SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE CREATION OF A SENSE OF BELONGING: EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL PHD STUDENTS IN FINLAND

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Abstract

Embedded in the context of internationalization of Higher Education, the focus of this study is on the reciprocal relationship between the Finnish language learning process of international PhD students and the development of a sense of belonging.

Based in the paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism this study follows a qualitative approach. Through semi-structured interviews I was able to collect data from nine international PhD students. Grounded in the theoretical concepts of belonging and Second Language Socialization, I analyzed the data through a reflexive thematic approach to address the following research questions: How do the experiences of international PhD students in learning Finnish perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland? How do the experiences of international PhD students of their social interactions and relations within their environment perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?

The findings of this study, which were structured around four main themes – *perceptions of Finland and how they perceivably influence belonging, intentions of learning Finnish and the developments, language as a form of inclusion versus language as a form of exclusion*, and *living in a(n English) bubble* – illuminate the multifaceted nature of international PhD students' experiences in creating a sense of belonging in Finland and the potential influence of their language learning journey on this sense. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of these experiences and can offer valuable insights for the students themselves as well as for Higher Education Institutions seeking to enhance language learning opportunities for international PhD students.

Keywords

Higher Education, international students, internationalization of Higher Education, study abroad, sense of belonging, second language socialization, second language learning, Finnish language

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Orientation

The motivation of this study was to explore the multifaceted factors that might have an influence on the development of a sense of belonging of international PhD students in Finland. I aimed to focus on the perceived influence of their learning and use of Finnish as well as the perceived influence of their socio-cultural interactions within their environment. Vice versa I wanted to explore the perceived influence of their sense of belonging on their Finnish language learning and use.

To my knowledge, no qualitative study on the development of a sense of belonging of international PhD students in Finland with a focus on language learning has been done before. Therefore, with this thesis, I am aiming to contribute to this field of research and offer new insights. The findings of my study can help to develop strategies for students to improve their opportunities to integrate themselves into Finnish society during their studies through their sense of belonging. They can also be used to support the students with integration into the Finnish labor market as a next step into Finnish society. Additionally, they can help Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to better understand why some international students do not learn or do not continue to learn Finnish during their PhD studies and what could be changed or improved for them to overcome these struggles.

In this orientation, I will give an outline of the structure of the thesis. In chapter 1 I will take a look at how the internationalization of Higher Education (HE) is portrayed in Europe with critically reflecting on the changes in international student mobility and Higher Education in Europe in recent decades. Following that I will provide an overview of the internationalization processes in Finland and offer insights into PhD studies in Finland. Chapter 1 will conclude with how Finnish is portrayed as a foreign language by first presenting an overview of it and how it is characterized as a

language when learning and then going into the status of the Finnish language in Finnish society.

Chapter 2 will introduce the theoretical background of this study. I will introduce the main concepts, the concept of belonging and Second Language socialization. Based on these concepts I will illustrate how they are connected to each other, their importance in the context of learning Finnish as a second language, and how they can have an impact on international PhD students.

In chapter 3 I will define the research design of this study based in the paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism and introduce the research questions. Chapter 3 will also display the used methodology and critically reflect on the ethical considerations and my own positionality as a researcher.

In chapter 4 I will present the findings of this study and discuss them in the context of the theoretical paradigm of belonging and Second Language socialization to find answers to the research questions.

Chapter 5 will conclude my thesis with a discussion, theoretical and societal implications, the possible limitations of this thesis, and my recommendations for future research.

1.2 Internationalization of Higher Education in Europe and international student mobility

For many decades international student mobility and studying abroad have been an important aspect of many students' experiences all over the world. Students from all levels of Higher Education, be it at the bachelor's, master's, or doctoral (PhD) level, are receiving diverse and multiple opportunities to broaden their educational and societal horizons through studying abroad. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (n.d., para. 1) defines internationally mobile students as

> individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin [country of prior education].

Internationally mobile students (hereafter used interchangeably with international students) stand in contrast to 'foreign students' and 'credit-mobile students'. Foreign students are defined as all non-citizen students who are enrolled in Higher Education degree courses and the definition "does not distinguish between students holding non-resident visas and those with permanent resident status" (Migration data portal, 2023, para. 4). Credit-mobile students however are defined as exchange students who are only enrolled for a short period and/or only receive a limited amount of credits from the foreign institution (Migration data portal, 2023). Due to the participation

requirements of my research, this thesis will be concerned with internationally mobile students.

When talking about student mobility and studying abroad, globalization and internationalization are to a certain degree implied. But what do we really mean when we talk about globalization and internationalization of Higher Education? Held et al. (1999) define globalization as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness" (p.2) which in the context of Higher Education can be understood as a "geo-spatial process of growing inter-dependence and convergence, in which worldwide or pan-regional (for example European) spheres of action are enhanced" (OECD, 2009, p. 19). This means that globalization combines cultural and economic changes. In the context of Higher Education, this can for example be seen through different projects such as the various Erasmus+ programs[1]. Whereas globalization works on a global scale, internationalization can be understood as "any relationship across borders between nations, or between single institutions situated within different national systems" (OECD, 2009, p. 21) and therefore works on a much more confined scale. While globalization and internationalization are often used synonymously in the context of Higher Education, it is important to note that globalization is not only internationalization on a larger scale but rather both concepts work in a dialectical relationship as two different aspects of cross-border relations (OECD, 2009).

In recent decades, the idea of international mobility has changed quite a lot. Due to globalization many aspects such as the transition to a knowledge-based economy, the commodification of Higher Education, academic capitalism, and global competitiveness have risen to the forefront of discussions (see De Wit & Merkx, 2023; Elken et al., 2023; Jokila, 2020). International mobility itself has become a part of international labor market mobility and is therefore not only a strategic goal anymore but linked to the university becoming a 'product' and the student a 'customer' that needs to be attracted to maximize the economic benefits (Fabricius et al., 2017).

Different processes, such as the Bologna Process, or the Erasmus+ program have had a big influence on student mobility in Europe and made studying abroad more accessible while playing an important role in the internationalization of Higher Education in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Through these processes due to these aspects (the transition to a knowledge-based economy, the commodification of Higher Education, academic capitalism, and global competitiveness), many new international study programs have been created in Europe. Most of these programs are structured with English as a medium of instruction (EMI). English as the main language of studying can make it easier for students to study in a country whose languages they do not, or only to an extent, speak (Lauridsen, 2016). While in the common discourse, the internationalization of HE and the increase in student

[1] For more information on Erasmus+ see https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/ (retrieved September 6, 2023)

mobility is promoted and praised, it is important to not follow this rather uncritical view blindly. When looking at the situation more precisely, it becomes clear that there is a stark difference between the expectations the common discourse presents about internationalization, especially concerning its cultural and linguistical benefits on the students as well as on the institutions and the reality that stems from the ongoing internationalization in European Higher Education (Fabricius et al., 2017). While English-mediated international study programs are often promoted to enhance among others multilingualism, intercultural competence, and multiculturalism, from a political point of view internationalization is often used to address the commodification of Higher Education and the global competitiveness of the institutions. Consequently, the internationalization of Higher Education is not equally available for everybody and is often viewed from a Eurocentric point of view (Leal et al., 2022).

One issue that emerges with English-mediated programs is how the Higher Education institutions are dealing with the connection between English and the official language(s) of the institutions. European HEIs have come up with three different approaches to this issue. Alexander (2008) defines these as the *cumulative type*, the *additional type*, and the *replacement type*. In HEIs that follow the cumulative approach, the use of the local language increases while the use of English decreases with the improvement of the local language. In the additional type, often used in the German Higher Education system, English is used for the students to transition into the local language. On the other side of the spectrum, in HEIS that are led by the replacement approach, English is used systematically throughout the studies. English-mediated programs in Finland have mostly been following this approach. This strategy can lead to the problem that the university environment becomes an 'English-only' bubble where the students do not have the need to study and learn the local language and therefore might struggle when stepping outside of the university environment (Koreik, 2020).

Although studying in English in an international program can offer many opportunities to students, such as a wider variety of study locations to choose from, gaining experiences they might not learn in their previous location of studies, increased intercultural understanding, or the lowered threshold of needing to learn a new local language; it is important not to view the position of English in international programs and these opportunities uncritically. While these programs can offer many opportunities and open many doors, it is important to take a look at who is able to step through these doors from the beginning. With international mobility often being promoted as 'multilingual', being proficient in English is seen as a necessary commodity when wanting to study in an international program (Earls, 2016).

The different perceptions and statuses of English and English speakers can vary widely, and this can lead to problems of unequal treatment (see Dryden & Dovchin, 2022 for an exploration of translingual English discrimination). There is often an unequal divide between English speakers from the Global North and the Global South

(Leal et al., 2022). For example, the university of this study, located in Finland, requires a certain degree of English proficiency from their international students to be able to apply for any kind of international degree program. Students can demonstrate their proficiency by either having completed a higher degree in English in an EU/EEA country, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand, or by providing the university with a language proficiency certificate (obtained through a language test such as the IELTS Academic or the TOEFL iBT). These requirements could indicate that the university makes a distinction between English speakers from countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand and from countries that also have English as one of their official languages, like many countries from the Global South (such as India, Singapore or many countries in Africa). This division highlights one of the issues of unequal access to international mobility and international education.

1.3 Internationalization of Higher Education in Finland

While countries with English as the national language, mainly the United States of America, Australia, and the United Kingdom, are still popular study locations for international students (especially for students from Asia), universities in Europe and especially in the Nordic countries have been chosen more and more by students from all over the world in the last decades (*Degree Mobile Graduates from Abroad by Education Level, Sex and Field of Education*, n.d.). In Finland, the amount of international students has almost doubled in the last twenty years (3745 international students in 2005 in comparison to 7972 international students in 2020) (OECD, 2023).

Finland has thirteen universities and twenty-two universities of applied sciences (UAS). While UAS are more professionally oriented, the focus of universities is on scientific research. This study will only be concerned with international students at Finnish universities.

In Finland, the universities are publicly funded and embedded in the Finnish equality-centered welfare state model. While universities have traditionally been defined by "uniformity within institutional structures, central administrative steering, free tuition and strong equality principles" (Jokila, 2020, p. 145), the beginnings of the 2000s have brought about a change. The commodification of Higher Education and the focus on the employability of international students have brought on a market-oriented shift in Finnish universities. In 2009, the *Strategy for the internationalization of higher education institutions in Finland 2009-2015* (Opetusministeriö, 2009) redefined the status of universities in Finland as 'independent legal entities' with the aim to offer universities stronger financial and administrative rights. In this strategy, internationalization is seen as a means for the "promotion of diversity, international networking, competitiveness and innovativeness and improvement of well-being, competence and

education of citizens" (Elken et al., 2023, p. 39). While the strategy of 2009 already framed student mobility as part of the growing education-based economy, it was only the precursor of the policy changes and the new internationalization strategy *Better together for a better world: Policies to promote internationalization in Finnish higher education and research 2017-2025* (Ministry of education and culture, 2018) implemented in 2017. These policy changes introduced among others a change to the university laws with a selective tuition fee policy. From 2017 onwards Finnish universities have been required to charge tuition fees to international students who come from outside of EU/EEA-countries to study in Finland. This policy has brought a clear division between on the one side local students and students from EU/EEA countries and on the other side international students from outside of EU/EEA countries. Based on these changes the Finnish Higher Education system has been slowly transitioning towards being more commercially oriented (Plamper et al., 2023). These changes have also reinforced the universities as marketing agents and students as customers who, with paying tuition fees, require to be served a product (Jokila, 2020).

According to the 2017 International student barometer [2] (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018), almost half of the international students would like to stay in Finland after graduation, with non-EU students being more eager to stay than EU students. While students want to stay, a major issue is the labor market entry for international graduates (Saarinen, 2020). One way the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture is trying to support international students throughout their studies and with the entry process into the Finnish labor market is through the Team Finland Knowledge network and the Talent Boost program (Ministry of education and culture, n.d.; Talent Boost, n.d.). The Team Finland Knowledge network aims to attract international talent and promote Finnish Higher Education and research outside of Finland. The aim of the Talent Boost program is, in addition to attracting international talent, to support their integration and immigration in Finland. These kinds of programs are designed to assist international students and encourage them to stay after graduation. But not only do the students themselves benefit from these programs, but the universities and the Finnish labor market profit as well (Airey et al., 2017; Hultgren et al., 2014). International students are considered an important labor force because, in addition to the education and knowledge they receive in Finland, they bring knowledge and skills from their previous educational background (Alho, 2020, p. 4). By keeping the international talent in Finland after their graduation they can be great assets in the global knowledge economy and when they stay in Finland after graduation, they can be a great resource to the Finnish labor market (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b). In comparison to immigrants who come to Finland directly for work, international students have the benefit that they have, to a certain point, already gained socio-cultural knowledge about Finland. By graduating in Finland, they are already part of the

[2] A new International Student Barometer survey was conducted in 2022, but the results are not yet publicly available by the time this thesis has been written.

Finnish system and do not require extensive accreditation processes such as people with a degree obtained outside of Finland. Therefore, the integration of international students into Finnish society and the Finnish labor market is an important task (H. Li, 2020; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b; Välimaa et al., 2013).

1.4 PhD studies in Finland

As Finland has seen an uprise in international students and many new international degree programs in the last twenty years, many English-mediated PhD programs have been developed as well (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; *Tilastoja korkeakouluopiskelijoiden ulkomaanjaksoista*, n.d.; Välimaa & Weimer, 2014). Currently, eleven Finnish universities offer the opportunity for PhD studies in English (*Doctoral Admissions*, n.d.). The university where the data of this study was collected offers a variety of different doctoral programs in six doctoral schools, which are open to students from all over the world. The language of instruction in these programs is predominantly English.

Although, as mentioned in the previous chapter, these programs offer many benefits for international students; living and studying in English, in a country where English is not an official language and not the main language of communication, can also lead to difficulties during and after the studies. One of the biggest barriers that students, as well as universities, have spoken up about is the lack of sufficient Finnish proficiency to live and work in Finland (Alho, 2020). This barrier can lead to societal and economic issues on both sides. From the student perspective, a lack of Finnish language skills can lead to problems with finding a job and integrating into Finnish society (see for example H. Li, 2020; Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a, 2021b). Välimää et al. (2013) state, "there is a lack of internships and work placements […] for students with less-than-perfect Finnish language skills" (p. 41). Therefore, not having learned sufficient Finnish can lead to different problems during and after their studies. This problem has also been recognized by the Finnish Higher Education Council. In the most recent *An evaluation of International Degree Programmes in Finland* report (Välimaa et al., 2013) the Finnish Higher Education Council points out that one of the main problems for international students is gaining access to the Finnish labor market after graduation. Part of this problem is the "insufficient ability to speak Finnish" (Välimaa et al., 2013, p. 91). From the perspective of the students one aspect, they spoke up about was not having enough time in their curriculum to study Finnish. While from the perspective of the HEIs, it often is a problem of allocation of resources. It is important to be critical when investigating the reasons behind learning or not learning Finnish and it is important not to forget that language ability is not the only factor that impacts the students during and after their studies. Factors such as cultural differences or the attitude towards international people are some of them (Välimaa et al., 2013). Ultimately, this problem is not only a personal issue of the students, but it also affects

Higher Education Institutions, the Finnish society, and the labor market in Finland. With the international students leaving after graduation, Finland is losing important human capital (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a). Therefore, the factors that influence the choice between starting and continuing to learn Finnish or not are important. These factors do not only affect the students themselves, but in the end, they also influence Finnish society and the Finnish labor market (Garam et al., 2014). The Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) (2014) states that "immigration of young adults at the peak of their working life results in clear net benefit in the public economy" (p. 1) and this is also important for international students staying in Finland after graduation.

The focus of this study is on international PhD students because, in contrast to international master's degree students, PhD students at the discussed university are not required to participate in any mandatory Finnish classes. It is their own decision whether they want to study Finnish or not. Therefore, the reasoning behind why they learn Finnish and how it influences their life in Finland can be insightful for both sides; the international students themselves as well as the Finnish Higher Education Institutions and the Finnish labor market.

1.5 Finnish as a foreign language

Around 4.8 million people in Finland speak Finnish as their first language. Finnish in itself is a small language[3] in this world with around 5.8 million native speakers in the world (Statistics Finland, 2019). Outside of Finland, it is registered as an official minority language in Sweden and there are bigger groups of Finnish language speakers in Estonia, Norway, Russia, the United States, and Australia (Latomaa & Nuolijärvi, 2005).

Finnish is part of the Uralic language group and a member of the Finno-Ugric language family. As a Uralic language, it belongs to the minority language groups in the group of European languages, while most of the languages spoken in Europe are Indo-European languages, such as German, English, French, Russian, or Swedish. The biggest difference between Finnish and the other languages spoken in Europe is that Finnish is an agglutinative language whereas most Indo-European languages are inflected languages (Dahl, 2008). Linguistics have identified eleven major features of the Finnish language:

1. Fewer phonemes than in many other languages (21 in total)
2. Vowel harmony
3. Each letter corresponds to one and the same phoneme

[3] Set in the comparison to e.g. English with 380 million native speakers (Eberhard et al., 2023). For an insight into how language statistics, such as the Ethnologue, can be conceptualized see Paolillo and Das (2006).

4. Difference between short and long sounds is used to distinguish words
5. Word stress falls on the first syllable of each word
6. Words are inflected by adding grammatical affixes
7. Verbs are inflected by person
8. Derivation is a common method of word formation
9. No grammatical gender
10. No articles
11. Adjectives agree in number and case with their headword when they appear as premodifiers (Latomaa & Nuolijärvi, 2005, p. 131)

Since Finnish, as a Uralic language, belongs to a minority language group in the European languages it can often be perceived as an 'exotic' language in contrast to the 'normal' European languages (Dahl, 2008). From a grammatical perspective, this perception stems from a rather 'euro-normative' point of view. Taking a step back and looking at the European languages from a non-euro-centric standpoint, it becomes visible that Finnish (and other Uralic languages) are not that far away from the Indo-European languages in Europe (Dahl, 2008). Haspelmath (2009) even proposes the hypothesis that from a Euro-centric perspective, a language's inflection status just pertains to how close it is to Latin and its agglutinating status how close it is to Turkish. This means, that even though from an Indo-European perspective Finnish might be more challenging to learn than a new Indo-European language; from a grammatical perspective the 'exoticness' of Finnish among the European languages is just a perceived one.

In their study of exchange students who are learning Finnish as a Second Language, Szabó and Dufva (2020) argue that

> Finnish as a Finno-Ugric language often means a challenge to them [the exchange students], its grammatical structure and vocabulary being significantly different than their L1 and the various Indo-European languages that are most commonly taught as L2s globally. Duly, students often find Finnish unfamiliar, even exotic, when exploring its use […] and they might not find [it] easy to refer to their previous L2 study routines either. (p.95)

While the 'exoticness' of the Finnish language and Finnish being 'one of the hardest languages to learn' is often iterated in common discourse it is hard to find theoretical sources that attest to these statements (for an example of how Finnish is portrayed in the common discourse see *Finnish among Most Difficult Languages for English Speakers*, 2013).

Albeit these statements often arise when learning Finnish becomes the topic of the conversation or are uttered by new Finnish learners, they are also represented in the discourse of Finnish speakers themselves when they talk about Finnish as a language to be learned. Different articles written for Finnish learners or written to attract people to the Finnish language use its 'exotic' status as a selling point. Dahl (2008) refers to this as 'self-exoticization'. Articles directed towards potential Finnish learners are for example titled *The unbearable beauty of Finnish grammar – What doesn't hurt*

you makes you stronger (Marten, 2013) or *Who's afraid of Finnish?* (Branch, n.d.). Varpu Rusila, a Finnish online coach and the creator of the popular Social Media channel *Her Finland* refers to Finland and the Finnish language as follows:

> We Finns are used to being different and we don't have high expectations for a visitor to speak Finnish. That being said though, we are deeply honored if you try to speak a couple of words or are practicing our language. That makes us feel very special. (Rusila, n.d., para. 2)

Latomaa (1998) stated already more than twenty years ago that

> it seems that foreigners are not expected to learn, or maybe it is not even appreciated when they learn the language especially well, which is reflected in the myth Finns themselves keep alive of Finnish as 'the most difficult language in the world'. (p. 57)

These examples show that Finnish people themselves might have a contradictory attitude to their own language. On the one hand, they are excited about everyone trying to learn their language, but on the other hand, it seems like they do not expect people to try learning Finnish.

Finland is a bilingual country, where Finnish and Swedish are both constitutionally official languages. Nowadays, Finnish is the dominating language in Finnish society and Swedish is only used by a small percentage of the population, resulting in societal rather than an individual form of practiced bilingualism (Saarinen & Rontu, 2018). An important aspect of Finnish societal bilingualism is, that it builds strongly on legislation and different language policies (see for example Kielilaki, 2003). For a long time, Finnish and Swedish have been the dominating languages in Finland. But in the last twenty-five years, Finnish society experienced a shift from being a rather exclusive bilingual country to a more multilingual one (Latomaa & Nuolijärvi, 2005). The Language Act of 2004 adds to the Finnish constitution on how the national languages as well as 'other languages' shall be used in different situations (Kielilaki, 2003) and therefore opened up the Finnish language policies towards languages other than the national languages and the registered minority languages.

Finland used to be a country dominated by emigration (Latomaa & Nuolijärvi, 2005), but due to a rise in immigration in recent decades, many new languages have been introduced to society. Due to globalization especially the status of English has become increasingly more visible. While the spread of English has been seen as rather positive in Finnish society and the language policies introduced during the post-nationalist period in Finland were very welcoming towards multilingualism, the beginning of the 2010s has brought on a change (Saarinen, 2020). In contrast to the rise of immigration and globalization, Finland (comparable to many other countries in Europe) has started to experience a political growth of new nationalism (Saarinen, 2020). Saarinen (2020) defines nationalism as "a civic or social contract, aiming at some kind of political unit ('nation'), based on solidarity to some political and community rule ('law') that does not overrule individual and universal (human) rights" (p.14). While

this understanding of nationalism is reproduced in the new nationalism motion in Finland, the motion also brings forward problematic connections with "right-wing politics, market economy, religious ideologies and authoritarianism" (p.19). This new nationalist understanding has among others led to the rise of the Finns party (*perussuomalaiset*), which in their political program stress the importance of 'Finnishness', which they understand as the patriotic combination of "culture, identity, we-spirit, and language" and which highlights the importance of the Finnish language as the unifying factor of the nation (*PS:N Suomalaisuusohjelma 2022*, 2022). The concept of 'Finnishness' is often used to exclude people who do not fit the strict guidelines of the created national identity and can create boundaries between 'us' (people identifying as 'Finnish') and 'them' (people who are not perceived to fit the 'us' category) (Saarinen, 2020).

While the English language might be seen as a threat to Finnish society and the Finnish language by some, the importance of English, due to the ongoing globalization, progresses continuously. Globalization also has had a significant impact on Higher Education in Finland and how languages are treated in the context of Higher Education.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework this thesis is based on. I will discuss, the main theoretical concepts – the concept of belonging and Second Language socialization – and analyze how they are linked to each other, how they come together in the context of learning Finnish as a second language, and how that might influence the PhD students in and outside of the university setting.

2.1 The concept of belonging

Belonging is a term with many different meanings and is often simultaneously or synonymously used with terms such as identity, community, positionality, or membership (Strayhorn, 2018). The concept of belonging itself is widely represented in common discourse and it is often not questioned what people really mean when they talk about a sense of belonging or the concept of it. This leads to the term often being ill-defined when used in a scientific context. Therefore, it is important to precisely define and theorize what the concept of belonging means in relation to the presented data and framework in this study.

As a notion, it was brought to attention in social psychology by Maslow (1962) in his motivational hierarchy of needs and later on by Baumeister and Leary (1995) who define the need to belong as a "fundamental human motivation" and the "desire for interpersonal attachment" (p. 520). The belief that all humans share a strong desire to belong and that a sense of belongingness is an elemental human motivation is still shared in current research in among others, psychology, cultural studies, and studies concerning students' sense of belonging.

Belongingness or non-belongingness can have a considerable influence on a person's behavior and perception of themselves and their life. The question of belonging often arises in situations when belonging itself is questioned and is therefore often brought into discussion in the context of migration, inclusion/exclusion, and identity

struggles (Lähdesmäki et al., 2014). A sense of belonging is not a static one, but fluid and flexible. It might change over time and can be dependable on location and environment (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Even though this makes defining belonging harder and leads to the many different meanings and definitions of it, it is also one of its biggest strengths. Belonging as a concept is "person-centred" (May, 2011, p. 364). Hence, as an academic concept the adaptability and the flexibility of belonging offer the possibility to create an extensive and detailed analysis of the different personal, social, and societal dimensions of individual human experiences. Therefore, to achieve such a profound analysis the complexity of belonging is inevitable (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Belonging itself is a social phenomenon and can be situated in a social constructionist approach (for a deeper understanding of how a social constructionist approach is pursued in this thesis see chapter 3). It is socially constructed and not an inherent feature.

With the aim to offer a more coherent theoretical approach towards belonging Antonsich (2010) created an analytical framework that can help in defining the notion better. He approaches belonging from two different points of view: 'place-belongingness' and 'political belongingness'. Place-belongingness refers to the personal experience of feeling to belong somewhere. A place does not necessarily have to be a spatial one, it can for example also refer to a group of people or a symbolic space. Some scholars refer to belonging as the feeling of 'being at home' (see among others hooks, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). 'Home' in this context does not refer to a spatial place, but it rather stands for a "symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 646). Antonsich (2010) defines five factors that are central to generating a feeling of place-belongingness: *auto-biographical*, *relational*, *cultural*, *economic*, and *legal factors*. Auto-biographical factors refer to personal past histories and are often feelings that are attached to a particular space. Relational factors refer to the interpersonal and social connections a person has created. One of the biggest aspects related to cultural factors is language. Specific languages can be connected to a place by the way people use them to establish meaning and create interdepending situations. Other cultural aspects can be, among others, religion, traditions, or food. Economic factors influence a sense of belonging especially through the possibility of creating stability and a feeling of safeness. Legal factors, such as questions of citizenship or resident permits can have a big impact on the sense of belonging in regard to the feeling of safety and having access to specific rights. In addition to these factors, Antonsich (2010) mentions that the length of residence in a particular place can also have an impact on a person sense of belonging.

The concept of belonging does not only include belongingness to a specific place but it has been politicized and is often used to discuss questions of exclusion, discrimination, and inequality (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Therefore, next to place-belongingness Antonsich (2010) included the politics of belonging in his framework. He defines the politics of belonging as "a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies,

or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion" (p.645). Therefore, in contrast to place-belongingness, the politics of belonging refer to the social aspect of 'feeling at home' and the influence of the environment on an individual's sense of belonging. The key factors of the politics of belonging are "membership (to a group) and ownership (of a place)" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 649) and how people separate themselves into 'us' and 'them'.

Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) extend Antonsich's (2010) and Yuval-Davis' (2006) frameworks and identify five topoi for the continuous conceptualization of belonging: *spatiality*, *intersectionality*, *multiplicity*, *materiality*, and *non-belonging*. The spatiality of belonging refers to the connection of belonging to place attachment and space boundaries. Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) also identify, that "social relations are inherently embedded in spatial belonging" (p. 243). The intersectionality of belonging supports the understanding that belonging itself is not unidimensional, but rather fluid and hybrid. Under intersectionality, they combine the social and political aspects of belonging. The multiplicity of belonging is also rooted in the understanding that belonging should be perceived as situational and dependable on context. Whereas the beforementioned topoi are more theoretical, the materiality of belonging refers to how individuals interact with their surrounding physical environment. While the common understanding of belonging identifies it as something that people always try to achieve and as something positive, it is important to also take the concept of non-belonging into consideration. Whereas non-belonging can be perceived negatively by some people, some individuals can feel a certain sense of comfort by explicitly excluding themselves from a certain group or place and placing themselves purposefully outside of the perceived group or place.

While the concept of belonging is closely related to studies of identity, it is important to note that belonging is on the one side a central part of identity (see Lähdesmäki et al., 2014) and on the other side goes further than just the concept of identity. It is a holistic concept that involves questions of identity, positionality as well as spatial and political attachment. Lähdesmäki et al. (2014) argue that belonging "emphasize[s] the relationality of subjectivity more readily than identity" and "while identity implies sameness and coherence within a group or an individual and assumes a shared basis, belonging can account for that which can change and shift in time and place" (p. 96). Due to its changing character, belonging and not solely identity is the focus of this thesis.

In the framework of this thesis, the element of belonging is relevant because the researched group – international PhD students – have all experienced a shift in their environment, and in the context of the university and the society in Finland they can be considered a minor group. Minor in this context is not defined as belonging to a minority, but rather seen in the context of the group of international PhD students occupying a minor position regarding their group size in comparison to other students.

The new or unfamiliar environment can influence international PhD students and questions of belonging can arise. As mentioned before an important aspect of the sense of belonging is language. As second language Finnish learners the international students are not part of the major language society. This has an influence on how and in which capacity they include themselves and get included in a Finnish-speaking society. The particulars of socialization through Finnish as a second language will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Sense of belonging of students has been the focus of many scholars. International students especially have been the focus of belonging studies, because they have to adjust to an unfamiliar and new social surrounding and their sense of belonging can play an important part in their adjustment being successful or not (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Strayhorn (2018) for example defines seven core elements of a sense of belonging specifically concerning college students:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need;
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior;
3. Sense of belonging takes a heightened importance a) in certain contexts, b) at certain times, and c) among certain populations;
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering;
5. Social identities intersect and affect […] sense of belonging;
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes;
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change (Strayhorn, 2018, pp.29–40).

These elements will be important in the discussion of the findings of this study. Especially the third element, sense of belonging taking a heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, and among certain people, will be reflected in the utterances of the research participants. Based on Strayhorn (2018), one aspect that can have an impact on the students' sense of belonging is culture.

In this thesis, I will follow the definition of culture by Fitzpatrick (2020) who refers to culture as "what is created and shared between and among people, and all interaction and behaviour can be seen to be framed and permeated by intercultural processes" (p.5). Intercultural interaction can be defined as an encounter in which people with different cultural backgrounds interact and perceive cultural differences. Embedded in a social constructionist paradigm (for a deeper understanding of how a social constructionist approach is pursued in this thesis see chapter 3), culture and intercultural interactions are perceived as complex and dynamic processes that are always active and neither static. Therefore, culture can mean different things to different people in different situations. Nevertheless, it is important to also take into consideration

that intercultural interactions should always be viewed "within a framework of contextual and dialectical tensions of power and inequality" (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 10). This means that all intercultural interactions are framed in a socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-ideological context that can define the encounter.

Concludingly, culture may play a heightened role in the creation of a sense of belonging for international students. When looking at the concept of belonging in relation to international students, scholars have among others observed the sense of belonging of international students in community college (García et al., 2019), the social and cultural integration of international students in Higher Education in American colleges (Rivas et al., 2019), the influence of belonging on the intercultural and academic experiences of international students in Northern Ireland (Cena et al., 2021) and the influence of a sense of belonging toward community well-being (Pazil et al., 2023).

2.2 Second Language socialization

Language plays an important role in the process of establishing a sense of belonging (see for example Jinkerson, 2012; Joubert & Sibanda, 2022). One way to approach the way a second language is learned and its influence on the learner is through the lens of Second Language socialization.

The term 'Second Language' (L2) is sometimes viewed as a controversial one in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. Defining a learned language as a 'second language' can be difficult based on the learner and their language learning background. Therefore, it is important to note that the term 'Second Language' is used here as an umbrella term for every new language learned after the learner's first or dominant language. Hence, in this term, I am including not only the second language learned, but also the third, the fourth, and so on. In the multilingual societies, shaped by more than one language, we live in in Europe it is important to see language learning processes as multilingual, giving attention to all languages involved (Duff, 2011).

Second Language socialization originates from the study of language socialization (specifically L1 language socialization). Language socialization (LS) research as a theoretical approach arose from anthropology in the 1980s and focused on the interplay of children and their sociocultural environment and the influence of and on their communicative practices (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986b, 1986a). Schieffelin and Ochs (1986a) view the notion of language socialization from two perspectives: "*socialization through the use of language* and *socialization to use language*" (p.163, italics taken from the original text).

Language socialization research itself is multidisciplinary and spans from linguistics to psychology and anthropology. In contemporary research, its focus has shifted from children to also considering the language socialization processes of

adults. With the widening of the field, research on how newcomers achieve communicative competence, group access, and membership all mediated by language, has grown (Duff, 2007). Language socialization is viewed as an always-changing interactional process that can be followed through the whole life cycle of a person's language learning. It is a process that does not only consider the acquisition of language but also the enculturation process that comes along with it. Language socialization research encompasses the holistic view of learning and includes the analysis of aspects such as culture, social knowledge, ideologies, epistemologies, and identities and subjectivities (Duff, 2007; Duff & Talmy, 2011). In a language socialization approach these processes are not only considered, but linguistic and cultural knowledge is co-constructed (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986b).

With the turn of the millennium, a new wave of language socialization came forward and a shift towards a broader and more heterogeneous field of research arose. The focus shifted to more diverse language communities characterized by (among others) multilingualism and bilingualism and towards second language learners. This shift introduced the risen interest in Second Language socialization (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002). Duff (2011) defines the scope of Second Language socialization as the "socialization beyond one's first, or dominant, language and encompasses second, foreign, and (concurrent) bilingual and multilingual learning contexts" (p.565).

In Second Language socialization the language learners are viewed not only as learners of a language but are constructed through and embedded in social experience and viewed holistically as socio-historically, -culturally, and -politically situated individuals (Duff, 2019; Duff & Talmy, 2011). The socialization process is bi- or multidirectional and depends on the learner itself, but also on the members of the community the learner engages with. This approach assumes that the community members are often more proficient than the learner and only in collaboration they can develop communicative competence and mediate the knowledge of "the values, practices, identities, ideologies and stances of the community" (Duff & Talmy, 2011, p. 98). This active and social construction of the socialization process can be closely linked to the theoretical paradigm of social constructionism (for a deeper understanding of how a social constructionist approach is pursued in this thesis see chapter 3).

In contrast to L1 language socialization, in L2 socialization learners are building on already existing social repertoire(s) based on their L1 or other previously learned languages, as well as previously obtained cultural or community knowledge. Therefore, learners already have a knowledge base they can build on. In addition, it is important to note that the socialization process is not a universal one for each learner, but that individual learners might seek different outcomes from it. Some learners might seek high proficiency in the L2 and/or high community management, while others may seek only functional understanding or are even distancing themselves from the language learning process. The different socialization processes can depend on different factors, such as duration of stay, intensity, effectiveness of instruction or

socialization, motivation, or opportunity to use the language (Duff, 2011). These aims might also change in the course of the learning, and they portray the fluidity and individuality of the language learning journey of the individuals.

One factor that can have an influence on the socialization processes of individuals can be their cultural adjustment. While adjusting to a culture, similar as adjusting to a language, is an ongoing process that can hardly be defined as a static point in the journey of individuals, different cultural adjustment models can help in understanding the individuals' experiences. Cultural adjustment refers to the process individuals go through when they enter a new cultural environment and adapt to it. It is typically linked to prolonged exposure to a new cultural context such as through migration, relocation, or international education. Especially in intercultural education, the concept can be highly relevant. With international students as a focus, it considers the challenges the students are facing in adjusting to their new living and studying environment (Fitzpatrick, 2020).

The origins of the concept of cultural adjustment can be traced back to the concept of *culture shock* by Oberg (1960). In his work, Oberg describes different stages individuals go through when experiencing a new or not familiar culture. While Oberg's concept can be seen as the foundation of cultural adjustment, more contemporary approaches have developed over time and become more nuanced. Another influential source on the concept of cultural adjustment is Ward and Kennedy's article *The measurement of sociocultural adaption* (1999). Ward and Kennedy have proposed to divide the concept of cultural adjustment into two components: *psychological adjustment* and *sociocultural adjustment*. Psychological adjustment refers to the psychological well-being of individuals in their adjustment and can be viewed from an emotional or affective point of view. Sociocultural adjustment refers to the behavioral aspect of adjustment and can be related to the interaction of the individual with the host environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Here, the language socialization can play a substantial part as well. Where psychological adaption can be influenced by the individuals' personality or their social support, sociocultural adaption can be influenced by factors of cultural learning and social skills; such as language fluency, length of residency in the new cultural environment or interactions with host nationals (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). In their study on international students' cultural adjustment in the United States, Ammigan et al. (2023) follow Ward and Kennedy's concept of cultural adjustment and point out the importance of the psychological and sociocultural components of the adjustment experiences of the students. They especially highlight the importance of the context of the experiences and conclude by offering recommendations on how to enhance the experiences of international students based on their cultural adjustment.

In the *Handbook of intercultural training* Cushner and Karim (2004) point out that many social and cultural cues are embedded in language. This means, that the sociocultural environment of international students' is entwined with their language

learning and use experiences (Cushner & Karim, 2004). Therefore, the cultural adjustment process and second language socialization are closely entwined.

Narrowing it back down to Second Language socialization, some researchers have voiced concerns about how (L2) language socialization is often used as an umbrella term and claim that works under the framework of language socialization are not authentically fulfilling the theoretical claims (for a critical approach to language socialization see for example Gregg, 2006). Therefore, it is important to clarify in which way the L2 socialization paradigm is understood in the context of this thesis. To do this, I am following the propositions of Bronson and Watson-Gegeo (2008). They have proposed three distinctions of how the language socialization paradigm can be approached in research: *LS as a method*, *LS as an approach*, and *LS as a topic*. Language socialization as a method is mostly used in extensive ethnographical studies with the use of discourse analyses. Studies that follow LS as an approach usually incorporate the ontology and epistemology of language socialization in their research, without necessarily following the strict longitudinal study design on studies that use LS as a method. In contrast to these two approaches, studies that approach LS as a topic usually do not follow the rigid longitudinal design nor use an ethnographical study method. The data acquisition is often done through interviews with a limited set of participants. Research with LS as a topic often discusses "the intersection of social life, language use, and language development" (Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008, p. 48).

Due to the time restrictions, this study did not allow for an extensive longitudinal design. Therefore, this study will treat LS as a topic. It will explore how language socialization develops in the context of belonging, especially in belonging through language learning and usage. Similar to the concept of belonging, identity interactions play a significant role in the discussion of (L2) language socialization. Through participation in social interaction, different identity aspects are inherently implicated (Duff & Talmy, 2011).

Research on Second Language socialization in international students and their language learning journeys has focused among others on the individual narrative (re)construction of individual learners (Ortaçtepe, 2013), the performance of speech acts in academic as well as social settings of international students in Higher Education (Boz et al., 2018) and the interplay of identity and social network in the socialization experience of international students (W. (Marco) Li & Gong, 2022). In addition, Duff (2008) offers a comprehensive overview of the language socialization aspects of L2 speakers in working situations.

2.3 A social approach to second language learning and use

Both the concept of belonging and Second Language socialization are inherently social. Social interaction and the social experiences of the individuals shape their

understanding of belonging and Second Language socialization. Since one of the factors that might have an impact on the sense of belonging of the international PhD students is language, their individual experiences with Finnish language learning and use is one of the foci of this study. Therefore, it is important to closely examine the approach to language learning itself. Language learning itself can be approached from two different theoretical points of view: A linguistic-cognitive perspective and a social perspective.

In a linguistic-cognitive approach, language is viewed as a self-contained, rule-governed system that builds on "quantitative, cognitive, positivist epistemologies" (Ortega, 2013, p. 3). Research from a cognitive point of view is often approached with quantitative methods. On the other side, we find research based on social approaches. In a social approach, language is seen as socially embedded, and language learning is based on experiences. The focus in a social approach is not on the linguistic acquisition of language itself, but on how learners are complex social individuals and how their learning process develops in specific social situations and different sociocultural contexts.

Language does not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, when discussing language, we do not only talk about language, but we always discuss societal structures that are connected to the language and the speakers. Especially in discussions where language is used as a political argument, it is often only a proxy for other matters such as ethnicity or national identity, and is sometimes used to justify social inequalities. But language does not define one's race, one's nation, or one's belonging (Saarinen, 2020). In particular, in the context of language learning and multilingualism, it is important to consider the impact of the social environment on the language learner. Socialization processes and a sense of belonging can influence the learning process immensely.

Based on this understanding and grounded in the paradigm of Social Constructionism (for a deeper understanding of how a social constructionist approach is pursued in this thesis see chapter 3.2) this thesis will discuss language learning and use, as well as belonging and Second Language socialization from a social approach.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim and research questions

This study aims to explore the diverse factors that could have an impact on the development of a sense of belonging of individual international PhD students in Finland. A focus has been put on the perceived influence of learning Finnish as well as the perceived influence of their social interactions with their environment and their relations to it. By following this focus I want to examine how a sense of belonging might influence their learning and use of Finnish and vice versa how learning and using Finnish might influence their sense of belonging. By situating this thesis in a Social Constructionism paradigm, this research aspires to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted relationship between the students' individual experiences, their Finnish language learning as well as the broader socio-cultural context in shaping their sense of belonging in Finland.

Previous research on belonging and language learning experiences in study abroad settings have focused mostly on bachelor or master students (see among others Kinginger, 2013a; Mendoza et al., 2022; Rienties et al., 2014) or short-term exchange students (see among others Benson, et al., 2012; Neff & Apple, 2020; Pazil et al., 2023; Sato, 2014). PhD students on the other hand come to study in Finland for a longer period of time (a PhD having an average duration of four years (*Doctoral Admissions*, n.d.)) and therefore might have other intentions regarding their language learning and socialization processes. Furthermore, by choosing the combined focus of a sense of belonging and second language socialization I am able to offer an insight into several aspects that shape the participants' experience as an international student as well as their language learning experiences.

In combining belonging and second language socialization under the umbrella of language learning I am proposing the following research questions for my study:

1. How do the experiences of international PhD students in learning Finnish perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?
2. How do the experiences of international PhD students of their social interactions and relations within their environment perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?

3.2 Research approach

To find answers to my research questions this study follows a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach has been chosen, because the aim of the study is to explore personal stories and experiences in depth. The findings of qualitative research can reveal the "meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312) and expose a new viewpoint of social situations. Important aspects of qualitative research are that the investigated reality is never static and can be approached from multiple perspectives. To achieve this multilayered point of view and understand the participants' subjectivity, the researcher has to work closely with the participants and be committed strongly to the study (Creswell, 2007; Roberts, 2020). By being committed strongly, the researcher's responsibility is to interact with the research participants, reflect on their contributions, and reconstruct their experiences. Together in interaction, within the interview, they will create the answers to the research questions.

To be committed strongly to this study I aimed to follow Tracy's (2010) eight 'big tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research (see Appendix I for the full table). While all eight criteria are inherently important in creating qualitative research, I specifically oriented myself on the criteria of rich rigor, sincerity as well as credibility. I aimed to achieve rich rigor in building a strong theoretical construct for this thesis, having a significant base of research data as well as embedding the whole thesis in a relevant context (for a detailed description of the data collection process see chapter 3.3). By reflecting on my positionality as a researcher as well as a person who has experienced similar situations as the research participants I aimed to produce sincere and valuable research. This is enhanced by my transparency not only throughout the whole research process but also in disclosing the limitations of this study (for an insight into the ethical considerations and the positionality see chapter 3.5 and for an insight into the limitations of this study see chapter 5.2). By having a transparent analysis process and offering multisided aspects and thick descriptions of the research participants' views I aimed to heighten the credibility of the research. All in all, I as a researcher was committed to the research process at every step, and within this research, I tried to follow all the criteria of Tracy's (2010) structure as best as possible.

To explore the personal stories of the participants in-depth I have chosen to follow the paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism. The roots of Social Constructionism can be followed back to Berger and Luckmann's (1967) *The Social*

construction of reality as well as Gergen's (2015) *An invitation to social constructionism*. The focus of the framework lies in the understanding of how individuals perceive their surroundings and how their experiences are socially constructed. The key concept of Social Constructionism is that the understanding of ourselves and the world is a human product rather than being influenced by an external reality (see Burr, 2015; Burr & Dick, 2017; Cunliffe, 2008; Silverman, 2013). Language and Experience are working in a bidirectional relationship with each other and language is viewed "as implicit in the social production and reproduction of both meaning and experience" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1395).

In a Social Constructionism paradigm, the meaning of the world is expressed through language (Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, by following a Social Constructionist approach, through their answers and their point of view the participants can actively create their own meaning. Through this approach, the interview data gives insight into how the interviewees describe their world and how they create their own meaning (Silverman, 2013). By focusing on the individual views of the participants, I am aiming to situate the participants' stories in their personal context and understand how they experience learning Finnish and how it can influence their sense of belonging as well as how their sense of belonging might influence their learning experience.

3.3 Data collection

To elicit the stories of the participants, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews are an important aspect of qualitative research methodology. As a method in social sciences, interviews have first been introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Through these in-depth semi-structured interviews, I am able to "acquire an understanding of the meaning and experience of the lived world from the perspective of the participant[s]" (Roberts, 2020, p. 3187). The semi-structured construction of the interview questions offered the participants the opportunity to construct their own meanings, while I as the interviewer was able to follow my predetermined topics in the interview process (Creswell, 2007). The interviews followed the personal narratives of the participants and through them, I was able to acquire a closer understanding of the research topic. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offer a flexible structure that allows giving attention to the lived experience of the individual interviewees while following an overall structure. While following the same structure in each interview, semi-structured interviews allow space for the research participants to offer new possible interpretations of the research focus (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Roberts, 2020).

The individual interviews were conducted with nine international PhD students. All of the interviewees were PhD students from the same mid-size university in

Finland. The requirements for participation in the study were that they do not have Finnish as their first language but have participated in at least one Finnish language course during the time of their studies or learned Finnish as part of their formal education. Additionally, they should have stayed in Finland for at least one year before the research interviews.

The requirement of not having Finnish as their first language has been set, because I wanted to focus specifically on the learning of Finnish as a foreign language from the perspective of international PhD students. The need of having participated in a Finnish language course has been made to ensure that each research participant has learned or started to learn Finnish formally at a certain point in their studies and has shown a commitment to learning Finnish. The last requirement of having stayed in Finland for at least one year has been set to obtain a group of research participants who have had the opportunity to get to know their new cultural and linguistic environment. Defining a common point when an individual has 'got to know' their new environment or has 'settled in' is impossible. Adjusting to a culture is an ongoing process and can hardly be defined as a static point in a journey. For my decision, I have oriented myself on different models of cultural adjustment (for cultural adjustment models see Cushner & Karim, 2004; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Hanvey, 1976; Page, 1990). I have not narrowed my decision down to follow one specific model, since the exact point of individual cultural adjustment cannot be defined (for an insight into cultural adjustment in relation to Second Language socialization see chapter 2.2). All models have in common that adjusting to a new culture starts with a superficial or entry stage. The goal of the participants having been in Finland for at least one year was to have a higher possibility that they have already passed this first stage. Through the setting of all of these requirements, the group of potential research participants has been localized to fit the focus of the research.

Additionally, I have not focused on students from only one Finnish language course nor only one faculty, but I have reached out to PhD students from all six doctoral schools at the university. To find the participants I contacted the PhD coordinators of all offered doctoral programs and asked them to share my research request with their PhD students. Additionally, I visited one Finnish class at the university and presented my research to the students. By reaching out to PhD students from different doctoral schools I wanted to have potential research participants who come from a variety of backgrounds regarding their gender, age, major subject, and previous language learning experience. The table below summarizes the background of the participants:

Table 1 Summary of participants' background

Participant	Gender	Department of PhD Studies	L1	Years lived in Finland	Current duration of PhD
Participant 1	Male	Faculty of Sport and Health Science	English	8 years	4 years
Participant 2	Female	Faculty of Education and Psychology	Russian	4 years	4 years
Participant 3	Male	Faculty of Sport and Health Science	English	10 years	13 years
Participant 4	Male	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Spanish	10 years	8 years
Participant 5	Male	Faculty of Education and Psychology	Not specified	4 years	2 years
Participant 6	Female	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	French	6 years	6 years
Participant 7	Female	Faculty of Education and Psychology	Not specified	3 ½ years	1 year
Participant 8	Female	Faculty of Education and Psychology	Spanish	7 years	4 years
Participant 9	Female	Faculty of Education and Psychology	Chinese	6 years	6 years

While data reliability and validity are used in quantitative research to establish credibility, it is not something that shows the credibility of qualitative research. One way credibility in qualitative research can be achieved is by having a variety of participants. Their individual backgrounds help in triangulating the data and in creating a more holistic set of interviews (Tracy, 2010). By not all interview participants being from the same doctoral school or the same Finnish language course, I tried to prevent gathering data from a one-sided point of view influenced by the interviewees' backgrounds.

Seven of the interviews have been conducted face-to-face on campus and two of the interviews have been conducted online through Zoom. All of the interviews were audio recorded and the language of the interviews was English. The length of the interviews varied from thirty minutes to one hour and forty minutes.

To direct the interviews, I have designed an interview guide that includes open-ended guiding questions regarding their educational and personal background, Finnish language learning experiences, motives to study abroad and especially in Finland,

plans after graduation, integration into the social environment in Finland, their motivation to continue or not to continue studying Finnish and their position as a PhD student in Finland (see Appendix II for interview guide) (see Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a; Ruuska, 2020). With these guiding questions, I was able to conduct each interview individually, but still follow a common thread (Roberts, 2020). With the help of the guiding questions, I adopted a conversational interview style intending to encourage the interviewees to share their personal points of view (Silverman, 2013). This approach considers both the researched and the researcher's perspective. However, since the researcher and the researched are working together closely in the interview, some issues have to be taken into consideration (Alho, 2020; Creswell, 2007). It is important that I as the researcher try to refrain from making any judgment regarding the narratives of the participants as much as possible and try to be free of stereotypes and assumptions (Yilmaz, 2013). But as Creswell (2007) points out, no research can be value-free, because the researcher brings their personal value to what is researched. Therefore, it is significant to be sensitive to all ethical considerations during the whole research process (for an understanding of my ethical considerations see chapter 3.5).

All recorded interviews have been manually transcribed by me with the transcription software f4transkript. The transcription followed an intelligent verbatim transcription approach, adopting the oral recordings to written norms, while still including certain aspects such as nonverbal cues, pauses, and repetitions (McMullin, 2023). The transcription symbols used loosely follow Jefferson's (2004) *Glossary of transcription symbols* (for a list of used transcription symbols see Appendix III).

3.4 Data analysis

To analyze the interviews I adopted a reflexive thematic approach following the established guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The reflexive thematic approach falls into the Social Constructionist paradigm through the importance of meaningfulness when establishing codes and themes. It offers the opportunity to take both the subjectivity of the participants as well as the reflexive influence of myself as a researcher into consideration (Byrne, 2022). Additionally, it is embedded in the Social Constructionist paradigm through its acknowledgment of the active role of language and interpretation in the analysis process. Overall, a reflexive thematic approach seeks to understand how participants actively construct their realities through their personal narratives and therefore aligns with the key tenets of Social Constructionism (Byrne, 2022).

A thematic analysis can help analyze the narrative material by dividing the transcripts into smaller units of content (codes) and it helps to identify and analyze themes from these codes in a transparent and traceable way (Guest et al., 2012). The aim of coding the composed data into thematic groups is to find patterns and compare

similarities and differences between the narratives. In my study, I used a predominantly inductive approach and followed a data-driven analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The analysis did not follow an exclusive inductive approach, since a certain degree of deductive analysis is necessary to create themes that align with the research questions (Byrne, 2022). During the analysis process, I established codes, not following a pre-established coding framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Depending on the data, I used semantic as well as latent coding. Semantic codes yield a descriptive analysis of the data whereas latent codes are more interpretive (Byrne, 2022). To understand the presented data, I was guided by an experiential orientation. An experiential orientation focuses on "how a given phenomenon may be experienced by the participant" and "reflect[s] the experience of a social reality" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1396).

By creating a rich thematic description by going back and forth between the codes and the data, I collated all the data into thematic categories. After all the relevant data had been sorted into thematic categories, I compared the findings of the individual interviewees with each other and matched common themes and differences into overall themes.

Based on these commonalities and differences I answered my research questions through a semantic lens, meaning that the analysis is based on what the interviewees have said, to pursue to "theorize the significance of the patterns and their meanings and implications" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

To produce a transparent research process and ensure quality, I also created a thematic map that included themes, codes, and their interdependencies (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). A thematic map can contribute to the validity of the study and help in measuring the prevalence of the themes (for a visual presentation of the thematic map see Appendix IV).

Validity is one of the key aspects of research of high quality. It can be broadly defined as "the state of being well grounded or justifiable, relevant, meaningful, logical, confirming to accepted principles or the quality of being sound, just, and well founded" (Cypress, 2017, p. 256). Originating from the empirical concepts of quantitative research the concept of validity can be seen critically in qualitative research. However, validity is not a singular concept that should only be applied to quantitative research. As an overarching construct it can yield important aspects and techniques in defining the quality of qualitative study (Whittemore et al., 2011). Common techniques are among others the awareness of design consideration, data generation, analytical procedures, and the presentation of the data (Cypress, 2017). It is important that the validity is considered throughout the whole research process and not only at the end of it. A potential threat to the validity is the researcher's own bias and positionality. In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at my own positionality and the ethical considerations I have taken to ensure qualitative research is of high quality.

3.5 Ethical considerations and positionality

When conducting qualitative research, the ethical aspects of research are of utmost importance to consider. Because qualitative research works in close contact with the research participants, it is important to tread carefully between establishing a relationship with the interviewee, while having enough distance to act in a scientific manner. Following ethical guidelines can help enhance the sincerity and validity of the research (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, it is important to note that research in social science is never free of risk or value and therefore the whole research process should always be conducted with ethical considerations in mind (Wiles, 2013).

Research ethics span from privacy and data protection and the importance of consent to the positionality of the researcher and many more topics. In preparation for this study, a research plan, as well as a data protection plan, have been established and checked by the thesis supervisors. Based on the results of the data processing impact assessment form[4] provided by the University of Jyväskylä it was decided that the study does not need to undergo further data processing impact assessment besides what is provided in the research plan as well as the privacy notice.

The research participants have received the research notification, the privacy notice, and a consent form prior to the interviews. Before and after the interviews verbal informed consent was cleared and at the beginning of the interviews each participant had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the official documents. All questions regarding the research process that occurred during the interviews have been answered sufficiently. In accordance with the privacy notice and the GDPR rules all participants have at all stages of the interview and after, had the possibility to withdraw their participation in the study (see Appendix V for the privacy notice including the GDPR rules). The interview data and the audio recordings were saved securely in a password-protected folder in my university's network drive. All the participant's personal information was pseudonymized so that their identities are not retraceable based on the data.

Important ethical aspects to consider besides privacy and data protection are the established relationship between myself as a researcher and the researcher participants as well as my own positionality regarding the research topics. In all of the interviews, it was important to establish rapport and trust, to make the interviewees feel comfortable, and to create a safe space for the participants to share their personal stories (Roberts, 2020). Since I am an international student myself, who does not speak Finnish as my first language, I was able to establish a shared background with the students. This can help to create an equal interview environment (Balbachevsky et al., 2021). Even though establishing rapport is important for successful interviews, it is

[4] For information on the DPIA form see https://uno.jyu.fi/en/help-centre/security-and-data-privacy/data-processing-impact-assessment-dpia (accessed on 05.11.2022)

important to view it critically as well. Since the ultimate aim of an interview is to gain data for the research, it is important to deal carefully with rapport. Because through creating a close interview relationship and using rapport to establish trust the interview participants can be led to share more personal experiences and emotions which they, upon reflection, might not have wanted to share. This can then result in an ethical dilemma (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). A critical point of view on the model of establishing rapport in interviews is presented by Ann Oakley (1981, 2016). She criticizes that the closer the rapport, the more ethical problems can emerge by using information shared based on personal connection for scientific research. Another ethical issue that can arise is based on the shared background of the participants. Even though this can help create an equal interview environment, it can also lead to an illusion of shared realities (Wiles, 2013).

Based in the paradigm of Social Constructionism it is also important that I, as a researcher, discuss my own positionality in regard to the research topic, since my personal background and my involvement with the research topic have an influence on how I view and analyze the obtained data. Therefore, it is important to keep the analysis process comprehensible and open for reflection (Creswell, 2007). As mentioned before, I am not Finnish, but an international student myself and have lived in Finland for many years. I have a background in studying Finnish as a foreign language and have experienced situations similar to the ones described by the research participants. These experiences have shaped my research interest and helped me in establishing my research topic. But these experiences also mean that I have a personal positioning in the research topic that I had to be aware of in the interviews and during the data analysis process. By keeping this in mind and having an open approach to the data, I am aiming to limit my personal influence on the research outcome.

4 FINDINGS

All of the nine interviews conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 were used in finding answers to my two research questions – How do the experiences of international PhD students in learning Finnish perceivably influence their sense of belonging and how do the experiences of international PhD students of their social interactions and relations within their environment perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?

The findings revealed the individual experiences of the international PhD students with learning Finnish and their social interactions with and in their environment. Altogether four main themes were identified that the students perceived to have an influence on their sense of belonging**: perceptions of Finland and how they perceivably influence belonging**, **intentions of learning Finnish and the developments**, **language as a form of inclusion versus language as a form of exclusion**, and **living in a(n English) bubble** (for a visual representation of the themes and the appertaining codes see Appendix IV). Each of these four themes, their connection to language learning, Second Language socialization, and how they had a perceived impact on the students' sense of belonging will be presented and discussed in the following chapter.

4.1 Perceptions of Finland and how they perceivably influence the sense of belonging

Most of the students choosing to do their PhD in Finland have, to a certain degree, obtained some kind of knowledge about Finland before they started their studies. This was also true for the participants of this study. Their knowledge was obtained through research on the country and the university, through personal connections, or through reports on social media or the news.

One influential point many of the study participants pointed out was the perception of the high quality of Finland's education system. The majority of the participants

(for example participant 1, participant 5, participant 7, participant 8, and participant 9) mentioned the Finnish education system and the results of the PISA[5] ranking as one of the reasons why they chose to study in Finland:

> So for me, if I want to go abroad, I want to go somewhere which is quite good for education studies and at that time, at that time particularly, like the 2010s, Finland is really doing really good in those PISA results […] (Participant 9, para 6)

In the early 2000s, Finland became internationally known for its educational system due to its high ranking in the PISA studies. Even though Finland's PISA ranking has been declining after the high results in the early 2000s, the country is still internationally known for its educational system and therefore also still sought after as a place to pursue education (Chung, 2019).

Another particularly important aspect for many of the participants was that at the point when they started their studies in Finland, it was still free for non-EU/EEA citizens before the reform in 2009 and is still free for EU/EEA citizens (Plamper et al., 2023). While doctoral students in Finland are not required to pay tuition fees, master students are. This is of importance to this study because some of the participants studied for their master's degree in Finland before they pursued their PhD studies, and the free tuition fee was one of the main motivations for them to come study in Finland:

> The main factor was that it was free, that I didn't have to pay anything else, but my own cost of living. That was the main appealing reason to come here. (Participant 4, para. 11)

The factor of not having to pay tuition fees can be beneficial in maintaining stability and can be conducive to creating a form of economic belonging (Antonsich, 2010). Besides these two main points of Finland being promoted as a country of good education and the benefit of no tuition fees that most of the students were still able to receive at the beginning of their studies, they seemed not to know a lot about Finland. Therefore, for them to get accustomed to Finland and establish a sense of belonging they had to create a space for themselves in accordance with their environment. While a sense of belonging, as Strayhorn (2018) states, can change as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change, it is important that it is, to a certain extent, continually satisfied. A substantial influence on the sense of belonging of the interviewees were their personal connections. Participant 8 points out that for her, the people that surrounded her were the most important in making her feel more comfortable. These interpersonal relationships strengthened her feeling of belongingness:

> Then I met my [partner] and [their] family is wonderful to me and then I have a wonderful supervisor, so it is all linked to the people that I have found that have been so great and so, they took me in. So they help you overcome the social barriers because they are locals. (Participant 8, para. 83)

[5] Programme for International Student Assessment

Antonsich (2010) refers to these as the relational factors of place-belongingness. As long as these connections remain stable, a certain feeling of belonging will too. While interpersonal connections are beneficial to create a sense of belongingness it is important to mention that not all interpersonal relations result in being closer connected with Finland or the Finnish society itself. Participant 5 for example mentions that

> sometimes I go to see my friends, who are from, of course, from my own country, not the international students or Finnish students. Unfortunately, I don't have any Finnish friends here whom I see regularly or even once a month. (Participant 5, para. 66)

He also adds that

> With my friends whenever I see them […] we speak our own language, not English, not Finnish, even though one or two of my friends they know Finnish, they have learned it. But we speak our own language. (Participant 5, para. 82)

Through these close connections participant 5 creates a form of cultural belonging inside of his community (see Antonsich, 2010). While this brings him closer to the members of this community, it does not connect him to the bigger community in his environment but rather creates a bubble he lives in and excludes him from the wider community (for a similar situation see Sevinç & Backus, 2019).

Another crucial facet in the creation of a sense of belonging is the legal one. Especially for the non-EU/EEA participants the obtainment of Finnish citizenship can simplify many aspects of their life such as not having to depend on a residency permit anymore, applying for a job in Finland, or traveling outside of Finland. Participant 2 argues that

> I really want to have Finnish citizenship. […] Some of [the students] probably don't need it if they already come from the European Union they can comfortable stay in Finland without having Finnish citizenship, but if you come from outside the EU then you have to have this hustle with all of this paperwork and renewing your residency permit and it kind of makes it easier if you are a citizen. (Participant 2, para. 72)

Participant 7 has experienced issues with her feeling of belonging connected to the problems of needing a residency permit. For her the pressure connected to her residence permit makes her feel like she does not belong:

> […] everything depends on my residence permit, so I am thinking about my residence permit all the time or I am finishing my doctoral anyway. Now I am just applying for my residental permit and yeah. Taking it three more years so I don't know how long they'll give me my residence permit and then if they give me one year, then next year I have to worry for the next one. I have to prepare like working check or financial security etc. so just thinking that way makes me think I am not really belonging here. I can be deported anytime. (Participant 7, para. 72)

While participant 7 has had negative experiences and participant 2's motivation to obtain the Finnish citizenship is largely based on legal factors, participant 8 has had a different experience. With being from an EU country she does not have the same legal pressure as students coming from outside of the EU. For her obtaining the citizenship

was a conscious step to create a feeling of stronger belonging to Finland. Having the citizenship made her feel more connected to the country:

> It makes me feel part of the country. Technically, it doesn't change anything, because I am from Europe. So I have had all the same things before and after. But I really like it. I like having my Finnish passport and my Finnish ID. Especially, when I go to the shop and they ask me for ID and then I am like so proud with giving them my Finnish ID. (h) So it makes me feel part of the country. (Participant 8, para. 101)

In order to obtain the Finnish citizenship people have to have, among other requirements, "at least satisfactory oral and written skills in one of the following languages: Finnish, Swedish, Finnish Sign Language or Finland-Swedish Sign Language" (Finnish Immigration Service, n.d., para. 3). These language skills have to be proven by an official language test. Through taking a language test people can receive the National Certificate of Language Proficiency (YKI). To be able to obtain Finnish citizenship people have to complete at least an intermediate level which is equivalent to the B1 level on the CEFR[6] scale (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). This brings us to the next theme: The intentions of learning Finnish and its development.

4.2 Intentions of learning Finnish and the developments

When asking the study participants why they initially started to learn Finnish I got very mixed answers. This was to be expected, since each participant is an individual with their own complex identity and their own relationships which guide their experiences (Coleman, 2013). As defined in the context of Second Language Socialization, a learner of a new language is not just positioned in a vacuum, but they exist in a complex dimension that is guided by their subjective experiences. The students establish their own environment which is influenced by different cultural and linguistic inputs that surround them (Kinginger, 2013b). Therefore, the following aspects are just glimpses into the multifaceted experiences of these individuals.

When learning a new language, learners build on their previous language learning experience. Participant 6 is from a central-European country and her L1 is French. She started to learn Finnish already before the beginning of her PhD. When asked what her first impression of the Finnish language was at the beginning of her learning experience she said:

> That it was very original. Very different from anything else. I think that was part of the interest. Yeah, very different from anything. Like the vocabulary sounds very exotic. The language itself sounds very exotic. The grammar is very different from everything I have learned before. So it is in a way hard, but on the other way there is logic behind the grammar, so it is hard, but it makes sense. Or not every time, but yeah. (Participant 6, para. 23)

[6] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

This 'exoticness' for her, was one main part of the motivation to learn the language. Participant 4 has similar experiences. For him, in the beginning, Finnish felt "very, very alien" (Participant 4, para. 25). This otherness for him was a big motivation to learn the language. While quite different from his L1, nowadays "Finnish, it is not alien, as it was before" (Participant 4, para. 31), and even though the language still does not feel natural to him, he got used to it.

Interestingly, similar to what Latomaa (1998) has observed and what is reproduced in common discourse, the study participants have also experienced, that Finnish-speaking people themselves perceive Finnish as a difficult language to learn for foreigners and are sometimes even surprised when foreigners actually do learn Finnish. Participant 6 considers herself a fluent Finnish speaker and has often come across the following:

> […] I speak fluently that people understand me. It's okay and […] I can like answer and practice and like not having any problems in those daily conversation. But it is also, I don't know, sometime it also struck me about this question of like 'oh foreigner, a person living in Finland' and now their Finnish skills are being perceived, because I sometimes have this feeling that for Finnish people foreigner can not learn Finnish, because Finnish is seen as so difficult, while, not it is not. Foreigner can learn Finnish and can speak it very well. (Participant 6, para. 39)

These experiences are examples of the multifaceted factors that can have an influence on the language learning journeys (see also Ruuska, 2020). They can on the one hand be a motivation to continue studying Finnish, but on the other hand, they can make the learners feel uncomfortable. Participant 6 has experienced both of these feelings. Feeling

> [p]leased in a way that Finnish people say that, yes I speak good Finnish, because it always feels good that your skills are kind of recognized, but sometimes also a bit uncomfortable if I am used as an example that, like if I was an exception, well I don't think I am. (Participant 6, para. 39)

Since many of the interviewees completed their master's studies in Finland before their PhD they were obliged to participate in at least one Finnish course. While some of the participants continued to study Finnish after the compulsory courses, some were struggling to do so. Reasons for that were among others no internal or external motivation, having not enough time in their schedule, or prioritizing studies and work over learning Finnish. With the decision to stay in Finland and pursue their PhD, this changed for some of the interviewees:

> In 2019 I had a compulsory, like two months course, for two credits at [my previous university where I studied for my master's degree]. After that I did not (h) want to learn Finnish language. I had no motivation for that, but when I came [here] and I started PhD and I know that for the next four years I am here, I am going to apply for Finnish citizenship, my family is coming, so I started learning here […], like in my previous semester (Participant 5, para. 26)

Participant 5 here mentions three very important aspects of why he was inclined to get back to learning Finnish. The first one is the time period of the PhD. While master's students normally stay in Finland for a period of two years, PhD studies have a planned duration of four years. As Duff (2011) mentions, the duration of stay can have an influence on the level of language expertise individuals want to attain. While initially planning to only stay for his master's degree, participant 1 came to the conclusion that he did not need to learn Finnish while he was in Finland:

> I looked up like, you know, how the [Finnish] language was going to be like, and it is one of the tougher, toughest, one of the toughest, I think fourth or third toughest, I can't remember. I checked before it when, before coming […]. I remember thinking like you know what: it is just two years, I am sure I'll be able to survive with English, two years and I am out. It may be tough, but I might not need that much of it. So I am just going to, I was kind of like, thinking of winging it. (Participant 1, para. 43)

But when he decided to stay in Finland for his PhD he concluded that "now I am going to spend the next four years here […]. Now I need to have a life life. I need to start doing other things that I enjoy doing and this will likely involve other Finnish people […]" (Participant 1, para. 52). Due to his circumstances changing, his intention to learn Finnish had also changed. His new intention was born out of the wish to interact more with Finnish people and get more involved in his personal language socialization process. This shows how interwoven the development of belonging is with the second language socialization process.

The second aspect participant 5 mentions is that he wants to apply for Finnish citizenship. As already mentioned in the previous theme, to obtain Finnish citizenship the applicant has to have taken an YKI test and prove their sufficient Finnish language skills. While citizenship is something that can contribute to a feeling of membership belonging (in this case membership in the group of Finnish citizens) it also serves as a goal that the participants are setting for themselves in their language-learning journey. The objective of obtaining citizenship is a big factor in their language learning motivation.

> I did the YKI test, […] because I applied for the citizenship […]. And I revised and did the test and it was nerve wrecking and it was hard. […]. Because a lot also is dependent upon that and I really wanted to get the citizenship. […] And it might also be a way to motivate myself to learn. Because I will have a deadline and I'll have something that I'll have to do. Which I know that is the way I learn. (Participant 3, para. 67)

This excerpt from the interview with participant 3 shows that learning the language is not only about learning 'the language', but so much more. It showcases why the second language socialization process is about the intersection between language learning and the individual's social life (Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008).

The third aspect participant 5 mentioned in the excerpt above is family. Social connections are an important aspect in both establishing belonging and the language socialization process (Jinkerson, 2012). Being able to provide an environment for his family when they come to join him in Finland is important for him. While asking

Participant 8 how the impact of Finnish would change in her personal life if she would stay in Finland after her studies, she mentioned how important it would be for her to be able to understand and communicate in Finnish when having a family here:

> I would like to have children and I think for having children the language is important, BECAUSE daycares speak to you in Finnish, they send you notifications in Finnish, the doctor wants to speak to you in Finnish. So those things are going to happen in Finnish. So those things are important also. (Participant 8, para. 73)

But also, being able to communicate with friends, colleagues, and family currently in Finland can be an important aspect of Finnish learning. Having these social ties can strengthen the feeling of belonging. Participant 9 has experienced that her being able to speak Finnish will bring her closer to people who are important to her:

> I have a Finnish boyfriend. […] But actually we were speaking English. But I mean I also met his family and his sibling all can speak very good English, but his parents […] only speak Finnish […]. So I feel it's, also maybe I should learn at least some communicatable Finnish so to communicate with them (Participant 9, para. 30)

Even though with her partner she uses English, she would like to improve her Finnish to communicate with his family. This can have an impact on her relational belonging and through that can also enhance her cultural belonging (Lähdesmäki et al., 2014). It can have a dual effect of enhancing her feeling of belonging and enhancing the effectiveness of her language socialization (Duff, 2011).

These examples show, that while language learning is an important part of the second language socialization process it does not exist in a vacuum, and the learner's experiences are shaped through and embedded in social experiences (W. (Marco) Li & Gong, 2022). Participant 1 comments on his experiences the following:

> […] it's not just about your subject matter, but it's about learning where you are, where you are living and how you carry yourself across to your environment. […] This is a place not just a language, but like we are, the environment maketh the man. (Participant 1, para. 106 & 138)

Based on the participants' experiences it shows, that as much as the language socialization process is about language, learning the culture is as important (Duff & Talmy, 2011). These two aspects are inseparably interwoven and co-influence each other (see Duff, 2019). Participant 8 describes her experiences with learning culture as the following:

> […] learning a culture is a very slow process I think. And it is, of course it is acquired through the language, but there is all this nuances that until you don't know, you don't know. (Participant 8, para. 69)

Culture is not something that can just be acquired, but the same as a language, it has to be learned and it can be influenced by many different factors. The experiences of the participants highlight the importance of the sociocultural and psychological components of the cultural adjustment process; such as the interactions with host nationals,

their language fluency, or their coping skills (Ammigan et al., 2023; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The interplay of language and culture can have a substantial influence on the feeling of belongingness (Mahmood & Galloway Burke, 2018). It also impacts the feeling of inclusion and the feeling of exclusion. The following chapter will shine a light on these experiences.

4.3 Language as a form of inclusion versus language as a form of exclusion

Being able to understand and speak Finnish can have a considerable influence on whether an individual feels included or excluded in certain situations. Feelings of inclusion or exclusion can affect the sense of belonging (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

A sense of belonging can express itself through the feeling of being 'at home' (Antonsich, 2010). Being able to understand the language and communicate with it in one's environment can increase this feeling of being 'at home'. When participant 5 decided to continue staying in Finland after his master's studies and pursue a PhD, he came to the conclusion that he needed to learn more Finnish in order to feel 'at home'. He says that "you feel like you are in a home country if you know Finnish language" (participant 5, para. 26). For him, the language is inseparably connected with his sense of belonging.

Participant 1 goes one step further. For him, the Finnish language is directly connected with the Finnish culture. He argues to "not think about Finnish as a language, so much a language, but also as a culture. […] And be part of the culture. Doing things the Finnish way" (Participant 1, para. 154). This aligns with Duff & Talmy's (2011) definition of how in a Second Language Socialization construct, the language learner is viewed as the accumulation of their sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical experiences. By 'doing things the Finnish way' participant 1 aligns his actions with his environment. For him learning Finnish is a bilateral process of inclusion. On the one hand, him being able to communicate offers him the opportunity to take a more active part in a conversation and therefore be able to include himself more:

> It is not so much that [learning Finnish] opens up opportunities to understand Finland or where you are in Finland, I think the mastery of the language allows you, it gives you a chance to let Finnish people know who you are and about your culture and things like that. (Participant 1, para. 76)

On the other hand, for him learning Finnish is also a show of respect and a way to connect better with his interlocutors:

> when I was working […] I realized, oh okay, having a little bit of the language is not just for the advantage of being able to be understood, but kind of feels like it's a form of, it's a show of respect. I am here, I have lived here for a while, people kind of have this quite expectation that you should know a bit of Finnish. (Participant 1, para. 76)

While language can be an asset for better inclusion and an enhanced feeling of belonging, it can also feel like a form of exclusion. Having negative experiences connected to the Finnish language or situations that include the Finnish language can contribute to a feeling of non-belonging or isolation.

Many of the study participants have spoken up about experiences where they felt like their interlocutors had to accommodate them because they were not able to communicate everything they wanted to express in Finnish. These situations made them feel excluded from certain groups or made them feel discouraged to learn or speak Finnish. Participant 4 has experienced social situations where his lack of Finnish made him feel excluded and gave him the feeling of not belonging:

> […] here in Finland I have become less, even less sociable, because of the language. I mean if I, when I have been in a party or something of that sort, people would speak to me in Finnish with patience or they would switch to English, for a while. And then after that there is no communication, so I am left out, so I rather go home and I have been thinking it is a waste of time to even come to this kind of party […]. (Participant 4, para. 48)

While he recognizes that the situation might have improved if he had learned more Finnish, this shows the impact the opportunities where to use the language can have on the socialization process.

This feeling of discouragement can not only come from external sources, but it can also come from inside. Participant 3 sometimes finds himself in situations where he is the one who puts pressure on his language abilities and internally excludes himself:

> I have to say the majority of the time it is more discouraging rather than encouraging. That's only my own personal view. That is not because of anybody else's actions. That's because I do beat myself up quite a lot and I am in a bit of a self persecution regarding my own abilities with Finnish and I constantly think I should be better than I am. So it is a very personal thing, it's nothing to do with how people treat me in my work place or in my own personal life, it is just me saying to myself you should be better than this. (Participant 3, para. 35)

Another issue the interviewees spoke about was how English is utilized in their environment and especially in the university. The next chapter will look into the phenomenon of experiencing an English bubble in a Finnish environment.

4.4 Living in a(n English) bubble

> […] I realized that oh right, this university setting is a parallel dimension. It's like you can survive here, but this is not really Finland. It's like you are in this small micro-cosmos of what is actually like a bubble. You shield it from the reality sort of. (Participant 1, para. 51)

This experience from participant 1 is not a singular one. Many of the participants have voiced their perception of living in their personal 'bubble'. This experience is common among international students. While one goal of studying abroad is integration into

the host culture and interactions with the 'local' students, many international students have a safety net of social connections that they fall back to. This safety net is often comprised of people from the same nationality or other international people. Coleman (2013, p. 13) describes these connections in his model of *concentric circles representation of study abroad social networks*.

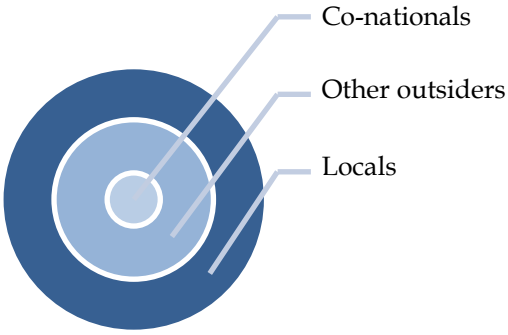

Figure 1 Coleman's concentric circles representation of study abroad social networks

He defines the connection international students can make in the three circles. The inner circle is comprised of co-nationals and often serves as a safe environment. The middle circle is where they interact with other outsiders, which are often other international students. They have similar experiences and might have similar issues in the host environment. In the outer circle are the 'locals'. Interactions with members of the outer circle are what can help to 'burst' their bubble.

One of the main aspects that is responsible for the creation of these kinds of bubbles is the question of language. While the participants, to a certain extent, actively learn Finnish, English has a strong foothold in their daily lives. It is well known, that in the context of Higher Education English is the lingua franca (see among others Airey et al., 2017; Geoghegan & Pérez-Vidal, 2019; Hultgren et al., 2014; Mauranen & Vetchinnikova, 2020). This can also be seen in the experiences of the interviewees. The language they work and study in is English. Participant 2 has had the following experiences:

> I feel like in my work Finnish is not important at all right now [..] All of the meetings are in English, all of my, I write all of my articles in English, so kind of, you know, at work I feel like I don't even need to remember that I am actually in Finland and use any Finnish. (Participant 2, para. 54)

This experience is shared among the other interviewees. In the university setting, they exist in an 'English bubble' and they are not expected to learn Finnish. As universities in Finland mostly follow a replacement approach to connecting English with the local language it can, as Koreik (2020) mentions lead to a struggle for the international students when stepping outside of the university environment and being faced with the local language. These experiences can have a dulling effect on their language socialization processes. Learning opportunities are one of the main factors that have an impact on an individual's language socialization process (Duff, 2011). When the

participants engage with people inside of their bubble, they mostly do so in their L1 or English. This also has an impact on how they experience their environment. Participant 1 has experienced a drastic difference between his life as a student inside his bubble and his life outside of the student experience:

> […] you have an impression of what the university is like, what [the city] is like, which is inaccurate, because you are surrounded by international people who all speak English. So you think everybody is great. […] But once you get out of this student life, when you get into working life, […] then you kind of go like okay, what is it really like to be an international or a foreign person in this place. (Participant 1, para. 110)

This experience is similar to what Mendoza et al. (2022) have described in their study on the creation of social networks for international students in Finland. While international students create a sense of belonging inside their bubble, when they need to step out of the bubble, they might experience difficulties.

One of the difficulties they might experience is connected to the Finnish language. In the university setting Finnish is not necessarily needed. But outside of this bubble, the importance of being able to communicate and being able to understand Finnish is more important. While many of the participants have experienced Finnish speakers being very accommodating to their lack of Finnish proficiency, they have also realized that to live in Finland, Finnish is a necessity. This becomes clear when comparing the following two excerpts. Participant 5 describes how he has experienced Finnish-speaking people being very accommodating when he is not able to communicate in Finnish. While this is beneficial to get by in life, it is also one of the reasons he mentions why he does not put too much pressure on learning Finnish:

> [W]e foreigners, like especially if I talk about myself. We believe that even if I don't know Finnish, I can survive here. Even if I am in a market, or I am at university or anywhere I am, because everybody speaks English here. So that's the, one of the reasons, that I am using less Finnish. And that's true, because I know less Finnish now at the moment. So whatever I am using it, it has some importance at least for myself that I am improving my Finnish, […] So if I not use Finnish language, whatever I have learned, then it will be my loss. In terms of language learning, not in any other way. (Participant 5, para. 46)

While participant 5 has made the decision to actively improve his Finnish by himself and actively tries to leave his English language bubble, participant 1 describes a conversation he had with a friend, whose bubble burst because of external factors:

> They didn't leave, couldn't find a job, got stuck. So took up a cleaning job […] [and] this person didn't like it. […] NOW this person gets a different impression. Same person, where this person initially thought that oh [this city] is really nice, because that's the illusion that has been created from the university bubble. Now you move into the society, now you have to work, oh, it's different. Then this person realized, that without Finnish language it is actually pretty hard to operate. And there has been many of these instances of people that I know, which sort of had their bubble burst and kind of like oh okay, maybe it is not that easy to be here without Finnish, you know. (Participant 1, para. 110)

In this excerpt, participant 1 mentions a crucial aspect of why Finnish learning is important: being able to find a job. Many studies (see among others Mathies &

Karhunen, 2021a; Puhakka et al., 2010; Shumilova et al., 2012) as well as the most recent *An evaluation of International Degree Programs in Finland* report by the Finnish Higher Education Council (Välimaa et al., 2013) have pointed out that the lack of sufficient Finnish skills is one of the main problems for international students to migrate from being a student into finding a job in Finland. Many of the study participants pointed this out as well and said that if they wanted to stay in Finland after their studies and work here, they would need to improve their Finnish skills:

> I need to learn more Finnish. I, there is no other way. If I want to get the job I want, I need to do it in Finnish. And of course I can work internationally and live in Finland, but I think at the end of the day working […] requires Finnish. (Participant 8, para. 71)

While it is important for them to improve their Finnish if they want to stay in Finland and find a job in Finland, some of the interviewees point out that the Finnish language is not something that motivates them to stay or not stay in Finland after their studies. It is rather that other aspects of their life influence them to stay in Finland which then influences their choice to continue learning Finnish:

> I feel [this city] is my home, I feel as if I belong here […], I love working here […] And I definitely feel at home here. And again that's a very positive thing and it is something I am grateful for. But also it motivates me to learn Finnish more. […] Because I realize that this is the life that I want to have, so if this is the life I want to have, then I really need to invest into my language learning. I think the things that motivate me to stay here in Finland are the more social, cultural aspects of life here. The ease of life, the space, the nature, the values. I think language is definitely not a thing that would encourage me to stay here. I think if anything the language would encourage me to move away from Finland. […] I think that if I didn't have such a good life here. And all the aspects of life were so motivational and encouraging then I would just say Finnish is just ridiculous as a language and too hard and I know that I won't be ever able to communicate in a way that I want to communicate in Finnish. (Participant 3, para. 41 & 65)

This excerpt from the interview with participant 3 shows how important a sense of belonging and social connections are in the language learning process. It shows that language learning is not just about learning a language, but it is a complex social process that depends on various different factors such as belonging, personal ties, and cultural aspects.

One way for the students to leave their bubble is through more interaction with local Finnish-speaking students. Creating a space where international students can meet local students can encourage them to be more active in their Finnish learning. One way for the university to be more actively involved in creating these spaces is by offering more conversational classes or workshops that open the space for communication:

> [M]y priority would be to involve more native speakers in the actual learning process. I mean we are here in a university of thousands of Finnish students and I would love to have the opportunity to just speak Finnish with those Finnish students or Finnish-English or whatever. Just to have a conversation where you can use the Finnish that you know and allow those students, teachers, whatever, members of staff, to be able to act as tutors in some kind of way in an everyday situation. (Participant 3, para. 73)

These situations offer opportunities for international students to enhance their second language socialization and can also contribute to increasing their sense of belonging.

5 CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore how international PhD students perceive the interplay between their socio-cultural environment, their language learning experiences, and their sense of belonging in Finland. By collecting and analyzing data from nine international PhD students, I aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the experiences of international PhD students in learning Finnish perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?
2. How do the experiences of international PhD students of their social interactions and relations within their environment perceivably influence their sense of belonging in Finland?

In the following chapter, I discuss and summarize my findings, give theoretical and societal implications, and point out limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

5.1 Concluding discussion

Situating my study in the paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism allowed for a nuanced exploration of the individual experiences of the international PhD students within their personal contexts while consolidating these experiences to provide answers to the research questions. Four prominent themes emerged from the data: *Perceptions of Finland and how they perceivably influence belonging, intentions of learning Finnish and the developments, language as a form of inclusion versus language as a form of exclusion,* and *living in a(n English) bubble*. Altogether these four themes provided interesting insights into the experiences of the international students. While the findings of the second and the third theme (*intentions of learning Finnish and the developments* and *language as a form of inclusion versus language as a form of exclusion*) predominantly yielded answers to the first research question, the findings of the first and the last

theme (*perceptions of Finland and how they perceivably influence belonging* and *living in a(n English) bubble*) predominantly yielded answers to the second research question.

The participants' experiences of how they perceived learning Finnish held notable implications for the development of their sense of belonging in Finland. Particularly, three primary reasons influenced their language learning efforts: the aspiration to acquire Finnish language skills for Finnish citizenship, the desire to improve communication with family and friends, and the perceived benefit of Finnish when applying for a job in Finland. When comparing these reasons to Antonsich's (2010) concept of place-belongingness, they seem to enhance the legal, relational, and economic aspects of belonging. Acquiring Finnish citizenship was seen as enhancing the feeling of safety and therefore the legal factor of belonging. Additionally, having acquired Finnish citizenship has also been experienced by some of the participants as an increase in the feeling of cultural belonging (see Yuval-Davis, 2006). Improved communication with personal connections was seen as enhancing the relational factor of belonging while the benefit of Finnish for entering the work environment after the studies can be beneficial for the economic factor (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

With some of the participants having completed their master's degree in Finland ahead of their PhD, the decision to stay in Finland for their PhD initiated a change in their intention to learn Finnish. The duration and the intensity of the stay can have an impact on the second language socialization process as well as on the sense of belonging (Duff, 2011; Lähdesmäki et al., 2014).

Language, while serving as a means of inclusion, can also emerge as a potential source of exclusion (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Shirahata & Lahti, 2022). While through the language some of the participants have experienced a feeling of inclusion, not being able to communicate everything that one wants to, can also lead to a feeling of being excluded from certain situations. This in turn can lead to a feeling of not belonging. Since belonging itself is fluid and flexible it can always change depending on the situation and the environment (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

Even though language can play a crucial part in the development of a sense of belonging it is not the only factor and for some of the participants not the main one (Cena et al., 2021). Therefore, the following aspects will offer answers to the second research question regarding the PhD students' experiences of their social interactions and relations within their environment and how they might have a perceived influence on their sense of belonging. For many of the participants, a feeling of belonging in Finland is created through the people that surround them, the culture, and their environment. These factors are also important in the second language socialization process, reinforcing the interdependence of these aspects (Ortaçtepe, 2013). Interpersonal relationships were one of the main factors that were beneficial for the development of the relational factors of their sense of belonging. The stronger and more stable these relationships are, the higher the possibility for a strengthened feeling of

belonging (Antonsich, 2010). These experiences can also be reconnected to the sociocultural aspects of the cultural adjustment process (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

Many of the participants have experienced that the environment they live in can feel like living in a bubble, especially in and around the university. This environment is characterized by the English language. As Koreik (2020) has mentioned, students studying in an English-dominated environment might be struggling with the local language when leaving these 'bubbles'. And since almost everything in the participants' environment is available in English, learning Finnish is not always a necessity and not always a priority. This experience of living in a bubble is stronger when international students spend a lot of time with co-nationals or other internationals (Coleman, 2013). While these interactions can make them feel comfortable and create a sense of belonging inside of their bubble, it does not enhance their sense of belonging outside of their bubble. When the participants experience the need for Finnish, for example when trying to find a job in Finland, it can happen that they experience a change in their environment, and their relationship towards the Finnish language and Finland can change (Alho, 2020; Saarinen, 2012). When this happens, they can either develop their sense of belonging towards Finland or they can experience a decrease in their sense of belonging.

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of the factors that influence international PhD students' sense of belonging in Finland. It highlights the interplay between language learning and socialization, cultural adjustment, personal connections, and environmental factors in shaping a sense of belonging. From a theoretical point of view, the language socialization process as well as the process of establishing a sense of belonging are coined by their fluidity and their dynamic development. Both are lifelong processes and depend on the individuals' experiences. Individuals are shaped by their sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical environment. The experiences of the participants in this study are examples of how the language learning process and the environment can have an impact on language socialization and the sense of belonging.

To achieve qualitative research of quality I was committed strongly to my research throughout the whole research process. I aimed to follow Tracy's (2010) eight 'big tent' criteria for qualitative research (see Appendix I for a detailed description) as a guideline throughout the whole process. While all eight of these criteria are of importance and are addressed to a certain extent throughout the study, I have focused especially on three of them: rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility.

I built a strong theoretical foundation based on the concept of belonging and Second Language Socialization and I had a diverse set of research participants and a rich base of research data. By placing the study in the context of internationalization of higher education and especially higher education in Finland, I was able to create a relevant context to embed the study in and to reflect the findings to. By positioning myself clearly and being transparent throughout the research process as well as with

my research participants during the interviews, I was aiming to produce ethical relevance. All in all, I intended to create a significant contribution to the research on belonging in international students with meaningful coherence. But while I followed Tracy`s (2010) guidelines to my best extent, no study can be without limitations.

5.2 Limitations

The first limitation that could be addressed is the design of the study. Due to the time constraints of this being a master's thesis, I was not able to develop my study with a longitudinal design. A longitudinal design could have enhanced the insights especially when looking at second language socialization (Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008). Therefore, I discussed second language socialization in the context of my thesis only as a topic and not as an approach or a method.

The chosen method of data collection in my thesis was semi-structured interviews. Interviews have the benefit that the participants are independent in their answers and can choose themselves how deep they want to go with their answers (Silverman, 2013). However, the independence of the interviewees can also be a limitation of the study results. Since interviews are a method of self-reporting, the participants' responses may have been skewed by their own consciousness and by what they deemed to be socially acceptable answers (Oldac, 2022). It might also happen that during an interview the participants stray from the topic and develop their own narrative away from the common theme. To mitigate the possibility of this happening I have designed an interview guide (for the interview guide see Appendix II) that helped me to structure the thread of the questions and through that ensured more relevant responses from the interviewees.

In the process of the data analysis through a reflexive thematic approach, the danger of straying from the validity of the study was influenced by my own positionality as the researcher. While I was aware of my own position and my influence as a researcher, data can never be without value (Wiles, 2013).

Lastly, all the research participants in my study were from the same university. This might have influenced some of their experiences and therefore skewed the results of this study. I tried to alleviate this influence by reaching out to PhD students from all doctoral schools at the university of this study and by interviewing students with a variety of backgrounds regarding their gender, age, major subject, and previous language learning experiences.

5.3 Theoretical and societal implications

The findings of this study contribute to the research on the sense of belonging of international students and hold both theoretical and practical implications for various stakeholders. This study enhances the research on the sense of belonging of international students and adds depth to the understanding of how a sense of belonging can evolve and manifest itself within the context of international higher education. It goes beyond the existing scope of Second Language socialization by exploring the learning of Finnish, a less common language, within an English-rich environment. This specific focus provides valuable insights into the challenges and experiences of international students when faced with acquiring a language that is not widely spoken outside of Finland. Through the lens of international PhD students, this research explores the personal and unique language learning experiences of the study participants. The combination of the concept of belonging and Second Language socialization offers insight into the individual experiences of language learners and can enhance further research in the field.

From a practical and societal perspective, the findings of this study can provide valuable insights for Higher Education Institutions, especially in Finland, seeking to enhance language learning support for international PhD students as well as strategies on how to increase the integration of international PhD students. These could include tailored language courses for PhD students, mentorship programs, and cultural integration initiatives, all with the goal of promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for the international PhD students. This study has shown that while the intentions of learning Finnish are individual, for all of the participants they are important factors for integrating into society and their environment and in developing a sense of belonging. This knowledge can guide institutions and government bodies in developing policies and practices that foster better integration and support for international PhD students, contributing to their overall well-being. The exploration of international students' experiences in their Finnish language learning process and their sense of belonging is a contemporary one and important in current times. The findings can help the students themselves and they can also enrich the knowledge of universities and Finnish institutions such as Talent Boost, which seek to attract and support international talent. Understanding the experiences and challenges of international students in their language learning and integration process can help these organizations to tailor their programs and initiatives to better support the needs of the international PhD students.

5.4 Recommendations for future research

Building on my research, I recommend the following aspects to advance the understanding of international PhD students' language learning, belonging, and language socialization experiences.

Future research should consider replicating this study with larger sample sizes to enhance the credibility and rigor of the findings. Replicating this study or conducting new research in the same field in different types of Higher Education institutions in different regions in Finland can contribute to that as well since students from different universities in different cities might have different experiences that could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of international PhD students in Finland.

Additionally, it would also be interesting to investigate the topic with international students at the Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland and compare them to the findings of studies conducted at universities. Investigating international students' experiences in Universities of Applied Sciences and comparing them to those in Universities can shed light on potential differences in language learning, belonging, and cultural adjustment experiences. A comparative approach like this can help identify unique challenges and strategies relevant to different types of institutions and different types of international students.

It would also be interesting to investigate the creation of a sense of belonging through a longitudinal study by following one or more international PhD students throughout their entire academic journey. This could provide valuable insight into the dynamic nature of belonging in the context of the Second Language socialization process and could help researchers understand how these experiences evolve and develop over time.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to see how the new Finnish government and their current change to the migration and integration policy in their new government program (Finnish Government, 2023) will have an influence on international student migration to Finland and consequently their sense of belonging. Therefore, it could be interesting to repeat this study in a few years and see how the experiences of international students have changed, how these policies impact international students' experiences, and whether they lead to changes in their sense of belonging.

In summary, this study has laid the groundwork for future research in the field of international education, language learning, and sense of belonging. By addressing the individual experiences of international PhD students in Finland, it contributes to both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies for supporting these students in their language learning and cultural adjustment journeys. Future research can build on these insights to further enhance the well-being and success of international PhD students in higher education in Finland.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TRACY'S EIGHT 'BIG TENT' CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Table 2 Eight 'big tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research (Tracy, 2010, p. 840)

Criteria for quality (end goal)	**Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve**
Worthy topic	- Relevant - Timely - Significant - Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex - Theoretical constructs - Data and time in the field - Sample(s) - Context(s) - Data collection and analysis processes
Sincerity	The study is characterized by - Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher - Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by - Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling - Triangulation or crystallization - Multivocality - Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through - Aesthetic, evocative representation - Naturalistic generalizations - Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution - Conceptually/ theoretically - Practically

	- Morally - Methodologically - Heuristically
Ethical	The research considers - Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) - Situational and culturally specific ethics - Relational ethics - Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
Meaningful coherence	The study - Achieves what it purports to be about - Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals - Meaningfully interconnects literature, research question/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background (educational and personal)
How and why did you decide to do your PhD in Finland?

- How did you decide to do your PhD in Finland?
- How long have you been here now?
- What were your motives to study abroad?
- Did you have any connection to Finland before you started your PhD?

Finnish Language learning experience
Can you describe your experience with learning Finnish?

- How did you start learning Finnish? Are you still learning Finnish?
- If no:
    - why did you stop?
    - How do you feel about not having continued to learn Finnish?
- If yes:
    - in what kind of situations and with whom do you use Finnish?
- How have previous experiences with learning languages influenced your Finnish learning journey?
- Is your experience with learning Finnish similar or different from what you expected? Can you elaborate on your experience with learning Finnish?
- Where would you describe yourself in the spectrum of being a learner of Finnish and a user of Finnish?
    - Was there a point in your learning journey where this has changed?
- Have you taken an official Finnish test?
    - Do you think they can be an asset when you are applying e.g. for a job?

Speaker identities
How do you see yourself as a Finnish-language user?

- Do you remember how you felt like when you started to learn Finnish? Do you feel different now?
- How do you feel when talking/trying to talk in Finnish?
- Do you feel like using/ not using Finnish has influenced the way you live here in Jyväskylä/ Finland? How so?
- How big of a role does Finnish play in your daily life?
- How would the role of Finnish change in your life if you would stay here after your PhD?

Experiences with Finnish outside of the university

Can you tell me about your daily life here in Jyväskylä and what role Finnish plays in it?

How does Finnish have an impact on your daily life now?

- Can you tell me a little about your daily life here in Jyväskylä?
- What role does Finland/ Jyväskylä play in your life? Does it play a role at all or would your life be the same somewhere else? [Do you feel like you belong here?]
- Do you feel like part of the Jyväskylä community/ the society? Do you feel welcomed here? Do you feel like you have created a home here? Do you feel like you were able to create a space here for you?
- What role does Finnish play in your life right now? Do you think this might change after you finish your studies? How so?
- Do you have any hobbies/ spend a lot of time with people where a lot of Finnish is used? How do you feel in these situations? Does it encourage or discourage you?

<u>Language surrounding</u>

- What languages do you use in your daily life? In what situations and with whom?
- What are the different roles of the languages in your life/ daily life?
- In which situations do you use these languages (e.g. work, with your family or friends, outside of work)

<u>Situation as a PhD student in Finland</u>
What does it mean to be a PhD student in Finland for you?

- What does it mean to be a PhD student in Finland for you?
- How would you describe your standing as a PhD student between studying and working?
- Do you think being in Finland has an influence on your PhD studies?
- Do you already have plans for after your graduation? Planning to stay in Finland?
- Do you feel like through the Finnish language there is something that could influence or motivate you to stay in Finland?
- What tips would you give to a new PhD student that just came here?
- What would you like to change about how language is taught here at the university?

What is the most important part of Finnish learning for you?

APPENDIX III: GLOSSARY OF TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

GLOSSARY OF TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS FOLLOWING JEFFERSON (2004)

(.) → A full stop inside brackets denotes a micro pause, a notable pause but of no significant length.

[→ Square brackets denote a point where overlapping speech occurs.

< > → Arrows in this direction show that the pace of the speech has slowed down

( ) → Where there is space between brackets, it denotes that the words spoken here were too unclear to transcribe

(( )) → Where double brackets appear with a description inserted denotes some contextual information where no symbol of representation was available.

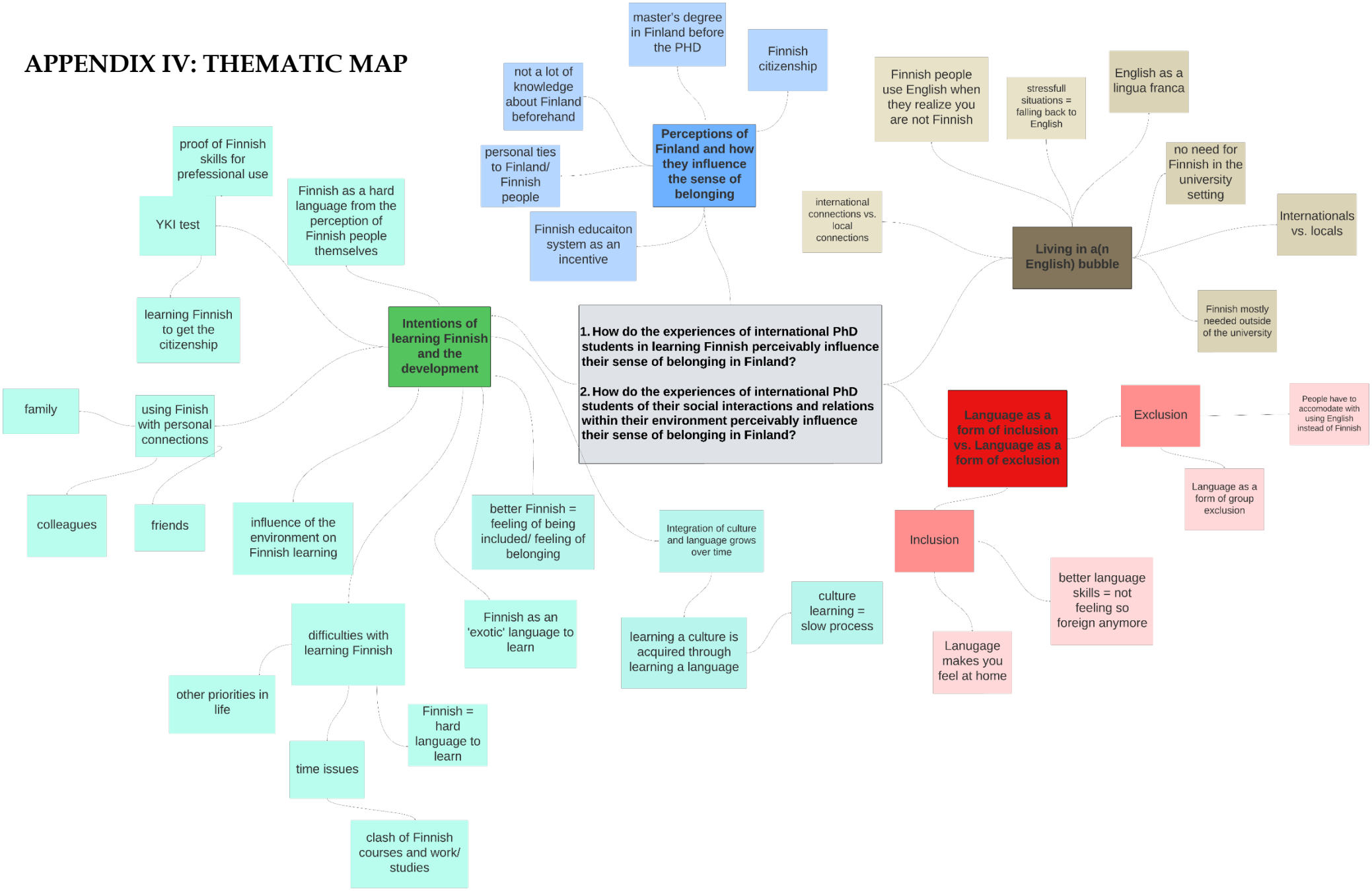
(h) → When a bracketed 'h' appears, it means that there was laughter within the talk - Hum(h)our

CAPS → When words are capitalized it means that that the word was spoken with heightened emphasis

[…] → Where there are three dots between brackets parts of the excerpt were left out

[xxx] → Where there are words between brackets parts of the excerpt were replaced due to issues of anonymity

APPENDIX IV: THEMATIC MAP



APPENDIX V: PRIVACY NOTICE

Date 12.11.2022

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Privacy notice

You are participating in a scientific research. This privacy notice informs you about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You have a legal right to receive this information in accordance with the European Union and Finnish legislation.

1. Data Controller(s)

The Data Controller is responsible for lawful processing of personal data in this research.

The Data Controller of this research is:
The researcher (the Data Controller and implementer of the research) [Katharina Weingärtner, kaweinga@student.jyu.fi].

Supervisors:
Mélodine Sommier, melodine.c.m.sommier@jyu.fi
Lotta Kokkonen, lotta.o.kokkonen@jyu.fi

2. Processor(s) of personal data

Processor of personal data refers to somebody processing personal data on behalf of the Data Controller and according to the Data Controller's instructions. A Data Processing Agreement must be signed with the processor of personal data. In this research, personal data are processed by:

F4 audiotranskription (www.audiotranskription.de/en)

During research, the Data Controller can also use other processors of personal data who cannot be named beforehand. Necessary agreements are always signed with the processors and their eligibility for the processing of personal data in terms of information security is assessed before signing the agreement. The data subject will be informed separately about the use of another processor if the change is significant from the data subject's point of view.

To ensure the accuracy of research data, the Data Controller may submit data for processing (primarily without direct identification data) to a so-called research reviewer or verifier for a defined period when necessary. These reviewers or verifiers work under the supervision of research staff, and data processing agreements are signed with them.

3. Other disclosure of personal data during research

Your personal data will be handled confidentially and without disclosing them to any outsiders.

4. Personal data to be processed in the master's thesis

Your personal data will be processed for the research purpose described in the information letter.

In this research, the following personal data might be collected from you

- Name
- Email address
- Audio records
- Interview notes
- Age
- Educational background
- Residential area
- Ethnic background or nationality
- Marital status
- Statements and opinions typical of a specific individual
- Information on the participant's circle of acquaintances or other parties
- Linguistic background
- Professional background

This privacy notice has been sent to the research participants via email before the interviews.

All data subjects are adults, over the age of 15.

5. The lawful basis for processing personal data in scientific research

☒Scientific research serving a public interest (GDPR, Article 6.1e, special personal data categories 9.2j)

☐Data subject's consent (GDPR, Article 6.1a, special personal data categories 9.2a)

6. Transfer of personal data outside the EU/EEA area

In this research, your personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/EEA area.

7. Protection for personal data

Processing of personal data in this research is based on an appropriate research plan and the study has a designated person in charge. The personal data collected and saved for this research will include only such data that is necessary for the research purpose.

Preventing identification

☐The data set is anonymised at the compilation stage (all identification data are fully removed so that there will be no return to the identifiable data and no new data can be connected to the data set).

☒As a protective measure, any direct identification data are removed upon the compilation of the data set (pseudonymised data allowing restored identification by means of codes or equivalent information, and also new data connected to the data set).

☐No direct identification data are collected, a data subject can be identified from the data only indirectly, i.e. by connecting the data with information from other sources in order to identify the person.

☐The data is analysed with direct identification data because (a justification for keeping the direct identification data):

The personal data processed in this research will be protected by means of:

☐ user ID ☒password ☐registered use ☐access control (physical spaces)

☐by other means, how:

For this study, a separate data protection impact assessment has been made**:**

☐ Yes ☒ No, because the research manager in charge has checked that the impact assessment is not compulsory.

The supervisors who are both employed at JYU have both completed data protection and information security trainings.

8. PROCESSING OF PERSONAL DATA AFTER ***THE RESEARCH HAS ENDED***

☒ The research register will be deleted after the research has ended, approximately by December 2023

Rights of the data subject

Right to access your personal data (GDPR, Article 15)

You have the right to get to know whether and which personal data of yours are processed. If you wish, you can also request a copy of your personal data to be processed.

Right to rectification (GDPR, Article 16)

If there are any inaccuracies or errors in your personal data to be processed, you are entitled to request that these be rectified or supplemented.

Right to erasure (GDPR, Article 17)

You have the right to demand in some cases that your personal data be erased. However, the right of erasure is not applicable if the erasure would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goal of processing in a scientific research.

Right to restriction of processing (GDPR, Article 18)

You have the right to restrict the processing of your personal data in some cases, like when you challenge the correctness of your personal data.

Right to object the processing (GDPR, Article 21)

You have the right to object the processing of your personal data if the processing is based on a public interest or a legitimate interest. In such a case, the Data Controller cannot process your personal

data, unless it can prove that there is a highly important and justified reason to do it, which overrides your right of objection.

Deviating from the rights

In some individual cases, it is possible to deviate from the described rights on the grounds stipulated in the GDPR and the Data Protection Act insofar as the rights would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goals of scientific or historical research or statistical purposes. The need for deviating from the rights is always assessed case-specifically. It is also possible to deviate from the rights if the data subject cannot, or cannot any longer, be identified.

Profiling and automatised decision-making

In this research, your personal data will not be used for any automatic decision-making. In this research, the purpose of the processing of personal data is not to assess your personal qualities, i.e. profiling, but personal data and qualities are considered from the perspective of broader scientific research.

Implementing the data subject rights

If you have any questions about your data subject rights, you can contact the researcher Katharina Weingärtner, kaweinga@student.jyu.fi or the thesis supervisors Mélodine Sommier, melodine.c.m.sommier@jyu.fi or Lotta Kokkonen, lotta.o.kokkonen@jyu.fi.

Reporting an actual or suspected information security breach to JYU
https://www.jyu.fi/fi/yliopisto/tietosuojailmoitus/ilmoita-tietoturvaloukkauksesta

You have to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority especially with a locally relevant one in terms of your permanent place of residence or work if you regard that the processing of personal data violates the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. In Finland, the supervisory authority is the Data Protection Ombudsman.

Updated contact information of the Office of Data Protection Ombudsman: https://tietosuoja.fi/etusivu