

**A THEMATIC ANALYSIS ON GROUP COMMUNICATION:
HOW DO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS EVALUATE THEM-
SELVES AND WHAT ROLE DOES ENGLISH AS A LIN-
GUA FRANCA PLAY?**

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| Abstract In higher education institutions students very often have to collaborate in groups in order to complete a task. This study examines how international students of a mid-size university in Finland, experience group communication and how they evaluate themselves in terms of their contribution and participation considering that they use English as a lingua franca. Interview data from individual and group interviews (n=18) were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The findings illustrate how various aspects such as diversity, culture, social and personal background, previous group experiences and English language skills become relevant through participants' group experiences. In general, this thesis contributes to identify the feelings students have during collaborative working, by highlighting the benefits and obstacles they face. Results also show how the idea of self-concept is affecting students' academic performance and communication in the group. The theoretical and societal implications of studying groups in higher education institutions are discussed, taking into account that students' perspectives could be further examined in research. By increasing understanding on the role of English as a language of instruction, diversity and sociocultural background, academics will be able to offer students better group work experiences in various levels. | |
| Keywords: communication, group work, cooperative learning, collaboration, academic performance, English as a Lingua Franca, English Proficiency, self-concept | |
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1 INTRODUCTION

The current study concerns the matter of group communication and investigates the way university students who use English as a lingua franca feel, when they have to collaborate with others in order to complete a weekly group assignment. Therefore, this master thesis's aim is to explore the communication practices students have implemented and the aspects and criteria they consider relevant when they communicate with their peers and evaluate themselves.

Many factors can affect the level of satisfaction students might have when working in groups and this is something Burdett and Hastie (2009) have been investigating from various perspectives. Few studies though focus on the relation between group performance and self-evaluation of students (Hofman et al., 2009). Specifically, according to Hofman et al. (2005), assessment in education is usually interrelated to students' effectiveness. However, there is not enough attention on the relationship between English competence and group performance. With this in mind, this study explores the ways students experience group communication considering that they use English as a lingua franca. Thus, it is important to see how they evaluate themselves in terms of their perceived academic performance and involvement in the group setting. In other words, as a researcher, I want to identify the aspects students ponder on when they experience group communication and when they evaluate themselves. Since this study draws on students' interaction, I consider that communication will be a key factor in their group experience as I will explain in the theoretical framework.

In the first section of this thesis, I present the theoretical framework that includes the relevant definitions, theories and literature that I find important to unpack for the purpose and completion of this thesis. Following up, in the chapter of methodology and analysis, I discuss my decision to proceed with a qualitative methodology and methods in order to answer my research questions and reach my goals. The data of the analysis are examined through the interview extracts and participants' answers, in the analysis section where I also present the findings in connection with the themes of my analysis and literature. Last but not least, as a conclusion of this study, I summarize the main outcomes in addition to the limitations of this research. Overall, I want to share my wishes for further research by highlighting the

multilayered levels that need to be further considered in the field of group work with a selective attention to students' perspectives.

1.1 Societal relevance

The purpose of my study is to offer findings that can motivate students to reflect on group dynamics and on themselves as members of groups. Studies considering how students behave and act in groups, have approached group learning from the viewpoint of education. The ongoing debate of students' preferences towards individual work or group work is still an important topic when groups come into being in all levels of education (Burdett & Hastie, 2009; Marks & O'Connor, 2013). Furthermore, it is observed that educators, especially in higher education institutions, assign group work projects to students to prepare them for the work life stage after graduation (Bacon, 2005; Chapman et al., 2010). More specifically, Chapman et al. (2010) state the necessity of developing students' teamwork skills since they are highly recommended by future employees. However, as Bacon (2005) highlights, it is not clear that students' learning skills and abilities are enhanced by group learning. Therefore, the contradictory outcomes and the way group work is being prominenced in higher education institutions and in general as an educational method shows the gap in research and the societal relevance of studying not only group work learning but also students' interaction. As Galton et al. (2009) study, classroom observations in England helped researchers investigate students' interaction and focus on how to improve the effectiveness of groups in many aspects. For example, results showed that when pupils between eleven and fourteen years old were involved in feedback and debriefing exercises, they ended up having meaningful group work experiences (Galton et al., 2009). Even if the field of group work has been discussed a lot in the context of education, we can see that students', scholars' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards group learning vary.

In a society where groups and teams are formed in all the levels of education and in several interpersonal environments, I want to propose different means to improve working in groups and help students approach this topic from a multifaceted angle. That is why, in this study my focus as a researcher was to invite participants to reflect on their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings in depth and in parallel with their peers' experiences. For this reason, I decided to proceed with a qualitative method and structure my interview questions in two phases. By investigating students' point of view, I wanted to analyze not only the group work experience itself but the interactions, dynamics, connections, emotional stages and relationships that individuals developed during the completion of the group assignments and group

sessions. Especially when approaching how members of a group interact or feel, further research can provide information not only about students' perspectives on communication within groups, but also about the importance of developing and practicing various skills during the process of group work (Payne et al., 2006). As I have briefly mentioned about the background of this field, we can see that working in groups is a complex and multilayered phenomenon that needs to be explored from various angles, which I unfold in the next section. From a societal perspective, analyzing the group dynamics and how members of a group interact can be helpful for teachers, researchers and students.

1.2 Theoretical relevance

In general, the method of group working is being used a lot as an educational way of learning (Ashman & Gillies, 2003; Hammar Chiriac, 2014; Long & Porter, 1985). Working in groups has been characterized as a debatable method for many reasons, however, it is interesting to observe how through the years students' experiences have been reported. What this means, is that students have been asked to review a plethora of features related to the effectiveness of group work such as the number of participants in the group, the role of instructions, group dynamics and the development of certain skills (Burdett & Hastie, 2009; Chapman, 2010). The method of group work has been studied a lot not only in early-childhood age and schools but also in higher education settings (Gillies, 2003; Hammar Chiriac, 2014). As Burdett and Hastie (2009) observed, the phenomenon of students' dissatisfaction and satisfaction towards group work is an effect that researchers need to investigate more, since the amount of group work assessments is increasing in higher education institutions. For this reason, I believe it is necessary to investigate further how students' group work experiences differ and vary and whether their perceptions affect their perceived academic performance and consequently the way they evaluate themselves. Additionally, there are studies that focus on whether students prefer or not to work in groups and investigate the reasons that affect their decisions while comparing them with various ethnic groups (Mustafa, 2013). However, these studies are not focusing on communication nor students' feelings during the group work. We know why educators choose this method, the benefits, pitfalls and challenges (Ferdous & Karim, 2019; Monson, 2017; Seric & Pranicjevic, 2018). But do we actually know how students experience and evaluate communication within groups?

Undoubtedly, scholars' interest in this field is not recent but continuous (George & Jessup, 1997; Poole et al., 1999). As Park (2001) discusses in his research,

participants mentioned that communication was an important factor that needed to be examined in future group projects. To be more specific, students suggested that communication was a “strategy to improve group work” (p. 443). These results highlight the necessity to examine further the concept of communication in groups and students’ perspectives particularly. Noteworthy is that the connection between group work and communication has come from the outcomes of collaborative working. Some experts have shown evidence that collaborative working promotes various skills among communication and participation in group discussions (Terenzini et al., 2001; Webb, 1995). That is why English as a second language (EL2) becomes relevant, in such studies as Matsumoto (2018) and Baker and Clark (2010), since participants are coming from a multilingual background. Similarly, according to Ghaith (2003), the method of cooperative learning has positive effects in multilingual students such as their reading progress, isolation feelings and academic self-esteem.

On the other hand, theoretical attempts, as the one from MacIntyre et al. (1998) have identified interpersonal and intergroup variables and connected linguistic and psychological aspects that affect second language communication. More specifically, they created a model with six levels of variables which explain twelve factors that influence the willingness of students to communicate. As MacIntyre et al. (1998) mentioned, they have possibly excluded other variables such as the learning environment and the language skills of students. Nevertheless, this model is related to the concepts I am investigating since it shows the different parameters of second language (L2) communication. Likewise, Aoyama and Takahashi (2020), have focused on the correlation between the willingness that international students have when communicating in English and L2 self-confidence, but they have not observed these aspects in the group work setting. The body of work I have discussed thus far indicates that more studies are needed in the context of group work environment with a specific focus on communication and self-evaluation.

Despite acknowledging how students perceive group work, studies have shown that instructors’ expectations and beliefs do not completely match students’ reality (Chapman et al., 2010). This is great evidence why we need to address and investigate at a deeper level students’ perceptions and self-evaluation beliefs. Also, interpreting individuals’ point of view while comparing students’ experiences is a useful tool that will answer questions such as how people make sense of their world. Therefore, this study approaches students’ experiences from a communicative perspective, which means that I am interested in investigating not only how students experience group communication but also what criteria they consider relevant when they evaluate collaborative learning. Through a qualitative data analysis, I want to observe the role that communication plays in this group interaction according to participants’ experiences.

This study approaches participants' group experiences drawing on literature from various disciplines. From the viewpoint of the educational field, collaborative learning and communication studies can be interrelated when investigating students' interaction and relationships. Likewise, the usage of English as a common language in the group setting, relates to the linguistic aspect of communication and social interaction. Finally, one of the main theoretical lenses used in this study is intercultural communication. Interestingly, scholars approach culture from various perspectives and distinguish intercultural communication based on how they define culture. As Scollon (2012) explains approaching "culture as a verb" enables researchers to understand what culture is doing instead of what people are (pp. 4-5). In other words, categorizing in which culture people belong to, can be problematic according to Scollon (2012) since grouping people based on specific characteristics such as their nationality and language can lead to certain assumptions that are focusing on how similar or different their cultures are. Defining how people behave according to their culture is an "essentialist view of culture" as Holliday (2010) argues (p. 5). This thesis aims to understand what aspects students find relevant when they experience group communication.

Considering that in a multicultural interconnected world, where students from diverse backgrounds meet, the concept of culture and the concept of language can be associated with one another. Leung et al. (2008) define diversity in an organizational setting, for example at work and in education for example in classroom, in terms of the cultural and ethnic background of people. The concept of intercultural communication co-exists with the aspect of diversity when groups come into being and will be discussed in depth in the theoretical framework. Another important aspect that Collins (2018) investigates in his study is that universities are described as intercultural environments where internalization as one of the discourses is being commercialized. Therefore, this shows how the university system is approaching the concept of interculturality in an essentialist way that students might adopt. However, like Piller (2012) critically states, the notion that anything intercultural is determined by culture and ethnicity can be problematic. In this study, I want to observe, whether diversity, intercultural communication, or the fact that participants used English as a lingua franca, were relevant to the ways they chose to interact and behave in the group setting.

1.3 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to address students' group experiences by highlighting the role of communication and English as a lingua franca. As I mentioned above, this study is qualitative since the emphasis is on participants' feelings, experiences and perceptions. As a data collection method, I conducted thematic open-ended interviews that I distinguished into two parts; group interviews and individual interviews. The former is used to focus on the group dynamics of participants' relationships and the latter on participants' self-perception and evaluation. That is why, after the completion of the group interviews, I decided that I wanted to explore further students' individual opinions and understand in depth how they experienced group communication and how they evaluated themselves in this setting. Overall, with this study, I hope to provide new resources to teachers and researchers about students' perspectives and raise awareness about students' experiences in relation to communication. In order to achieve my goals, I specify my research questions below:

1. How do university students enrolled in a mid-size university in Finland and who use English as a Lingua Franca experience group work communication?
2. How do university students enrolled in a mid-size university in Finland and who use English as a Lingua Franca evaluate themselves when they collaborate in groups?

2 KEY FACTORS ON HOW GROUPS FUNCTION

2.1 Defining groups

Groups are part of our lives from the day we are born, since we belong to them or have to interact with them every day (Burtis & Turman, 2006). In a macro level as well as in micro level, groups appear in various contexts and sizes as I discuss in this section (Frey et al., 1999). In line with previously cited scholars, Harris and Sherblom (2018) distinguish the diverse types of groups that individuals belong to. A “primary type”, as they explain can be a family group and a “social type” can be a religious group (p. 3). Families can be a notable example of a micro level group that consists of members we do not necessarily choose to interact with. Therefore, any type of group can be formed in good conditions or in not so functional conditions (Petronio et al., 2003). Despite this scenario, there are groups that we can voluntarily be part of, such as social groups. In turn, working groups and study groups can be under both categories depending on the conditions of the environment we experience at that time (Burtis & Turman, 2006).

To begin with, I consider it particularly important to define groups as it is one of the main components of my research focus. That is why it is necessary for me to explain the meaning and structure of groups. Groups are made of individuals who are considered as social beings therefore, the whole concept of ‘group’ acts as a social action that involves interaction. Group members are mutually dependent for the completion of a common task (Cragan et al., 2008; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Harris & Sherblom, 2018). It is common that group members communicate and share tasks based on the size of their group and this can result efficient or problematic interaction. For example, if the tasks are not equally distributed with the number of mem-

bers in the group, this might affect communication, or any other aspect related to the group composition (Keyton & Beck, 2008). To be more specific, as Keyton and Beck 2008 mention, it seems that the number of group members is a determinative factor when not only scholars but also educators define groups.

Literature about groups defines them as consisting of a minimum of three people who are called “members” and collaborate in order to achieve a specific goal (Beck et al., 2022; Dipboye, 2018; Reimer et al., 2017). This is what Bar-Tal (2012) has described as the establishment of “group belief” which shows that the group itself and its members comes into existence. As Keyton (2006) explains, two people are considered as a “dyad”. In this situation, the third additional actor nevertheless plays an especially significant role in the dynamic of the dyad because it contributes to formulating the relationship of the dyad members. In contrast, Williams (2010) argues that scholars can approach to some extent dyads as groups, since the social behavior of individuals in dyads can be observed in the same way as in larger groups. This is happening because, as Williams explains, “social facilitation and social loafing” are two aspects that can be studied even when two people interact (p. 271). In other words, the former is referring to the phenomenon where the existence of other parties is affecting positively individual’s behavior such as enhancing their performance whereas the latter, explains that the presence of a third factor can have a negative impact in someone's group performance by minimizing their effort of contribution. On the other hand, Moreland (2010) labels dyadic relationships as a different type of formation that cannot be compared to groups for many reasons. Whether this is a romantic relationship, a friendship or a studying dyadic relationship, Moreland (2010) notes that dyads have a more simplistic form and are more likely to last less, something that Williams (2010) confirms with the ephemeral character dyadic relationships have. Specifically, Moreland (2010) talks about the temporality of dyads by describing that the lack of members can be beneficial when “forming” and “dissolving” (p. 258). Additionally, as Moreland (2010) predicts, individuals tend to feel more intense emotions in dyads than in groups. Overall, as he explains, even though dyads and groups have shared characteristics, this does not presuppose that they function in the same way. According to Williams (2010) dyads often function similar to groups whereas sometimes dyads are considered as a separate category. Hence, it is useful to know their differences in order to understand which type fits researchers' purpose.

The idea of group size has been criticized a lot over the years by scholars who have compared the efficiency of smaller and larger groups (Wheelan, 2009). Studies have shown that members who belong in smaller groups are willing to cooperate better than when they are in larger groups (Seijts & Latham, 2000). To be more specific, researchers have been examining the relationship between the size

and the productivity of groups. A common pattern that these studies present is that both larger and smaller groups outweigh in some aspects and are inferior in others. For example, according to Slater (1958), larger groups can be less organized than smaller groups.

Except for the group size, researchers have noted four more characteristics that help us define groups such as the *identity*, the *mutual dependence*, the *structure* and the *goal* that group members have (Keyton, 2006, pp. 4-5; Keyton & Beck, 2008, p. 489). The first aspect, refers to group identity, the ability of individuals to identify as members of a group and therefore feel a sense of belonging in that setting (Henry et al., 1999). The second, mutual dependence, refers to the interdependent relationship that members develop in areas that concern the group outcomes, whether these are in terms of their tasks, goals or performance (Wageman, 1995). Under these conditions, members build trust relationships because they expect or believe that each factor will complete their task (Cragan et al., 2008). The third component, structure, is interrelated to the abovementioned, since it refers to aspects such as the norms and roles that group members have (Beck et al., 2022). In general, we can observe that each characteristic lead to the other. That is, sharing a group membership makes individuals feel dependent on one another and creates a structure that will help them be organized and share responsibilities to achieve their goals. As Hogg and Reid (2006) explain, norms are embedded behaviors that members adjust when they interact. In the same way, roles are “given positions” (Robbins et al., 2017, pp. 218-219) which predict how members will act in the group setting. Lastly, studies have shown the positive connotation that goal setting has with motivation and performance (Van Mierlo & Kleingeld, 2010; Seijts & Latham, 2000). Apparently, one of the reasons to form a group as Robbins and Judge (2011) found out, is that members with various knowledge and skills gather to complete a task and achieve a goal. As I discuss in the next sub-section, the four characteristics stated above also become relevant when researchers define groups and teams.

2.1.1 Distinguishing the terms “group” and “team”

Many researchers argue about the distinction of the terminology “group” and “team.” In this section, I will justify which terminology I use in this thesis. For some researchers, separating these terms is not a significant issue however for others, defining both is an essential point of their research (Guzzo & Dickson 1996; Hughes & Jones, 2011). Clarity about the way scholars define these terms is important for me, as a researcher too, since this literature review is going to help me identify which term is more suitable for the purpose of this study.

Using the labels 'groups' and 'teams' is a contextual and socially constructed matter as Beck et al. (2022) claim. This means that individuals are used to say "football team" instead of group and "therapy group" instead of team (p. 28). Consequently, by relating any activity such as sports to the label "team", automatically, the usage of the word "group" is used to describe a more formal or resonant context. Also, it is more common to use the term "team" when referring to a working environment like an organization and "group" in a different setting like a classroom interaction (Dipboye, 2018, p. 382; Galegane, 2018). Hence, both concepts are socially constructed, which means that people contextualize them depending on the norms and values of the society.

Despite 'groups' and 'teams' being socially constructed some researchers have identified slight differences between both terms. Reimer et al. (2017) argue that teams have a common past and are aiming for a common future whilst members develop a co-dependent relationship. There are several overlapping and partly differing definitions of group characteristics which confirm that one of the reasons why groups exist is because members have a goal (Harris & Sherblom, 2018; Keyton & Beck, 2008). On the one hand, the joined participation in teams and on the other hand the goal orientation of groups, create interdependent relationships among members' interaction and a sense of commitment (Seijts & Latham, 2000). Thus, we can see that there are slight differences and some commonalities when scholars describe groups and teams.

Another aspect that has been studied for many decades now is teamwork effectiveness in relation to group work effectiveness and that is why, scholars separate and explain the basic differences of each concept (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005). One of the biggest differences Katzenbach and Smith (2005) state is that team members work individually and collectively, which means they tend to produce more. Therefore, this ongoing productivity makes team members have a high task interdependence performance.

On the contrary, there are scholars who use both terms mutually without separation (Burtis & Turman, 2006; Morgeson et al., 2010). Overall, I recognize the fact that some scholars interchange both or strictly separate the abovementioned terms (Dipboye, 2018; Ramirez, 2013). However, in this master thesis, I only use the term "group" because I believe that it fits better my understanding and the purpose of this study. Since my focus is related to the group work method itself based on the literature I have read and therefore the communication experience of students within the group, I want to be consistent with the terminology I use. Other than that, working in groups is also interrelated with classroom environment or educational purposes (Blatchford et al., 2003; Galegane, 2018). That is why I consider that it is important for me to use the same terminology when I describe the process and steps of

participants' experiences. Finally, during the interview process, as I present in the analysis section, most of my participants used the term 'group' to refer to their experience.

2.2 Small Group Learning

Research about small groups has been associated with classroom learning and educational contexts and more specifically, with cooperative and collaborative learning methods (Johnson et al., 1994; Springer et al., 1999). In this section, I want to discuss how working in groups has developed through the years in education. Previous research on groups has been focusing on the benefits and pitfalls of this method (Gillies et al., 2003; Monson, 2017). Researchers have investigated the distinct reasons that influence working in groups by highlighting the benefits, disadvantages, and challenges of this process (Campbell & Li, 2008; Chang & Kang, 2016; Payne et al., 2006). Regarding the challenges that groups are facing, we can see that scholars have developed several theories, models and concepts that helped them analyze the group work method and group interactions (Egolf, 2013).

As Tuckman (1965) explained, the difficulties of working in groups can be separated into five levels according to the phase the members are in (as cited in Ferdous & Karim, 2019). *Forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning* are the basic stages to unpack (Haynes, 2012, pp. 8-12; Tuckman, 1965, as cited in Ferdous & Karim, 2019, pp. 344-345). Each of these subcategories deal with a certain momentum of the group process. *Forming* refers to the first steps of the process where members are still unknown, and they are struggling to meet each other. The following phase, *storming*, concerns the challenges that might arise concerning the members' group commitment. The difficulty of the *norming* stage is about the distribution of norms and roles whereas, *performing* means dealing with any issues related to the performance of individuals. Lastly, *adjourning* is examining if the goal of the group has been achieved successfully. We must acknowledge that Tuckman's model is a traditional representation of groups formation focused on students' behaviors. However, the way it is structured can be problematic since it might not be relatable to every group development process. Limited studies nowadays, implement Tuckman's model when examining small group learning (Ferdous & Karim, 2019; Cresswell-Yeager, 2021). More specifically, Cresswell-Yeager (2021) used Tuckman's model in order to observe how the instructor of small group projects that were assigned to students evaluates the group communication and development process based on forming, storming, norming and performing. In this study, Tuckman's model was used as a conceptual framework that facilitated the reflection process of

students and the instructor's questions. As the study of Ferdous and Karim (2019) showed, the sequence and stages of challenges that each student faces differ. Hence, we cannot predict so easily how members will interact or what difficulties they will have to overcome when they work in groups. Also, as Le et al. (2018) note, challenges can also concern teachers' viewpoint and not only students' perspectives. Likewise, Seric and Pranicovic (2018) suggest that teachers' role and input can help students understand how groups work effectively.

On the other hand, many studies support the idea that group working as a pedagogical method benefits the learning process of students (Ashman & Gillies, 2003; Baker & Clark, 2010; Hammar Chiriatic, 2014; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012; Long & Porter, 1985). From a macro level perspective group working can be a beneficial method for production and mass production, because as Veenman et al. (2002) explain comparing to individual learning, group working can maximize the efficiency of the assigned task. That is why, when discussing how groups work, in the field of education we can observe a tendency to score higher results, to produce bigger, better projects and outcomes on a personal and collective level (McCorkle et al., 1999). Of course, this happens when other factors are beneficial such as having a clear goal and a helpful environment that requires having good relationship with your co-members. Productivity and effectiveness have been measured by group work scholars and are closely related with cooperative and collaborative learning (Cohen, 1994). Overall, cooperative and collaborative learning are being used as the tools that helped researchers observe small group interactions (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Etymologically the noun cooperation explains the action of "com + op" which refers to "with + work" that means working with/working together. Hence, the roots of this action match the idea of working in groups. Cooperative learning encourages everybody to contribute towards a common goal. As a consequence, regardless of the outcome of this cooperation, members act as a unit in this setting and experience mutually their group results (Johnson et al., 1994). Working in small groups according to Gillies and Boyle (2011) presuppose cooperative learning towards a common goal. Additionally, studies (Slavin, 1995; Slavin, 1996) show that students not only grow personally in this cooperative environment, but also, they enhance their learning and creative thinking ability (Slavin, 1995). This means that students involved in this cooperative learning process learn how to learn (Slavin, 1996). One of the characteristics of cooperative classrooms and learning environments is the process of "group processing" (Veenman et al., 2002, p. 89). This process of updating each other about the working progress based on Veenman et al. (2002) is a discussion that helps members achieve their goals. As Jolliffe (2007), adds group processing gives time to students to understand and reflect on their group progress according to the feedback they get. This is the purpose of my study too, to hear and

understand students' perspectives and reflections on their experiences. Cooperative learning is interrelated to how teachers will approach and manage this practice, since they need to be trained before they adopt this method in the classroom (Gillies & Boyle, 2011; Seric & Pranicevic, 2018). Teachers' role except from providing clear instructions is to also being supportive and guide pupils before implementing cooperative activities as Mercer (1996) study of nine to ten years old shows. As Kirchner (2005) claims, the strategy of cooperative teaching has been used for many decades now in education and in many subjects and ages.

Another aspect that is discussed by scholars is that learning in groups can be more beneficial than working individually for many reasons. First, this practice helps students develop certain social and academic skills such as communicating to complete efficiently a task while supporting each other (Johnson et al., 1994; Millis, 2010). As Springer et al. (1999) agree, especially for the purposes of this cooperation, members need to communicate above all, their joined goal. Additionally, sharing tasks and responsibilities based on the members' strong characteristics and skills also plays a significant role during this process. Noteworthy is the fact that responsibilities entail accountability which makes members focus on the effectiveness and progression of their work. For this reason, giving feedback to each other and having activities that emphasize members' relationship are considered a necessity.

Collaborative learning on the other hand, has been associated with the communicative aspect of students' interaction (Johnson et al., 1986). It is important to note that collaborative learning is highly related to educational learning environments (Glaister et al, 2023). That is why, in literature researchers refer to various teaching methods, the teachers' role and students' skills (Le et al., 2018; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Scholars have been researching the benefits of collaborative learning, the effect on students' perspectives and the obstacles of this experience (Lee & Yang, 2023; Osman et al., 2011; Seric & Pranicevic, 2018). Participants in these studies expressed that they feel more comfortable sharing their opinions during collaborative activities than in class and that they are more willing to speak up in a small group environment. Among other characteristics, a focus on the emotional aspect of students' collaboration process has been examined (Järvenoja et al., 2020; Järvenoja & Järvela, 2009). As we can see, collaborative learning scholars have been observing students' perspectives, in connection to other aspects such as the methods of learning or the size of the group. It seems necessary to scrutinize collaborative learning from a communicative and linguistic perspective. By exploring the ways students who speak English as a second language, communicate and evaluate themselves in this group setting, I aim to provide useful facts and recommendations for students and teachers.

2.3 Communication in groups

We cannot examine how groups function without mentioning first the communicative part of the group interaction. A crucial element in group working experience as I discussed already is the concept of communication. But how can we define communication and why is it relevant in my research? Working in groups and communication are mutually linked as this thesis connects participants' perspectives with literature from several fields. Despite its common usage, like I have briefly explained in the introduction, group communication has been studied in the context of interculturality and diversity as I will further analyse in the next section (Burton & Dimbleby, 1998; Collins, 2018; Cragan et al., 2008; Harris & Sherblom, 2018; Leung et al., 2008; Piller, 2012; Reimer et al., 2017). Thus, I recognize the fact that, communication is a broad concept and a general umbrella that scholars try to investigate and narrow down.

As scholars acknowledge, communication is hard to be defined, because it is a multidimensional concept (Hannawa & Spitzberg, 2015; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). For Harris and Sherblom (2018) communication can be a set of meanings which are shaped by verbal and non-verbal actions that exist into a specific context and construct the dynamic of the relationship that is developed among people. Similarly, Burton and Dimbleby (1998) describe that communication functions as an "activity" (p. 6). This characteristic makes communication a broader sense-making experience of engagement in what is happening through talking (Castells, 2009). To put it differently, communication is not only about exchanging messages as the traditional models used to propose, but is a "practice" that changes based on the context and the people involved (Berger et al., 2010, pp. 47-48; Shepherd et al., 2006, pp. 37-40). Thus, through communication we act, we do things, we make statements, we ask, we agree, we debate and many more (Burton & Dimbleby, 1998). Consequently, in this interactive context, when a group of people get together, communication becomes a major factor.

Groups and teams are forms of human activity (Harris & Sherblom, 2018). This explains the central character and idea of groups. As I examine in this thesis, communication can affect group working experience in multiple ways. No matter in which type of group people are, whether this is in a school or a family environment, communication co-exists and develops according to the setting. Scholars have specified communication as one of the components of small groups (Egolf, 2013). To be more specific, individuals can be part of various types of groups that characterize the context of their membership and affect communication within the group (Harris & Sherblom, 2011). Work groups, social groups, therapeutic groups can be a few examples of small groups that formulate their characteristics based on

communication. In small group, communication is an essential factor of the group experience since is the midpoint that controls and affects whatever the group members want to achieve.

Group communication refers to the communication that is happening in a group setting between a group of people (Burton & Dimbleby, 1998). Group communication scholars, mostly study how small groups manage to work together efficiently, by observing the dynamic, the roles and the interaction within the members (Poupore, 2018; Rubin et al., 2010). Researchers approach groups from a “functional perspective” (Cummings & Ancona, 2005, pp. 107-108; Wittenbaum et al., 2004, p. 18). This perspective is based on the group theory which examines how groups function and evaluates the group performance and specifically the effectiveness of groups. However, working and communicating in groups can be a contradictory practice that makes people interested in investigating why some groups are working better than others. As Mercer (2002) claims, interaction aims to a mutual understanding from both parties. Therefore, grouping as a form of interaction that requires at least two people, depends on communication. Some scholars consider that group working is a great opportunity for students to develop, improve and expand their communication skills whereas others try to find solutions to conflicts that occur because of inefficient communication (Poole et al., 1999). In general, the lack or existence of social and cooperative skills might influence long term and short term the future of students and therefore, their personal, social and career life (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Similarly, Morgeson et al. (2005), highlight the effects of social skills developed during group working, such as listening, speaking and time management in learning and individuals’ team performance. As Marks and O’Connor (2013) state, communication skills and problem-solving skills are a few other aspects that students develop while they learn together. As they explain, working in groups is a particularly useful practice in the school setting. Additionally, Marks and O’Connor (2013) stress that it is a great chance for students from diverse backgrounds and specialist knowledge to come together and focus on their strong aspects one by one. Overall, diversity and students’ backgrounds play a vital role in the whole experience of collaborative learning and group working for various reasons that I will further explain in the next section.

2.3.1 Diversity and background

Group work diversity has been examined in organizational and educational settings as Knippenberg et al. (2004) discuss. That is, diversity has been examined in the context of groups that occur not only in the educational environment but also at work-

place environment. This observation shows how important and relevant the concept of diversity is on a societal and organizational level. In the field of education, according to literature, students' group work experience might be influenced by the perceived diversity of the cultural and social background of the group (Kimmel & Volet, 2012). In their study, Kimmel and Volet (2012), have conducted a mixed method approach to investigate the ways university students react and behave when they are working with members who have backgrounds perceived as culturally diverse. Researchers in this study separated the target group of students into diverse and non-diverse linguistic groups. The former group was formed by Anglo-Australian students who completed their studies and lived permanently in Australia whereas the latter was formed by multilingual students who had studied and were living temporally in other countries. Therefore, we can observe that Kimmel and Volet based on the Australian context and school system defined diverse and non-diverse national and linguistic backgrounds. This is a great example of the "contextual and symbolic" meanings participants gave to diversity based on their experiences (Harris & Sherblom, 2018, pp. 25-26). In addition, Kimmel and Volet (2012) wanted to see whether the diverse or non-diverse background influences students' learning environment and consequently their group working experience. Results showed a general preference for working with non-diverse groups. At the same time, students' evaluation on working with cultural mix peers was diverse. Many factors such as the organization of the learning environment and English proficiency played a vital role in students' preferences (Kimmer & Volet, 2012).

Leung et al. (2008) acknowledge the importance and value a multicultural experience has not only in education but also on an organizational level when people from various cultural backgrounds are working together. Leung et al. (2008) in this study, tend to parallel diversity and culture in a "banal" way. As Billig (1995) defines, activities of banal nationalism act as "mindless reminders" (p. 41). Claims such as the fact that collaborating with colleagues from other countries help employees familiarize in an intercultural environment or the idea that some of the reasons why people are enhancing their creativity is related to their exposure to a foreign perspective have been strongly contested by Piller (2017) and Billig (1995). Pointing out, assuming or generalizing such expositions about the benefits or effects of multicultural environments can be problematic when the idea of nation and the idea of culture are approached as equivalent (Piller, 2017). Since 1970s, the positivist paradigm (Hua, 2015) of intercultural communication studies has supported many scholars and has been criticized by others as I already mentioned, because it is focused on the determinative factor of culture and the assumptions around culture. Likewise, as Baker (2015) states, researchers need to criticize the connection between English competence and culture. That is why, researchers working on intercultural studies

and linguistics when analyzing data and before conducting relevant studies need to ponder on those aspects. The former idea about nation does not presuppose the latter which is culture and this was a great reminder for me when I was writing the analysis section. On the other hand, as Burton and Dimbleby (1998) claim communication is a way to express our culture and through culture we communicate certain aspects. Furthermore, intergroup interaction impacts communication skills and vice versa, hence communication and culture are interrelated aspects connected with group working that possibly shape students' experiences. When talking about culture, a particularly challenging concept to grasp, I find it significant to highlight that my purpose is not to define what it is, but to see what scholars have been arguing and how they connect it with group working. In turn, I focus on how the participants of my study talk about culture and connect it with group working. To put this differently, this study aims to understand how university students make sense, describe and interpret their group work interactions through the lenses of their own experiences and background. For this purpose, I will combine the interpretive and constructivist paradigm to analyze participants' feelings and explanations (Hua, 2015).

Scholars have been focusing on the problems caused in multicultural working environments considering that the national cultural differences of the members might lead to conflicts (Hofstede & McRae, 2004; Knippenberg et al., 2004; McSweeney, 2002). However, as Holliday (1999) stresses, the meaning of culture can be defined differently according to people's social conditions, context and situations. A similar note has been acknowledged in recent literature from Miller and Boivin (2022) who explain that diversity and multiculturalism are two definitions that people use differently based on their region and discipline. That is why, in this study, I want to identify the context under which international students perceive group work communication and whether diversity, culture or their background is relevant or associated with their experiences. Linguistic diversity is a common characteristic participants have, since they use English as a *lingua franca*, a concept I will further explain in the following section. Therefore, in this study I want to observe if participants considered the fact that groups were diverse and how they related this feature to their group performance, overall experience and self-evaluation.

2.3.2 English as a *lingua franca*

In this study, the term international student is used to describe individuals who are enrolled in a mid-size university in Finland and who use English as a second language (EL2) or in other words English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) defines how users of “different first languages communicate” (Pariwat, 2023; Fiske & Jenkins, 2011, p. 926; Pitzl, 2016). As Bjorkman (2013) explains, a lingua franca enables a large group of people to connect and network. In today’s globalized world people use the dominant language which is English. As a result of internalization, higher institutions have been examining the impact the usage of English has on students’ linguistic and academic performance.

Andrade (2006) has been reviewing how language proficiency and academic success are interrelated. Similarly, Berman and Cheng (2001), compared the perceptions native and non-native English speakers have about their language skills and whether their difficulties affect their achievements (Berman & Cheng, 2001). In addition, results confirmed, that non-native English-speaking students found that language skills such as writing and speaking are more difficult than native English students believe. Based on Andrade’s (2006) research review, peer support programs can further benefit international students’ learning and adjustment in multiple levels such as their language skills and academic success. Hence, the above-mentioned implications show that universities should focus on enhancing students’ language skills by implementing group activities or English support courses designed for international students. Llanes et al. (2016) examined the general level of L2 English proficiency of exchange students in non-English speaking universities. Findings showed that exchange students, improved linguistically in EL2 but this was not the case for everyone because other factors were significant such as their initial level of English proficiency before their study abroad experience (Llanes et al., 2016). These results show how important it is for academics to consider the multidimensional aspects of the linguistic barriers students face not only when they study abroad but when they use English as a lingua franca in a social and academic setting. Another study that examined university level students, focused on the effectiveness of communicating in ELF in comparison to L1 and L2 speakers (Mulken & Hendriks, 2015). Results identified that students’ interactions in L1-L2 were more effective in terms of communication with their interlocutors than when they were interacting using English as a Lingua Franca. More specifically, signals of students lacking linguistic expressions/vocabulary were observed in ELF interactions. Hence, we can see that scholars have studied the struggles and obstacles students in higher education institutions have when they use ELF and the impact this practice has on students’ perspectives. However, language difficulties, as He and Chiang (2016) indicate, are experienced both ways, meaning that sometimes students find it hard to communicate with their instructors. The variety of English accents and lack of speaking proficien-

cy are a few factors that cause miscommunication problems and misunderstandings. Communication challenges due to English varieties and lack of proficiency skills are observed in He and Chiangs' study (2016), when international students in China have to interact with their instructors and English as a lingua franca becomes challenging. Of course, such implications might change based on the context of each country, the target group and the background of participants. As Liimatainen et al. (2022) discuss, ethnicity, history and coloniality have affected how people perceive world Englishes and categorize the different language varieties. Terms such as native language, second language, and foreign language might carry negative connotations in terms of the view of standard English and the distinctions between British and American accents. Based on Kachru's model (1982) firstly British and secondly American English have become more powerful and prestigious linguistically because of their nativeness and this is something that new generations should deconstruct (Xiaoqiong & Xianxing, 2011). Noteworthy is that scholars (Crystal, 2003) acknowledge that Nordic countries and especially in the Finnish context, speakers consider to be good at English comparing to other countries (Liimatainen et al., 2022). However, the notion that speakers of EL2 make "common errors" as Wolf et al. (2009) explain, distinguishes Englishes into specific groups based on L2 varieties and norms that increase self-doubt and promote British and American English as the dominant English version (pp. 11-12). The linguistic/language barriers might affect students' motivation and performance (Dörnyei, 2005), thus, I find it important to investigate how participants of this thesis perceive the fact that they use English as a second language during their group sessions. In other words, I want to observe how participants experience group communication and whether the role of English as a lingua franca is relevant in their interaction and self-evaluation process.

Thus far, the theoretical framework has defined and distinguished the meaning behind the terms "group" and "team". In addition, this section has argued aspects relevant to this thesis such as learning in groups, communication, diversity and background and English as a lingua franca. The structure, characteristics and composition of groups has also been examined by reviewing previous and recent years' literature. Since I want to observe the way participants of this study interacted and experienced working in groups, I believe that the dual interview guide I designed will help me identify the dynamic and relationship participants developed when they communicated in their groups. At the same time, I aim that the interviews I conducted will help me to better understand the different aspects participants drew on when evaluating themselves while I examine their individual perspectives and feelings.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Qualitative Research Design

This section is focused on the methodology and methods I used for this study. As I briefly discussed in the introduction, my goal is to firstly give students the chance to express their inner thoughts and secondly, help them understand their peers' and their own behavior. Qualitative methodology is used to analyze what people do and how they perceive their actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The sense-making process that participants go through by sharing their experiences is what makes this research qualitative. One of the most acknowledged characteristics of qualitative research is reporting the actions or words of participants. In other words, researchers are interested in finding out why and how participants act (Mantzoukas, 2007). As Galanis (2018) notes understanding, interpreting and searching are key words when analyzing qualitative data. Hence, I find that a qualitative approach fits my research goals, as I want to see how students interact in a group setting and interpret their group communication experiences.

Qualitative research design as Byrne (2016) states has a plethora of decisions and concepts that the researcher needs to define. A primary distinction between inductive and deductive approach of methodology is part of the research design (Court et al., 2018; Hennink et al., 2020). Scholars usually use the term "philosophy of research" when they want to present the concepts of methodology such as ontology and epistemology (Byrne, 2016, p. 4). The complexity of qualitative approaches and theories have indeed been acknowledged by Byrne (2016) and that is why he tries to categorize the basic terminology that is related to the research practices. In general, orienting the methods and the theoretical framework helps researchers to clarify and understand the approach and steps they will follow. The

theoretical background, the data methods collected and the ways the researcher interprets these data are the main parts of this puzzle (Flick, 2007). Other than that, the paradigms that researchers draw on, explain the philosophical position of their methodology and their standpoint. As a fact, approaching each aspect of your research plan differently can lead the outcomes and findings in a different direction. For instance, if I chose to proceed with a content analysis instead of a thematic analysis, the analysis process and my study results would be different.

Defining the methodological framework that I represent as a researcher is an essential point in this study. Approaching individual and group interviews under the lens of “social constructivism” is a way of linking participants’ experiences with their perspectives, beliefs and understandings (Flick, 2022, p. 8). Another way to say this is that this constructivist epistemology enables participants to formulate their understanding through their experiences and therefore, construct personalized and contextualized research (Court et al, 2018). Hence, the research methods I utilized and consequently the research questions I designed are interpreting participants' world from a socially constructed perspective (Flick, 2007). In addition, as Seale et al. (2004) suggest, when analyzing data researchers can use different types of interpreting the data such as a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data. In my case, I believe that the group interviews facilitated the second part with the individual interviews because information gathered during the group interviews helped me understand participants’ views and stories deeper. This illustrates how I have combined semi-structured group interviews and individual interviews.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Data collection process

The data collection process began when I started thinking about the profile and the characteristics, I imagined potential participants would have. I knew that I wanted to approach university students, a group of people that I can relate with. As Court et al. (2018) explain, qualitative researchers may sometimes be in the same position as their participants. As a consequence, it is possible that researchers' personalities and background will impact the way the data will be conducted and thus, the data analysis process. The position of researchers is extremely important and a sensitive issue to approach especially in my case, due to the lack of experience in interviewing. I am aware that my position as an international student made me choose a similar target group with possibly common and relatable experiences in group work assignments.

It is important to note here, that I decided to use the the term "group interviews" instead of "focus groups" when describing the method I followed because firstly I believe that my role as a researcher and a "moderator" was not strong enough as relevant literature suggests (Barbour, 2018, p. 2). However, I relied my thesis on literature on focus groups due to the fact that it is interconnected with the theoretical framework of my study which is focused on group communication. Participation of this study was voluntarily and it required that participants are English user speakers who studied in a higher education institution. Interviews were organized in two parts; four group interviews and seven individual interviews. The four groups I interviewed separately were randomly formed by the teacher of the class at

the beginning of the course. The selection of the interviewees happened in late October 2022, when I introduced my research interest to potential participants of a mid-size university in Finland. Based on the course syllabus students had to complete five group sessions in order to submit five group assignments, one for each session. I chose to do group interviews because I wanted to observe members' interaction and interpersonal communication. Initially, I wanted to interview participants individually, however later I decided to divide the interview process into two parts. I chose to combine both group and individual interviews because I wanted to get an inside of the group perspective and a more in-depth viewpoint of the individual experiences of some members. By conducting group interviews my role was to rely on meanings created through interactions among participants (Barbour, 2018). Consistently, during the group interviews, participants were commenting on each other's replies and opinions and they were taking a stance by agreeing, disagreeing or adding their own examples and sharing their experiences. Group interviews helped me observe the dynamic of each group and understand to some extent the relationship participants have developed. At the same time, I believe that discussing with each member individually has helped me get a detailed and more in-depth understanding of their own personalities, background and perception towards this experience. Research has shown (Bryman, 2016) that semi-structured interviewing allows the researcher to have more flexibility during the process. This method, as we will see, is not so strict on guiding the outcomes of the interview.

After the completion of the group interviews, I read the data and chose one or two members from each group from whom I would like to investigate further points they had raised during the group interviews. Therefore, having in mind what I want to examine, I chose participants who mentioned aspects of relevance to my research questions during the group interviews. For this reason, in the second part of individual interviews, I selected members who were open to share their personal stories, experiences and feelings during the first part of group interviews. Thus, the fact that I interviewed some of the participants twice; the first time in a group setting and the second time individually, helped me deepen my understanding of their perspectives. Based on group members' input and answers, I created a personalized interview guide for the seven participants individually. As I will further explain in the following subsection, this strategy helped me formed interview questions tailored down to each subject independently. One of the assets of this part, was that individual interviews gave me the opportunity to create closer and deeper relationships with participants. According to literature, the answers participants provide during individual interviews can be more authentic than when they participate in group interviews (Chrzanowska, 2002). Last but not least, completing one-to-one interview sessions, gave me the opportunity to get an inside of a non-group dynamic

setting, due to the fact that participants' peers were absent in the second part of my data collection process.

Table 1 Group Interviews (November, 2022) - Part 1

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Group (a) Duration: 23' | Group (b) Duration: 21' | Group (c) Duration: 41' | Group (d) Duration: 57' |
| Participants present: 5/5 members | Participants present: 4/5 members | Participants present: 5/5 members | Participants present: 4/5 members |

Table 2 Individual Interviews (December, 2022) - Part 2

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Participant 1 (from group a), duration: 40' | Participant 6 (from group b), duration: 73' | Participant 11 (from group c), duration: 35' | Participant 16 (from group d) duration: 72' |
| Participant 4, (from group a), duration: 32' | | Participant 13,(from group c), duration: 53' | Participant 18 (from group d), duration: 47' |

3.2.2 Designing the interviews

Having a structured and clear plan and sequence is a necessity as Galanis (2018) argues. That is why I created a research plan during every stage of my study. Planning, conducting and completing an interview can be challenging since it requires many elements such as being descriptive, specific and precised during the discussion with participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). For this reason, the interview questions the interviewer designs reflect not only the relationship that the interviewer and the interviewee construct but also the knowledge they exchange. Structuring the interview in advance can be beneficial for the analysis that will happen later. Having clear topics or themes beforehand can help the researcher to categorize the codes easier which based on Proudfoot (2023) is a deductive approach of data analysis. However, as I will further explain in the analysis section, when I did the coding of analysis I followed an inductive approach. Therefore, a hybrid thematic analysis was used mutually in order to address deductively; pre-structued themes data driven and inductively; code data driven. The way I decided to structure the interviews in the first place was by creating a diagram (see appendix A) which included the aspects I would be interested in investigating and learning more about. Knowing what you want to study and how is a necessity according to qualitative researchers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Roberts, 2020; Proudfoot, 2023). Implementing a deduc-

tive approach before the data collection process, helped me structure my interview guide and narrow down what I want to investigate. That is why, after finalizing the most important themes that are related to my topic, I contacted the groups and prepared my interview questions based on the potential themes of our discussion. As scholars like Brinkmann (2013) and Hollingshead and Poole (2011) explain, preparation is a key element when conducting interviews because it helps researchers to have a clear framework before starting the interview. Having a “predetermined agenda” or an “interview guide” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 46; Pratt & Kim, 2011, pp. 18-19) was indeed beneficial and helped me being prepared during the interview. In contrast, as Seale (2007), suggests it is also important to follow the discussion flow.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) suggests many ways that aim to help researchers correctly interpret participants’ answers such as clarifying by repeating or summarizing what they have already said. Interpreting what participants are saying is one of the hardest parts of the interview in my opinion because it requires a very cautious approach from the researcher. During the interviews, I also applied this practice by paraphrasing what participants were explaining. I believe that interpreting can be a challenging part of the interview and data analysis process since researchers’ positioning and background can negatively or positively affect the research process as Miller and Boivin (2022) note. Also, in cases where I wanted to make sure that I understood what the participants meant, I used clarifying questions like “do you mean that..., so from what you are saying I understand that you felt...”. Impementing the abovementioned practices can secure mutual understanding between the interviewer and the interviewee as Kvale (2007) explains.

Another responsibility that interviewers have, is to make sure that they are getting involved in the process by being active listeners (Seale, 2007). As Roberts (2020) points out, the purpose of the interview is not to provide answers to the research questions but to understand the story the participants tell and the ways they have connected each part of the story. In addition, I consider relevant to mention that several of external factors can affect the discussion process such as the interview space and environment (Seale, 2007). That is the reason I chose to interview students in a quiet and private area such as the library’s study rooms and the university’s classes. In case the participants chose to be interviewed online, it seemed that they were all alone in their own private space.

Participants were interviewed twice in two different timelines; the former during the middle and the latter at the end of the group work sessions. Noteworthy is the big interest that I have received from my potential research participants because it helped me as a researcher to collect a satisfactory sample of data. As you have seen in the tables 1 and 2 of the data collection process subsection, I con-

ducted four groups to collect a good sample of data and seven members of these groups for the individual interviews. In the beginning of the interviews, I made sure to remind the participants of the main topic, purpose of the discussion, and repeat the confidentiality rules, their rights and ask for their permission before starting the recording.

The first part began with four group interviews in the middle of November in 2022, during the last week of the group sessions. After two weeks, I continued with the individual interviews. For this part, I based my interview questions on participants' answers during the group interview. This means I quoted their own words from the data I collected during the group interviews to clarify specific aspects and get a deeper understanding of specific topics and aspects from them. Moreover, I rephrased some of their classmates' opinions to get their own perspective and stance on certain topics. In total, six out of eleven interviews were recorded face to face using a voice recorder provided from the university's department and four recorded online using the university's credentials on Zoom. Interviews were transcribed from December until June without using any software.

3.2.3 Research Ethics and Confidentiality

Regarding the ethical concerns I had as a researcher, I had to follow a series of steps and procedures to ensure that participants will feel safe and comfortable participating in this research. To start with, I planned the timing of the first and second part of group and individual interviews in light of the syllabus of the course which described the group work assignments students had to complete and the timeline of the lectures/tasks.

During the first meeting I had with my potential participants, I explained the purpose and presented my thesis topic to ensure that students are interested in supporting my research. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) explain, ethical concerns are unpacked in many research phases starting from the topic researchers are investigating. To be more specific, Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) state that the idea behind that topic should also be valuable for the development and enhancement of the participants who are involved. Another aspect I highlighted to participants before I began the data collection was the fact that participation was voluntarily and students had the right to withdraw or cancel their participation at any stage of this process. Informing participants about research confidentiality and their rights is one of the most important principles a researcher should follow (Court et al., 2018). Moreover, as I informed them and also noted in the privacy notice document I prepared, participants' identities were pseudonymized and their personal data were protected. During the interviews and before I started recording, I reminded all par-

ticipants that if any question made them feel uncomfortable, they had the right to skip it and not answer. By making this disclaimer, I wanted to make them feel relaxed in case they were anxious about giving the “right” answers or sharing things they did not feel comfortable with. Considering participants’ feelings during the interview is a point Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) find necessary after the stage of designing the interviews. Similarly, as they discuss, when transcribing and analyzing the data, researchers should be conscious when handling interviewees’ answers.

Regarding the protection of the data, I followed the data management plan that I created before the beginning of the data collection process. Since my study includes personal data and indirect identifiers such as participants' mother tongue, education status and nationality, I pseudonymized and stored the data in a safe drive which was protected by a secure password. Following my data management plan and as I stated in the research notification document I shared with participants, I used only the minimum amount of data to accomplish my research. Other than that, communication with participants was through email and after the completion of the study, I securely destroyed any documents, emails, data that I collected by using duly software. Before the interviews began, I received participants’ verbal consent and gave to all of them the written consent forms, the privacy notice and the research notification documents in order to start properly the data collection process.

3.2.4 Expectations and my own motivation

The current thesis topic was in my mind for a long time, but has changed as it is expected before finalizing the idea. I remember submitting my very first research proposal during the admissions period in January 2021, before I even got accepted to the LAGIC Programme. Back then, the main focus of my proposal was about group work and conflicts. I believe that the idea came because of my general interest in the field of education and communication. My background in education as a primary education teacher and my curiosity to learn more about students’ interactions, feelings, thoughts and experiences in higher education institutions led me to this topic of interest.

Firstly, as a student, who has experienced group working in all levels of education and secondly as a teacher that has used this method, I wanted to further investigate this concept from the students’ points of view. According to the positive feedback I got after the completion of interviews, my participants found both methods I used to support their reflection. Luckily, this study helped them realize things they did not think about or pay attention to, before participating in the interview.

I hope that the structure of the interviews and the topics we discussed, encouraged them to evaluate their experiences from a different perspective. As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, I aim that students will understand their group members' approach and behavior and that they will share their opinions freely. I wish that the interview process was a great chance for all participants to connect in a deeper level not only with their peers but with themselves as well.

3.3 Analysis

3.4 Data Analysis Process

Proceeding with a dual data collection method and combining group interviews with individual interviews helped me focus on how words are used by and between members. In other words, I want to observe how participants draw on their previous experiences and background in order to co-construct meanings such as intercultural communication, during the group interviews (Graneheim et al., 2017). After the completion of the data collection, I transcribed each interview and then I conducted a thematic analysis since I aim to identify various themes participants brought up. By coding each transcript separately and then comparing them all together, I aimed to identify some main overarching themes. Through the analysis and coding process I followed, I wanted to highlight the dynamic of each group and the ways they chose to communicate during their weekly sessions in order to examine participants' experiences. For this reason, I grouped the codes that showed the ways participants interacted and how communication was functioning in the group setting, for which purposes and why. Likewise, I identified the codes which displayed the criteria and characteristics participants considered relevant when they were evaluating their perceived academic performance. Based on the grouped codes I collected, I created the corresponding four themes which helped me answer my research questions as I will analyze in the findings section. Two of the qualitative research elements are interpreting and understanding of participants' experiences (Galanis, 2018). This means that researchers need to proceed to the analysis and carefully conceptualize their stance in order to answer the research questions of their study. Identifying for example the codes and themes presuppose that the researcher has fully comprehended and analyzed the data. During this process, I familiarized myself with the data by re-hearing and re reading the interviews and creating an "open coding" report before finalizing the codes and proceeding with the theme's classification and categoriza-

tion (Galani, 2018, p. 417). I started this process with the group interviews before moving on to the individual interviews. More specifically, after the “open coding” phase, I grouped the notes I had and found the common and repetitive patterns in the codes. According to Flick (2018), the first layer of the analysis begins with the experience that each participant or a group of participants bring. From these experiences, the researcher needs to find out connected layers such as their story lives, the ways they handle communication with others and their interactions.

The current research follows a combination of inductive and deductive analysis method, called the “hybrid approach” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 81). This means, that during the process of thematic analysis, I coded data using the open coding method in relation to the diagram (see appendix A) I developed when I was preparing my interview questions. Mapping the data into categories forces the researcher to go through the collected data and search for patterns that will be coded and defined (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). To be more specific, I had in mind during the “compiling phase” the first step of my analysis, the categories I created and the main concepts I have read from previous literature concerning the method of working in groups (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). After that, when I proceeded to the coding phase and I created the themes, I followed a data-driven approach to identify new phenomena that answered my research questions (Court et al., 2018). Having discussed the ways and methods I utilized when analyzing the data I collected, I will proceed to the findings section to present the main themes I identified that helped me answer my research questions.

4 FINDINGS

The first research question addressed the matter of how students experience group communication. A criterion for participants' selection and an important element of this study, is that participants used English as a Lingua Franca in the classroom setting and therefore, within the group. In practice, this means participants used English during their group meetings since it was the study language of the course and consequently a shared language for everyone. The following four themes; interpersonal level of communication, the role of English in the group setting, evaluation of self-involvement in the group setting, and evaluation of English competence capture the outcomes of the patterns I identified during the analysis process.

As Mantzoukas (2007) notes, qualitative approach focuses on how participants' experience and perceive things and therefore, researcher's role is to interpret and understand participants' point of view. The thematic map (figure 1 below) I created illustrates the ways participants made sense of the communicative aspects of their group work experience and evaluated themselves. The line of the Thematic map (Figure 1) indicate ways in which themes are interrelated to one another. More specifically, the interpersonal level of communication in addition to the role of English in the group setting, raises the curiosity for the second research question which is focused on how students evaluate themselves and their group performance. Therefore, the first two themes provide answers to the first research question whereas the other two themes, are linked to the second research question. Although, as I will further discuss in this section, each theme is not interrelated only with the research questions, but also with one another.

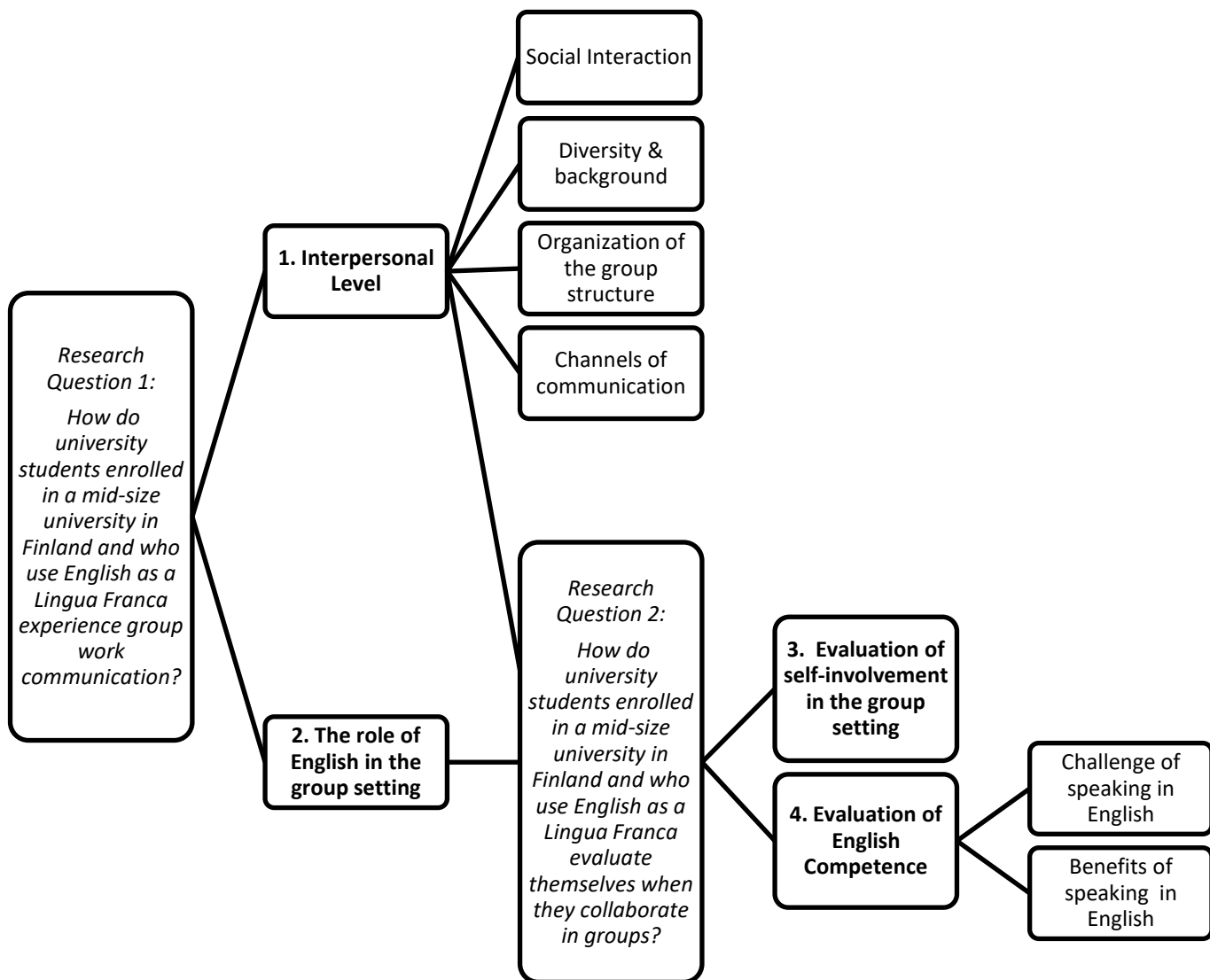


Figure 1 Thematic map showing connections between themes and research questions

4.1 Interpersonal level

The theme ‘interpersonal level’ reveals the first aspect of communication experience that I will discuss and represents the characteristics of interpersonal relations that members have established during their weekly meetings. This theme is a general umbrella that includes four more sub-themes based on the analysis of participants’ answers. (a) Social interaction, (b) diversity and background, (c) organization of the group structure and (d) channels of communication, are the main categories of the communicative aspect participants found important. Findings illustrate how sub-themes are linked to one another and how participants made sense and connected each of the four phenomena, by drawing on their personal experiences. The extent

that participants understood and experienced communication has many dimensions which show how interrelated are the sub-themes of 'interpersonal level'.

4.1.1 Social Interaction

As we will see in this section, participants described group communication by providing numerous examples and characteristics that show what they understood an efficient and positive working environment to be. Participant 3 (group A, group interview) explained that during the group's weekly discussions, members were talking one by one, giving space to one another and did not interrupt each other during their group meetings. Participant 5, who was in the same group, explained that the communication behaviour that members of group A adopted made them have positive feelings and create a "respectful, fun and interesting" experience (Participant 5, group A, group interview). Both, participants 3 and 5 experienced how working in a group can be a respectful environment. According to their descriptions, participating in this group gave them the chance to communicate freely and to interact in a great atmosphere. Likewise, during the group interview, the rest of the members agreed and seemed happy and satisfied about this attainment. Participants from group A found their communication practices to be efficient something that positively affected peers interaction. This linked relationship between communication and members' interaction is a common phenomenon observed in Payne et al. (2006) study, where students highlighted the importance of communication skills and how the quality of communication affects the interpersonal level of group outcomes and interaction.

Another example of an efficient group work environment was provided by participant 18, from group D: "I feel comfortable with them and otherwise I'm very silent person, so I think group work makes even the silent person speak and add their ideas freely. Yeah that's my personal experience" (Participant 18, Group D, individual interview). Here, this participant expressed views that illustrate how collaboration and interaction with their peers, helped them overcome their shyness and become more talkative which means that they felt comfortable expressing their thoughts. Hence, it seems that participant 18 felt safe to contribute and engage in the group discussions despite their fear of talking and the fact that they self-identified as shy and silent. The comfortable environment members of group D had established made this person more willing to talk. Also, based on the fact that as a silent person this member was more talkative than usual during the group discussions, participant 18 came to the conclusion that group work pushes students to "open up".

One more aspect that the participants 15 and 17 highlighted is the fact that group discussion was an opportunity for everyone to participate without the

need or pressure to agree with each other. Interestingly, Group D, managed to “agree to disagree,” which means that they were all feeling “comfortable enough” to share their point of view without any hesitation or fear (Participant 15, group D, group interview). Through communication, group members of group D, gained freedom and felt accepted by constructing a safe group environment. Interpreting what participants shared, the way they interacted created an equal relationship between the members that helped them debate and dialogue with one another without any obstacles.

Equality was one of the characteristics that participants mentioned during the group interviews. Particularly, as participant 14 (group C) said, talking and expressing their opinions freely was a key factor and the main point of this group work assignment since active participation and discussion during the group sessions was an important requirement of the successful completion of the assignment they had to submit. More specifically, equal participation allowed everyone in the group to talk without worrying whose turn was or if they will have silent moments. As participant 14 (group C) said: “...yes I feel like we are all equal and that everyone can share what they think, there is no like someone who speaks first, or someone who doesn’t speak at all, we are all equal...” (group C, group interview). In addition this member stated that interacting in a diverse environment is the reason the groups were randomly formed in this course by the teacher. As participant 14 clarified: “...I mean it, it also because, you, you have to meet other people and to like face other point, points of view...” (group C, group interview). In other words, participant 14, claimed that since these sessions intended to bring students together and embrace communication about certain topics, on purpose group members were distributed randomly. Therefore, the groups were formed with members from diverse backgrounds with different perspectives which aligned with the aims of the group assignment. Diversity is the second sub-theme we will analyze during the next section. However, we can see how participants pondered on various elements such as meeting new people and exchanging ideas when they analyzed the phenomenon of social interaction and communication in their groups.

Another example of social interaction in the group setting came up when I asked students to describe their overall group work experience. In group B, one of the members explained that working in groups can be challenging but another student added a positive aspect and compared university group work experience with high school experience. More specifically, for this participant these group meetings were “more serious,” (participant 8, group B, group interview) than they used to be in the school based on their experience. On the same note, members’ effort and motivation made the whole experience easier as they claimed. Namely, participant 8 said: “But I also think everyone is really motivated and serious, so that also makes

the group work for example easier compare to group works at high school, so everyone is really putting effort in it so yeah" (group B, group interview). This can imply that participant 8 perceived that their peers will be more focused on their studies and were more willing to contribute actively when they collaborated in a group setting. Based on participant's 8 previous group experiences, increased motivation in addition to the serious attitude participants of group B showed due to the fact that they were in a higher education institution were the reasons why their peers interacted and behaved in a more mature way than students used to act in high school.

When discussing and reflecting on how individuals contributed to and felt in the group, similar communication skills like not talking on top of each other and active listening were mentioned by two of the four groups and during the individual interviews as well. This shows how important it was for participants to have respectful and equal space of communication. As participant 11, analyzed during the individual interview more in-depth, respecting each other's opinion, letting everyone speak and giving space to each other helped participant 11, (group C) feel accepted and comfortable in the group setting. The following quote explains how a successful engagement in a group discussion can affect members' feelings and contribution.

"Yes, because they were not really like overlapping, like for example when one group member is talking everyone just listened to this person, so which was really like more comfortable for me" (Participant 11, Group C, Individual Interview).

4.1.2 Diversity and background

In general most of the group members shared that they tried to create a respectful and safe environment where everyone felt included, comfortable speaking and participating. Another aspect that was repeatedly acknowledged by participants during the interviews was the concept of diversity. Whether participants were discussing the purpose of the group sessions, the overall group work experience, the fact that they were exchanging knowledge, opinions, perspectives and different points of view, diversity and participants' backgrounds were common themes that every group emphasized. As we will see below, social interaction and diversity in the group setting goes hand in hand with communication. In other words, participants felt that they had the chance to connect and create something new together during their weekly meetings. The meaning of "togetherness" in this setting becomes relevant and highly valuable for participants through communication.

Participant 11, (group C) during the group interview, highlighted that collaboration in a multicultural environment can be interesting and unique for three reasons. Firstly, according to participant 11 (group C), group work, gave students

the opportunity to learn from each other by exchanging their ideas and knowledge. Secondly, working in a group where members had diverse backgrounds was a new experience for this member and therefore different because in their home country they were not exposed in diverse perspectives. Thirdly, participant 11 (group C) found it interesting when members were connecting their experiences to the reading materials in order to complete the task. Likewise, during the individual interview participant 11 (group C) had the chance to reflect on their personal experiences and compare them with this course's group work experience. To be more specific, participant 11 (group C, individual interview) said that "... we don't have like diverse people from different cultural backgrounds and my knowledge and ways of thinking were very limited when I was in my home country, but once I came here and joined group work with lots of student from different cultural background like my world is expanding every time...". Participant 11 in this quote has defined and associated diversity in terms of the different cultural and national backgrounds group members had. Based on participant's 11th personal experiences, we could see that this person had not been interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds before. Therefore, it can be interpreted that participating in groups with peers from different countries, nationalities, cultures and social backgrounds can be a unique phenomenon for some members who experienced for the first time in that university, collaborative working under these multicultural conditions. How participants defined, interpreted and valued diversity seemed to be very subjective since it was shaped from their previous experiences. Also working and collaborating with peers who had multiple cultural backgrounds can be considered as an opportunity for personal growth and learning, as participant 11 (group C) expressed, because as participant perceived working in a multicultural environment to broaden their horizons and knowledge.

We can see that the individual interviews supported and enhanced specific aspects participants highlighted during the group interviews and helped interviewees ponder on their beliefs. To sum up, communication with people from different national and cultural backgrounds was a unique experience for someone who had only been collaborating with peers from their own culture. Similarly, Participant 11 (group C), shared in the individual interview how the experience of group working can be "different" when students are working in diverse environments and the positive impact that this had on a personal and educational level. The usage of the word "different" was repeated a lot during the data collection process. It can be interpreted that the word different is used to describe the diversity of educational, personal and cultural background of the group members. As Miller and Boivin (2022) explain, the ways humans define diversity depends on the context they live in and

that is why participants experienced diversity in a different way based on the setting and context they were part of.

As Participant 12 (group C, group interview) explained, finding common ground and compromise to collaborate with each other is part of the group process. Likewise, the connection between the lectures, the reading material and the group discussions were expected to be analyzed in the group assignment members produced. Working in groups, seems to improve their decision-making and learning ability, something that is also supported in literature (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012; Osman et al., 2011). Hence, storytelling had a significant role in the group discussions and developed their communication and interpersonal skills “we have to find our own perspective in the middle” (Participant 12, group C). As Ma et al. (2017) pointed out, implementing storytelling in collaborative group activities, affects the communicative competence of students. What we can observe in this quote is that compromising and negotiating were essential aspects in group communication. Like participant 12 (group C) said, “...we have to make a bridge between the classroom and the articles...”. Bridging in this context had a dual meaning; on the one hand, they had to connect the lecture materials to the readings and group discussion, but also as participant 12 said: “...we have to connect it with our personal experiences and our subjective opinions”. This connection point was feasible because group members were finding a middle point when deciding how to link their diverse opinions, ideas and experiences to the reading materials in order to express a shared viewpoint and create a “new synthesis” according to participant 12 (group C).

Active listening was mentioned again by Participant 13 (group C) as an efficient skill and a useful practice that members followed. Having broad and extended discussions, in the group setting, while comparing their different ideas, opinions, experiences and perceptions was interesting like participant 13 explained, “Yeah, it is interesting because all of us are from different countries, and we can say some examples related to our country and sometimes our discussion is like become broader and broader” (participant 13, group C, group interview). This was the biggest advantage according to participant 13, of working with people from different countries, who had different experiences, examples and stories to share. Furthermore, cultural and national background were relevant to this participant and thus demonstrated how they perceived the idea of diversity in this setting.

Following on, participant 14 who was in group C like the previous interviewee, shared in the group interview that the meaning, purpose and main point of the group meetings was for students/participants of that course to see how differently their peers could read, understand and interpret the assigned readings. More specifically, participant 14 quoted: “I think it’s very interesting when we start to talk about our different point of views and how differently we see something, or how

differently we read a certain article, or something like that and I really enjoy it". Thus, the way the groups were composed and structured, in relation to the tasks and the reading material, made participants 12, 13 and 14 (group C) enjoy the sessions and feel fruitful. The fact that members from various backgrounds and fields of studies came together and discussed their experiences seemed to be interesting for participants.

Along with the feeling of belonging that the groups managed to create, participants 18 (group D, individual interview) and 11 & 13 (Group C, individual interviews) compared the current course's group experience with other group work experiences or situations. The concept of culture was a common aspect that participants referred to when they compared this group's work experience with previous experiences or when they wanted to emphasize the diverse backgrounds that each member had. Specifically, Participant 18 (group D, individual interview) compared group work with individual work and shared their preference towards group working. This student stressed that collaborating with students with diverse backgrounds and cultures can help individuals get another perspective. When describing the role of culture in the group, this participant mostly reflected on the diverse cultural background that members in a group can have. Participant 18 (group D, individual interview), also noted that members' background can be constructed by the ways individuals have grown. Hence, participants' social, national and cultural background was perceived to affect their perspectives and ideologies and consequently shaped the stories they shared and the topics they discussed. It can be interpreted that the different perspectives of group participants influenced the group discussion and therefore, the overall group experience. Participants' perspectives seemed to be relevant also when they compared individual group work with group assignments. As pointed out by Mustafa et al. (2013) who studied how Malaysian undergraduate students of a public university perceived group work, most of the participants from that study shared that working in groups is a way to share the workload, engage and actively participate in the discussions. In addition, more than half of the respondents of that study, expressed that they were more satisfied from the results of the assignments they did in groups than with the tasks they did alone. We had a similar discussion with participant 18 (Group D, group interview) about individual and group assignments:

"...I think it's better than individual assessments because in individual assessment we come up with our own idea, it's my perspective, only my perspective and what we find from uh the other resources, that's all and in this group work we come up with different perspectives, from different people, different students who grew up in different backgrounds and different cultures" (Participant 18, group D, group interview). Diversity in this case was defined as the national and cultural background of

participants in relation to their character. Participant 18 here, drew on the positive aspects of working in groups with peers who had diverse perspectives and backgrounds, something that they perceived as an advantage comparing to working and studying alone.

Finally, participant 13 (group C, individual interview) compared the positive feelings they had, like admiration and joy during the sessions with a previous group work experience. Efficient communication, mutual effort, understanding, contribution and active participation were a few characteristics that made this group work experience special according to this member. Productivity is one of the key elements this participant observed, which made this learning experience fulfilling for them. Collaborating with active and hard-working peers, as this participant said, was linked to the fact that during their group meetings, members had extended discussions, which meant that communication was fruitful. For this participant personally, these elements made the group sessions easier to follow and attend, whereas compared to a previous group discussion in another course: "sometimes...we had like silent moment, like everybody had their own stuff and like were not so involved in the discussion." (Participant 13, group C, individual interview). Overall, looking at the themes brought up by participants 11 and 13, of group C, the whole experience of group working and the way members interacted mirrored the interpersonal level of analysis which lead to the sub-themes of diversity and background. To be more specific, group communication displayed in an interpersonal level which showed how peers interacted and how diversity and background was an element they pondered on throughout this experience. In literature, scholars often mention the term interaction when they are referring to the group working method because as Jolliffe (2007) explains, learning in this context functions as a "social activity" (p. 4). The communication practices they have implemented along with members' backgrounds, performance and attitude helped all of the members, since based on participant 13, peers of group C, were learning from each other: "...but here maybe like such combination of people, of different experiences and characters and way of learning that we like, help each other to understand and to, to write..." (Participant 13, group C, individual interview).

To sum up, the role of diversity was brought up in many ways in participants' answers and was interconnected with the way they interacted in general. On the one hand, the topics of participants' discussion and the structure of the course which reinforced group discussions by implementing the group work assignment made the entire process more enjoyable and interesting for most of them. The fact that participants had the opportunity to connect the reading material with the lectures and their experiences was seen as an asset since they could draw on the concepts and theories of the course and study together their perspectives. That is why,

students felt that they had the opportunity to actively participate, learn and grow in what they perceived to be a diverse environment during the group sessions. More specifically, participants of group C shared that sometimes they lost track of time during the meetings because members' engagement in the discussion was so strong. Hence, a variety of communication skills and efficient practices were implemented by participants, that helped some groups not only to interact but also to organize better, as we will see in the following part.

4.1.3 Organization of the group structure

Communicating about the group's organization and the structure that members had to follow could be unplanned or an expectation of group members. Staying on schedule, submitting the weekly assignment, actively participating and getting a good grade were some of the goals that groups had: "...we said from the beginning, when we got the grade, we were like we want a five [highest grade in the Finnish educational system], we wanna work towards this..." (Participant 1, group A, individual interview). In this case, communication helped members express their goals and work towards that together. As Wittenbaum (2011) describes, interacting groups are communicating and working face to face or virtually in order to achieve a common goal. However, as participants of group B explained, they managed to get organized and work towards a common goal spontaneously. More specifically, as participant 9 (group B, group interview) quoted in the extract, preparation for the group task was not something the group discussed beforehand. "I think there is like we haven't like discussed it, but I think there is like an expectation that everyone comes to the meeting prepared so that they have something to give to the assignment, so I think that's a goal, that someone like everyone has something to say" (Participant 9, group B, group interview). According to this quote, members expected that everyone will be well-prepared, active, talking and contributing. Communicating about each member's responsibility in this context was not necessary.

Based on the interview data, implementing practices from earlier group work experience had a dual effect. For some groups, working together, was a beneficial practice, while for others it is a disappointment, as we will see. The quotes show how members tried to structure the group assignment "we wrote our memo the same way" (Participant 1, group A, group interview) and how they handled the situation when they got teacher's feedback: "...we actually had to like do it completely different, so on the second one, we like re-structured the whole format" (Participant 1, group A, group interview). A few members from group A, had a similar group task in another course and received a positive feedback. Therefore, during their first meeting they thought that it would be a good idea to suggest following the same

structure when writing the group assignment in this course as well. However, this method did not go as planned, because the feedback they got for their first group assignment in this course was not the one they expected and this made them feel dissatisfied: “We didn’t feel like it was difficult but then we got a grade that we didn’t expect to get (Participant 1, group A, group interview). Like participants 3 and 4 noted, it was unpleasant but as we will see in the conversation below, they managed to work towards their goal and succeed. This unexpected first session experience, as participants shared, made them re-structure the way they wrote the assignment since the feedback and grade did not match their expectations. In addition, obtaining a high grade was a common goal for everyone in this group. Except from the fact that group A shared a common goal, the dynamic members had was remarkable. Participants were laughing, commenting on each other’s opinions and feeling free to “jump in” into the discussion during the group interview. Generally, a common pattern that I observed throughout the data collection and analysis process was the fact that, members had the chance to interact not only with me as an interviewer, but with each other. They agreed “That’s true. Yeah” (Participant 3); “Yeah, it sounds like... fun” (Participant 5), disagreed as we have seen earlier (Participant 8, group B, group interview), added their own beliefs, exchanged experiences, and shared their perspectives.

Noteworthy is the decision that group A made, in contrast with other groups’ role distribution to avoid setting any specific roles, or the role of secretary, as the teacher recommended: “...that was what the teacher proposed, but we just share a drive, a document drive, so everybody writes” (Participant 2, group A, group interview). As Harris and Sherblom (2018) explain, group norms help students behave according to the rules and values the group has established. Hence, this group agreed to share responsibility and tasks equally as they described: “Yeah, everybody is a secretary” (Participant 3, group A, group interview). Regarding the structural aspect of the assignment, members of group A decided that it was more practical and beneficial to write separately their individual experiences and then connect and complete the task together. Communication about the group norms, for instance the practicalities of the group assignment such as the document's structure and context, was mentioned as an essential element that could change the organizational aspect of the group meetings. According to Felder and Brent (2007), an important characteristic of functioning groups is “positive interdependence” (p. 37) a criterion for efficient cooperative learning, where members rotate roles in order to coordinate the group and maintain members’ responsibilities. The last example I present comes from a student who explained during the group interview how they perceived the role of diversity, members’ background and communication in relation to the structure of the discussions. Participant 17, was aware that their peers

during the group discussions were presenting their own story, opinion and without taking it personally: “I feel like, even if we are in disagreement about something it’s not against the person” (Participant 17, group D, group interview). Also, participant 17, validated the fact that each member in the group had its own upbringing and this contributed to participants’ perspectives and ways of thinking. Likewise, as quoted below, members of group D, understood and considered that not every story or experience must be included in the assignment. Hence, according to the students, this group managed to create a safe space where everyone felt comfortable sharing their stories, experiences and beliefs.

“...sometimes we say: “ok, now I’m talking off record, so please don’t add this to the memo and then we decide together, “ok should we add it, or is it something we’re going to leave out? That’s just something that happens between us, so I think it’s kind of a safe space we have in the group to say “ok, no, I don’t want that to be on the memo, I want you to know, but I don’t want to include it” (Participant 17, group D, group interview). This extract shows the role and positive impact of negotiation and decision-making process in peers’ group communication experience. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) explain, group norms are showing “how we do things together” hence, I had the opportunity to observe how groups were interacting and why, based on the group interviews (p. 35). The reason why I am focusing on the group dynamics of groups A and D is because during the group interviews they pondered more on the roles and norms they established than the rest of the groups.

4.1.4 Channels of communication

In general, all groups used WhatsApp to communicate online when needed for the group assignment. Likewise, they all shared an online document where everyone could write and edit at the same time. As we will see, having a shared document could positively affect members’ participation in the group setting because it was perceived to support equal contribution. Participant 2’s statement showed how a group can manage to structure and communicate to the same degree without feeling that the workload is unbalanced: “we just like share a drive and everybody just writes and everybody can see at the moment what everybody is writing” (Participant 2, group A, group interview). The interconnectivity here of online communication and organizational structure of shared responsibility, roles and tasks is notable. Participants’ preference in choosing a hybrid communication or online channel could also be perceived as strengthening a form of belonging according to Participant 17: “if somebody is not able to be present in person, we try to include them online” (group D, group interview).

Moreover, one member (Participant 9, group B, group interview) also noted how valuable it is to work and discuss in a group setting in person, after social

distancing and Covid-19 Pandemic. As this member said: "...especially after the few couple of years after Covid since we did not have any like group work and the social distancing so now especially it feels good, to see people and work together." This statement highlights how group work was seen as a form of social interaction that was perceived to be important and enjoyable in 2022, due to the restrictions students had during the pandemic.

4.2 The role of English in the group setting

So far, we have seen that participants perceived group work to give them opportunities to develop certain skills and learn by interacting with each other. The role of language and specifically English is an aspect participants stated a lot since communicating in English can be a versatile experience. During group work interviews and individual interviews, participants' opinion about the usage of English varied. The examples below, present how English as Lingua Franca became relevant for participants in the group setting. Overall, I observed that for participants using English as a Lingua Franca to communicate with their peers in the group was:

- Supportive & Connective
- Challenging & limiting

Participant 1 and 2 of group A, explained in the following quote that since they share the same mother tongue, it is possible to use it during the meetings but not about tasks related or group's related matters: "Sometimes, Participant 1 and I speak in our native language...Participant 1 is like more fluent than me in English so, sometimes if I don't know how to uuh, write something or how to express myself I just ask them and they help me" (Participant 2, group A, group interview). We can see how participants categorized themselves or others by referring to perceived English fluency and comparing themselves with their peers. Also, the fact that a few members in the group were better at English than others was perceived to be beneficial since they could support each other according to participants' 1 and 2 experiences. Similarly, research done in pair work of students who speak in L2 during classroom but share the same L1 showed that when learners were talking privately, they switched to L1 in order to clarify and understand the unknown vocabulary and help each other completing the assigned activity/task (Storch & Aldosari, 2010).

Another notable point was that English competence was for some students a primary issue. As Participant 6 (group B) implied, in the quote below, participating in this group work caused mixed feelings. On the one hand, meeting new

people, exchanging opinions and collaborating could be interesting, a similar finding observed in a focus group of Spanish students (Seric & Pranicevic, 2018). However, speaking and doing group work in English could be challenging for international students, because of the language barrier, an issue that is also addressed in literature (Mori, 2000; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

“And for me in my home country we don’t make a lot of group work, so it’s quite challenging here and even more because it’s in English, so yeah it’s difficult but also very interesting because we have the point of view of different person and, and not only my perspective” (Participant 6, group B, group interview). In addition, the fact that this was the first time participant 6 was enrolled in a course which felt that was designed for students with high level of language requirements was also a significant factor for them as we will analyze in the next section of self-evaluation. Thus, speaking in English in this case made the overall group experience harder.

Participants 11th and 13th (group C), had a similar perspective about the usage of English as a common language based on their responses. Speaking and writing in English as members of group C experienced, could be a mixture of both connective and challenging phenomena. Participant 11 (group C) for example felt that the fact that during the meetings, someone could ask for help when they forgot a word, or they could not express themselves was useful: “...when I don’t have English word, everyone helps me...” (group C, group interview). On the same note, talking in English was also a way to connect with one’s peers like participant 14 stressed: “I feel like uuuuhm when you speak English, you find a way to like meet in the middle” (group C, group interview). Likewise, speaking a shared language with your peers as participant 17 explained in the quote, was a way of inclusion and it created a sense of belonging among the members: “...we are a group we’re supposed to work together and if there is some kind of language barrier, we as a group have to overcome it, because I feel like we should include everyone” (participant 17, group C, group interview). As participant 17 analyzed, the purpose and meaning of collaborative work was that everyone supports everyone and together, they dealt or handled any obstacles that might occur like the linguistic barrier.

An example that showed the linguistic challenges that participants experienced was when participant 13 (group C, group interview) expressed that sometimes speaking in English could be more tiring and exhausting than speaking in one’s native language. This happened because thinking in a foreign language could be intense and required concentration according to participant 13 (group C). Even though according to Participant 13 (group C), the rest of the group members were supportive, and by paraphrasing or using non-verbal communication, students could explain what they mean, it could be challenging. Also, Participant 13 (group C) compared speaking in their native language with speaking in English and argued

that speaking in English can be limiting because it was a second language for everyone: "I think that if we will be able to speak in our native language all together, we would have even bigger discussion because you are getting more tired, like faster than in your native language, when you speak more confident and more in general" (group C, group interview). Noteworthy, the impact that speaking in English could have on members' self-confidence due to speakers' lack of fluency was important since it helped me focus on the self-evaluation aspect of my research interest and develop the two themes that were related to this aspect. Literature and research about English native language ideology support that non-native speakers compare English proficiency to the native speakers' level of English performance which causes bad feelings to the not native English speakers (Ferri & Magne, 2021).

Overall, the role of English in the group setting was not experienced in the same manner by all participants. Speaking, writing and reading in English, as I presented, can be a multidimensional phenomenon. Hence, for some students it was a positive aspect, whereas for others a challenge that they had to handle or overcome. In both cases, English fluency affected not only group communication but also how participants perceived themselves as I will further develop in the last theme.

4.3 Evaluation of self-involvement in the group setting

As we will see in the next two themes, how members experienced group work was interrelated with the ways they evaluated themselves. During the individual interviews, I asked questions to understand how satisfied with their group work performance participants were, and if they were not, why. In addition, as students reflected on their involvement in the group, they also proposed ways of improving their attitude and contribution.

Participant 1 (group A, individual interview) for example, was fully satisfied with the group results, its contribution and peers' effort. However, Participant 1 (group A), believed that due to the workload of other courses and self-procrastination, the pre-assignment task and reading process were not as detailed or "in depth" as it could have been. Another participant from the same group, mentioned a similar thing: "...maybe I could have like make more effort and like really revise it more, even after the group works and before uploading it" (Participant 4, group A, individual interview). One thing that this member said they could have done better was the reviewing part before submission. As a result, participant 4, wanted to put more effort into finalizing the assignment before submission, which was something to consider.

Participant 13's (group C, individual interview) evaluation was related to these three aspects; academic reading and writing, speaking and communicating and critically thinking: "I can say that it, it helped me to like, to, to teach myself to write academic text and to read the article fast and like get main points and sometimes like to, even to speak with people, like to share your ideas and to listen to others, like carefully, to try to critically analyze what they say, so it was productive". As we can observe from the quote, this participant felt that they have improved a lot during the current group work experience, a common aspect that Payne et al. (2006) identified as a beneficial practice of student-centered themes in the context of skills development. Additionally, participant 13 (group C, individual interview) felt that they managed to develop communication skills such as speaking, listening, academic reading and writing while at the same time, critically thinking and evaluating the reading materials. However, participant 13 (group C, individual interview), noted that the reading part could have been more detailed and precised: "I would definitely read articles more carefully". Interestingly, participants' reflections of their study progress and overall group performance indicated a few of the criteria they considered relevant when they evaluated themselves. These results showed not only how members evaluated their pre-work tasks but also how they associated their performance with the group discussions and contribution. A connection between the pre-reading and therefore participants' performance was evident as well.

Speaking and contributing more was another common characteristic that participant 1 (group A) and participant 13 (group C) pondered on during the interviews. As participant 13 said: "I would also maybe speak more, because sometimes I was stressed because of my home university, because of a lot of tasks and I was more silent not because I am shy, but just because I feel pressure on like, from a lot of spheres of my life" (group C, individual interview). For that reason, we can see that participants' personal life and everyday struggles can affect to what extent they were taking part in the group discussions. What is more, the fear that this participant had of what others will think was intense. More specifically, when Participant 13 (group C, individual interview) was not active in the group discussion, they were afraid that others will think that this participant was not well-prepared or friendly. We can interpret here, that the fear of judgment or not being good enough was an insecurity that members could experience when they felt that they were not performing well.

In general, we can observe how the background of each student, their individual experiences, their upbringing and their beliefs can impact the way they contributed and participated in the group setting. Figure 2 is based on participant 11 (group C, individual interview) who compared previous group work experience with this one and evaluated themselves in each context.

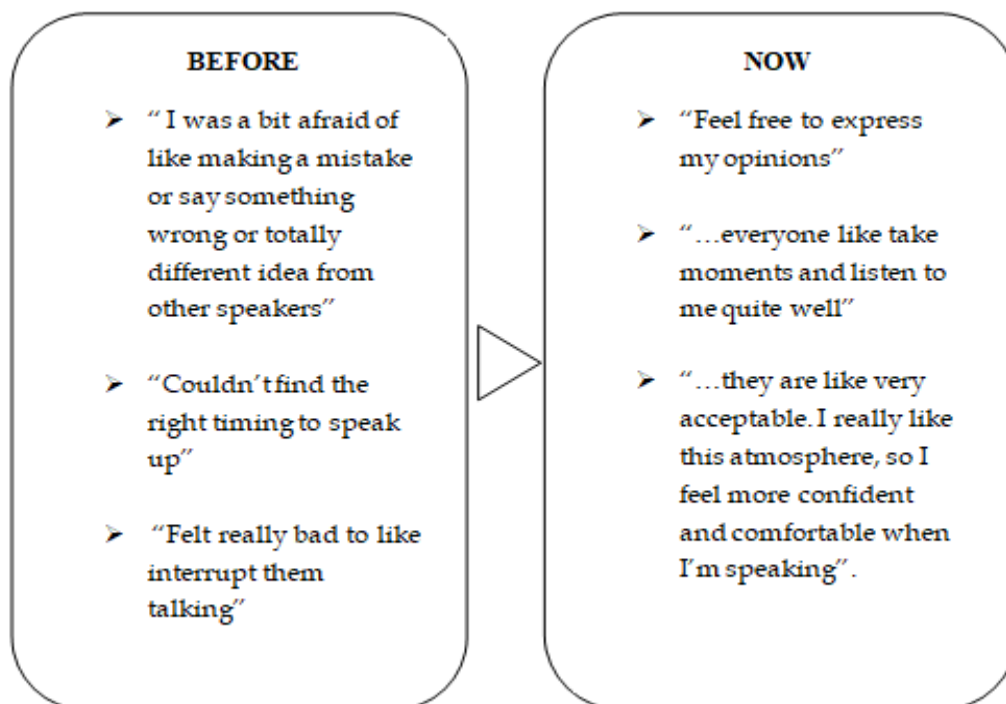


Figure 2 Participant's 11 previous and current group work emotional process regarding communication

During our individual discussions, participants had the chance to reflect on their previous group work experiences. For instance, as figure 2 presents, participant 11 (Group C), realized that before, in previous group work experiences, fear of rejection and low self-confidence were affecting their level of involvement when collaborating in groups. In other words, this member was hesitating to speak and share their opinions with the group. Additionally, no matter how well-prepared this member felt it was extremely hard for them to participate and contribute actively due to the mindset of not interrupting: "I am not sure if it is a cultural thing but when I was in my home country I was told not to interrupt while people are talking" (group C, individual interview). This member tentatively connected their behavior to the cultural and societal background they were exposed to. Therefore, even if the rest of the group was talking and sharing their perspectives, Participant 11 (group C, individual interview), avoided contributing since interrupting was a sensitive matter for this member. Furthermore, this person explained that they preferred to listen instead of talking: "I am still not sure if it is really nice thing, because listening to other opinion, other's opinion is also important in my opinion" (group C, individual interview). As a result, doubting and negotiating when it was the right time to speak up, made this

person silent. However, as figure 2 shows and participant 11 (group C, individual interview) acknowledged, this improved a lot during this course's group work experience. A recent study conducted by Aoyama and Takahashi (2020) in international students' willingness to communicate, showed that the time and period that students spend using English impacts their willingness. Likewise, results indicated that L2 self-confidence is interrelated and correlated by students' willingness to communicate. Therefore, the more confident students are, the more comfortable they feel to speak with their peers. The atmosphere in group C made participant 11 feel comfortable and confident to talk, thus, we can interpret that peers' attitude and stance can possibly affect participant's behavior as well.

Another participant who experienced dissatisfaction with their self-involvement in the group explained that the barrier of language and academic reading was the reason this member could not follow the group discussion. More specifically, participant 6 shared that they were happy with how the group performed but not quite content with their own contribution: "As a group yes, but me, I don't think so, because yeah, it was difficult to really well understand the, all the text and after to answer correctly to the question and speaking about them correctly with my group" (group B, individual interview).

A commonality that participants 11 (group C, individual interview), 13 (group C, individual interview) and 6 (group B, individual interview) had, was that they expressed how uncomfortable it was for them to share their perspectives because they were afraid to make mistakes. In particular, participant 6 (group B, individual interview) shared that "I think I could have given more, but because I was always saying my agreement about what another person said...but if I had to bring a new idea it was difficult and not comfortable for me, because I didn't know if I, if it's a good idea or if it's the, what the author wanted to say or" (group C, individual interview). That being the case, participant 6 (group B, individual interview) felt insecure to talk in the group setting and preferred to contribute only when others had a shared opinion with them. Therefore, it was easier to agree with their peers than adding a new point or a unique perspective because of their personal fear of being wrong or making a mistake. A key factor that might have influenced participant's 6 (group B, individual interview) self-confidence would be the fact that members of that group were not familiar with each other. Specifically, participant 6 referred to the relationship they had in the group and realized that discussing "deep subjects" with unknown people or peers whom you did not have a close connection with could be uncomfortable (group B, individual interview).

Participant 18 (group D, individual interview) also explained that they preferred to avoid uncomfortable situations and for this reason they tried to adjust a few characteristics when collaborating in groups: "I would always try to prefer like,

other peoples' styles rather than my own, because yeah, I am not a very well-organized person in my own eyes so" (Participant 18, group D, individual interview). We can see here how this member tried to compromise or blend in a group based on other members' characteristics and working styles. In this case, participant 18 (group D, individual interview), considered and cared about what others think or need, while trying to make everyone feel comfortable. When it comes to the self-involvement evaluation, this person believed that they were speaking a lot and that characteristics could be annoying to others: "I think it's like me, like even I can understand that I'm always speaking! But like normally, normally, not just in the group work, like people always tell me that I speak a lot". Based on the feedback and comments this participant got, participant 18 (group D, individual interview) self-identified as a talkative person and considered that this could be a negative aspect. Namely, participant 18 (group D, individual interview) said: "Yeah yeah I just think that I was more, like that if I could have been more present and more reachable that could have been something and more there for people" (group D, individual interview). Regarding the reflection of participant's 18 performance, this individual observed that being accessible and more communicative are two aspects that could have been improved when interacting with the rest of the group members.

As we have seen previously in the section of social interaction, shyness was one characteristic participant 16 (group D, group interview) brought up as an important aspect of their personalities. When discussing privately with this member, this participant expressed that: "I have to speak more (laughing), I have to open up myself, I am kind of introverted person" (Participant 16, group D, individual interview). This further suggests that participant's 16 (group D, individual interview) reflection and evaluation was related to the self-involvement and interaction in the group setting. It is remarkable how participants have seen the progress of themselves and how the group work has helped them develop personally as well. For instance, participant 16 (group D, individual interview) shared that: "I kind of developed myself, I, now I know without the speaking, I can't have people around me, I must speak up, I must share my ideas and now I try little by little to speak up with other friends, even without, outside group works and I think I, I got that from these group sessions". Not only this participant managed to reflect on their self-performance, but also evaluated their contribution by expressing their thoughts. Hence, we can see how this member began the interview with a perspective of an introverted, shy and silent person who was afraid this characteristic would be perceived to others as a negative aspect and ended up recognizing how valuable it was to interact, communicate and speak with people without holding back. Therefore, we can observe how communication and the theme of social interaction are both interrelated and affecting student's self-idea and perceptions. Based on the basic con-

cepts of face theory Ting Toomey (1998), the meaning of face is a dimension of “self-concept”, in other words, the image that we project to others that is followed by different emotions regarding the situation we are in (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 408).

While some members were satisfied and identified a few aspects or characteristics that could have been improved, others had to overcome intense feelings during the meetings and personal matters. In general, most responses were related to the lack of time and preparation before the group meetings. They mentioned that they needed more time to read or could have put more effort and paid attention to the details instead of skimming the articles. Also, the fear of rejection, making mistakes in relation to what others would think was a common concern I observed some participants had during the individual interviews. Again, the fear and worry of some participants to save, repair or maintain their face becomes relevant in group interaction (Gudykunst, 2005). Even though their peers never showed signals of rejection or criticism, it was a concern that several participants still had to deal with. This observation shows several aspects such as the importance of having one-to-one sessions with participants and the benefit of conducting both group and individual interviews. Proceeding with a dual data collection method gave me the opportunity to further examine and compare how participants interact in each context. Thus far, results have show how peers presence were shaping each others attitude and therefore, feelings and thoughts which had an impact on the ways participants were evaluating themselves in multiple levels such as their participation, contribution and overall involvement in the group.

4.4 Evaluation of English Competence

During participants’ self-evaluations and reflections, lots of aspects were mentioned that were related to the linguistic aspect of the group assignment and the usage of English in the group setting. As I will analyze in this section, participants’ performance and self-evaluation were interconnected to their perspectives towards English. The challenges and benefits of speaking in English were the two main sub-themes that summarize participants’ experiences.

4.4.1 Challenges & Benefits of speaking English

Academic English and expressing oneself in English were two points participants mentioned a few times. This challenge was an obstacle when participants had to discuss in a group and share their thoughts. To begin with, the matter of having different accents in the group was mentioned by participant 16, as a challenging part:

“...sometimes find it difficult to understand their different accent, because I’m not used to the accent the way they talk, that is the only difficulty I found, otherwise everything is good” (group D, individual interview). This quote focuses on the diverse linguistic backgrounds members who use English as a lingua franca can have and the variety of accents and pronunciations they might use. As Wolf et al. (2009) explain the term “world Englishes” is used to describe the diverse forms speakers of EL2 have (p. 2). This is a common phenomenon according to Siemund et al. (2012) due to globalization. Like participant 16 shared, understanding the varieties of Englishes was challenging in a diverse group setting because this person was not familiar hearing and interacting with L2 speakers from different parts of the world who come from different countries and have different mother tongues.

A second central issue that occurred was the limiting English vocabulary for some participants. For instance, participant 11 (Group C, individual interview) said: “yeah, like my English vocabulary is, I have to admit this but, limited”. This quote explains how restrictive in speaking the lack of vocabulary can be. Participant’s 11 wish, was to speak with their peers in everyone’s mother tongue mentioning that this scenario would be ideal: “I sometimes wish I could have a discussion in my native language, or everyone’s mother tongue, so that we can have deeper and greater discussion...” (group C, individual interview). On the other hand, using English as a lingua franca with international students who were not native in English, was a positive aspect according to this participant since it minimized the pressure of speaking perfect or correctly: “...to be honest, I didn’t feel any pressure to like speak correct English or say something proper in English...” (Participant 11, group C, individual interview). However, when this member evaluated their English level, they compared their competence with their peers: “I am sure I study a lot, but maybe it’s not enough comparing to some student for example some student who did their bachelor's degree in English, maybe they have more, a lot more vocabulary in this field, in English, so comparing to those students my effort is not enough, so this is how I rate my English or myself” (Participant 11, group C, individual interview). This quote shows that even though this individual knew that they have been studying and putting effort, comparing to other members’ participation, their effort and contribution, were not considered to be enough.

In an equivalent manner, participant’s 13 (Group C, individual interview), evaluation was related to the lack of vocabulary, missing and forgetting words in English. This member described their feelings and thoughts when this happened. The fear of forgetting a word was something this member mentioned a lot, in addition to the feelings of shyness and stress: “...during the lectures, when there are a lot of people, I have this fear to forget a word and like to begin to panic” (Participant 13, group C, individual interview). Likewise, participant 12 (group C)

was feeling more confident speaking in the sessions with their peers than speaking in the classroom while teacher and other students were present. It seems that it is more likely for students to feel shy, insecure or anxious when speaking in classroom or public environments as Long and Porter (1985) discussed in one of the pedagogical argumentations they present. Specifically, when participant 13 (group C) forgot a word, they shared that they started to panic and wonder if it was better to keep quiet instead of talking. Therefore, we can see how self-doubting and hesitation in addition to fear and stress affected participants' 13 self-confidence. Lastly, when this member evaluated their competence, they referred to the skill of speaking as the most important aspect that needed to be improved: "I feel that I definitely need to improve speaking, speaking and like extend vocabulary because it is the biggest problem" (Participant 13, group C, individual interview). Noteworthy, is the fact that this participant acknowledged how through constant practicing and speaking in everyday life and at the university, their ability of speaking got better and they felt more comfortable at that time comparing to the beginning: "I saw that like, step by step, months by months, it was becoming better and better" (Participant 13, group C, individual interview). In general, we can observe how personal factors such as participants' character and self-concept in relation to external factors such as their environment like the group and classroom setting have shaped their emotional state and experiences of using English as lingua franca.

The same challenge faced participant 6 (group B, individual interview) with the usage of English since their low self-confidence and fear influenced the overall group work experience. Group communication for this member was a struggle due to the advanced vocabulary and level of English that was required in the reading material and the group assignment. Similarly to participant 13 (group C, individual interview), the main struggle was related to the ability of speaking and then reading. This experience was stressful, complicated and challenging for this participant. As the following quote says, on the one hand collaborative working was an interesting experience, whereas on the other hand, it was very demanding: "Every week it was challenging and a bit stressful so yeah. It was not very fun for me to participate to this meeting, it was interesting, but it was very challenging for me and stressful..." (Participant 6, group work B, individual interview). Complimentary, Xue (2015) explains that one of the factors that students have mixed feelings about group work, is based on the lack of English proficiency in speaking and listening in English. Interestingly, when participant 6, shared this personal experience and difficulties about speaking English during the group interview, the rest of the members related and agreed with participant 6, something that was unexpected and at the same time a sad realization for participant 6 as quoted: "so yeah, it's good to know that I am not the only one to be like that but yeah it's, quite sad that we are afraid of

what people could think about us so yeah” (participant 6, Group B, individual interview).

Throughout this struggle of language barrier, participant 6, (group B) was following an English course that helped them with speaking and reading. In addition, translation tools were used in the beginning as they mentioned and implementing useful practices such as taking notes and making bullet points were beneficial. Overall, this member recognized that only through speaking and constant practicing, they would improve. As they explained: “I know that it’s because I, I don’t feel comfortable and I don’t have the confidence to speak English, but I know, I also know that it’s by speaking English that I will improve” (Participant 6, group B, individual interview). Hence, we can see that practicing English by participating in the group sessions, as difficult as it might seemed for participant 6, was an opportunity to practice and long term improve.

During the group work, interviews and individual interviews, participants shared the importance of speaking in English. Practising, connecting, having a shared language in a multicultural environment were a few of the benefits participants noticed. Practicing English was also a good reason and an advantage of this group work task according to participants 7 and 17; “It’s a good practice” (Participant 7, group B, group interview). Likewise, participant 17, was aiming that speaking English in the university and every day life setting would help them improve their language skills: “I came here to speak English and to improve my English, also to improve my everyday English, so uuuh I am pretty comfortable” (Participant 17, group D, group interview).

Like participant 4 (group A, individual interview) described, speaking in English gives people the opportunity to travel and therefore learning English is a helpful tool which was a priority for this member. As participant 4 (group A) shared: “I’ve always been interested in learning languages because I knew it was a really useful language that could bring me outside of the country, so it’s always been really important for me to learn it ...so yeah it’s not really hard for me to speak English and it came naturally in a way” (Participant 4, group A, individual interview). Again, the English course facilitated students reading ability and was a common factor that made participant 4 (group A) feel more comfortable doing the group work in English.

In general, results show that most of the participants whether they faced difficulties or not with the usage of English, they observed that their English competence and skills have been enhanced. As Xue (2013) investigated, group work can positively affect students’ English language skills and more specifically English grammatical competence. To conclude a common pattern that was observed, is the fact that participants compared how group communication would be if all of them were speaking in their native languages. Noteworthy, is the fact that participants

were not focusing only on the obstacles of English speaking but also on the positive aspects and opportunities that this language can offer.

In summary, participants experienced group communication in an interpersonal level while emphasizing on the usage of English as a lingua franca. Furthermore, they evaluated themselves in terms of their overall involvement in the group and in relation to their English competence skills. That is why, for some participants speaking in English was difficult whereas for others it was easy. As I will address in the next section some of the abovementioned results are in agreement with previous studies whereas other differ from earlier findings.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of the thematic analysis I conducted revealed the following themes; the interpersonal level, the role of English in the group setting, the evaluation of English competence and the evaluation of self-involvement in the group setting. These themes have contributed to the understanding of participants' point of view in terms of group work communication, self-evaluation and English as a lingua franca as the Table 3 below presents.

Table 3 Key Findings of the analysis

| Group work communication | English as a Lingua Franca | Self-Evaluation |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal interaction • norms and rules • verbal and non verbal communication • diversity and sociocultural background • previous experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Proficiency • English as an opportunity to practise and enhance their skills • Fear of making mistakes, difficulties in speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and negative academic self -concept • The presence of others • Comparison others VS perceived idea of themselves |

In response to the first research question, I will firstly discuss how university students enrolled in a mid-size university in Finland experience group work communication.

To begin with, comparing the four groups within each other we can observe that even though some of the groups adopted specific norms and rules, interpersonal interaction was functioning in some cases without verbal communication. This observation was remarkably interesting and compliments the explicit and implicit character of group norms as Harris and Sherblom (2018) analyze when defining and explaining the types of group norms. Thus, even though specific norms were communicated withing the group, such as the structure of the weekly assignment, the

roles members will implement and the organization of the reading material, there were moments where verbal communication was not necessary since participants knew what they had to do. It is also important to recognize the individuality of members within the group despite establishing specific norms, roles and common goals. This is not a unique phenomenon according to literature, since as Burton and Dimbleby (1998) explain each individual acts differently based on the type of the group and the “norms and roles of behaviour” they have (p. 101). Based on the group and individual interviews with participants, it was clear that each member had their own personality, behavior and perspective and that sometimes, participants had similar views on certain ideas but clashing positions in other topics during their group sessions as well.

In addition, the theme of diversity and background was also an important characteristic of participants personalities and reflection since they pondered on this aspect repeatedly when describing their group work experience and communication. A common aspect that students observe and find relevant when working with peers from diverse backgrounds is the fact that they have the opportunity to hear different perspectives and ideas (Jahns & Zintl, 2023). Equivalent results have been reported by Rajabzadeh et al. (2022), as two of the main themes identified were related to communication and diversity according to undergraduate students who described their group work experiences. More specifically, efficient communication was an aspect students acknowledged as the main lesson learned when working in groups due to negative communication experiences. Regarding the second theme, participants of that study referred to the fact that knowing the character and personalities of their peers is causing them mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was a valuable experience since interacting in diverse teams helped them learn from each other and develop various skills. On the other hand, based on students’ previous group work experiences, working with different personalities can lead to conflicts and therefore, it can be challenging (Rajabzadeh et al., 2022). Thus, participants of my study were experiencing communication through social interaction which was functioning in multidimensional aspects such as their previous experiences in group working and in relation to their sociocultural background. There are some similar and partly differing results in Dytham’s (2019) study of PhD students’ experiences in collaborative learning. An overlapping theme was “social collaboration” since PhD students shared that interacting and meeting other students who are facing similar challenges and have common experiences with was particularly important for them (p. 453). Moreover, the participants of that study said that collaborative work helped them socialize, talk and overcome loneliness because they had mostly individual tasks as post-graduate students. In line with Dytham’s (2019) outcomes, social inter-

action, in my study as well, was perceived to come into being through participants' communication.

In connection to my second research question which is focused on how students evaluate themselves when they collaborate in groups considering that they use English as a *Lingua Franca*, what played a crucial role in participants behavior and consequently communication with their peers was the way they perceived themselves. Participants' group work experience was shaped by the positive or negative self-concept (Griffin et al., 2015) they had in relation to their academic performance and behavior in general. In many cases the presence of others also affected participants' behavior by pressuring or motivating them. Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) data suggest that members who belong to a preferred group are more likely to compare themselves with the group. Academic self-concept is defined as the perceived image individuals have for themselves in terms of their academic capability (Shavelson et al., 1976). Research done on the academic self-concept of university and elementary school students has shown that students compare themselves in relation to their peers, their past and with other aspects of their success. These three comparisons are called social, temporal and dimensional and are affecting students' self-academic concept (Wolff et al., 2018). In congruence, we have seen from the results of my study that participants were evaluating their selves by comparing their perceived academic performance and most specifically their English proficiency level in social, temporal and dimensional ways. Firstly, they were comparing themselves with their peers, secondly, they were evaluating their progress by stating phrases which are indicating improvement and lastly, they were comparing their English proficiency skills in many domains such as their writing, speaking and vocabulary.

Going one step further, participants were also drawing on their status and sociocultural backgrounds when they were evaluating their contribution to the group and explaining their self-ideas. At the same time, the fact that English was not everyone's first language seemed to be perceived as mostly beneficial because this made the participants feel less stress, insecurity, fear, or anxiety. In other words, English as a *lingua franca* was a positive element in group communication for most of the participants since, it seemed to be relieving knowing that they were allowed to make mistakes or forget a word. A few of them felt the need to repair, maintain or save their face (Griffin et al., 2015) especially because they were thinking that they spoke too much or too little in general and particularly in the group setting. Most of the participants felt more comfortable communicating with their group members, due to the fact that they were meeting weekly and they managed to create a relationship with a safe environment. In comparison to the classroom environment with the presence of their peers, the teacher, or the scenario of being in a group setting where

members would be native English speakers, nearly all participants were feeling less stressful during the group sessions. The findings of this study confirm the findings of Kusmayanti et al. (2022), who found that the main reason English medium instruction (EMI) students felt anxiety when speaking English in class was because of the self-perception they had that their abilities are limited. In addition, they were not feeling confident to communicate in class since they were concerned about the presence of other students and lecturers.

Despite the challenges, many participants of my study evaluated their group experience and themselves by focusing on the improvement they have made, something that agrees with recent research (Jahns & Zintl, 2023). Comparing themselves with their previous group work experiences and performance, participants of Jahns and Zintls' study were feeling more comfortable and confident in the group setting. This is a similar feeling most of participants in my study had in terms of their overall satisfaction, contribution, performance and English competence. However, the findings of this thesis supported the fact that not all participants felt that they had equally participated in the group when they evaluated themselves and this is in line with recent results (Strauß, & Rummel, 2021). Last but not least, some participants were evaluating themselves in parallel with the idea they had of their peers' contribution by comparing themselves with others.

5 CONCLUSION:

In this study I have presented a thematic analysis of international students' group communication experiences. I have examined this phenomenon from multifaceted angles; linguistically, theoretically, educationally and socially. From a linguistic perspective I have investigated the role of English as a lingua franca in relation to participants English proficiency skills considering Ting Toomey's theory (1998) of self-concept (Griffin et al., 2015). In terms of the educational level, I have focused on the literature concerning collaborative working by finding relevant studies about learning and working in groups. Lastly, I addressed students' experiences by designing corresponding methods of qualitative research like group and individual interviews which helped me observe and analyze the group dynamics participants constructed.

In terms of my first research question, I have identified two themes that explain students' group communication experiences. As I showed in this thesis, participants first communicated to create an interpersonal level of interaction by drawing on diversity and sociocultural background. In addition, participants used online channels of communication and combined hybrid and/or face to face meetings for their group sessions. Communication was necessary when members wanted to organize the group structure. In general, participants' interaction reflected the relationship they constructed. Furthermore, the role of English as a lingua franca was considered a relevant element in their interaction and therefore, group communication based on the findings of this thesis since for all the participants, English was a second language (EL2).

To answer my second research question, regarding students' self-evaluation process, it can be concluded that participants evaluated themselves taking into account their English competence and their self-involvement in the group setting. In other words, participants often felt shy, insecure or scared of making mistakes when they interacted in the group setting and these feelings made them want

to save, repair or maintain their face (Gudykunst, 2005). To sum up, the self-perception of participants seemed to affect their participation and thus communication with their peers. It is important to note that participants' experiences differed due to the various levels they had on the language of instruction being used. That is why, for some participants speaking in English was perceived as an obstacle in communication with their peers, whereas for others it was an advantage.

5.1 Limitations

One limitation I identified after the data collection process was the timing that interviews occurred. I began the first part of the interviews in the middle of November during the last week of participants' group sessions. Therefore, I continued with the second part of individual interviews, in the beginning of December, after the completion of students' group sessions. If I conducted the first part of group interviews during the beginning of the group sessions, participants could make more comparisons about participants' feelings, perceptions and reflections. A different timing of the data collection process could have potentially led to different results or themes.

Communication with participants was one of the reasons that might have impacted the interview timeline. To be more specific, I think that better organization from my side as a researcher would have helped me start the data collection process earlier. Moreover, finding other means to communicate with participants such as email and telephone could have saved me time. Regarding the design of the interviews and based on participants' feedback, I realized that some questions were repeated when I was trying to rephrase them. Due to the lack of experience in interviewing, I consider that I could have avoided this sense of repetition, by making clarifying questions that will help both the interviewee and the interviewer understand each other. In other words, I believe that if I implemented strategies such as paraphrasing more frequently their words during the interviews, I would have smoother conversations with my participants. Like Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) analyze, "probing" or "specifying" questions aim to enhance the conversation and make participants describe in detail their experiences (p. 67).

Additionally, I feel that the designing of the group interviews could have been structured in a way that would benefit more interaction with the subjects as focus group research recommends (Barbour, 2018). What I mean is that, as a mediator, I could have improved my contribution to the group discussion in order to facilitate greater interaction among the members when it was needed. Sometimes, when one or two participants were answering a question, I was moving on to the

next question without asking what the rest of the members were thinking. This tactic was limiting the possibility to get various viewpoints on specific topics from participants. As Chrzanowska (2002) explains, group interviews risk losing respondents authenticity since the presence of other people might affect their behavior. That is why the role of moderator is difficult. However, since I realized this limitation after the completion of the group interviews, during the individual interviews, I had the chance to ask in one-to-one sessions participants' stances and reflections.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Findings of this master thesis have shown that more qualitative studies are needed in the field of group communication and higher education students' interaction. Conducting a thematic analysis, helped me as a researcher to narrow the relevant codes and create the four themes I discussed, based on my research questions. I think that focus groups or mixed methods approach would benefit similar studies that aim to analyze group communication and students' perspectives in depth. In my study, I have seen that the combination of group and individual interviews has helped me ponder on the group dynamics and the individual perspectives of participants. As qualitative researchers explain, one of the positive aspects of focus groups is the fact that participants might be more active in the group interaction by asking questions, commenting on each other and discussing with the mediator and with the rest of the members (Morgan, 2001; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Interestingly, I have observed in distinct levels and various scales the dynamic and relationship of peer interaction members had established during the group sessions. As Poupore (2018) describes, group dynamics show the verbal and nonverbal communicative behavior a group of people construct. With this in mind, I was also able to compare participants' behavior in the individual and group interview context which helped me recognize the aspects participants were feeling comfortable sharing privately and/or in groups.

Various aspects like peer pressure and the conditions of classroom and group environment could bring data that will help researchers explore external factors of group interaction results. The numerous benefits of collaborative working have been acknowledged (Lee & Yang, 2023; Osman et al., 2011; Seric & Pranicic, 2018) however, it is important to explore the reasons why some students prefer working in groups and the effects this method has on a personal level as well. I believe that if we examine group work by focusing on students' personal backgrounds and perspectives we will better understand the gap in research concerning the con-

tradictory results scholars like Kirschner et al. (2011) and Fransen et al. (2011) identify in terms of individual and collaborative learning effectiveness. Likewise, the fact that in the current study, groups were formed randomly provides data on the interaction and relationship members created. Hence, random, or planned group formation can possibly influence members' contribution and participation. Also, the language that members used and the sociocultural background of each participant shaped the outcomes of this thesis. Thus, it is important that further studies will be interested in investigating extensively the linguistic aspects that relate to the sociocultural factors that could affect students' reflection, evaluation and group experiences.

5.3 Societal implications

From a practical viewpoint, addressing university students' perspectives and experiences when participating in group work may help teachers to implement practices and strategies that will enhance students' academic performance and skills. I personally believe that if teachers increase their understanding on the role of English as a lingua franca, diversity and background in collaborative working, they will be able to further support students' learning process.

We have seen that the matter of English language and English proficiency was a significant issue for participants. This observation brings insight to the attention higher education institutions' scholars pay when designing group work activities and tasks. More specifically, findings suggest that considering students' challenges and difficulties can help teachers reevaluate the reading materials, the structure and guidelines they provide. In the same way, academics need to further examine the structure of the assigned tasks teachers give in relation to the norms students establish when they collaborate and therefore communicate in groups.

Regarding participants' feedback on peer interaction, we can conclude that one of the key factors to a positive group experience is efficient communication. Creating an environment where members feel comfortable to share and express their thoughts was a common criterion participants of this study acknowledged. These outcomes build on existing studies such as Robbins et al. (2017) who found that a trustful climate is one of the elements of team effectiveness. Also, in this study based on respondents' answers the significant role of members' background and previous group work experience was emphasized. Highlighting students' interaction can benefit participants of this study and students in general because it hints at the possibility to reflect on the group dynamics, relationships, connections and feelings devel-

oped when working in groups. Results of the current study are similar with existing data which show that previous experience positively affects students' academic performance and skills (Martínez-Romero et al., 2021). Moreover, findings implied that sharing personal experiences and stories in a group fostered strong connections and helped participants build meaningful and valuable group experiences. Tapping into the meanings participants gave to culture and diversity allow teachers and scholars to develop a better understanding of students' background, personalities and previous experiences when examining groups. Hence, such findings unfold the various ways each individual experiences communication in groups and share awareness about the challenges, obstacles, possibilities and benefits collaborative working has on students' learning ability in multiple levels.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL DIAGRAM OF FACTORS BEFORE DATA COLLECTION

