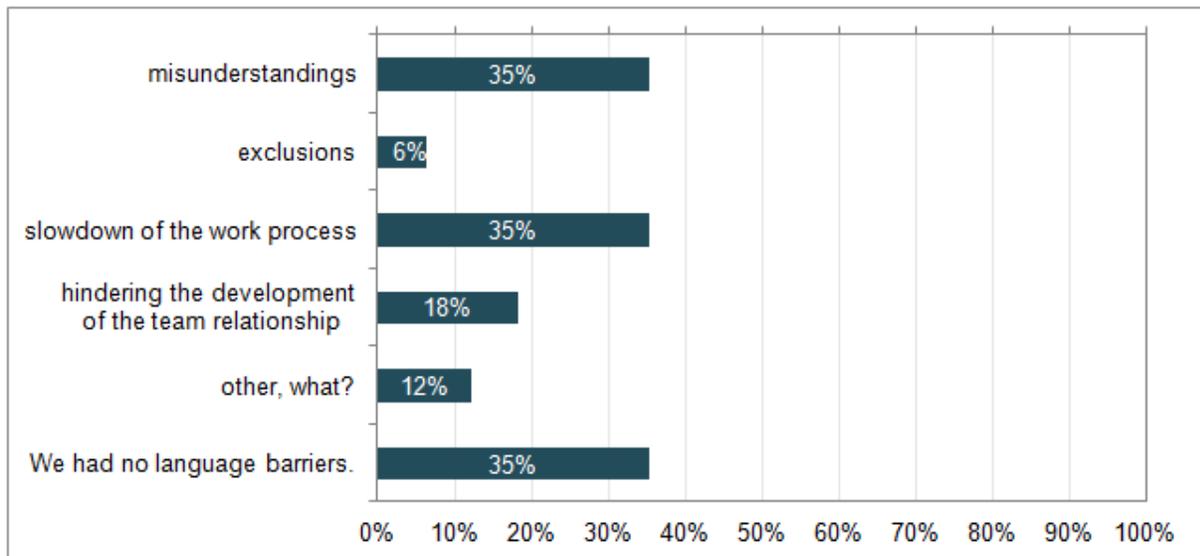


Figure 6. Problems caused by differences in team's language skills

A similar picture was conveyed in the interviews. All but one student remembered situations where English as a lingua franca hindered the team communication to some extent even though most of these incidents were not perceived as severe. In fact, many interviewees described ways how they solved these problems related to language. Nevertheless, misunderstandings appeared to be the result of the lacking knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, since it limited the

expressiveness of a speaker when explaining ideas, on the one hand, and caused understanding problems for the listener, on the other hand, as pointed out by Respondent 2:

R2: So translating you know and expressing these ideas into English was also a challenge for them. And for me to understand how they translate was also a challenge.

Moreover, one student said that she struggled with the task of taking notes as a secretary during meetings, as her weak listening and writing skills slowed her down so that she missed information. In those cases where the language barrier was prominent in a conversation, the teams developed strategies to deal with them: clear communication of deficits, clarification questions (“Did you say this or did you mean that?” R4), translations among speakers of the same mother tongue or with the help of a dictionary, and use of descriptive words or pictures in the chat during virtual meetings. Besides that, it turned out that a common way to handle language barriers was to adapt one’s own language to the team members’ language, such as by speaking more slowly and clearly, using simple words and staying on the topic of the assignment to avoid confusion. One interviewee phrased it in the following way:

R6: Yeah, I used some simple words and tried to like put myself in the listener’s shoes.

In contrast to these examples of students who tried to make their spoken language easier to understand for teammates with lower English skills, one interviewee also depicted that she tried to improve and adjust her language skills to her teammates with a higher proficiency by learning new words from them. Furthermore, a couple of interviewees did not recall any concrete incidences of language adjustments in the case of this particular team project, but they were aware that there are other situations in which they would adjust their language, such as when discussing with a stranger versus with a friend.

The students were also asked about their opinion on the reasons for conflicts in their teamwork. More than half of the survey respondents had not experienced any conflicts in their teamwork, as Figure 7 shows. The other participants regarded the following options, in various proportions, as reasons for conflict: different opinions, language barriers, personality, cross-cultural differences, and power contests. Lack of commitment (4%) was added in the open answer field, for which a delayed contribution to the assignment was given as an example in an interview. Even though all of the options were chosen only by a small proportion of the participant group, language barriers

were the second most chosen reason. This indicates that they seem to play a role at least in some teams.

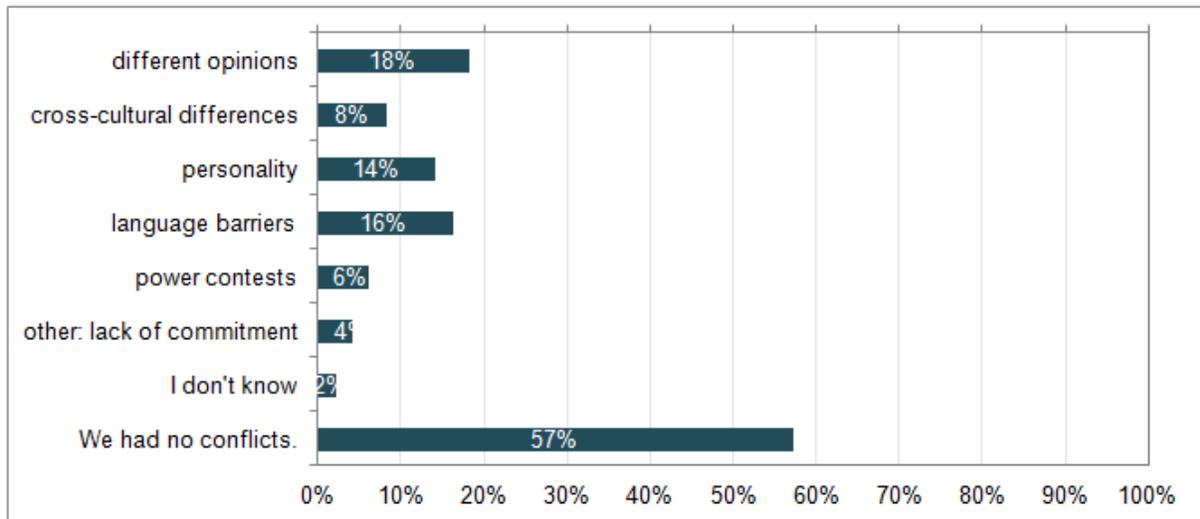


Figure 7. Reasons for conflicts

Another communication problem, which is not related to language skills, was brought up in the interviews. The written team communication in the chat groups appeared to somewhat hold potential for conflict, as the spatial distance and tight schedules of some of the team members complicated the direct communication (see example by R7). Moreover, one student made the assumption that her team avoided discussions about certain topics such as politics in order to minimise the potential for conflict.

R7: So we had like tons of messages and I was the only one that tried to like compromise on meeting, because everyone was so busy. ... Because it was very difficult to well to communicate in a written form. You can't see the other people. You don't know how they will respond.

#### 4.3.5 Trust building and language skills

As described above, the team relationships developed from slightly different starting points. Some team members knew each other before the project and others did not, but the majority did not know their teammates well at the beginning. Nevertheless, all but one questionnaire respondent answered that they trusted their teammates to some extent with regards to their task competence, their values and their consideration for the respondents' interests (see Table 15). Around half of the participants stated that they trusted their team very much, a little less trusted much and 6% trusted somewhat. With regards to the development of the trust relationship, more

than half of the students answered that they began trusting their team at the beginning and one third said in the middle of the teamwork (see Table 16). 2% started trusting their team at the end of the teamwork and 4% stated that they did not trust their team, which is one person more than in the previous question. Similar answers were given in the interviews. Some respondents had a good relationship with their team from the beginning, some did not have instant trust but developed it gradually and others did not see any major developments in their team relationship.

Table 15. Strength of trust

	n	%
very much	27	53%
much	20	39%
somewhat	3	6%
little	0	0%
not at all	1	2%
Total	51	100%

Table 16. Beginning of trust building

	n	%
at the beginning of the teamwork	32	63%
at the end of the teamwork	1	2%
in the middle of the teamwork	16	31%
I didn't trust my team.	2	4%
Total	51	100%

The interviewees also shared their thoughts on the factors that presumably influenced the trust building processes. Time as well as the number and kind of team meetings were a crucial factor. According to the interviews, teams who had the chance to spend more time together developed a better relationship compared to teams who met less often. Additionally, a joint, not work-related activity, such as a common meal or a game, was regarded as a positive influence on the development of the team relationship. By contrast, one interviewee described that her team, which focused only on work, did not develop a friendship-like relationship but that the team's turn taking became gradually smoother over time. Another important factor seemed to be finding similarities in the team, such as similar work ethics (see example by R1), the same wavelength or matching personal views about a relevant topic (see example by R4). Moreover, friendly and encouraging personalities as well as proof of expertise contributed to the trust formation.

R1: So it gave me at least the feel that she's here to do her work and not to run away.

R4: So I was amazed that we have the same kind of thoughts sometimes.

The correlation analysis of the teams' English language skills and the strength or the beginning of the trust relationship did not yield a relevant result, but the survey participants also evaluated statements about this relationship (see Table 17). 70% in total thought that the fact that their team's language skills were similar had a positive effect on the trust building process and only 6% disagreed somewhat or strongly with this proposition. On the other hand, only 14% agreed somewhat or strongly that the differences in their team's language skills had a negative impact on the trust building process and 61% in total disagreed. With regards to both statements, around one quarter of the respondents stated that they neither agree nor disagree or that they do not know. This indicates the difficulty of the question. Nevertheless, both positive and negative effects of a team's relative language skills on the development of its relationship were noticed in some cases, as one of the interviewees described:

I: Do you think your high language skills played a role in the trust building process?

R5: I think yes, it's easier. Because we didn't have to use time to ask people that do they understand and do you know what we talking about and stuff like that, which I know I had a couple of friends who started the class with me at the same time and they are not as efficient with English language. And they had problems within the small groups, because they couldn't understand English and we talked about those things. And I think it makes it easier that everyone is kinda at the same level. Because it creates the environment where you can like have a conversation actually without interruptions to ask did someone understand and stuff like that.

Table 17. Statements related to trust

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>somewhat agree</b>	<b>neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>somewhat disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
The differences in my team's language skills had a negative impact on the trust building process.	2%	12%	21%	16%	45%	4%
The fact that my team's language skills are similar had a positive effect on the trust building process.	20%	50%	12%	4%	2%	12%
I trust teammates with relatively low English language skills.	14%	23%	24%	23%	4%	12%
I trust teammates with relatively high English language skills.	42%	42%	12%	2%	0%	4%
I fear that teammates who have higher language skills than me might deceive me.	0%	12%	6%	19%	57%	6%

A salient difference emerged in the opinions on the trustworthiness of team members with high or with low English skills. Trust in teammates with relatively high English language skills was confirmed somewhat or strongly by the large majority of in total 84% and it was somewhat negated by only one person. On the other hand, the evaluation of the same statement concerning teammates with relatively low English language skills was less affirmative and more dispersed. More than a quarter of the respondents disagreed somewhat or strongly that they trust these teammates and an even larger proportion did not have a clear opinion on this question. This could be an indication that it is not possible to make a general statement like this about diverse groups of people. Likewise, the results of the Spearman correlation run with the respondents' perception of their team members' language skills and their trustworthiness demonstrate that the variables may affect each other, but it might vary from person to person. A weak, positive and statistically significant association was found for team member 1 ( $r_s = .371$ ,  $n = 51$ ,  $\rho = .007$ ) but not for the other team members. The last questionnaire statement in Table 17 concerning the potential fear that teammates who have higher language skills than the respondents might deceive them was largely negated. However, 12% somewhat agreed with the statement, which should not be ignored.

While the last topic was not addressed in the interviews, a similarly mixed picture was conveyed with regards to the other statements. A few students (e.g. R5 and R7) told about situations in which their teammates' low speaking skills made them question the speakers' expertise. However, they also said that they reflected on this train of thoughts and partly corrected their assumption when their teammates proved them wrong by demonstrating their task competence in another way.

R5: I was like hmm that's not quite right... But I knew about my thinking and where it comes from. So it didn't kind of affect that much, but it was a thought that popped into my mind at times.

R7: I mean maybe at first when I met them and I realized that someone didn't have as high English as me, I was a bit worried that how can we manage. But then because they were like experts in tourism and I wasn't, so I think that they could actually show that: "Hey I know this."

On the other hand, several students said that their team's language skills did not impact their perception of the speakers' trustworthiness, since they distinguished between language skills and other features such as expertise. Some students also assumed that their teams trusted them among other things because of their high English proficiency. Moreover, one interviewee (R1) gave an

example of a teammate whose proficient language skills induced him to trust in her task competence and to expect good results although he did not know her:

R1: But yeah I have to admit that if I hear somebody like the new person in the group who has very proficient skills, so yeah it gives you the confidence that she's gonna do good work.

#### **4.3.6 Power relations and language skills**

The final part of the study dealt with influence and sources of power. Concerning the formal hierarchical set-up of the team, almost all of the interviewees described that the contributions to discussions were balanced among the team members and that decisions were made by mutual agreement. 84% of the questionnaire participants confirmed that all team members were equal. However, it was pointed out by a couple of respondents that despite basic equality, some team members did not take over responsibility. Moreover, 12% of the participants reported that there was an assigned team leader, that the leadership changed from time to time or that someone guided the team by default. The interviewees explained that, for example, a certain member stood out occasionally by initiating work processes or organizing meetings. Some teams also had a weekly changing secretary, who took notes during the meetings.

In addition to the question about the general organisation of the teamwork, the participants were asked to think about incidences in which some team members appeared more influential than others and rate the provided options according to their relevance as a possible source of power from very relevant (1) to somewhat relevant (2), little relevant (3), irrelevant (4) and I don't know (5). Table 18 displays the average score of every answer. Expertise/knowledge was regarded as the most relevant source of power, followed by personality and language skills. Nationality, hierarchy and age appeared less relevant, whereas gender was considered irrelevant. In the free text field, charisma and technical advantage, such as access to high-quality equipment and fast Wi-Fi, were mentioned as very relevant sources of power. Particularly the latter plays probably an important role in virtual exchange and was brought up in an interview as well. The topic of power and influence might also be a question of interpretation, since one interviewee did not regard knowledge as a source of power even though she described that experienced students helped their team by sharing their knowledge.

Table 18. Relevance of sources of power

	very relevant	somewhat relevant	little relevant	irrelevant	I don't know	Mean
expertise / knowledge	61%	29%	10%	0%	0%	1,5
hierarchy	6%	14%	20%	54%	6%	3,4
personality	45%	41%	10%	4%	0%	1,7
nationality	6%	10%	16%	68%	0%	3,5
language skills	25%	49%	18%	8%	0%	2,1
gender	0%	0%	8%	88%	4%	4
age	0%	4%	10%	84%	2%	3,8

The Spearman correlation of the respondents' perception of their team members' language skills and their influence produced a similarly mixed result as the correlation analysis related to trustworthiness. The variable influence only correlates positively with the English skills in the evaluations of team member 3, 4 and 5. For instance, Table 19 demonstrates that the more proficient the language skills of team member 4 were, the more influential the person appeared, and the less proficient the language skills were, the less influential they appeared ( $r_s = .659$ ,  $n = 24$ ,  $\rho = .000$ ). As in all of the previous analyses, these correlations may also derive from other factors that were not considered in this study. Therefore, the complementary, profound insights provided by the interview data are very useful.

Table 19. English language skills and influence

		Influence: Member 4				Total
		very influential	somewhat influential	little influential	not influential	
English language skills: Member 4	proficient	3	3	0	0	6
	advanced	2	8	0	0	10
	intermediate	0	4	2	1	7
	elementary	0	0	0	1	1
Total		5	15	2	2	24

With regards to the significance of language skills in power relations, the interviewees who had worked in teams with diverging language levels felt certain that their high language skills functioned as a source of power and that team members with lower language skills seemed less powerful (see quotes by R6 and R7). Furthermore, a couple of students (R2 and R8) elaborated on the dependence of a team member with relatively low language skills, who needed to rely on the information and help provided by team members with higher language proficiency.

R6: Yeah of course, language is power.

R7: I think the ones that had better English were more influential. Definitely, yeah.

R2: They have access to all the websites in Finnish, they can you know access everything. I was depending on them to give me the information rather than just doing my own research and you know reading outside.

R8: Well on the Polish side it was a bit difficult, because the girl didn't speak that good English. So I might not ever know what she wanted to say, because the boyfriend was translating what she wanted to say.

As opposed to this, the members of teams with even language skills either regarded the team's power relations as balanced or ascribed importance to another source of power, such as personality or knowledge. Thus, based on the students' experiences it seems that language as a source of power matters if the team members' levels of language proficiency are different. If the levels of language skills are similar, other sources of power may matter more.

The survey results concerning the relationship between one's English language skills and the influence of the other sources of power from the previous question were mixed (see Table 20). 56% agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement saying that the relatively high language skills of some team members increased the impact of their other sources of power, whereas 22% disagreed somewhat or strongly. 24% stated that they neither agree nor disagree or that they do not know. The answers regarding a potentially decreasing impact of one's relatively low language skills on other sources of power were similar, but the proportion of disagreeing responses was slightly higher.

Table 20. Language skills and sources of power

	<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>somewhat agree</b>	<b>neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>somewhat disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
The relatively high language skills of some team members increased the impact of their other sources of power.	8%	47%	17%	6%	16%	6%
The relatively low language skills of some team members decreased the impact of their other sources of power.	0%	43%	16%	17%	16%	8%

## **5 DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, the most interesting findings of the analysis will be discussed and critically evaluated in light of the research questions. Moreover, the results will be compared and contrasted with views presented in earlier studies. The number of survey and interview questions was rather large, and it was expected that not all of them would yield striking results that are worth discussing. Nevertheless, they were included in the study to gain a more thorough background picture of the respondents and the functioning of their teams and because it was not possible beforehand to know exactly which questions would generate interesting answers. Based on the insights gained in this study and connected with the results of previous research, ways to enhance students' multicultural teamwork experiences through effective team building and cooperation with equally participating members will be suggested.

### **5.1 The role of language proficiency in multicultural student teamwork**

The analysis showed that the English language belongs to the daily life of the participants. They started learning English at an early age and use it today regularly in different contexts. English language skills might also play an important role in their future, since most of them are interested in a career in an international environment, which is assumed to require English skills. According to the self-reports of the students, their overall English language proficiency can be considered high, while their speaking and writing skills appeared to be a little weaker than their skills in listening and reading understanding. These results are interesting in the context of team communication, as one's productive skills are probably more directly noticeable for the other team members than one's receptive skills. The findings also comply with Komori-Glatz' (2017b: 293) study on multicultural student teamwork at an Austrian university, which revealed a "discrepancy between active and passive proficiency, both in English and in other languages" as well. She suggests, therefore, taking this insight into account both in admission requirements and in the daily academic life.

All of the students had gained experience in English-speaking teamwork to a greater or lesser extent before participating in this study. Based on the interviews, it can be assumed that the learning about teamwork took place by means of practical experiences and that concrete

guidelines on how to work in teams were rarely provided by course instructors. It has been noted also in other studies that it is rather common to place students in teams with no guidance other than content-related (e.g. Hansen 2006; Hassanién 2006; Komori-Glatz 2017b) even though scholars researching the methods of collaborative learning argue that more detailed instructions on working in teams and overcoming barriers increase the learning effect (Feichtner & Davis 1995; Colbeck et al. 2000).

The fact that the students selected language and communication skills as the third most important feature of the members of a successful multicultural team may be considered the first contribution to the answer to the overarching research question of what role language proficiency plays in student teamwork. The comments made by the interviewees indicate that differences in the team members' language proficiency may have negative effects but they can be minimised with the help of different measurements. Thus, the ability to deal with language-based problems, clear communication that ensures mutual understanding as well as a fair and respectful turn-taking strategy were emphasized. The next sections will look at this in more detail and from various angles.

### **5.1.1 Attitudes towards native English**

In order to find out about the significance of language skills in the students' personal view and in preparation for the following research subquestions, the students' attitudes towards the English language and native standard ideology were investigated. The findings show clearly that having personally a high level of English language skills is important for the students. The, perhaps surprisingly, large majority of 76% of the questionnaire respondents agreed somewhat or strongly that their goal in English language learning is to achieve proficiency at native level. The rest of the survey answers can perhaps be explained by the responses of those interviewees who regarded it as important to have or to acquire high language skills but not necessarily up to a native level. A sort of relaxed and less ambitious attitude was conveyed by interviewees who would like to reach proficiency at native level but who questioned the feasibility of this learning goal.

Compared to the rather unambiguous result that achieving native English proficiency is considered a goal worth striving for, the opinions on whether native English is the ideal variety were more diverse and partly questioning the relative majority of survey respondents who agreed with the idea. The moderate positive result of the correlation analysis demonstrates that many students who aim at achieving proficiency at native level also agree with the idea of native English as the ideal variety and that students who do not have this goal are not in line with the idea either. Moreover, the contingency table showed that some students want to reach proficiency at native level while not idealizing native English. Thus, students may have high expectations of the level of their own language skills while being tolerant towards other language varieties and levels of language skills. Mortensen and Fabricius (2014) identified another perspective on this, which was not found in the present study but which reflects a similar ambivalence. In the study on language ideologies at a Danish university, students presented a differentiated attitude by acknowledging the high status of native English while not viewing it as a desirable target for their own language use. Similarly, Kalocsai (2009) explains that students might think native English is not appropriate or relevant for the ELF contexts in which they move.

A variety of opinions was also revealed by the interview answers in the present study. Some students regard British or American English as ideal and consider a common standard useful for learners, for instance. On the other hand, it was pointed out that all accents are equal and that intelligibility and general communication skills are more important than correctness according to Standard English. Thus, the findings of this study indicate a tendency of changing views from the standard language ideology, which is partially still anchored in people's mind, to a more favourable orientation towards the use of ELF. This is in line with previous research from different countries. Studies in Germany (Erling 2007), Croatia (Margic & Sirola 2014) and Hong Kong (Sung 2018) have depicted the traditional view of students favouring British English or American English as well as the newly emerging opinion held by students who simply aim for a good level of English skills that enables them to communicate in diverse ELF environments. Moreover, the ambivalent attitudes of some of the interviewees in the present study that are torn between the advantages of both concepts can also be found in Sung (2018), for instance. The question arises whether this change in thinking will continue and entail practical implications, for example with respect to language policies that rely less strongly on the standard language

ideology as desired by ELF researchers (Jenkins et al. 2011), or whether the different concepts will coexist.

One interesting case of somewhat contradictory statements also indicates that one's thoughts about this complex matter may be already changing while the emotional reaction in a particular situation is still different. This refers to an interviewee who voiced a refusing stance towards native speaker ideology but later on described conversations with English native speakers as somewhat intimidating because she feels a need to speak perfect English. Working with other non-native speakers, who also make mistakes, is perceived as less pressuring. Several studies with similar comments and observations suggest that this emotional solidarity among ELF speakers is a common phenomenon, which might even exclude monolingual native English speakers at times (Holden 2002; Ehrenreich 2010; Kassis-Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen 2011).

In contrast to studies on multicultural business settings that have observed frequent occurrences of anxiety among non-native speakers using English in team communication, this issue seems to be less common in the educational context. The interviews conveyed a generally positive or neutral picture with regards to one's feelings in team communication when using a foreign language such as English. Nevertheless, the students pointed out that it may depend on factors such as the topic of conversation and mentioned situations with which they associate slightly negative feelings. For example, feelings of discomfort and nervousness can arise when a student feels limited in their ability to express their thoughts. Moreover, using a foreign language as well as dealing with different levels of language proficiency can be unsettling and exhausting according to the students, which has been also noted by Ehrenreich (2010). These experiences as well as the minority of almost one fifth of the survey respondents, including both students with high and with low English skills, who admitted to some extent anxious feelings should be taken seriously so that these feelings do not grow into a problem in the graduates' career, where the pressure is assumed to be higher. Studies such as Neeley (2013), Tenzer et al. (2014) and Presbitero (2020) show that anxiety seems to be a common issue in international business communication and that it can entail avoidance behaviours and negatively affect the individual task performance.

### **5.1.2 Are varying degrees of English language skills perceived as a barrier?**

The question whether varying levels of English proficiency are perceived as a barrier was approached from various angles in this study. When studying the topic of team communication, the means of communication are a relevant aspect to consider. The analysis showed that digital communication tools are very popular among students and that they may be used for various purposes in different teams. Differences were also found in preferences for oral and written communication media. On the one hand, several interviewees pointed out that the team discussions in face-to-face meetings or video calls were more efficient and comprehensive than the group chats, which can hold potential for conflict. This is in line with Bell and Kozlowski's (2002) proposition that the performance of complex tasks require synchronous communication. On the other hand, written communication appeared to have advantages for team members who struggle with insecurity or low English speaking skills. This may be related to the raised perceived similarity and the reduced degree of social categorization that are characteristic for written communication media, as argued by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) and Klitmøller et al. (2015). Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) point out that linguistically disadvantaged individuals may benefit from the extra time that they can use when communicating asynchronously.

The participation of the team members in the team communication was perceived by the majority of the questionnaire respondents as somewhat equal, but there is also a noteworthy number of students who regarded the participation in the communication as unequal. With regards to the language skills of the individual team members, there appeared to be teams with a similarly high level of English skills as well as teams with differences in the level language proficiency. Several findings of the analysis indicate a slight association between English language skills and participation in the team communication. More than half of the survey respondents agreed somewhat or strongly that team members with relatively high language skills spoke more. Taking into account the number of opposing answers, the relative majority of 43% stated that team members with relatively low language skills spoke less. Furthermore, a weak to moderate positive correlation was found between the evaluations of the English skills and the degree of activeness of the individual team members and the teams as a whole. A couple of interviewees provided examples indicating that in some teams a member's relatively low English skills were a reason why they contributed less to the discussions and vice versa. Moreover, the interviews

illustrated that language skills are one of the factors that can function as a positive impact or as a negative impact on team performance depending on the level.

When asked if language was a barrier in their teamwork, the majority of the survey respondents disagreed somewhat or strongly. Agreement was found only in the minority of 14%, which included only participants who had before evaluated their teams' English skills as relatively low. A somewhat contradictory result to this was produced by the answers to the more concrete question of what kind of problems were caused by the potential differences in the team's language proficiency, as 37% less than in the previous question repeated that their team had no language barriers. The survey showed that common problems appeared to be a slowdown of the work process as well as misunderstandings, which may be caused by the limited proficiency of both the speaker and the listener according to the interviews. Moreover, differences in language skills were perceived to have a hindering effect on the development of the team relationship. A few students also mentioned exclusions, participation in speaking and dissatisfaction with other team members' writing skills as problems.

An explanation for the inconsistent answers could be different conceptualisations of language barriers in the context of the two questions. Many students seemed to remember effects of the differences in language skills, such as misunderstandings, but perhaps they did not notice severe consequences of this or the team managed to effectively avoid any further problems. The interviews shed light on creative strategies that the teams developed in order to handle a language barrier. These strategies involved the clear communication of deficits, clarification questions, translations as well as the use of descriptive words or pictures in the chat during virtual meetings. The experiences of the students reflect the cooperative nature that seems to be common for ELF communication (Kalocsai 2009; Mauranen 2010). While the present study does not necessarily confirm statements from previous research claiming that misunderstandings are rare in ELF settings (e.g. Björkman 2009; Cogo 2010), the students' way of handling language problems correspond with and partly expand clarification techniques that have been observed by ELF researchers (e.g. Kaur 2009; Cogo 2009), such as repetitions and paraphrasing. Besides negotiating meaning, the students also accommodated differences through the adaptation of their language use to the team members' language level, such as with the help of simple words and

slow speech. These observations comply with Mauranen's (2006) finding that ELF users tend to employ specific interactional practices to prevent understanding problems. Furthermore, the students' comments show that mutual intelligibility requires awareness of different ELF variations, as pointed out by Guido (2012).

With regards to code-switching, which was used in most of the cases by teammates with the same mother tongue to solve understanding problems, the slightly negative experience of one interviewee should be kept in mind. The student described the behaviour of the code-switching team members as disrespectful, because they were talking at the same time as a third member and because she did not understand their speech. Previous studies have shown that code-switching can be perceived as rude if the team members who are not involved do not know the reasons for the use of the other language (Tenzer et al. 2014; Vigier 2015). Hence, it is recommended to counteract any confusion caused by this behaviour. While more than half of the survey respondents did not experience any conflicts in their teamwork, language barriers were the second most chosen reason selected by those participants who had to deal with conflicts. This demonstrates that language differences had a negative impact to some extent on some teams in this study.

### **5.1.3 The impact of varying language skills on trust formation and power relations**

As almost all participants confirmed that they trusted their teams to some extent, even though the formation of trust proceeded in various ways in the different team constellations, and reliability was selected as the most important quality of the members of a multicultural team, this study is another example that shows, in line with previous research such as Henttonen and Blomquist (2005), that trust is an important part of successful teamwork. Based on the questionnaire data, it seems to be more common that the processes of trust building start at the beginning of the teamwork than at a later point. Time spent together as a team, however, appears to have a positive impact on the trust formation according to the interviews. Moreover, it was pointed out that finding similarities among the team members has a fostering effect as well, which matches the views on the construction of a shared identity presented in studies by Pullin et al. (2016) and Konichi et al. (2018). The researchers suggest that a shared identity may enhance the effectiveness of communication and of the team as a whole. With regards to the influence of

English language skills, the questions related to trustworthiness as well as trust formation yielded interesting results.

To begin with, the analysis of the survey and interview answers indicates that a speaker's level of language skills might affect their trustworthiness as perceived by the team. Keeping in mind that it may vary from person to person, there seems to be a tendency that team members with high English proficiency are perceived as more trustworthy than those with relatively low language skills. Trust in teammates with high language skills was confirmed rather clearly both the survey and the interviews as opposed to the more vague and partly negative evaluation of teammates with low language skills in the survey. The slight tendency was also supported by the correlation analysis. This finding provides evidence from a new context to Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman (2007), who revealed a significant connection between perceived language fluency and trustworthiness in the context of inter-unit relationships in Finnish and Chinese subsidiaries.

A possible explanation for this is according to the trust model proposed by Tenzer et al. (2014) in a business context that a team member's trustworthiness may be reduced if low task competence is (falsely) attributed to them based on their lower language proficiency. This proposition can neither be clearly confirmed nor denied on the basis of the present study. However, the interview answers suggest that at least some students make assumptions about their teammates' task competence based on their high or low language proficiency, similarly to the employees in the study conducted by Tenzer et al. (2014). Yet there seems to be awareness of these thought processes among many participants of the present study, which enables them eventually to distinguish between language skills and expertise.

In addition to the cases supporting a positive relationship between language proficiency and trustworthiness, it is important to note that the opposite is also possible and seems to occur to a small extent in the educational context. 12% of the survey respondents feared somewhat that their teammates with higher language skills might deceive them. It is a small number but a sign of similar experiences as depicted by Tenzer et al. (2014) and in Neeley's (2013) research on a corporate setting, in which non-native English speakers had feelings of distrust toward native English speakers because of their superior language skills.

Concerning the impact of language differences on trust formation, the findings of the present study can only partly confirm the observation made by Tenzer et al. (2014) in their study on multinational teams. Tenzer et al. (2014) found a correlation between the disparity in a team's language skills and the negative impact of language barriers on trust, which is assumed to show that relative language skills are more influential than absolute skill levels in terms of trust building in teams. Only 14% of the students participating in the questionnaire thought that differences in their team's language skills had a negative impact on the trust building process, and one quarter of the respondents stated that they neither agree nor disagree or that they do not know. This may indicate that, on the one hand, this question is complex and difficult to answer with a simple statement, and, on the other hand, that the relationship between language skills and the negative impact of language barriers on trust might be less strong in the educational context. However, the opposite idea of this obtained approval by the majority of the respondents. According to most of the students, the trust building process in their team was facilitated if the team had similar language skills, as for example the team's turn taking was smoother.

The general hierarchical set-up of the teams was flat and balanced, since all of the participants were students. Likewise, the large majority of the participants asserted that all team members were formally equal. Only in a small number of teams, one of the members took on a particular role, such as the one of a leader or a secretary. Otherwise, formal positions or hierarchy were rated as a rather less relevant source of power in the questionnaire, which distinguishes the educational context from business context examined in previous studies, such as Tenzer and Pudelko (2017). Similarly, gender and age are assumed to play a significant role in certain industries and countries, but they were not perceived as a relevant source of power in the student teamwork according to the survey. Expertise or knowledge, on the other hand, seems to have a similarly high standing in both contexts, as it was chosen as the most relevant source of power by the students and has been studied by business scholars, such as Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) and Panteli and Tucker (2009), who also noted that power may shift among the members depending on the required knowledge. Language skills were considered the third most relevant source of power by the students after personality (see e.g. Anderson & Kilduff 2009). Only a minority of the survey respondents regarded nationality as a relevant source of power, but it would be interesting to investigate the experiences of these students in more detail. Furthermore, a few

students mentioned technical advantages, such as access to high-quality equipment and fast Wi-Fi, as very relevant sources of power, which should be borne in mind in the educational context.

Regarding the impact of English language skills on the power relations in the student teams, the results are not entirely unambiguous but they indicate a slight tendency. The correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between the perceived influence of some team members and their English skills. This means that some students with high English skills were perceived as more influential and vice versa, but it seems to vary from person to person and other factors might be involved as well. Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews added insightful findings to this matter, which mirror partly the results presented in previous research.

There appeared to be a difference between the answers of interviewees whose teammates had disparate language skills and the responses of those members of teams with the same (high) level of language skills. The former group clearly described fluent speakers as powerful and influential, whereas less proficient speakers were less talkative than in their mother tongue (in line with Vigier 2015) and seemed less powerful. Moreover, proficient students had access to more information in that language and/or helped as a translator, on which less proficient speakers were dependent. This corresponds with the gatekeeper role in multinational corporations identified by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), albeit without the severe consequences of the business context. By contrast, the latter group of students, whose team members were equally skilled in the English language, did not regard language proficiency as a relevant source of power. Instead, they described the power relations of the team as balanced or emphasized the relevance of another source of power, such as personality or knowledge. Thus, it can be concluded that varying levels of language skills seem to have an impact on the power relations in some student teams according to this study. As with respect to trustworthiness, the study seems to support Tenzer and Pudelko's (2017) finding that differences in the team members' relative language proficiency matter more in terms of power dynamics than the absolute skill level. According to the interviews, the students handled this issue in a way so that it did not become a problem as in the business context, but it would be important to study in more detail the perspective of the less proficient and seemingly less powerful students, who were mentioned.

The relationship between one's English language skills and the influence of other sources of power, which was studied extensively by Tenzer and Pudelko (2017), was not explicitly discussed in the interviews. For example, it was brought up that some students were partially limited in expressing their expertise due to their language skills, but it was considered sufficient for the university work. In the survey, the relative majority of the respondents agreed with the statements, which draw on Tenzer and Pudelko's proposals, saying that high language skills increased the impact of other sources of power and that low language skills had a decreasing effect. This might indicate a weak tendency, but the results are rather vague and the opposing votes might indicate that this topic does not play a significant role in student teamwork. More detailed responses would be needed in order to draw meaningful conclusions on this question.

## **5.2 Proposals to enhance students' multicultural teamwork experience**

The analysis and the discussion of the extensive empirical data have provided profound insight on various aspects of multicultural student teamwork that are relevant in connection with language skills. Based on these findings, ways to enhance students' multicultural teamwork experiences can be suggested, which is assumed to also affect positively their wellbeing and their employability. The following list is not intended to be exhaustive, as it consists only of ideas inspired by the statements of the students and linked to the findings of other studies.

The study has demonstrated that student teamwork is an enriching way of learning, which confronts the participants with challenges they might face in their career as well. Most of the research participants have not had the chance to gain English-language (team)work experience outside the university and a slight weakness in their productive language skills was revealed, particularly in their speaking skills. Hence, it would be advisable to keep the current courses and extend the offer by creating more ELF situations that give students the opportunity to practice in a safe environment. Teachers may be encouraged to consciously assign teams including local and international students or instruct the students to form multicultural teams, as it was done in the courses of this study. As Colbeck et al. (2000) recommend, it makes sense to integrate team projects throughout the whole curriculum to enable students to develop their teamwork skills at the beginning of their studies and to benefit from the advantages when concentrating on the

content of the more demanding, subsequent courses. It may be also beneficial to formulate the experience of multicultural student collaboration, which serves as preparation for professional contexts, as a learning outcome in the curriculum (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson 2012).

While it is assumed that more exposure leads to greater acceptance (Margic & Sirola 2014), it is still recommendable to actively raise the awareness for English language varieties, different discourse practices as well as varying degrees of language proficiency and its effects on different aspects of teamwork, such as trust building and power relations, since awareness of potential challenges is the first step in preventing them. This study showed that there are clear signs of awareness among the students, but there are also indications of problems related to language and, for example, rather traditional views in line with the standard language ideology are still present. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to find creative ways to handle barriers and to develop accommodation strategies. Raising awareness for the effects of language strategies and choices will lead to improved communication and relations. Moreover, it is hoped that a positive attitude towards linguistic and cultural differences can be spread. In addition to the students, awareness might also need to be raised among teachers, since they are supposed to instruct the students to observe and reflect on the communication processes in the team. These instructions could be part of generally more concrete guidance on effective team management, e.g. the formulation of goals, which seems to be uncommon despite the recommendations by researchers (e.g. Feichtner & Davis 1995; Colbeck et al. 2000). One way to enhance the communication and diminish misunderstandings and power conflicts is to assign and possibly rotate specific roles, such as secretaries who host and structure a meeting. According to the observations of some of the research participants, this was particularly useful in virtual teamwork. Several studies confirm that setting up roles is beneficial to teamwork, as it reduces ambiguity and improves participation (Hansen 2006; Hohenstein & Manchen Spörri 2012; Vigier 2015). Moreover, a regular pattern of communication to increase the predictability and trust building in virtual teamwork is recommended by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999).

Most of the interviewees depicted that their language and/or communication skills developed, especially with respect to the special context of an international group, over the course of the team project or several projects of this kind and through practical experience in things such as

equal turn-taking. However, the diverse experiences of the group of research participants showed once more that every combination of people is different and that one cannot expect the same level of English proficiency from different non-native speakers. Learning about and from each other as well as the development of suitable accommodation strategies in order to deal with varying degrees of language skills requires time and this should be taken into account when designing the learning objectives and the timetable of a course, since extra time is assumed to be rare in real business settings. Additionally, several interviewees expressed the wish to have more time, especially at the beginning of the projects, to get to know their teams better, as they assumed that closer personal relationships would have been beneficial for the teamwork. ELF scholars such as Mauranen (2006) and Kaur (2009) emphasize that mutual understanding in ELF requires special effort. Time to build a good relationship is, therefore, assumed to be a fruitful investment, as it will most likely enhance the willingness to collaborate and facilitate group interaction (Hohenstein & Manchen Spörri 2012). Moreover, good interpersonal relations may be a way to counteract the negative effects of language differences on trust formation and power relations, which were found in some teams. Research has shown that social talks serve, for instance, the exploration of common ground in heterogeneous teams and, thus, the construction of a shared mental mode or identity, which has been suggested to be positively related to communication effectiveness and thereby also to team effectiveness (Pullin et al. 2016; Komori-Glatz 2017b; Konichi et al. 2018). In addition to the finding that relational talk supports the team performance and the success of work talk, several studies indicate that social communication poses a challenge in work context whereas it appears to be easier for students (Komor-Glatz 2017a; Kassis-Henderson 2005; Kassis-Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen 2011). Hence, it seems advisable to be practiced in student teamwork so that graduates can benefit from these experiences later on.

Another essential aspect of the success of the team communication is a well-functioning communication channel, which all team members can access easily. While many students are probably familiar with popular tools, such as WhatsApp groups, not all teams decide to make use of it right away, as mentioned in an interview. This can hinder the progress of the work. Thus, it might be a good idea if the teacher reminded the students of this point in their instructions at the beginning of the project so that the working time can be used efficiently. At the same time, it is important to consider different forms of communication and choose one that all team members

feel comfortable with, since the study showed that different media of communication suit different purposes and individual preferences. For example, a written medium of communication may reduce language-based power differences or feelings of stress (Tenzer & Pudelko 2017), but it might not be suitable for the discussion of a complex topic.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role language proficiency plays in multicultural student teams working in English at a Finnish university. The study succeeded in answering the research question by approaching the perceptions of the students from various angles and with the help of several subquestions. The participants' attitudes towards English language varieties were explored as well as their views on varying degrees of language skills in teamwork and their strategies to deal with barriers. Moreover, the effects of differences in language skills in terms of trust formation and power relations were investigated. The data were collected via eight interviews and an online questionnaire with 51 participants. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the interview data and the questionnaire data required a quantitative analysis. The mixed method research approach was suitable to find comprehensive answers to the research questions by combining detailed descriptions with statistical findings.

The results of this study show that language and communication skills are regarded as an important feature of the members of a successful multicultural team. Differences in the team members' language proficiency may have negative effects on the team performance, but they can be minimised with the help of different measurements. Attitudes in line with English standard language ideology seem to be present to some extent among the students, but the dominance of this traditional view is questioned by the number of opposing and ambivalent opinions. Anxiety when using a foreign language such as English in team communication appeared to be less prevalent than in business contexts, yet the indications of negative feelings in student teamwork should be taken seriously. The study also shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of the usage of different media of communication in teams.

The results contain several indications for a correlation between English language skills and participation in the team communication, which means that students with higher language skills tended to speak more and vice versa. The responses related to the question whether language differences were a barrier in the team work were somewhat inconsistent. It is assumed that the relative majority of the participants noticed language-related problems, such as misunderstandings and slowdown, but perhaps only a smaller number of teams struggled with somewhat severe effects such as conflicts. According to the interviews, teams developed

accommodation strategies to handle language barriers and avoid further problems, which is in line with previous ELF research.

The study also indicates the tendency that team members with high English proficiency are perceived as more trustworthy than those with relatively low language skills. Interestingly, there was also a small number of survey respondents who feared somewhat that their teammates with higher language skills might deceive them. Moreover, some students made assumptions about their teammates' task competence based on their high or low language proficiency. While the majority of the students shared the opinion that the trust building process in their team was facilitated if the team had similar language skills, only a small number of participants thought that differences in their team's language skills had a negative impact on the trust building process. Language skills were also regarded as a relevant source of power by the students, which became noticeable in teams with different levels of language proficiency. The findings suggest a positive correlation between the perceived influence of some team members and their English skills.

There are a few aspects that limit the representativeness of the findings. The number of survey respondents was lower than desired but sufficient for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, some of the survey statements related to the entire team might have been difficult to rate if the respondent had different opinions on several teammates. It was attempted to counteract this issue by addressing the same topic with several questions, about individual team members and the team as a whole, and also in combination with the interview data. Concerning the significance and generalisability of the results of this small scale study, it is noteworthy that many of the interview statements and some of the survey findings confirm to some extent findings from previous studies. Thus, despite its limitations, the present study contributes to previous research with the required support from a different context.

Research of human subjects always depends on the voluntariness of the participants, which may be influenced by various factors. The dominance of volunteering participants with advanced language skills, particularly in the interviews, might have been a further limiting component in the study. Self-reports need to be treated with caution, but it seems that the average of the participants' language skills was higher than the average of the team members, who they

evaluated. Hence, students with lower English language skills are assumed to be found in the student body, but their perspective was underrepresented in this study. It would be important to investigate in more detail their point of view on the impact of language differences on teamwork.

The selection of courses involved in the study was also not ideal, since several of them dealt content-wise with topics such as intercultural communication and some of the course participants also study in language or communication degree programmes. These students might be more self-reflective and have a different attitude towards certain topics than students who have not dealt with this in their courses. This is not representative for the student population of this university, as this kind of course is not compulsory in all study programmes. However, as described in Chapter 3, it was not possible to find any other courses at the time of the data collection. Moreover, the increasing significance of virtual teamwork in the context of the COVID19-pandemic affected the study at an inconvenient time, because it could not be taken into account in the questionnaire and the interview design, as the data collection was already going on. Nevertheless, certain aspects of online collaboration and tools of communication were addressed in the literature review and the discussion.

The study dealt with the topic of teamwork, which is of great relevance today both in educational and in business settings. Comparisons of the findings of the present study with previous research on the business world revealed that similar effects and challenges related to language differences may occur in student teams, albeit to a different degree. The findings of tendencies are important and useful, because based on these indications, it is now possible to address certain issues related to language diversity more purposefully in university courses and hopefully prepare the students in such a way that these issues do not become real problems with more serious consequences in their future career in a multicultural working environment, as shown in some of the previous business studies (e.g. Hohenstein & Manchen Spörri 2012; Neeley 2013; Tenzer et al. 2014; Lauring & Klitmøller 2015; Tenzer & Pudelko 2017).

This Master's thesis provides new examples and empirical evidence to some proposals made in previous research, such as with regards to the students' attitudes toward native English. Moreover, the present study advances research, since the role of language proficiency in student collaboration has not received much attention in ELF or pedagogical research and the educational

context has been widely disregarded in business research on multicultural teamwork. While it might be more common to examine the skills and behaviours of students and soon-to-be graduates in order to assess if they are properly prepared for the demands of today's work life, perhaps employers or HR managers can also benefit from some insights of studies like this on the educational context, such as the ease and lightness with which students seem to deal with intercultural encounters, and make use of them in staff training.

In addition to the contributions to research on ELF as well as multicultural teamwork and in order to enhance the learning success and the wellbeing of student teams, recommendations for practitioners involved in this matter, including teachers, study programme coordinators and students, have been presented at the end of Chapter 5. It is suggested to create more ELF learning opportunities and to develop the role of the instructor. It is hoped that a positive attitude towards language diversity can be spread by raising awareness for language differences, its effects on teamwork and strategies to handle barriers. Since this study has demonstrated that genuine interest in understanding the other team members and finding together suitable rules or strategies for successful interactions are crucial, it is recommended to schedule extra time that enables the students to adjust to the teammates and their language use. Moreover, the importance of choosing the right medium of communication is highlighted.

The present study has touched on a number of topics that could be examined in more detail with a larger number of participants. For example, it could be investigated what kind of language use is perceived as influential or trustworthy. As pointed out before, more research with students from other departments and with students with lower English proficiency is also needed to assess whether the tendencies observed in this study can be generalized or if, for instance, the educational background plays a role. Additionally, research on higher education institutions in other countries would be interesting, since most of the previous studies on the role of language proficiency in teams have focused on business contexts. As Komori-Glatz (2017b) notes, further research should also follow graduates of international study programmes into the workplace in order to investigate their employability and the applicability of their skills.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Interview guide

#### Background

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from? What is your mother tongue?
3. What do you study?
4. How often and in which contexts do you use English?
5. Evaluate your English skills by selecting the most suitable description: proficient, advanced, intermediate or elementary. Specify your evaluation based on your skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing.
6. What is your goal in English language learning? Which level of proficiency would you like to achieve?
7. Do you think there is an ideal variety of the English language and why?
8. What kind of experience have you gained in teamwork in English (inside and outside the university)?
9. How do you feel when you need to speak a foreign language in team communication?
10. What do you think about teamwork as a way of learning?
11. Have you ever learnt about working in teams, e.g. by means of concrete guidelines?

#### Specific teamwork experience

12. Summarize your team assignment.
13. Describe the composition of your team.
14. How did you communicate and coordinate your work? Which digital tools did you use and how did you find this?
15. How did your team perform and what do you think influenced your team's performance?
16. Did your team have a leader? How did your team make decisions?
17. Which language(s) did you use in the teamwork? When did you use other languages than English and how did you find that?
18. Evaluate the English language skills of your team members by selecting the most suitable description: proficient, advanced, intermediate or elementary.

19. How did you and your team members manage to communicate in English? Comment on how strongly the English proficiency levels diverged in your team. How about the team members' participation in the communication, how was it shared?
20. Describe the competences of your teammates and their contribution to the assignment.
21. Can you describe how your team relationship developed? What do you think influenced the trust building process? Comment on the trustworthiness of your teammates.
22. Can you remember any conflicts in your team? What were the reasons in your opinion?
23. Did you experience any language barriers and how did you react to them?
24. Did any members in your team appear more or less influential than others? If so, why?
25. Is there anything you would do differently if you were doing the team project again? Or anything that you have done differently in other groups?
26. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire

1. At what age did you start learning English?

- at age   English is my native language.

2. How often do you use English?

- daily  weekly  monthly  
 a few times a week  a few times a month  less than once a month

3. In which contexts do you regularly use English? You can select more than one option.

- studies  
 work  
 free time  
 other, what?

4. How much experience have you gained in English-speaking teamwork?

- very much  much  some  little  none

5. Evaluate your English skills by selecting the most suitable description.

	proficient	advanced	intermediate	elementary
Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



9. Which course did you take? The following questions are related to your experience in this course.

- CEMS2150 Corporate Strategies for Sustainable Business  
 LACS1010 Introduction to Intercultural Communication

10. How often did you meet with your team in total? Estimate the approximate number.

times

11. How well did you know your teammates before the course started?

- very well     well     somewhat     little     not at all

12. How often did you use these means of communication to coordinate your work?

	not used	used rarely	used sometimes	used often	most used
face to face meetings	<input type="radio"/>				
email	<input type="radio"/>				
WhatsApp	<input type="radio"/>				
Facebook	<input type="radio"/>				
Google Drive	<input type="radio"/>				
Skype	<input type="radio"/>				
other, what? <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>				

13. How did your team perform?

- very successfully                       somewhat unsuccessfully  
 successfully                                 unsuccessfully  
 neither successfully nor unsuccessfully



**17. What was the formal hierarchical set-up of the team?**

- All team members were equal.  
 There was an assigned team leader.  
 Other, what?

**18. How equally did your team members participate in the communication?**

- entirely equally       somewhat unequally       I don't know  
 somewhat equally       very unequally

**19. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?**

	strongly agree	somewhat agree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	I don't know
Team members with relatively high language competence spoke more.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Team members with relatively low language competence spoke less.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language was a barrier in my teamwork.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**20. What kind of problems did the differences in your team's language skills cause? You can select more than one option.**

- misunderstandings  
 exclusions  
 slowdown of the work process  
 hindering the development of the team relationship  
 other, what?   
 We had no language barriers.



25. Think about incidences in which some team members appeared more influential than others - what were in your opinion sources of power in your teamwork? Rate the following options according to their relevance as a possible source of power.

	very relevant	somewhat relevant	little relevant	irrelevant	I don't know
expertise / knowledge	<input type="radio"/>				
hierarchy	<input type="radio"/>				
personality	<input type="radio"/>				
nationality	<input type="radio"/>				
language competence	<input type="radio"/>				
gender	<input type="radio"/>				
age	<input type="radio"/>				
other, what? <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>				

26. Keep the previous question in mind. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	strongly agree	somewhat agree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree	I don't know
The relatively high language skills of some team members increased the impact of their other sources of power.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The relatively low language skills of some team members decreased the impact of their other sources of power.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

27. What is your native language?

28. What are the native languages of your team members? Indicate the language of every member separately, also if several members have the same native language.

- Language 1
- Language 2
- Language 3
- Language 4
- Language 5
- Language 6

29. What do you study?

Name of your degree programme:

30. Are you pursuing a bachelor's or master's degree?

- bachelor's degree
- master's degree

31. How old are you?

years

32. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other