

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Räisänen, Tiina

**Title:** Cultural Knowledge as a Resource in BELF Interactions : a Longitudinal Ethnographic Study of Two Managers in Global Business

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © The Author & Iperstoria, 2019.

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Räisänen, T. (2019). Cultural Knowledge as a Resource in BELF Interactions : a Longitudinal Ethnographic Study of Two Managers in Global Business. *Iperstoria*, 13, 34-46.  
[http://www.iperstoria.it/joomla/images/PDF/Numero\\_13/Monografica/saggi\\_mono\\_13/Räisänen\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.iperstoria.it/joomla/images/PDF/Numero_13/Monografica/saggi_mono_13/Räisänen_PDF.pdf)



Tiina Räisänen\*

## CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AS A RESOURCE IN BELF INTERACTIONS: A LONGITUDINAL ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TWO MANAGERS IN GLOBAL BUSINESS

### 1. Introduction

Large multinational corporations and small businesses alike cross national borders in their everyday business practices. One key factor in companies' economic success in these settings is the successful management of diversity: the recognition and negotiation of cultural and linguistic difference among their employees and clients. As companies face diversity, individual professionals need the skills to handle their transactional and relational work activities: solve problems, sell products or concepts, negotiate terms and prices, build interpersonal relationships, or, to put it simply, get the job done (e.g. Lüdi, Höchle, and Yanaprasart 2010). Thus, when professionals enter working life, they need to socialize into intercultural encounters, learn to manage them and develop strategies to cope.

In intercultural encounters, workers often do not share a common first language and they therefore opt for the use of a shared lingua franca, usually English. People using English as a lingua franca often have different cultural values and norms (Baker 2009, 588), and these may cause challenges in work interactions. Managing intercultural interactions at work thus requires accommodation skills, respect and tolerance of each other's differences (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011), namely cultural resources and knowledge (Räisänen 2013, 55; 2016; 2018). Professionals gain this knowledge by immersing themselves in encounters with different cultures, where they begin to identify cultural and communicative differences between their own and other workers' practices and develop strategies to handle these differences successfully. These strategies have interested scholars, business practitioners and educators because they are the key to successful business. In particular, research on English used as a business lingua franca, BELF (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta 2005) has paved the way in identifying the challenges faced and strategies used by practitioners in various business settings. However, more research is needed in order to understand the diversity and complexity in which present-day business practitioners do their work (Nickerson 2015).

This paper contributes to the growing field of BELF research and extends the discussion on the role of culture and cultural knowledge in business interactions. It aims to provide insights into the relationship between cultural knowledge and professionals' management of BELF interactions. The paper is based on a longitudinal ethnographic study of two Finnish professionals' trajectories of socialization into global working life. It draws on interview data in which the participants orient to Finnish and Chinese professional and everyday practices and differences between them and thereby display their cultural knowledge. The main aim of the paper is, using discourse analytic methods, to investigate how this cultural knowledge, as depicted in interviews, manifests in BELF interactions and functions as a resource for transactional and relational purposes.

### 2. Theoretical background

#### 2.1 Culture at work

In this section, I will discuss the role of culture at work and the cultural knowledge needed by global professionals in BELF interactions.

'Culture' is a multidimensional concept and it has been widely problematized, discussed and criticized across disciplines. The main topic of conceptual discussion in the social sciences lies in the distinction between essentialist and non-essentialist approaches (Holliday 1999). The former considers culture to be an a priori fact and an omnipresent category; it has been the starting point of cross-cultural pragmatics and business communication training that treat cultural differences as the source of miscommunication between people (Sarangi 1994, 411). The latter, non-essentialist approaches, take a more dynamic view of culture (Sarangi

---

\*Tiina Räisänen is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. She received her PhD in 2013. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, multilingualism, English as a lingua franca, intercultural communication and language and literacy learning at work.



1994), allow social behaviour to speak for itself, and are based on the analysis of how people from different cultures use language. The focus is on whether and how culture is relevant to the interactants, and how cultural affiliations emerge and are enacted in interactions (e.g. Higgins 2007; Brandt and Jenks 2011; Zhu 2015). For instance, Schnurr and Zayts (2017), drawing on Holliday (1999), discuss the difference between the essentialist and non-essentialist approaches in the context of working life. Holliday's (1999) notion of 'large culture' captures ethnic and national cultures, while 'small cultures' refers to shared local practices and activities that occur among group members and emerge in people's encounters with others. Schnurr and Zayts (2017) follow similar lines of argument that are of particular relevance for this paper. They highlight the difference between how culture emerges in professionals' talk (i.e., interviews) about their work practices in multicultural environments and in their actual interactions. Schnurr and Zayts' research participants explained perceived differences in work practices as being due to culture (Chinese, Western), while in actual work practices the participants did not enact these differences. Based on this difference between perceived and actual performance, Schnurr and Zayts concluded that culture as depicted in interviews was not really an issue in actual interactions to the same degree, but rather a whole range of cultures on different levels were enacted that were related to, for example, work teams and local practices. In this paper, I draw on Schnurr and Zayts' perspective and consider how participants in interactions orient to the cultural issues that they bring up in their interviews.

## 2.2 Culture in BELF

The role of culture in the context of ELF and BELF has been approached from various perspectives (see e.g. Holmes and Dervin 2016). The findings illustrate the diversity of culture in BELF: while users of ELF sometimes draw strongly on Anglo-American frames of reference (Fiedler 2011), at other times native-speaker or national cultures are irrelevant to them (e.g. Kaur 2016). For instance, in talk around food, speakers have been seen to draw on their background cultural knowledge and display their national cultures and identities (Jenks 2016). A dynamic perspective enables us to treat as intercultural the diverse situations in ELF/BELF interaction in which people create their own practices, bring their background culture into play or reconstruct their practices and cultures (see Baker 2009).

In business interactions, culture plays a role and emerges in people's perceptions and actual practices in different ways. For instance, Kankaanranta and Lu (2013) discovered a difference in the perceived level of directness between Western and Asian business professionals, and Räisänen (2016) found a similar difference between Finns and Chinese according to her Finnish respondents. Du-Babcock's (2006) findings from simulated business interactions suggested a difference between people's topic management in meetings that were held in Cantonese and English, with Cantonese meetings following a more spiral pattern compared to a more direct style in English. Virkkula-Räisänen's (2010) study on a business meeting between Finnish and Chinese participants reveals the variety of skills needed to manage interaction, ranging from the use of gestures to the choice of language (English or Finnish). In particular, the use of Finnish instead of English was associated with politeness: if the same matter were communicated in English, it would be a threat to the interlocutor's face. Using Finnish was also part of a strategy to ensure that the Chinese interlocutor understood: according to the Finnish manager, the Chinese engineer was reluctant to admit non-understanding, a feature the manager associated with Chinese culture. Although these findings are based on case studies and are thus non-generalizable, they do suggest the relevance of national culture in BELF interactions and for professionals, and point to the professionals' need for specific kinds of cultural competence in order to handle such interactions successfully.

As BELF researchers have made clear, the main point in BELF encounters is to get the job done. This requires holistic competence: multicultural competence, BELF competence and business know-how (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011). Multicultural competence involves accommodation skills in managing interactive situations with business practitioners of different national, organizational, and professional cultures (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011, 254-255). This resembles Baker's (2009, 2011) intercultural awareness in ELF as the "conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in communication" (Baker 2011, 202). According to Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011), BELF competence refers to such communicative strategies as asking for



clarifications and questions, repetition, and paraphrasing, in order to achieve successful communication, while business know-how is pertinent to the business domain and the overall business community. In this paper, I will examine the kind of cultural knowledge Finnish professionals make relevant and use as a resource in managing BELF interactions.

### 3. Finnish professionals' cultural knowledge and their interactions with Chinese colleagues

This paper draws on a longitudinal ethnographic study in which the career trajectories and working life communication of two Finnish professionals (Tero and Oskari) were followed and recorded for over 15 years (2003–2018), from their student days all the way through their career advancement towards leadership positions in small and medium-sized and multinational companies. Both participants' career paths have taken them to China, where the major part of the BELF data was collected by the researcher and by the participants themselves. Some recordings were also made in Finland by the researcher. Table 1 illustrates the data used for this paper.

Participant	Employment	Company	Job Title	Methods and Workplace Interaction Data (all stages include interviews)
Oskari	2006–2011	Engineering company	Project Manager	2008 self-recordings(China) 2009 fieldwork (China)
	2014–2018	MNC, services and solutions	Operations Manager	2016 fieldwork (China) 2018 fieldwork (China)
Tero	2008–2010	Engineering works	Global Business Developer and R&D Manager	2008 self-recordings(China) 2009 fieldwork (Finland)

**Table 1:** BELF data

In the ethnographic interviews and discussions, the participants, understandably, refer to their experiences in China. They show a similar orientation to Finnish and Chinese professional and everyday practices, and to the challenges they faced. For Oskari, the English spoken by someone who was to become his colleague did not sound like “any language” due to the accent (Räisänen 2012, 220). During his temporary placement in China as a project manager (after 2010), Tero had to manage workers without a common language; the only communicative resources were gestures. Over time both Oskari and Tero began to understand Chinese ways of speaking English, to manage interactions with the available resources and to get the job done.

The professionals also identified cultural differences between Finns and Chinese at the level of directness (Räisänen 2016), both in work and organizational practices, and in preferences for leadership style. These characteristics, according to Tero and Oskari, caused challenges and problems at work. The perceived cultural practices and differences, labelled here as cultural knowledge, were identified in interaction data and will be analysed in detail in this paper. In particular, I will examine the ways in which culture and cultural knowledge, as depicted in interviews, indeed become relevant in interactions. Hence, the research question is:

What kind of cultural knowledge becomes manifest in BELF interactions and how does it function as a resource for transactional and relational purposes?

The analysis began with a review of the interviews and discussions. They were then analysed using content and discourse analysis to identify the participants' discursive orientations to Finnish and Chinese professional and everyday practices, as well as differences between them. The analysis of the interviews helped inform the analysis of the interactions, but it will not be discussed in detail in this paper. Next, the interactions were analysed in detail to identify moments in which these orientations, labelled in this paper as cultural knowledge, became manifest and were enacted by the participants. The detailed analysis of the interactions in the findings section will focus on the orientations and communication strategies that the participants deployed in order to manage interactions. The participants oriented to culture explicitly and implicitly: for example, by referring to



Chinese food practices, showing their knowledge of Finnish and Chinese professional practices and Chinese language, and shifting to their L1, Finnish, in order to ensure the completion of work tasks.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1 Finnish language and business practices as resources

Example 1 comes from the period when Oskari was working as a Project Manager in a Finnish company and frequently travelled to China. Oskari, Henry (Engineer, L1 Chinese) and Matti (Engineer, L1 Finnish) are standing in front of a product that is manufactured in the factory. Oskari is orienting to the need to ensure that the Chinese factory workers understand their tasks. This is a challenge Oskari often referred to in the interviews and our discussions. Here, Oskari explains in general what the company needs to do and what Henry in particular has to do (that is, make material cards for a particular manufactured part). Oskari also communicates this in Finnish to Matti.

##### Example 1: *kato että se alakaa tekemään* (Oskari, China 2009)

- 22 Oskari so (1.0) Mr. Sun told me that end of next week (.) we will get the drawings  
23 Henry drawings  
24 Oskari for (this machine) but now you must make the material card for the straight (parts/duct)  
25 Henry [okay so now]  
26 Oskari [because] I think it's quite easy (.) for you to make  
27 Henry do the drawing the the end of it will be it will be [(delivered)]  
28 Oskari [no end] of next week  
29 Henry next↑ week  
30 Oskari next↑ week end of next week  
31 Henry oh okay  
32 Oskari but now we must make a (.) preliminary material card for (.) for th- the straight duct  
33 Henry okay okay  
34 Oskari okay.  
35 please make it as soon as possible that Mel can make order  
36 Henry this have a have a here aa: the the the three ducting  
37 and then aa: that's the way maybe we get aa: eight aa: ten make the (.) must keep the  
elements for the parts hundred and six  
38 Oskari mm yeah I see yeah  
39 (.)  
40 Henry maybe aa: also make some [ (.) ] parts  
41 Oskari [yeah]  
42 yeah but now the first most important thing is to do the material cards  
43 Henry okay  
44 Oskari based on layouts  
45 Henry okay  
46 Oskari kato että se teke- alakaa kans tekemään niitä  
((see that he ma- begins to make them))  
47 Matti mitä↑  
((what))  
48 Oskari kato kato vielä että se alakaa tekemään niitä materiaali- kattomaan niitä layoutteja  
((see see again that he starts to make those material- look at those layouts))  
49 Matti joo se eilen alotti jo  
((yes he started yesterday already))  
50 Oskari alottiko. joo joo.  
((did he okay okay))  
51 Matti siinä on monta vaihettavaa  
((there is a lot to change))





First, Oskari tells Henry that he had heard from another engineer, referred to as Mr. Sun, that they would get the drawings for a specific machine, and then in line 24 he gives a direct order to Henry: *you must make the material card for the straight (parts/duct)*. The terms of address that they use are interesting: an absent male engineer is referred to with the formal, polite term Mr. (line 22) whereas a female engineer is referred to more informally, with her first name (Mel). In line 26, Oskari evaluates the task as *quite easy*, one which, by implication, would not take long. Line 27 shows that Henry does not directly respond to the order but instead talks about the drawings and the delivery time. Oskari takes Henry's turn as a question and responds with an answer about the delivery time: *no end of next week*, which Henry seems to understand as he echoes *next week* and provides a positive response *oh okay* (line 31). This results in Oskari repeating his order in line 32 in a slightly different formulation from earlier, *but now we must make a (.) preliminary material card for (.) for th- the straight duct*. Now he uses the collective *we* and a pre-modifier, the adjective *preliminary*. He also adds a polite request (line 32): *please make it as soon as possible that Mel can make order*. Again, Henry, instead of orienting to Oskari's turn as a request, begins to talk about the properties of the part in lines 36-37. Oskari provides positive feedback in lines 38 and 41-42 as if to be polite and to align with Henry. After this he again makes a contrastive move with *but* and says *but now the first most important thing is to do the material cards* (line 42). Again, this is a modified version of the earlier order as Oskari uses the superlatives *first* and *most important*. Repetition and reformulation are typical features of BELF meetings (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010; Cogo 2016). However, judging by what Oskari does next, these do not seem to suffice for task completion because he switches to Finnish and addresses Matti: *see see again that he starts to make those material- look at those layouts*.

The repetition is a reflection of Oskari's job, which is to ensure that all the necessary tasks are completed. The purpose of the repetition may also lie in the difference between Oskari's and Henry's aims for the interaction: Oskari is clearly pushing his agenda in a direct manner and conveying the need to make the material cards, while Henry is talking about technical matters (line 37). Despite Oskari's alignment with Henry, the repetition, reformulation and change of language indicate that he orients to a possible problem in understanding, which he further confirmed in a follow-up interview. Finnish as L1 serves as a secret code for sharing with L1 peers information that would be impolite or would threaten another person's face if shared in a common language (Virkkula-Räsänen 2010; Cogo 2012).

Example 2 shows a similar situation that arose during Tero's work trip to China as a Global Business Developer and Research and Development Manager. Tero, Juha (Engineer, L1 Finnish, travelled with Tero), Susan (Subsidiary Manager, L1 Chinese), James (Engineer, L1 Chinese) and Chen (Engineer, L1 Chinese) are talking about a malfunctioning machine that has given the local workers some problems. As Chen does not speak English, Susan uses Chinese with him and mediates his turns to the others in English. She reports that Chen said it is to be expected that problems will arise with new machines, but if the same problems occur several times that is unreasonable. Then James, Susan and Chen discuss the matter in Chinese. Although Tero does not understand them since he cannot speak Chinese, he evaluates and interprets James' feelings on the basis of his performance and tone of voice, saying to Juha in Finnish that

*iso jii käy ihan kuumana tossa*  
(big J is really getting heated there)

Here Tero is demonstrating his knowledge of appropriate language for evaluating the performance of a worker in a subsidiary company. If this had been taking place in English, it would have had an adverse effect on their interpersonal relations. The discussion continues with Susan's interpretation of James' talk in English to the others, which confirms James' negative stance towards the malfunctioning machine. Susan says that according to James, they should not accept the situation. After this, Tero makes a suggestion from his leader position: he says that if the machine does not work, they could charge the machine provider (Chris) for time lost (lines 64-65).



**Example 2:** that's quite typical in Finland (Tero, China 2008)

- 61 Susan anyway mm:  
62 Susan James says that we should not accept any (xx) no way this  
63 Tero yeah  
64 Tero erm and we can also say to Chris that  
65 Tero after this this day we will charge for example fifty euros per every hour we lost  
66 (.)  
67 Susan [*Chinese*]  
68 Tero [actually that] that's quite typical in Finland  
69 Tero yeah  
70 Susan mm mm  
71 Tero we can calculate how how £much£ one hour cost in this factory  
72 Tero and if we can't make some work in that hour  
73 Tero they will pay  
74 Tero but I will I will call Mikko today  
75 Tero and ask his opinion about this  
76 Susan okay

In this discussion, Tero makes clear his knowledge of business practices in Finland. He says that it is usual in Finland for a company to claim compensation from a supplier for time lost due to a malfunctioning machine. The sum is calculated on the basis of the number of hours of work that are lost. In reality, whether this is possible in Finland or elsewhere depends on the kind of contract made between the parties. Although Tero suggests charging the machine provider for the loss, he says he will first have to ask his boss (Mikko) for his opinion (line 74). Here his mid-manager role becomes manifest. The boss is referred to by his first name (Mikko), which is a typical term of address for co-workers across the organizational hierarchy in Finland. Susan's okay shows her acceptance. Also, the fact that Tero represents head office and Susan the subsidiary becomes manifest through their role alignment.

#### 4.2 Cultural difference as a resource for humour

In the interviews and discussions, Tero and Oskari explicitly discussed differences in working and living practices between Finland and China, based on their own experiences and observations. Both participants framed various practices related to safety as cultural. For instance, Oskari often wondered at Chinese people's attitude to safety: he commented on the fact that while some of his subordinates, particularly pregnant women, refused to have their office desks close to copy machines and printers because they were concerned about radiation, and that adults and minors drove scooters without wearing a helmet. In addition to orienting to differences in attitudes to safety, Oskari is contrasting Chinese people's behaviour with that of Finns, who are required by law to wear a helmet when driving a motorcycle.

Safety issues in working conditions also emerged in the interactions. In Example 3, Tero and Juha are following the Chinese engineers' machining work in the factory in China. Tero explicitly orients to the lack of proper safety gear in the factory.

**Example 3:** you should buy some ear covers (Tero, China 2008)

- 167 Juha eikai siinä jos se puol milliiä niin ei siinä oo mitää väliä  
((well if it's half a millimetre then it doesn't matter))  
168 Tero niin  
((yeah))  
169 (*James using the drill, loud noise for 5 sec. + 2 sec.*)  
170 Tero James you should buy some ear covers for [you] and Cheng  
171 Juha [a-]  
172 James yes.  
173 (1.0)  
174 Juha you don't have yet?



- 175 (0.5)  
176 Tero we we don't want that you (.) are going to be dea(d) de[(afth)]  
177 Juha [heh]  
[heh]  
178 James [heh] yeah  
179 Juha hehheh

Tero and Juha are standing next to James and Chen, who are doing the machining. Juha and Tero talk in Finnish about the specifications for the product being machined. Juha says that a difference in the drilling hole of half a millimetre does not matter (line 167), and thus displays his technical knowledge. After this, the drill that James is using makes a very loud noise, first for five seconds and then for another two. The noise prompts Tero to produce a directive in line 170 targeted to James: *James you should buy some ear covers for you and Chen*. This directive is intended as a protective measure to safeguard the workers' ears from loud noise. James responds to Tero's order with a positive yes. Juha then asks a question with a declarative statement using rising intonation *you don't have yet* (line 174).

After a pause, Tero continues with an explanation for his directive (line 176): *we don't want that you are going to be (deaf)*. Tero's repetition of the adjective at the end of his turn suggests that he is looking for the right word and pronunciation. He first says something sounding like *dead*. At the second attempt it is more like *death* than *deaf*, which is presumably his intention, given the surrounding talk and the contextual information: Tero tries to convey the idea that the worker's ears will be badly affected by the noise and this may result in deafness. Despite the unconventional form, the function is achieved, although the others respond with laughter and thus treat Tero's explanation as humorous. Here, humour seems to function as a resource, a hedge, to mitigate and soften the impact of Tero's directive speech act and to reduce the power differences between the interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987). In the same discussion, Tero also points to the need for an automatic tool for machining, to speed up the work and to protect James, who was making pieces by hand. Tero's directives signal his leadership role, orientation to safety issues in the Chinese factory, and the need to work efficiently, and their purpose is to protect workers from harming themselves. Tero acts in the same way as in the example above. Humour thus functions as a communicative strategy in the BELF interaction, mitigating orders and building collegiality (Pullin-Stark 2009).

In addition to differences in working practices, there was also discussion about food. According to Brandt and Jenks (2011), food and food-eating practices can function as a resource for topicalizing cultural differences. The present data supports this. Food as a cultural issue emerged in interviews and interactions, as in Example 4, for example, from a discussion over lunch recorded by Tero in China, exemplifying relational talk between the participants. Susan had ordered food into the office where the staff were having lunch together. During their meal, Tero asks Juha, a first-time visitor to China, about his food:

**Example 4:** Juha don't know what he is eating (Tero, China 2008)

- 15 Tero Juha do you like your snakes  
16 Juha aargh they are not snakes heheh  
17 Tero heheh  
18 Juha heheh  
19 Tero Juha don't know what he is eating heheh  
20 Juha heheh  
21 Susan pork pepper and carrot  
22 Tero pork with snake  
23 Juha [heheheh]  
24 Susan [no:]  
25 Juha hehehe  
26 höpö höpö  
((nonsense))  
27 Susan I eat the same as you  
28 Juha yeah





- 29 Tero £and little bit rat£  
30 Susan ha?  
31 Tero £little bit rat also£  
32 Susan hmpH  
33 Juha yeah  
34 Tero £and frog legs£  
35 Susan no:  
36 Juha hehheh

Tero asks Juha if he likes his snakes (line 15). Juha responds, slightly annoyed as he produces an irritated *arghh* sound. Despite this, judging by his laughter, he seems amused during his turn *they are not snakes*. Tero's turn *Juha don't know what he is eating*, expressed with a laughing tone (line 19) indicates Tero's orientation to cultural differences. Tero is using his knowledge of differences between Finnish and Chinese eating practices when teasing Juha about his meal and his possible unawareness of what he is eating. The statement about not knowing what one is eating is part of the Finnish workers' discourse about travelling and working in China where one, especially a first-timer, is likely to encounter odd, unfamiliar and unrecognizable food that may include ingredients that are not normally encountered in Finnish cooking. Here, Tero exaggerates this by referring to wild animals as food, namely snakes, rats (line 29) and frogs' legs (line 34). Tero thus draws on his knowledge to joke with Juha, to assign him a first-timer identity and generally to promote a relaxed atmosphere among the workers. Interestingly, Susan responds in a more serious tone, saying that the food is *pork, pepper and carrot*, that is, more universal and thus less exotic. Despite Susan's serious tone, Tero goes on in a humorous vein, saying it is *pork with snake* (line 22). Susan confirms her previous answer with a stressed *no* (line 24) as if to reassure Juha that the food is safe to eat as she is eating the same thing (line 27). Susan seems to be orienting to the possibility that the meal could include the exotic ingredients Tero is referring to. Although Juha first seems to accept Tero's humour, in line 26 he says *höpö höpö* (nonsense) as a request to Tero to stop his silly behaviour. Tero's talk displays features of non-native speaker language as he uses the form *don't* instead of the grammatically accepted *doesn't* in line 19. The use of the ungrammatical form does not interfere with understanding and is therefore acceptable here, as is commonly the case with grammatical irregularities in BELF discourse.

#### 4.3 Competence in Chinese as a resource

Earlier research has shown that Finnish and Chinese business people perceive differences between their own and each other's communication habits when communicating in English at work (Räisänen 2012, 2016; Kankaanranta and Lu 2013). While Finns are seen to be direct and to focus on the point, the Chinese style is perceived as more elaborate, as they discuss more and manage topics in a non-linear manner. Oskari reported on this difference as it manifested in situations with a Chinese interpreter present who, rather than translating word for word from English to Chinese, tended to filter the message and mediate it by using different expressions than those used by Oskari in English (Räisänen 2016). This had caused misunderstandings and delays in task achievement. After several years of working in China, Oskari had learnt some Chinese and could follow the translations, and therefore could react to the interpretation, as seen in Example 5.

During my fieldwork in China, Oskari's company prepared to move to a new office building. During the planning and preparation phase, Oskari and the administrative personnel had several meetings with the new landlord to discuss the premises and its renovation, including air-conditioning, decoration and fire safety issues. During one of the meetings I observed and recorded, Oskari, an admin person (Bill, L1 Chinese), and two representatives of the landlord (M and N, both L1 Chinese), discussed the need for government approval for the renovations. Oskari, Bill and N spoke English while the main representative (M) spoke only Chinese. Bill then functioned as the mediator of Oskari's message by speaking Chinese. In their discussion, Oskari had made a point about the landlord needing to take responsibility for getting government approval for the decoration of the building and also pointed out that, should any equipment need installation, the landlord, rather than Oskari's company as the tenant, should ask for a quotation. As often happened in meetings, Oskari repeats his message:



**Example 5:** you mentioned *kòngtiáo* (Oskari, China 2018)

- 1 Oskari well (.) I go this step by step  
2 first thing  
3 only approval what we are going to ask from any official government is the approval for the decoration  
4 Bill mm  
5 Oskari and you have already our plan and layout in your disposal and and you can ask from the related firefighting agency or officials or whatever  
6 that what kind of changes are required if any  
7 and then based on this (the landlord) can ask a quotation for the equipment and the work  
8 (our company) will not sign any contract with any firefighting equipment or installation provider company  
9 Bill ((gazes at O, nods))  
10 Bill (speaks Chinese to M and N)  
11 *kòngtiáo* (xxx)  
(air conditioning)  
12 Oskari you mentioned *kòngtiáo* the the AC  
13 Bill AC  
((gaze O, nods))  
14 Oskari I I didn't mention anything about the AC  
15 Bill [firefighting]  
16 Oskari [I was] talking about the firefighting at this point  
17 Bill ((speaks Chinese to M and N))

In line 1, Oskari uses metalanguage to explain his actions: *go this step by step*, which is a useful communicative strategy in BELF meetings that is used to help interlocutors follow one's line of thought. The *first thing* is his company's request for government approval for the decoration. After this, Oskari shifts responsibility to the landlord, who *can ask from the related firefighting agency or officials or whatever* (line 5) about possible required changes and, based on this, also for a quotation for equipment and the work. Oskari stresses that his company *will not sign any contract with any firefighting equipment or installation provider company* because, in his opinion, this is the landlord's responsibility. Bill accepts Oskari's message with a gaze directed to him and a nod. After this, he returns to M and N, speaking in Chinese. During this time Oskari looks at Bill who, in the middle of his turn, says a word in Chinese (*kòngtiáo*=*air conditioning*) that makes Oskari interrupt him (line 12): *you mentioned kòngtiáo the the AC*. Bill repeats AC, again acknowledging Oskari, who goes on to say that he *didn't mention anything about the AC* in his step-by-step listing of points before. Bill then says *firefighting*, which Oskari had mentioned earlier, and that is then confirmed by Oskari, too (*I was talking about the firefighting at this point*). Oskari's use of *kòngtiáo* is significant in many ways. First, it shows that he has learnt some Chinese, which indicates a major change in his repertoire (this became evident also elsewhere in the observed interactions). Second, showing recognition of a Chinese word displays Oskari's concerns about the differences between his talk and how his words may be translated: here Oskari orients to his concern, and the actual fact, that the interpreter, here, Bill, does not translate word for word and introduces elements that were not present in the original. Oskari's interruption suggests that he is truly concerned about achieving understanding about the renovations. Third, this exchange shows BELF as a part of the professional communicative repertoire, which includes resources from different languages (Räsänen 2013, 2018). It also confirms earlier findings that the use of a multilingual repertoire is an asset in BELF (e.g. Cogo 2016; see also Yanaprasart 2015). Oskari's strategic resources to make the point clear include metatalk, speaking slowly, stress and repetition, and the explicit demonstration of his Chinese proficiency.

#### 4.4 Knowledge of working culture as a resource

Earlier research has shown that culture affects leadership and management performance (Schnurr 2013, 82) and the present study supports this. Cultural knowledge was a crucial resource for Oskari's leadership, decision-making and problem-solving practices as he managed over 100 Chinese subordinates as an



Operations Manager. In an interview he characterized the Chinese work mentality as having a preference for collective rather than individual problem-solving, and an inclination among subordinates to bring problems to the boss. These characteristics had posed challenges to Oskari's aim for leadership that emphasized employees' critical thinking and individual problem-solving. His style became evident, for instance, in his open-ended questions, as illustrated in Example 6, in which he and Mark (Department manager, L1 Chinese) discuss workers' resignations. After Mark has told Oskari about the recent resignations of members of his team, Oskari asks for Mark's opinion about it.

**Example 6:** I know that they are quite eager to change (Oskari, China 2016)

- 36 Oskari what is your opinion  
37 what do you think  
38 how is the is there any any other problems behind this  
39 is it is it the workload or is there any any kind of aa:  
40 Mark I think workload is one thing  
41 and then aa: (.)  
42 okay it depends actually  
43 Oskari mm  
44 Mark so if we are talking about this junior engineer  
45 Oskari [yeah]  
46 Mark [or] like two or three years of working experience  
47 engineer like that  
48 then aa: it's kind of natural that  
49 if they are not (.) so satisfied with the nature of the work  
50 then aa: they decide to leave  
51 Oskari yeah  
52 Mark that is aa: actually that is quite common  
53 I'm not sure if it's worldwide  
54 but anyway in China  
55 so you basically work in a company two or three years  
56 Oskari mm  
57 yeah  
58 Mark especially you are actually graduate from university  
59 then two or three years it's kind of aa: it's kind of aa: (xxx)  
60 Oskari I know that they are quite eager to change or they leave quite easily  
61 Mark yeah

In the example, Oskari enacts his reported leadership style by asking for his subordinate's opinion about what is behind a problem (resignations). Mark explains his point of view and tells Oskari that junior engineers with two to three years' work experience are very eager to leave if they are dissatisfied with their job. Interestingly, Mark frames this as common in China (lines 52-55). In line 60 Oskari displays his knowledge about Chinese workers' habits by saying that he knows that workers are eager to change jobs or leave easily. Here not only does he show his knowledge about Chinese work culture but also the leadership style and company culture, in which employees' opinions are taken into consideration. Such style and culture have developed through participants' regular interactions (Schnurr and Zayts 2017, 9).

## 5. Discussion

During their trajectories of socialization into global working life, the two Finnish professionals under study socialize into unfamiliar cultural and linguistic norms, recognize differences between practices in Finland and China, learn to manage them, and develop coping strategies. Although the professionals' discursive orientations echo national cultures and groups, they are real for them and are based on their own experiences (see also Räsänen 2016). The findings indicate that, in particular, professionals need cultural knowledge and accommodation skills for managing interactions with their Chinese co-workers. This supports earlier findings



(Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011). Cultural knowledge manifests in BELF interactions in the participants' completion of work tasks and in relational talk, and it is intertwined with the use of communication strategies. Cultural knowledge shows in the interactions either explicitly or implicitly as participants comment on their own and others' practices, as summarized in Table 2.

Cultural knowledge related to	Dichotomies	Communicative strategy
Language proficiency	Proficient vs. lack of skills	Repetition
Understanding problems	Explicitness vs. implicitness	Paraphrasing
Interpreters' behaviour	Direct translation vs. paraphrase	Summarizing
Work culture	Long-term jobs vs. changing jobs	Metalanguage
Safety issues	Safety gear vs. lack of safety gear	Local language (Finnish, Chinese)
Eating	Non-exotic food vs. exotic food	Directives
Business	Liability vs. lack of liability	Humour

**Table 2:** Finnish professionals' cultural knowledge and use of communicative strategies in BELF interactions

The examples discussed in the previous sections show how Oskari uses communication strategies that have been recognized as being particularly important in BELF contexts, such as repetition, reformulation, summarizing and metalanguage, in order to ensure understanding and clarity in messages addressed to a Chinese engineer (Example 1) and the landlord (Example 5). He also utilizes his knowledge of the Chinese language to manage his subordinate's mediation practices (Example 5). Both professionals use their knowledge of working cultures in Finland (Example 2) and China (Examples 3 and 6) in their managerial problem-solving and instructional tasks. In relational talk, Tero draws on cultural differences to build collegiality and create humour (Example 4). Such communication strategies are indeed needed to manage cultural differences and for transactional and relational purposes.

## 6. Concluding remarks

As a contribution to this Special Issue, "Negotiating meaning in Business English as a Lingua Franca," this article has shown that attention to cultural knowledge as manifested in talk about culture and in actual intercultural interactions can provide a way of understanding communication strategies in the use of English as a business lingua franca. The paper has illustrated the kinds of communication strategies that professionals resort to in order to manage challenges and cultural differences when doing their job. An ethnographic approach has made possible a holistic investigation of how culture matters to professionals, manifests in interactions, and is intertwined with the use of communication strategies. This study has been enabled by longitudinal ethnography, involving sustained contact and discussions with the participants and close collaboration with them, which has facilitated analysis and understanding of what happens in the interactions. There are certainly limitations to this study. For instance, it has opened up a one-sided view of culture and cultural differences, namely the view of these Finnish professionals. If their Chinese colleagues had been interviewed, a more complete understanding of culture could have been achieved. Nevertheless, this study, with a dynamic perspective merging both talk about culture and actual performance (Schnurr and Zayts 2017), has hopefully increased our knowledge about the relationship between culture and English used as a business lingua franca. In particular, it confirms the importance of cultural knowledge as an essential managerial resource in global working life and for a successful international business career (see also EIU 2010).

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland and the University of Jyväskylä. The article is a revised and expanded version of a paper that was presented at the *American Association for Applied Linguistics* (AAAL) conference in Portland in March 2017. I would like to thank the Special section editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback on an earlier version of the paper and Eleanor Underwood for proofreading the text. Most importantly, I would like to express to the research participants my sincere appreciation of their commitment to this research. I alone am responsible for any errors or misunderstandings.





## Works Cited

- Baker, Will. "The Cultures of English as a Lingua Franca." *TESOL Quarterly*, 43.4 (2009): 567-592.
- . "Intercultural Awareness: Modelling an Understanding of Cultures in Intercultural Communication through English as a Lingua Franca." *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 11.3 (2011): 197-214.
- Brandt, Adam and Christopher Jenks. "Is it Okay to Eat a Dog in Korea...like China? Assumptions of National Food-eating Practices in Intercultural Interaction." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 11.1 (2011): 41-58.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Cogo, Alessia. "ELF and Super-diversity: a Case Study of ELF Multilingual Practices from a Business Context." *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* 1.2 (2012): 287-313.
- . "'They All Take the Risk and Make the Effort': Intercultural Accommodation and Multilingualism in a BELF Community of Practice." *Intercultural Communication. New Perspectives from ELF*. Eds. Lucilla Lopriore and Enrico Grazzi. Rome: Roma Tre Press, 2016. 364-383.
- Du-Babcock, Bertha, "An Analysis of Topic Management Strategies and Turn-taking Behavior in the Hong Kong Bilingual Environment: The Impact of Culture and Language Use." *Journal of Business Communication* 43 (2006): 21-42.
- EIU. *Up or out: Next moves for the modern expatriate*. *The Economist*. London, UK. [http://graphics.eiu.com/upload/eb/LON\\_PL\\_Regus\\_WEB2.pdf](http://graphics.eiu.com/upload/eb/LON_PL_Regus_WEB2.pdf), 2010 Last Visited January 31, 2019
- Fiedler, Sabine. "English as a Lingua Franca—a Native-culture-free Code? Language of Communication vs. Language of Identification." *Apples-Journal of Applied Language Studies* 5.3 (2011): 79-97.
- Higgins, Christina. "Constructing Membership in the In-group: Affiliation and Resistance among Urban Tanzanians." *Pragmatics* 17.1 (2007): 49-70.
- Holliday, Adrian. "Small Cultures." *Applied Linguistics* 20.2 (1999): 237-264.
- Holmes, Prue and Fred Dervin (eds.). *The Cultural and Intercultural Dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2016.
- Jenks, Christopher. "Talking National Identities into Being in ELF Interactions: An Investigation of International Postgraduate Students in the UK." *The Cultural and Intercultural Dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca*. Eds. Prue Holmes and Fred Dervin. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2016. 93-113.
- Kankaanranta, Anne and Brigitte Planken, "BELF Competence as Business Knowledge of Internationally Operating Business Professionals." *Journal of Business Communication*, Special issue of Language Matters, Part 2, 47.4 (2010): 80-407.
- Kankaanranta, Anne and Lu Winnie. "The Evolution of English as the Business Lingua Franca: Signs of Convergence in Chinese and Finnish Professional Communication." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 27.3 (2013): 288-307.
- Kaur, Jagdish. "Intercultural Misunderstanding Revisited: Cultural Difference as a (non) Source of Misunderstanding in ELF Communication." *The Cultural and Intercultural Dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca*. Eds. Prue Holmes and Fred Dervin. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2016. 134-156.
- Louhiala-Salminen, Leena, Mirjaliisa Charles and Anne Kankaanranta, "English as a Lingua Franca in Nordic Corporate Mergers: Two Case Companies." *English for Specific Purposes* 24:4 (2005): 401-421.
- Louhiala-Salminen, Leena and Anne Kankaanranta. "Professional Communication in a Global Business Context: The Notion of Global Communicative Competence." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 54.3 (2011): 244-262.
- Lüdi, Georges, Höchle, Katharina and Yanaprasart, Patchareerat. "Plurilingual Practices at Multilingual Workplaces." *Multilingualism at Work: From Policies to Practices in Public, Medical and Business Settings*. Eds. Bernd Meyer and Birgit Apfelbaum. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2010. 211-234.
- Nickerson, Catherine. "The Death of the Non-native Speaker English as a Lingua Franca in Business Communication: a Research Agenda." *Language Teaching* 48.3 (2015): 390-404.
- Pullin Stark, Patricia. "No Joke – This is Serious!: Power, Solidarity and Humor in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)." *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and findings*. Eds. Anna Mauranen and Elina Ranta. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 152-177.





- Räisänen, Tiina. "Discourses of Proficiency – Endangering Aspects of English in an Individual's Biography of Language Use." *Dangerous multilingualism: Northern Perspectives on Order, Purity and Normality*. Eds. Jan Blommaert, Sirpa Leppänen, Päivi Pahta and Tiina Räisänen. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 207-227.
- Räisänen, Tiina. *Professional Communicative Repertoires and Trajectories of Socialization into Global Working life*. PhD Thesis, Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 216, 2013.
- . "Finnish Engineers' Trajectories of Socialisation into Global Working Life: From Language Learners to BELF Users and the Emergence of a Finnish Way of Speaking English." *The Cultural and Intercultural Dimensions of English as a Lingua Franca*. Eds. Prue Holmes and Fred Dervin. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2016. 157-179.
- . "Translingual Practices in Global Business – a Longitudinal Study of a Professional Communicative Repertoire." *Translanguaging as Everyday Practice*. Ed. Gerardo Mazzaferro. New York: Springer, 2018. 149-174.
- Sarang, Srikant. "Intercultural or Not? Beyond Celebration of Cultural Differences in Miscommunication Analysis." *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*, 4.3 (1994): 409-427.
- Schnurr, Stephanie. *Exploring Professional Communication: Language in Action*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Schnurr, Stephanie and Olga Zayts. *Language and Culture at Work*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2017.
- Virkkula-Räisänen, Tiina. "Linguistic Repertoires and Semiotic Resources in Interaction: A Finnish Manager as a Mediator in a Multilingual Meeting." *Journal of Business Communication. Special issue Language Matters: Corporate Language in International Business Operations* 47:4 (2010): 505-531.
- Yanaprasart, Patchareerat. "Making an Asset of Multilingual Human Resources in Organizations." *The Routledge Companion to Cross-Cultural Management*. Eds. Nigel Holden, Snejina Michailova and Susanne Tietze. London: Routledge, 2015. 112-130.
- Zhu, Hua. "Interculturality: Reconceptualising Cultural Memberships and Identities through Translanguaging Practice." *Researching Identity and Interculturality: Towards a More Reflexive and Critical Methodology*. Eds. Fred Dervin and Karen Risager. London: Routledge, 2015. 109-124.

#### **Appendix 1:** relevant transcription conventions

[	the point of overlap onset
]	the point of overlap termination
=	latching utterances, no break or gap between two adjacent utterances
(.)	micro pause
(2.0)	silence marked in seconds
°what°	silent speech
↑	switch to high pitch
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
:	lengthening of the sound
<u>text</u>	emphasis
>text<	faster speech
<text>	slower speech
£text£	smiling voice
(xxx)	unclear speech, transcriber's interpretation
((gaze))	embodied action
((text))	translations from Finnish/Chinese to English