

ESL politeness:
Finnish exchange students' experiences on the politeness used in
English

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Kohteliaisuus voidaan määritellä universaalilla tasolla, mutta sitä voidaan tutkia myös yksityiskohtaisesti eri tavoin kontekstista riippuen. Esimerkiksi kielissä kohteliaisuus voi ilmetä hyvin eri tavoilla. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii selvittämään, kuinka pragmaattinen kohteliaisuus ilmenee englannin kielessä. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kerätä suomalaisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden kokemuksia kohteliaan englannin kielen käytöstä vaihdon aikana, ja pohtia sen mahdollisia eroavaisuuksia suomen kieleen verrattuna. Lisäksi tutkimus pyrkii selvittämään, oliko vaihdolla vaikutusta vastaajien kokemukseen heidän omasta englannin kielen taidostaan.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin sekä määrällisiä että laadullisia tutkimusmenetelmiä. Vastaukset kerättiin Google Formsin avulla, täysin anonymisti. Tutkimukseen osallistui 32 suomalaisessa yliopistossa opiskelevaa tai opiskellutta henkilöä, jotka ovat olleet opintojensa aikana vaihdossa maassa, jossa englantia käytetään yleis- tai äidinkielenä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että yli puolet vastaajista koki opettajien kanssa tapahtuvan vuorovaikutuksen kohteliaammaksi vaihdon aikana, kuin Suomessa. Vuorovaikutuksen kohteliaisuus ryhmätyöskentelyssä ei eronnut vaihtokohteiden ja Suomen välillä merkittävästi, mutta vastaajat huomauttivat kulttuureihin liittyvistä eroavaisuuksista. Lisäksi puolet vastaajista koki, että heidän englannin kielitaitonsa parantui vaihdon ansiosta. Kysymys kohteliaan palautteen antamisesta ja kohteliaan pyynnön tekemisestä ei tuottanut radikaaleja eroja vastausten välillä. Tätä voidaan selittää sillä, millaiseksi vastaajat arvioivat oman kielitaitonsa: korkeammalla tasolla olevat puhujat pystyvät käyttämään monimutkaisempia ja vaihtelevampia ilmaisuja, kuin matalammalla tasolla olevat.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Politeness is an important part of interaction between people. Since politeness can be seen as a way to show respect and consideration towards others, it is considered to be a significant communication strategy (Hosseinpur & Nevisi 2017: 110). As there may be quite varying ideas of what can be considered as ‘polite’ within intercultural communication, studying and comparing the experiences of exchange students will give a wider understanding of the topic.

According to Yan (2016: 232), a deficient knowledge of native speakers’ politeness acts may create cross-cultural miscommunications and result in pragmatic failures. Exchange students should aim at being open to the new diverse culture they are living in, even though it can be a difficult and a stressful task. As demonstrated by Kasper (1997, as cited in Hosseinpur & Nevisi 2017: 110), second language (L2) learners constantly underuse polite expressions in their L2, even though they would perform them perfectly in their first language (L1). Furthermore, Kasper argues that L2 learners may not be familiar with polite communication strategies, or do not know how to use them. Zeff (2016: 3) suggests that teachers should aim at providing their students with varying options on how to act in different communicative situations, since a typical L2 classroom might not provide enough examples of this part of communication. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Peng, Cai & Tan 2012: 982) explain that the high level of indirectness might result in a higher level of politeness. Thus, students who have a lower English proficiency are more likely to not be able to give clear and detailed explanations.

The purpose of the present study is to examine pragmatic politeness of English as a second language (ESL), by studying Finnish university students’ experiences on politeness during their time in a student exchange. The aim is to compare the experiences of politeness while using English abroad, and to present the possible differences based on those experiences. In addition, the study will examine the participants’ experienced language proficiency. The following sections will explain the theoretical framework and terms related to the theme and present the results of an online survey in order to gain a wider understanding of the topic. Furthermore, these results will be discussed in more detail.

2 ADAPTING TO A NEW CULTURE

2.1 Cross-cultural adaptation

Cross cultural adaptation can be defined as an individual's way of adjusting their feelings, behaviors and interpretations to the new cultural environment they are living in (Sussman 2000: 360). When considering the human adaptation experiences, cross-cultural adaptation happens through the communicative interface of an individual and the new cultural environment, where the individual will accomplish their daily functions. Furthermore, cross-cultural adaptation will occur for as long as one communicates with the environment and aims at maintaining a certain functional relationship with new cultural surroundings (Kim 2017: 3-4)

2.2 Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication is a rather complex term, which can be defined in several ways. As stated by Patel, Li and Sooknanan (2011: 15), ‘‘*Intercultural communication means that some form of culture and some form of communication has interacted or intersected in a particular space, time and context*’’.

A challenging, yet an interesting topic a researcher may need to pay attention to is defining the relationship between an individual and the cultures they are participating in. One of the reasons to cause these challenges is that often an individual associates with more than one culture, as they have joined various discourse systems during their lifetime (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012: 161). Furthermore, the authors state that mastering one discourse system may create conflict with the other systems, as the ideologies in them might differ to some extent.

Another challenge of intercultural communication is to be able to share information successfully, while it is quite likely that disruptive errors will occur (Billow & Yeung 1998, as cited in Chen 2017: 205). These disruptive errors might include e.g. the differing standards of privacy and personal space.

According to Eskin (2017: 57-58), linguistic abilities, such as requesting, vary greatly depending on the speaker’s language proficiency. For instance, speakers may know how to use

the word 'please' while requesting something, but at the same time they might not know how to combine it with verbs and other words to create a polite sentence. Usually, the more proficient speakers are able to use the word 'please' with e.g. query preparatory forms such as 'could'.

2.3 The psychology of culture shock

As argued by Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001: 50), values play a crucial role in understanding the adaptation of a new culture. The authors mention that values are a part of cognitive constructs as they are. Furthermore, values are linked to one's self-definition and cultural identity. The most intrinsic aspect mentioned in the text is that values are somehow related to the perception of the people joining the group from somewhere else. Even though people tend to be open-minded towards exchange students, there still might be assumptions based on the values that may not be like one's own.

When studying the grounds of culture shock, one can become familiar with the term *cultural distance*. As Babiker, Cox and Miller (1980: as cited in Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001:95) explain, the term aims at expressing the distress that people might experience while going through the process of acculturation. The hypothesis regarding the link between one's psychological well-being and cultural distance is based on the research studying the medical consultations and experienced anxiety of foreign students in Scotland. This factor could be seen as one of the crucial matters affecting the experience of a culture shock. Furthermore, Ward and Searle (1991:218-219) point out that individuals who have stronger cultural identity tend to be less willing to adapt to the local culture's traditions and customs. Thus, those people face more social difficulties than others.

3 ENGLISH AS THE LINGUA FRANCA

English has been recognized as the most common language of interaction around the world, as around 335 to 360 million people speak it as their native language. In addition, over 800 million people speak English as their second language (Matthiessen, 2015: 2). As it has a strong position in communication with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it can be called a lingua franca (Fang & Baker 2017: 609). The extensive use of English can be

seen in student mobility, too. Universities offer different exchange programs that usually include several options where English is used as the medium of instruction (EMI). As Baker (2016: 440) mentions, a part of students' increased mobility can be explained by the rising importance of English language in the academic world. The need for international experiences has increased and going abroad might often be recommended by universities.

3.1 Using English abroad

Going abroad can be an exciting experience for students. During an exchange, a new life in a foreign country and being surrounded by people from different cultures might be a perfect way to learn English. Although English is the lingua franca, the level of the language proficiency of exchange students might differ from a native-like speaker to a less fluent one. A study conducted by Llanes, Arnó and Mancho-Barés (2016: 299) regarding the use of English in a non-English speaking country shows that there was significant improvement in participants' general English proficiency due to their time abroad. The results of the study show that studying English abroad, even in a non-English speaking country, can be beneficial. Collentine and Freed (2004: 164) emphasize the fact that studies have shown significant increase regarding the gains in oral fluency, e.g. in the smoothness of the speech of students who have been abroad. Furthermore, they explain that the smoothness of the output is a part of more native-like speech. By exposing themselves to a new language environment, students might have a particularly positive and enriching effect on their language skills (Collentine 2009; Llanes 2011, as cited in Llanes, Arnó & Mancho-Barés 2016: 292).

Since student exchange can be seen as a beneficial and memorable part of one's studies, it is interesting to examine students' experiences regarding their exchange period. Furthermore, these experiences might differ considerably depending on the person. For instance, Muller and Schmenk (2017: 142) reveal that one of their survey's participants was so overwhelmed by their own language deficiency that they gave up trying to make themselves heard. The idea of being a native-like speaker silenced her and prohibited her from benefitting the time abroad. On the contrary, Muller and Schmenk (2017:145) point out yet another example, where the exchange student purposely distanced himself from sounding like a native speaker, so people would recognize his foreign accent and hear the effort he must have used to learn the language. Due

to this adequate use of language, his pronunciation seems to be quite impressive and thus gives support for his self-perception as an intelligent student.

4 PRAGMATICS

According to Kaburise (2011: 11), there is a general agreement that pragmatics considers a set of rules, which explain the relationship between meaning and the context in which it occurs. Even though pragmatics focuses on the meaning of the context, it can be analyzed differently depending on the context. The term covers themes such as linguistic aspects, language functions, principles of communication, attitudes and beliefs (Trosborg 2010: 219).

Since pragmatics can be analyzed differently depending on the context, it could be argued that exchange students must do plenty of analyzing during their time abroad. Furthermore, the contextual factors affect the way people encode or decode messages, because the same message may have quite a different meaning in different situations (Patel, Li & Sooknanan 2011: 20). For instance, depending on the culture, there are several varying principles of communication, e.g. how to be polite. It is possible that exchange students might come across with situations where the meaning of context deviates from what is familiar to them, and that might cause misunderstanding. Thus, it is possible that some basic functions, such as the way of greeting others, might feel either too familiar or impolite for some people. Even when people are fluent in a certain language, they might consciously or unconsciously modify their way of communicating by selecting certain words or using non-verbal language, such as gestures and intonation (Patel, Li & Sooknanan 2011: 23).

4.1 Pragmatic coding

One way to examine pragmatics is to look at different parts of it. The present study will take a more specific look at a certain area of pragmatics, called pragmatic coding. As McGuire (2017: 1) demonstrates, while pragmatics concentrates on the bigger picture, pragmatic coding addresses various subtle parts of language. Thus, it is not a surprise that politeness can be seen as a part of it.

Politeness can be interpreted differently depending on the culture, as there may be versatile forms of it for different situations. For instance, there is a difference between the way people speak to their friends and the way they speak to authorities. They might address the authorities more formally and in conclusive way but speak to their friends in a more unofficial tone, as if they were family. While students with lower language proficiency may use more simple and perhaps impolite language, the ones with higher proficiency seem to possess more diverse expressions and tend to be able to adjust their output (Bu 2012: 33). Thus, if a student has a low language proficiency, they might not be able to express their matter in the way that would be suitable for the situation. When it comes to the politeness of exchange students, it could be argued ESL students with a lower language proficiency tend to lack formality. Therefore, they may use more direct and informal expressions within their speech.

4.2 Politeness theory

Defining politeness is not a simple matter. There can be different ways to describe what it means for one to be polite. Watts (2003: 1) suggests that politeness could be characterized as a way of being considerate towards others, or to be socially appropriate. Furthermore, when defining the term *polite language*, Watts (2003: 1) admits that explaining such an idea may be difficult, too. Thus, the definitions can include varying explanations such as *'the language a person uses to avoid being too direct'*, *'language which contains respectful forms of address like sir or madam'* or *'language that displays certain "polite" formulaic utterances like please, thank you, excuse me or sorry'* (Watts 2003: 1).

According to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978, as cited in Song 2017: 67) all forms of politeness include an intention to be polite, which can be considered as a universal trait that happens in communication regardless of the culture. Furthermore, they assume that regardless of one's culture, everyone could relate to the following matters:

1. Everyone has face
2. The face can be threatened by any speech act
3. Speakers aim at minimizing the threat by using different linguistic strategies

The politeness theory presents three factors, which determine the level of politeness and the form of strategy that is used by the speaker: How the speaker understands the social distance between themselves and the hearer, the speaker's perception regarding the social power ratio between the communicators, and the speaker's idea of the imposition of the task (Song 2017: 67). Even though these factors provide a certain basis for understanding politeness, it could be argued that one should not rely just on these arguments. For instance, Ide (1989, as cited in Song 2017: 68) reports that as Japanese culture leans to collectivism, while American culture is widely individualistic, their politeness strategies and expressions cannot be the completely similar. In addition, Felix-Brasfeder's (2008, as cited in Song 2017:68) cross-cultural study of politeness reveals that Americans tend to favor direct refusal, no matter what the hearer's power or distance is. On the contrary, Felix-Brasfeder explains that Mexicans prefer indirect refusal strategies, if the power of the hearer is higher.

As politeness might be experienced differently depending on one's personality and other factors, there can be several other matters that affect the way a person understands politeness. Kádár (2017: 3) notes that several scholars, who are not native speakers of English, have expressed their opinion of the politeness theory, arguing that it relies too heavily on the Western idea of individual mean-to-ends rationality behind the operation of politeness. Their worries relate to the fact that in countries such as Japan, the form of politeness being used might not be connected to an individual's choices, but rather to strict interactional norms and frameworks (Kádár 2017: 3).

4.3 Pragmatic politeness

The research of politeness from a pragmatic point of view began between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. It has undergone several phases during the years, but the main point that was discovered is that one cannot form just one universal frame to explain pragmatic politeness. As politeness is strongly related to individual's own culture, it can be seen as a wide phenomenon that should be studied at different levels (Kádár 2017:1).

Exchange students must interact with other people in order to work, play, or express any kind of message (Lompscher 1999, as cited in Shively 2016:52). From a linguistic aspect, an exchange period offers students situations where they get to interact with people from different

cultures and who might have varying ideas of politeness. The interaction occurring during exchange might differ from what students have been used to.

5 PRESENT STUDY

In this chapter, I will be discussing the aim and the research questions of the study. Furthermore, the section includes discussion of data collection, methods and ethics. Both the pilot questionnaire and the final version of the questionnaire will be presented as well.

5.1 Research questions and the aim of the study

As mentioned above, the present study will focus on the pragmatic politeness in the use of English. The aim of the study is to get a better understanding of Finnish university students' experiences regarding politeness of English during their time abroad. The idea is to compare students' experiences and discuss the matters affecting them. Thus, the research questions of the study are the following:

1. Was the classroom interaction with a teacher, and during group work, more polite or less polite than in Finland?
2. How did it feel to give polite and rationale feedback, and to request something in English during the time abroad?
3. Did the exchange period affect students' language proficiency so much that their communication in English is now more polite than before the exchange?

5.2 Methods of the study

When conducting a research, there are always different options on how to do it (Denscombe 2014: 3). Denscombe (2014:3) argues that one of the biggest decisions considering the research is to choose the right *strategy* for it. The present study consists mostly a mixed methods approach, as it combines aspects of other strategies. These strategies include for instance a

survey to gather facts and to measure them, an ethnographic perspective that interprets social interaction within a culture, and a phenomenological strategy that aims at understanding a matter through someone else's eyes (Denscombe 2014: 4).

As the study utilizes mixed methods -strategies, using only a single method like action research, which aims at solving practical problems, would not be reasonable when considering the aim of the study: to gather information and widen one's understanding of the topic. Since there is not an actual research problem that the study would attempt to solve, excluding this kind of a strategy is easy.

Another inadequate research strategy for the study is sampling, since the aim of the study is not to conduct a large-scale survey that could provide a probability equating the results to fit a certain group. Moreover, the aim of this study is not to make generalized assumptions, but to gain a wider understanding of the topic based on the respondents' experiences. Although, the results of the questionnaire may include several similar experiences, which could serve as a generalized explanation. Still, the thesis will not focus on creating generalizations.

In addition to sampling, a case study could have not been an option either. According to Denscombe (2014: 54), a case study requires distinct boundaries. The present study deals with a specific topic, but the boundaries of it are not distinct enough since the questionnaire gathers experiences from a little wider perspective. Furthermore, case studies do not usually focus on more than just a few instances of a certain phenomenon. Therefore, if the survey was conducted with just a few participants and a bit more qualitative aim, a case study could have been an option.

5.3 Ethics

Before the actual questionnaire, the form includes some basic questions about one's background. These questions include asking about information needed for the study, such as the respondent's home university, the country in which they were during their exchange and how they would define politeness. An important part of the survey is that it is anonymous. In order to offer respondents a chance of being anonymous, I had to choose only the necessary questions that I would ask, and to ponder whether these questions would reveal participants'

identity. As the questionnaire includes a privacy notice, which the participants must read and accept in order to complete the survey, it provided me a chance of explaining their anonymity. According to Denscombe (2014: 311) researchers should ensure participants' personal safety, respect their privacy and sensitivities, treat all the information as confidential and provide them a chance of being anonymous.

The privacy notice informs the participants that the questionnaire does not include questions asking about their name, gender, or any other quality that would reveal their identity. Although, it mentions that there are a few open-ended questions in the questionnaire, where the participants can share their personal experiences. These are the parts from which some people could recognize the respondent. Therefore, the privacy notice explains that answering those open-ended questions is voluntary for the participant.

The basis of answering the questionnaire is that it is voluntary. Participants should have enough information regarding the study, before they make their decision on whether they will participate or not (Denscombe 2014: 311). Before the possible participants of the survey are able to see the questionnaire, they are provided detailed information about the study, for example the aim of the research, for what purpose their answers will be used, and that the questionnaire is anonymous. Furthermore, the privacy notice informs the participants of the ways that make the questionnaire anonymous, e.g. by not collecting the participants' names.

The strength of the fixed questions used in the questionnaire is that they cannot reveal one's identity. Even though the questions are anonymous and rather easy to answer, they do not offer such detailed information that open-ended questions would do. On the other hand, the weakness of the fixed questions is the amount of information they give to the researcher. When it comes to the open-ended questions, they offer respondents a chance of giving more detailed answers. This is a strength of the method, but a weakness, too. Since these open-ended questions provide participants a chance of sharing their experiences rather freely, it could cause a situation where someone reading their experiences would recognize the participant. Moreover, open-ended questions require more effort from the participants, and leave the researcher with data that is quite superficial, which then needs to be analyzed in quite detail before the researcher could use it (Denscombe 2014: 176).

5.4 The pilot questionnaire

Preparing to publish the questionnaire required a pilot version of the survey. Therefore, two people that were suitable when considering the requirements of a participant answered the questionnaire, and the other one gave some comments about the structure of the survey, too. Based on the comments and suggestions of the first pilot version, I modified the questionnaire to a more detailed and specific one. For instance, the first pilot did not include a question about defining politeness. As participants may have varying ideas of the term, it is necessary to include a question asking them to define the concept. Furthermore, the required changes aimed at making the questions more specific. For instance, one of the questions in the pilot version of the questionnaire was presented as ‘How often did you feel stress, frustration or anxiety during your exchange?’’. The question is quite generalized, and based on the comments from the first pilot, I edited the question to ‘How often did you feel stress, frustration or anxiety related to producing speech during the exchange?’’. Furthermore, as I had asked whether there were differences in polite interaction in general, I had to specify that one as well. Therefore, the final version of the questionnaire includes two different settings, where the respondents must ponder the politeness of their interaction: A classroom setting where one is interacting with a teacher, and a setting where one is doing group work.

After the first pilot, I created a second pilot. Then, another two people answered the questionnaire. This time both participants gave comments about the survey. In addition, the second pilot was sent to the teacher of the seminar, so that I could get feedback from different perspectives. Based on the comments regarding the second pilot, I narrowed down the number of questions to almost half. Furthermore, I did some small changes, such as added a drop-down catalogue including a list of all the countries in the world, so that the participants could choose their exchange country from there. These two pilot versions of the questionnaire made it possible for me to create more specific questions relating to the topic, and to form them in a way that they were easier to understand.

5.5 Data collection

The data gathered for the study was collected through Google Forms, as an online questionnaire. Exploiting the internet seemed like a rather safe choice, as the participants were able to answer the questionnaire regardless of their location. Moreover, the participants were able to choose the device through which they would answer the questionnaire. Thus, they could utilize their mobile phones, as they did not need to be at home to use their computers. The survey accepted responses for twenty-four (24) days between March and April 2021. After that, the questionnaire was closed, and no more responses were collected.

Conducting an online survey is rather easy nowadays, and one may come across with them daily. Due to the status of the internet in people's lives, it could have been more time-consuming to conduct e.g. a telephone survey. Furthermore, the time required just to search for the phone numbers and to discuss with the respondents would have not been suitable for the timeframe of the study. Therefore, it could be argued that choosing an online questionnaire saves time and money. In addition, it expedites the data processing, as the data of the questionnaire is automatically formed to graphics.

Before an online questionnaire was chosen as the method of gathering data, some other methods, such as interviews, were considered. A face-to-face discussion with the respondents could have given detailed and precise information, but as the aim of the study is to take a brief look at the subject, the online questionnaire was a better option. Furthermore, arranging interviews during the coronavirus pandemic would have not been possible, and conducting them online would have not served the same idea. Meanwhile, people tend to be quite busy with their own lives and arranging time for longer surveys that include interviews may seem impossible. Even though an online questionnaire will not give as precise and detailed information as a face-to-face discussion would do, it was the best option when considering the aim of the study. In addition, an online questionnaire does not require a considerable amount of time from the participants and is easy to answer to, no matter what the location of the respondent is. Based on that, the survey was shared to social networks, such as Facebook, and in different universities' email lists.

First, it was easy to begin to share the questionnaire on Facebook, where some students would see it. As Facebook itself does not offer enough visibility for the questionnaire, contacting student associations offered a better chance of getting responses. Thus, the questionnaire was sent to different student associations in Jyväskylä, but to other cities' student associations as well. Sending the request asking if the questionnaire could be shared in associations' email lists required plenty of time, as finding the right person to contact was a slow process. In addition to contacting student associations, the questionnaire was sent to some education designers, too. All the contacts were found by searching for different universities or student associations through the internet. Some of the representatives answered the email, some did not.

5.6 The questionnaire

Before the actual questionnaire, the respondents were asked some basic questions about their background, such as their home university and exchange country. The actual questionnaire consists of thirteen (13) questions. Most of them are multiple choice, as they measure quantity, but there are also a few open-ended questions to focus more on the qualitative side of the experiences. In addition, the questionnaire includes a space for free comments at the end of the form.

For being able to participate in the survey, respondents were required to look at a certain criteria to see whether they fit into it or not. The criteria for the respondents was that

1. They study in a Finnish university at the moment, or they have studied in one (but are already graduated)
2. They have been in a student exchange during their studies in the university
3. English is widely used (either as a native language or a second language) in their exchange country.

Altogether thirty-two (32) people participated in the survey. Most of them were from the University of Jyväskylä (96,9%), and the rest were from the University of Tampere. Figure one shows that the exchange countries of the participants are located in Europe, Asia and the United States.

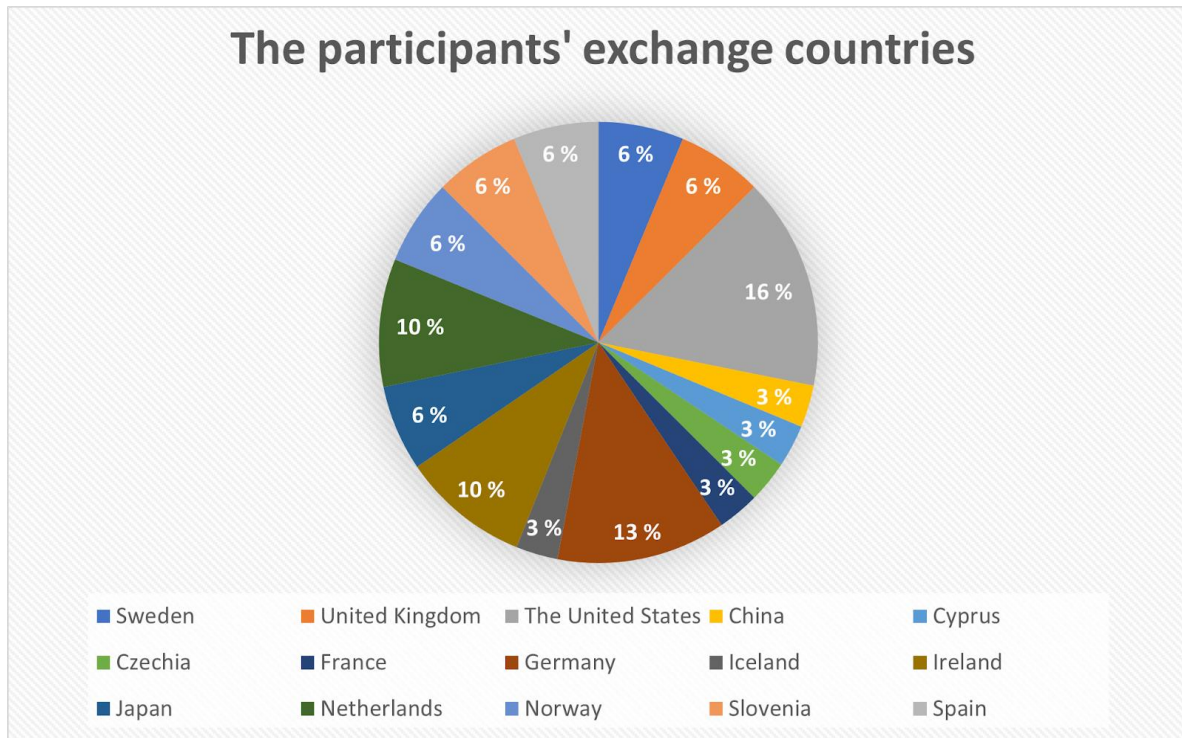


Figure 1: The participants' exchange countries

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results of the questionnaire will be discussed and compared to the theoretical background. When dealing with the results, the following sections will focus on the research questions one by one.

6.1 Defining polite speech

As mentioned previously, defining politeness can be challenging due to its varying interpretations by people with different backgrounds and values. The participants of the study were asked to define polite speech in order to get an idea of how they understand the term. The answers varied, but there were plenty of similar ones as well. Next, I present you the three most often mentioned qualities of polite speech demonstrated by the respondents:

Using the words 'please, thank you and excuse me.'

A half of the participants mentioned that being polite in English requires the use of the word 'please'. Some of them mentioned it briefly, while others emphasized the amount in which the word should be used. Watts (2003: 1) mentions that polite language includes formulaic utterances such as 'please'. Thus, the word 'please' can be associated with polite requests, as it is commonly used in English. In addition, Eskin (2017: 57-58) points out that L2 speakers may know how to use the word 'please' while requesting something, but at the same time they might not know how to combine the word with verbs and other words to create a polite sentence. Usually, the more proficient speakers are able to use the word 'please' with e.g. query preparatory forms such as 'could you'. As mentioned previously, the lack of proficiency may appear as a use of more direct and informal expressions within one's speech, while the proficient speakers are able to use more diverse expressions and to adjust their output (Bu 2012: 33).

The use of auxiliary modal verbs

According to the participants, another way of defining polite speech is the use of auxiliary verbs that are used in conditional sentences. These verbs include words such as 'would you' or 'could you'. The idea is to sound anything but imperative. The use of auxiliary verbs can be useful especially when one desires to do polite requests, such as 'Could you pass me the salt, please?'. Furthermore, the use of the word 'please' is favored by the participants. In many cases, these two ensembles are combined to one expression, in order to be as polite as possible.

The way of taking others into consideration during discussion

A third point that several respondents made regarding polite language was not actually about any specific word choices or other linguistic features, but rather about the way of expressing oneself and taking other speakers into consideration. According to the participants, important features of polite language include good manners, friendly gestures, a pleasant tone of voice, taking the other person into consideration and paying attention to cultural habits such as small talk. These matters are certainly an important basis for pragmatic politeness, as it was previously discussed that even if people are fluent speakers of a certain language, they might affect their way of communicating by using specific words or non-verbal language, such as

gestures and intonation (Patel, Li & Sooknanan 2011: 23). Sometimes, when one considers the parts of language, they might not necessarily acknowledge the varying aspects of it. The idea is not always about choosing the right words or expressions, but to focus on taking others into consideration as well.

To gather more examples of the polite speech, the participants were asked to answer the following question: *How would you politely in English ask someone to get out of the way?*

Almost all the participants included ‘*Excuse me*’ to their answer, which is a great example of being polite. Compared to e.g. ‘*Move, you are on the way*’, excusing oneself is a better option. Moreover, some of the participants used the modal auxiliary ‘*could*’, e.g. ‘*Excuse me, could you get out of my way?*’. This example supports participants’ idea of using modal auxiliaries in order to be polite. Moreover, some of the respondents used formulaic utterances as well, e.g. by asking ‘*Sorry, could I get through here? Thank you.*’

6.2 The level of politeness during interaction in the exchange classroom

In this section, the results of the research question ‘*Was the classroom interaction with a teacher and during group work more polite, or less polite than in Finland?*’ are being analyzed. During the questionnaire, the participants answered two separate parts questions: The first one aimed at comparing whether the interaction with teachers in classrooms was more polite or less polite than in Finland. The second question asked whether the interaction during group work was more polite or less polite than in Finland. At first, the participants answered these multiple-choice questions. After that, there was a section for optional comments, so that the participants could share their experiences in more detail.

The results show that over a half of the respondents (56%) considered the classroom interaction with teachers to be more polite than in Finland, while only 3% considered the interaction to be less polite than in Finland. As shown in the second figure, 38% of the participants did not notice any difference regarding the politeness of the classroom interaction.

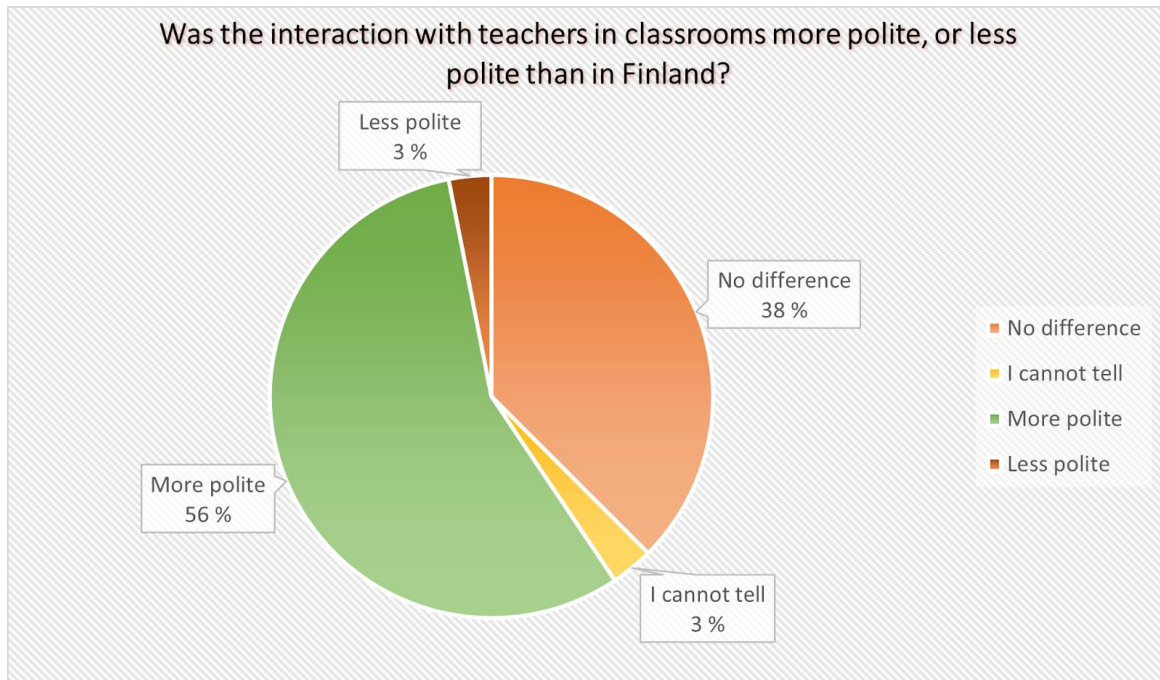


Figure 2: Participants' experiences regarding polite interaction with teachers

One of respondents described their experience as diverse:

1. [“There was a huge variation between the teachers. One of my English teachers, who was originally from the United Kingdom, was really formal and rude. For instance, when the teacher explained some rules, they told us that they would throw one’s computer out of the window if they did not obey.”]

But at the same time:

1. [“Another English teacher of mine, who was originally from Australia, was actually really polite and compassionate. The teacher shared plenty of personal, even private experiences besides teaching, was interested in students’ cultures and experiences regarding the content of the course (Nordic Welfare State Model), and they built the course based on the interests of the students. The politeness of the teacher got really emphasized as they constantly stated that they are no more professional than the rest of us”]

These varying experiences are a relevant example related to the statement of Bilbo and Yeung (1998, as cited in Chen 2017: 205), pointing out that one of the challenges of intercultural communication is to be able to share information without disruptive errors, such as differing standards of privacy and personal space. It could be argued that the first teacher of the respondent caused some confusion regarding the standard of privacy, as their rules included

threatening to throw one's computer out of the window. Meanwhile, the more compassionate teacher might have shared too personal information about their life to the students. As mentioned above, the same message may have quite different meanings in different situations. Thus, it might be that the participant's experience of politeness could be different if it happened in a different context.

Most of the experiences regarding polite interaction with teachers were about addressing them properly. Since this is not a common principle used in Finland, addressing teachers by using terms such as 'Ms./Mrs.' or a 'professor/doctor' can be a challenging task for exchange students. According to the participants, some of their teachers were quite strict about the proper way of addressing them.

The third figure shows the different result of the experienced politeness during group work. Over a half of the respondents (66%) perceived that there was no difference of politeness between the group work done during the exchange compared to group work done in Finland. Still, 16% of the respondents agreed that the interaction in group work situations was more polite during the exchange than in Finland. In addition, 9% of the participants felt that the interaction during group work was less polite than in Finland, while another 9% could not tell their opinion.

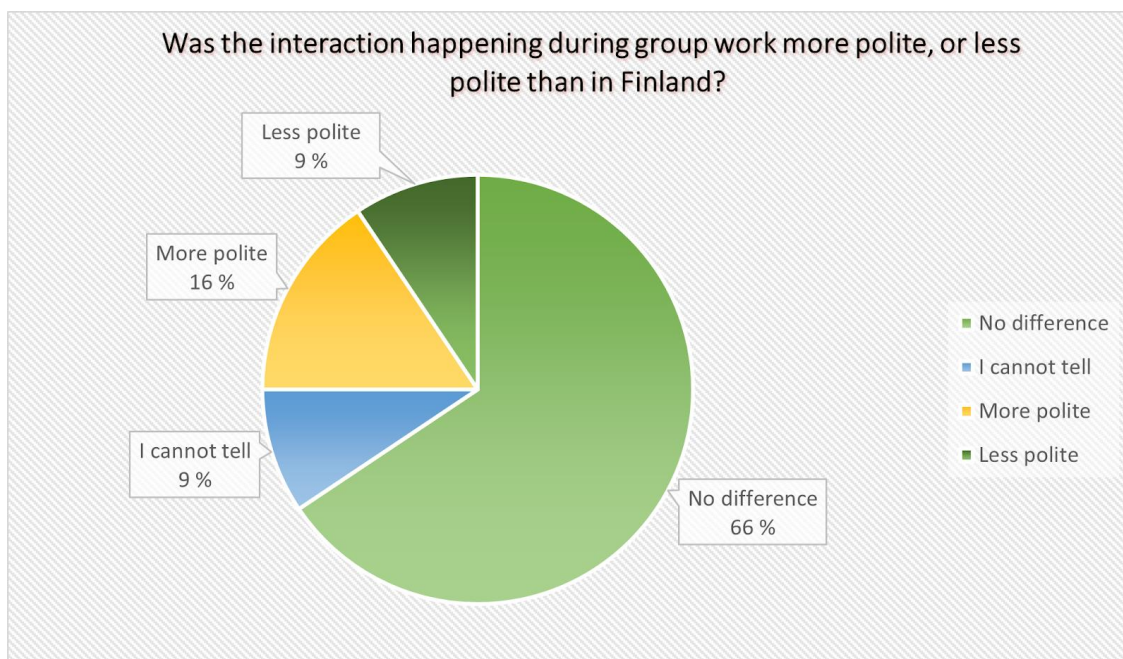


Figure 3: Participants' experiences regarding politeness occurring during group work

The experiences relating to group work seem to be quite neutral. Many participants felt that doing group work during exchange tended to be as informal as in Finland. For instance, one of the respondents stated that:

2. ['The group work felt perhaps a little more familiar and boisterous than in Finland, but I did not notice any differences in politeness.']

On the other hand, some of the students experienced situations in which cultural differences were emphasized more:

3. ['The most surprising thing about group work was the amount of avoiding responsibilities. For example, people did not complete the things that were agreed together on time. Furthermore, as we created WhatsApp -groups for the assignments, one could not get answers there. I am used to more functional group work in Finland, yet I do not believe that this is dependent only on language.']

As discussed above, values play a crucial role in understanding the adaptation of a new culture (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001: 50). The example of the cultural differences during group work demonstrates how differently people might experience the function of a group. If the respondent values punctuality and the ability to communicate, their chances of adapting to a new culture might be compromised by other students' behavior.

As Patel, Li and Sooknanan (2011: 20) explained, the messages people send to each other may have quite different meaning depending on the context. Thus, it could be that the way some students did not do their group work on time was completely normal for them. In general, it could be that returning tasks late is not a huge issue for them. At the same time, their way of acting might have appeared as rude to the respondent. Furthermore, as the respondent stated, in Finland punctuality and a certain functional way of doing group work is a norm. Since the way of acting differs in this context, it can be experienced as impolite by the exchange students.

As mentioned above, besides language other matters may influence the communication as well. Non-verbal language, such as gestures, can affect the basis of the communication, and therefore, one's adaptation to culture. If one considers their idea of non-verbal matters affecting the communication, and the participant's experience of impoliteness, it could be argued that the non-verbal language that was presented by other students (disrespect for agreed 'rules' and

being on time) immediately affected the respondent's way of adapting to the culture. Furthermore, another respondent pointed out that

4. ['I have different experiences with different groups. Interaction during group work with the locals was more impolite per se. There may have been cases where someone was late or did not inform the teacher about their absence, somebody took control of someone arbitrarily and someone was unable to engage in group work. In several cases, the locals expressed themselves in Swedish, so they actually used a language that was not understood by everyone. On the contrary, the groups that were formed with other exchange students were really polite instead.']

Perhaps, the context has a meaning here as well. Local students live by their norms, using the language that is familiar to them. While their actions may seem impolite, the way that exchange students interact appears to be sincerely polite instead. It could be that living in a completely foreign country creates some kind of an act of politeness. Since exchange students might aim at creating new friendships and contacts, it is important for them to be polite. One of Watts' (2003: 1) suggestions to define politeness is that it could be characterized as a way of being considerate towards others, or to be socially appropriate. These could be some of the qualities that the exchange students aim at being. A third, and a rather different experience presents another way of experiencing politeness:

5. ['When speaking English, polite expressions may be left unsaid if one is concentrating on being even able to say their matter and to be understood. I do not feel that people are impolite just to be mean, but rather because the spoken language is not a native one for them. Personally, I am not even sure if I know how to pay attention to how politely something is presented to me.']

The respondent's experience is quite like the point mentioned above: Although English is the lingua franca, the level of language proficiency might differ from a native-like speaker to less fluent one. For instance, Muller and Schmenk's (2017: 142) study revealed that one of their study's participants was truly overwhelmed by their language proficiency, while the other one purposely utilized the position of being an exchange student to improve their language skills. Therefore, one needs to understand that people's language proficiencies might differ considerably, and the way people see the use of foreign language may vary as well. While some students have a high language proficiency and can possess diverse expressions or are able to adjust their output, others may lack the proficiency and thus be impolite. Consequently, it is

good to remember the basis in which the student might not be a native speaker of the language. Due to that, they might focus on being understood rather than being polite.

6.3 Giving polite feedback and requesting in English

The second research question aims at gathering the participants' experiences of giving rationale and polite feedback in English. Furthermore, it addresses the experiences of doing polite requests in English as well. As the participants were asked to define politeness and to give examples of the ways they would ask someone to get out of the way, they managed to give a concrete example of their idea on how to politely request something in English.

As the previous study by Bu (2012: 33) shows, a higher language proficiency usually results as an ability to use more specific forms of language, and to be able to adjust one's output. This enhances a person's ability to be polite. On the other hand, lower language proficiency might be seen as a more 'direct' way of speaking, as the using varying expressions is not fluent.

Furthermore, as stated by Eskin (2017; 57-58), linguistic abilities such as requesting differ greatly depending on the speaker's language proficiency. For instance, some people may know how to use the word 'please' while requesting something, but struggle to combine it with other words to create a polite sentence. Moreover, it is common that the people who are more proficient speakers are able to use the word 'please' with e.g. query preparatory forms like 'could you.'. As presented above, all the participants were able to give an example of a polite request, where they used the word 'please' or modal auxiliaries such as 'could' or 'would'.

Before answering the questions about giving feedback and doing requests, the participants were asked to evaluate their language proficiency. The first question focused on the participants' ability to interact fluently and spontaneously in English, while the second one focused to the extent of their English vocabulary.

As the first table shows, almost a half of the participants consider that they can interact really well in English. Furthermore, most of the participants feel quite confident about their fluency, since there were no answers between the options one to three.

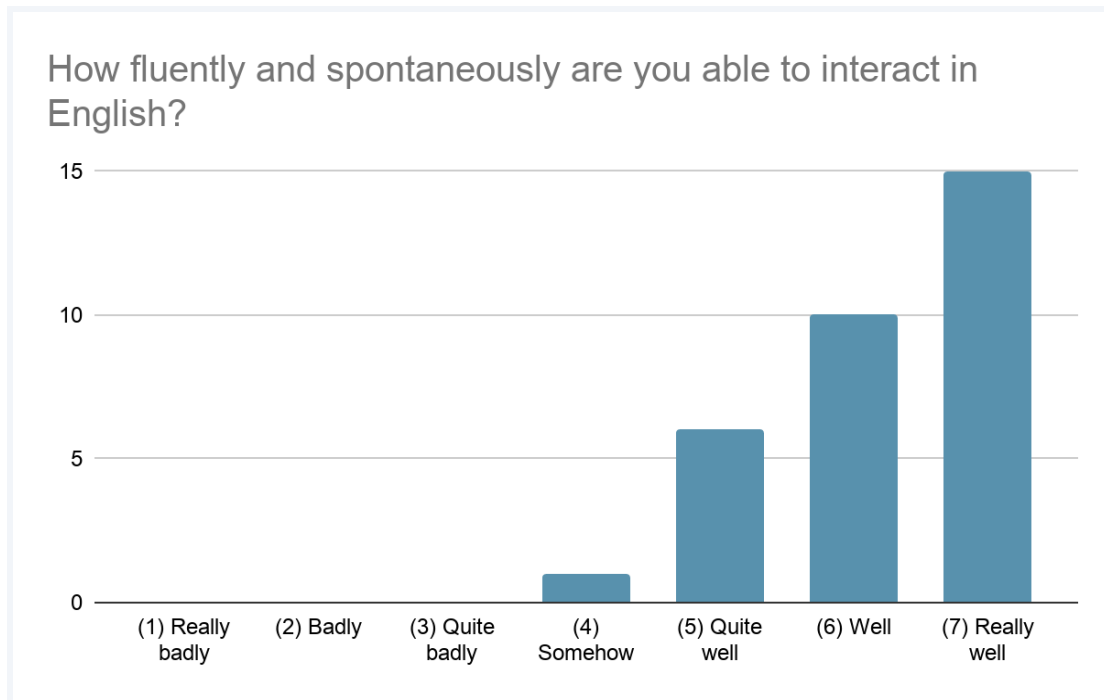


Table 1: How fluently and spontaneously are you able to interact in English?

The second table shows slightly different results, as they distribute more steadily between the options. As the second table demonstrates, only one participant considered their vocabulary to be quite limited. Furthermore, a couple more participants considered their vocabulary to be neutral, while options five, six and seven gained the most votes. Yet, the answers to the question are distributed quite steadily, rather than in a way where the last answer options would have gained the most votes. The table below shows that eight of the participants considered that their English vocabulary is quite extensive, whereas eleven participants answered that their vocabulary is extensive. In addition, eight of the participants feel that their English vocabulary is really extensive.

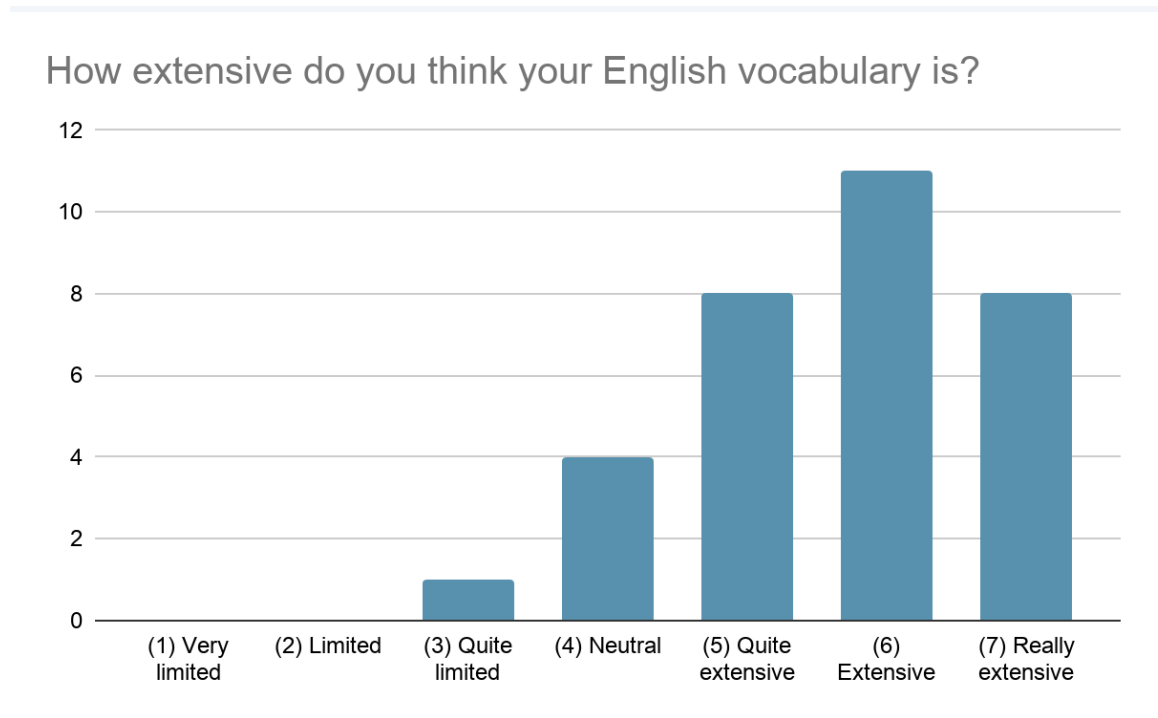


Table 2: How extensive do you think your English vocabulary is?

As discussed previously, cultural distance demonstrates the distress that people may feel while adapting to the current, dominant culture. If the use of English during an exchange is considered as a part of this process of adaptation, it is possible that using L2 might cause some stress for the students. Furthermore, if a student desires to be polite, but due to their language proficiency is not able to do so, it can cause stress and anxiety as well. Thus, the participants were asked how often they felt stress, frustration or anxiety related to producing speech during the exchange. The fourth figure reveals that even while the answer option '*almost never*' got 37,5% of the votes, 28,1% of the participants felt stress, frustration or anxiety related to producing speech during their exchange. Furthermore, 15,6% of the participants experienced these feelings often. Thus, experiencing these more negative feelings could be an interesting topic for later studies.

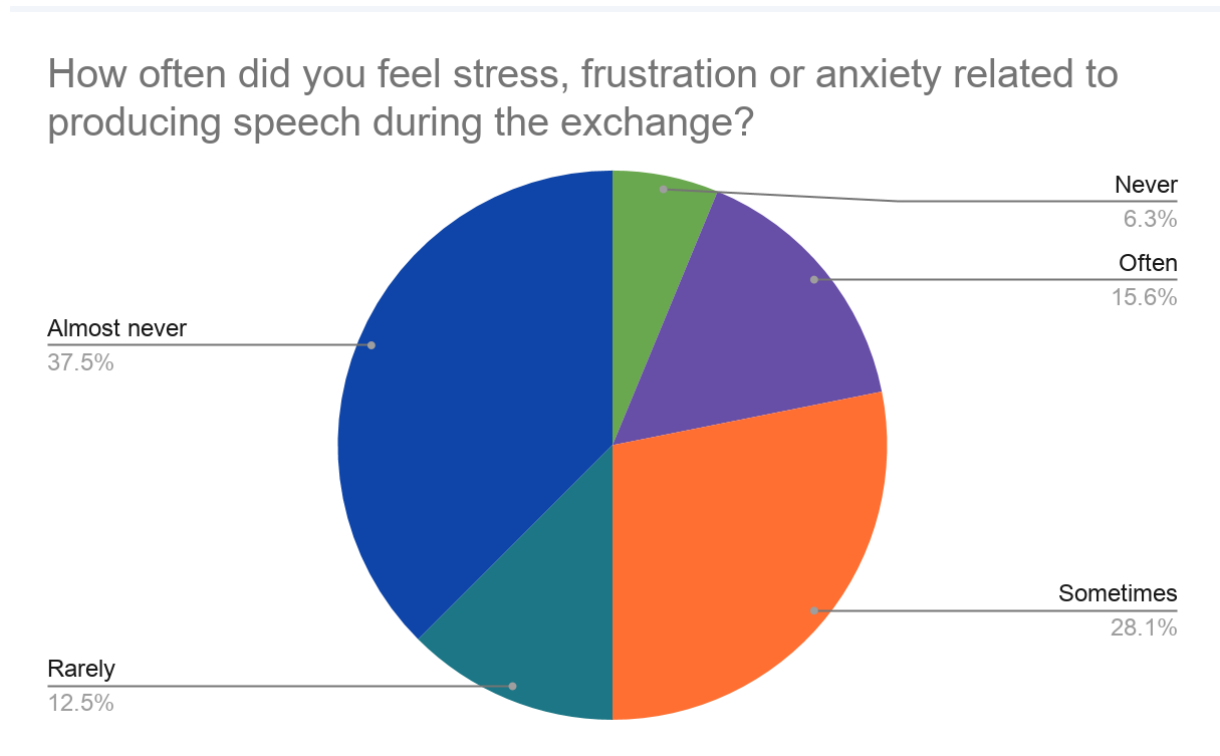


Figure 4: How often did you feel stress, frustration or anxiety relates to producing speech during the exchange?

The second research question aims at gaining a better understanding of how it felt for the participants to give polite and rationale feedback and to do polite requests in English. Table four shows that giving polite and rationale feedback was considered as a quite neutral and easy task. Yet, a few participants felt that giving feedback was quite difficult. Furthermore, only a couple of participants considered giving feedback to be really easy.

These experiences are based on one's personal feelings, as well as to their language proficiency. As mentioned earlier, if the person's language proficiency is high, they tend to be able to use a more diverse language and to use different expressions. So, the results of this question can reflect the participants' language proficiency to some extent, and from a one point of view.

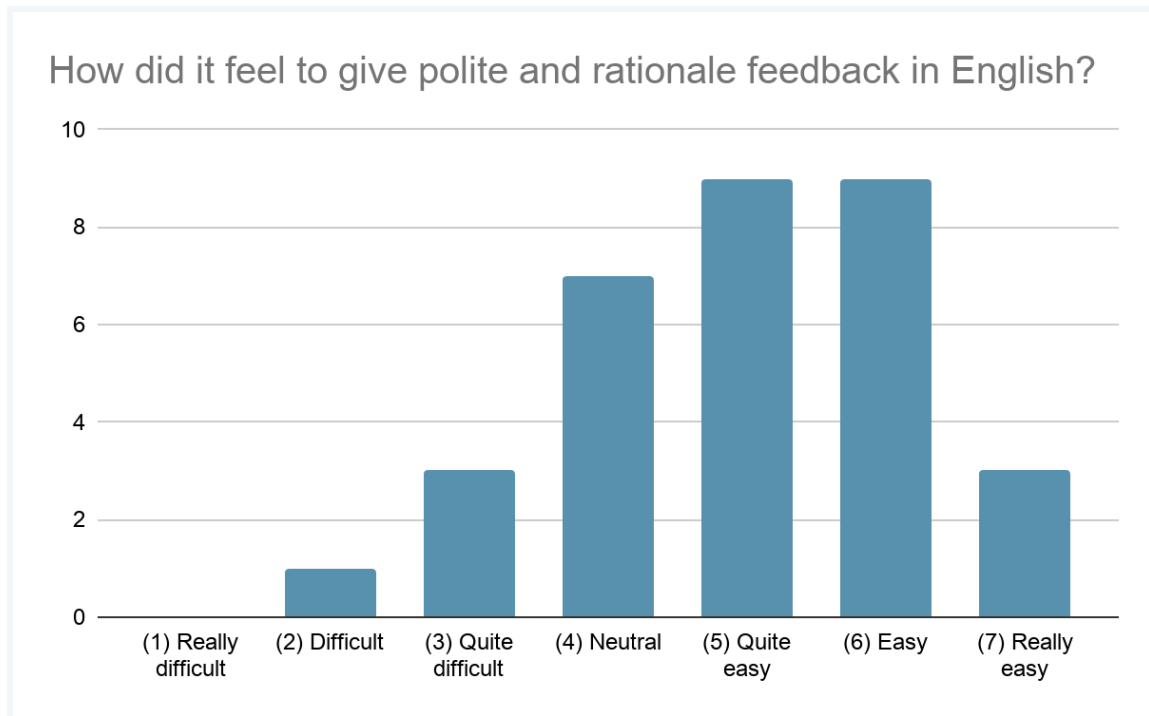


Table 4: How did it feel to give polite and rationale feedback in English?

The second part of the question deals with the participants' experiences of doing polite requests in English, such as asking for clarification. As doing a request can be an easier task than giving proper and detailed feedback, the results for the question are dominated by the answers between '*Quite easy*' to '*Really easy*'. The fact that doing a polite request might be a little easier task can be demonstrated with the participants' examples of asking politely for someone to move aside. Since polite requests can be quite simple questions, such as '*Excuse me, may I go from here?*', it could explain the results of the fourth table. Of course, there is some variation due to personal experiences, but the results indicate that the respondents considered making requests to be an easier task than giving feedback. The notable difference between the results can be seen with the number of answers in the option '*Really easy*'. The question of giving polite feedback got three votes on the answer option '*Really easy*', whereas the same option with the question of doing a polite request got seven votes.

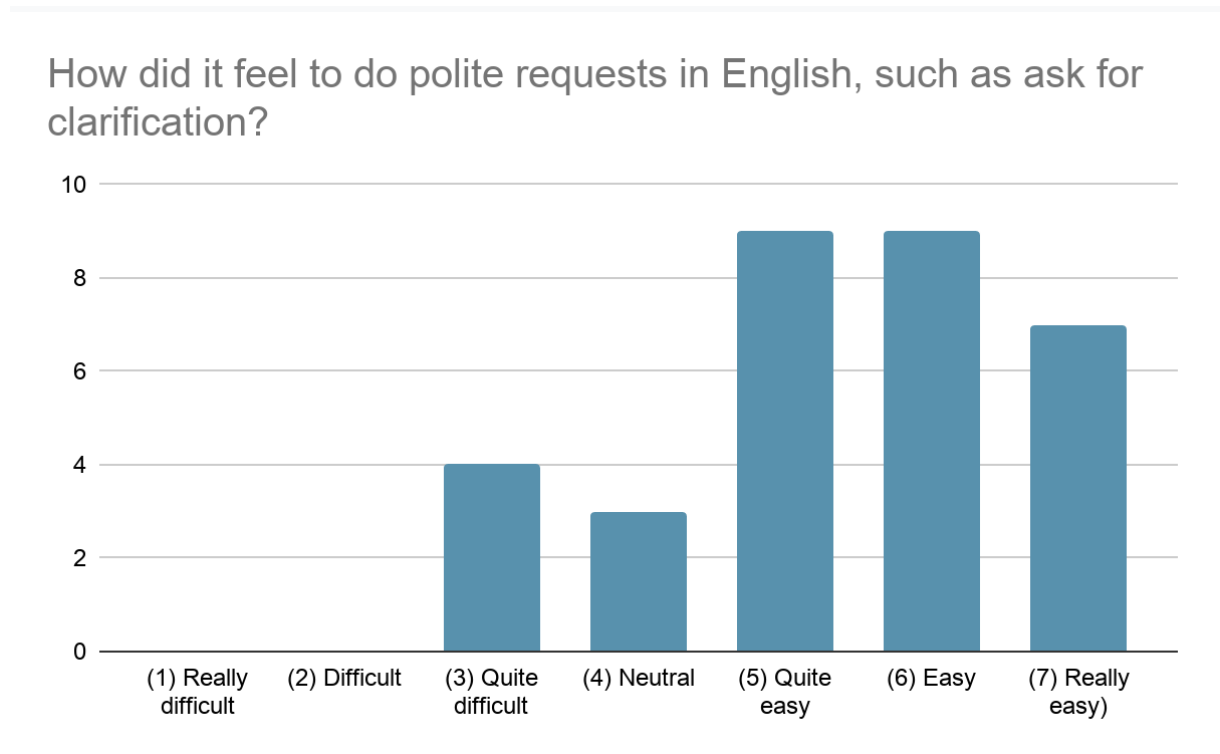


Table 5: How did it feel to do polite requests in English, such as ask for clarification?

6.4 The effect of the exchange period on the participants' language proficiency

The third research question aims at gathering the participants' feelings regarding their current language proficiency. Furthermore, the main question is whether the exchange period affected the participants' language proficiency so that their communication in English is now more polite than before their time abroad.

There are studies that indicate a significant improvement in people's general L2 proficiency after they have been in an exchange. As discovered by Llanes, Arnó and Mancho-Barés (2016: 299), the time abroad can improve one's English proficiency considerably, even if English is not the first language of the country. Furthermore, Collentine and Freed (2004: 164) reveal in their study that the oral fluency (e.g. the smoothness of the speech) of exchange students has improved considerably during their time abroad. As students experience cross-cultural adaptation, such as accomplishing daily communicative functions, they expose themselves to a

new language environment and might have a particularly enriching effect on their language proficiency.

The fifth figure shows the distribution of the participants' experiences. Surprisingly, 37,5% of the respondents could not notice any difference in their L2 proficiency. Yet, 50% of the participants felt that their vocabulary and expressions improved because of the exchange.

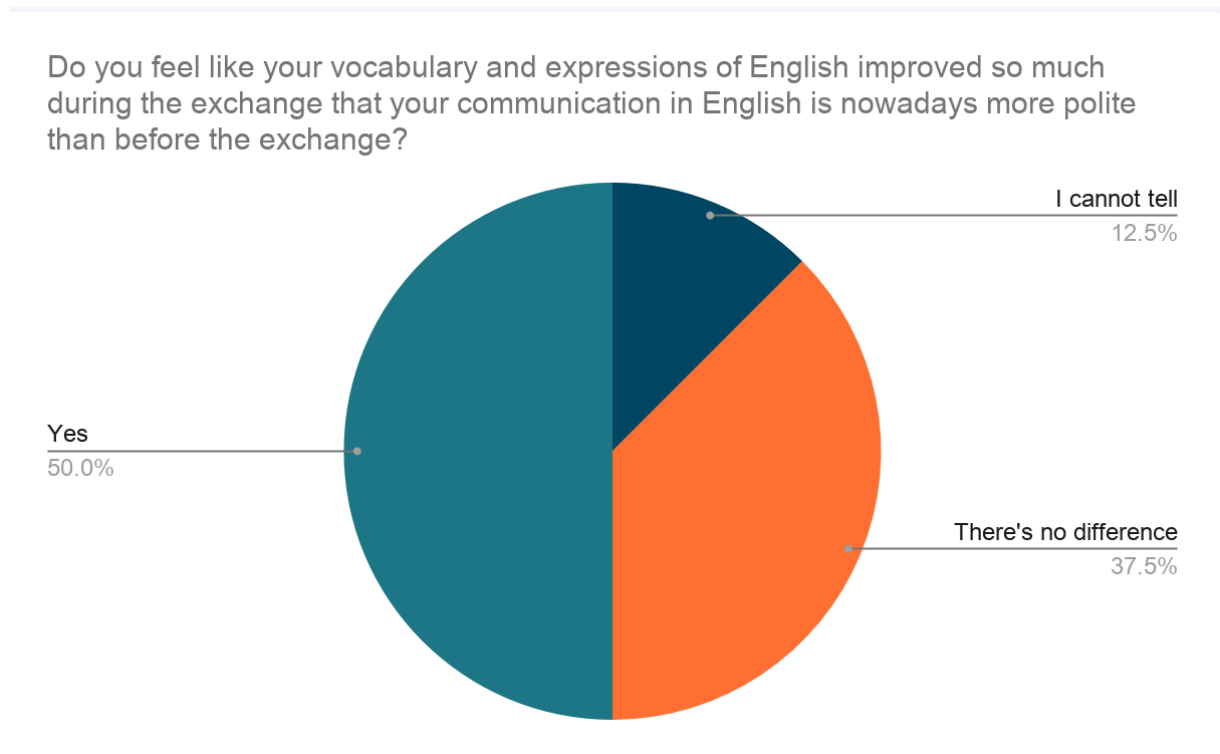


Figure 5: Do you feel like your vocabulary and expressions of English improved so much during the exchange that your communication in English is nowadays more polite than before the exchange?

In addition, the participants were asked whether they believe that they became more confident English speakers because of the exchange. Only three of the participants answered that they do not believe that the exchange period affected their confidence. While the three respondents did not notice a change, all the other respondents did. For instance, one of the participants described their experience as follows:

6. ['Yes, my confidence improved. Mainly because I was able to use plenty of English, and as I learned that it does not matter if I make occasional mistakes. Most of the time people will still understand the meaning.']

Another participant stated that

7. ['Yes, as my vocabulary improved constantly and as I noticed that grammar is not the most important thing, but rather to be understood. During the exchange most of my friends and teachers spoke some other language than English as their native language, so we were in a similar situation, trying to learn something new. The people speaking English as their first language were kind and taught us if necessary.']

Furthermore, several respondents pointed out that they became more natural and spontaneous with the language. Other people's positive comments about language boosted some participants' confidence, too. Many of the participants began to believe more to themselves. When they were asked whether they paid more attention to being polite in English than they would in Finnish 75% of the respondents answered that they did. Therefore, the participants have been more aware of their language use, as they have paid attention to it.

7 CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that over a half of the respondents considered the classroom interaction with teachers to be more polite than in Finland. Although, the experiences were still quite varying, as some of the participants felt that teachers were rather strict, for example with the proper way of addressing others. Some of the participants stated that their teachers were caring and respectful towards the students. While the interaction with teachers was widely considered to be more polite in the exchange country than in Finland, over a half of the respondents did not notice any difference in the politeness during group work. Some participants felt that cultural differences, e.g. the idea of being on time, might have caused misunderstandings. Yet, several participants considered that the interaction during group work was quite polite.

Giving polite and rationale feedback and requesting something in English was considered to be rather easy. Although, some participants felt that completing these tasks was quite difficult. The variation of the answers is not radical but could be explained with the participants' experienced

language proficiency. Therefore, if the participant's language proficiency is high, they are able to use a more diverse language and expressions.

Lastly, a half of the participants considered that their language proficiency improved due to time abroad. Surprisingly, 37,5% of the participants did not notice any difference, even though there are studies that show the improvement that occurs when one goes to an exchange. While the percent of the participants, who did not notice a difference on their language proficiency, was quite high, most of the respondents felt that they had become more confident speakers because of the exchange.

For future studies, it could be interesting to examine whether the length of the exchange period or the number of years one has already studied influence the experience of politeness. Furthermore, gathering more detailed information and examples of the ways of giving feedback or making requests could explain more precisely the varying experiences regarding the process of forming expressions. Moreover, future studies could examine how exchange students from other countries coming to Finland would answer similar questions like in the present study. To get an even deeper understanding of the exchange students' experiences, studying their idea of (reverse) culture shock and its connection to the development of one's language proficiency could be useful.

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APPENDIX: The questionnaire

Background

1. Your home university
2. Your exchange country
3. The length of your exchange
4. The years you had studied when you went to an exchange

The questionnaire (*required an answer)

Millaista mielestäsi on puheessa ilmenevä kohteliaisuus? / How would you define polite speech? *

Long-answer text

Kuinka pyytäisit kohteliaasti englanniksi jotakuta siirtymään pois tieltäsi? / How would you politely in English * ask someone to get out of the way ?

Short-answer text

Kuinka usein tunsit stressiä, turhautumista tai ahdistusta puheen tuottamisesta vaihtosi aikana? / How often * did you feel stress, frustration or anxiety related to producing speech during the exchange?

- En koskaan / Never
- Todella harvoin / Almost never
- Harvoin / Rarely
- Joskus / Sometimes
- Usein / Often
- Todella usein / Really often
-

Kuinka sujuvasti ja spontaanisti pystyt kommunikoimaan englanniksi? / How fluently and spontaneously are you able to interact in English? *

1 Todella huonosti - Really badly // 2 Huonosti - Badly // 3 Melko huonosti - Quite badly // 4 Jotenkuten - Somehow // 5 Melko hyvin - Quite well // 6 Hyvin - Well // 7 Todella hyvin - Really well

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Todella huonosti / Really badly Todella hyvin / Really well

Kuinka laajaksi koet englannin kielen sanavarastosi? / How extensive do you think your English vocabulary is? *

1 Todella rajallinen - Very limited // 2 Rajallinen - Limited // 3 Melko rajallinen - Quite limited // 4 Neutraali - Neutral // 5 Melko laaja - Quite extensive // 6 Laaja - Extensive // 7 Todella laaja - Really extensive

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Todella rajallinen / Very limited Todella laaja / Very extensive

Oliko opetukseen liittyvä vuorovaikutus opettajien kanssa kohteliaampaa vai epäkohteliaampaa kuin Suomessa? / Was the interaction with teachers in classrooms more polite, or less polite than in Finland? *

- Kohteliaampaa / More polite
 - Epäkohteliaampaa / Less polite
 - Ei eroa / No difference
 - En osaa sanoa / I cannot tell
-

Jos sinulla on esimerkkejä vuorovaikutustilanteista opettajien kanssa, voit kirjoittaa ne tähän. / If you have examples of interaction with teachers, you may write them here.

Long-answer text

Miltä kohteliaiden pyyntöjen tekeminen tuntui englanniksi? (Esimerkiksi jos tarvitsit jonkin asian selventämistä) / How it felt to do polite requests in English, such as ask for clarification to something? *

1 Todella vaikeaa - Really difficult // 2 Vaikeaa - Difficult // 3 Melko vaikeaa - Quite difficult // 4 Neutraalia - Neutral // 5 Melko helppoa - Quite easy // 6 Helppoa - Easy // 7 Todella helppoa - Really easy

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Todella vaikeaa / Really difficult

Todella helppoa / Really easy

Kiinnititkö enemmän huomiota ollaksesi kohtelias englanniksi, kuin mitä suomeksi? / Did you pay more attention to being polite in English than you would in Finnish? *

Kyllä / Yes

Ei / No

En osaa sanoa / I cannot tell

Koetko tullessi itsevarmemmaksi englannin puhujaksi vaihdon ansiosta? Miten? / Do you think that you have become a more confident speaker of English because of the exchange? How?

Long-answer text

Koetko englannin kielen sanavarastosi ja ilmaisutaitosi kehittyneen vaihdon aikana niin paljon, että kommunikointisi kyseisellä kielellä on nykyään kohteliaampaa kuin ennen vaihtoa? / Do you feel like your vocabulary and expressions of English improved so much during the exchange that your communication in English is nowadays more polite than before the exchange? *

Kyllä / Yes

Ei / No

Ei eroa / No difference

En osaa sanoa / I cannot tell