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The Role of Shared Foreign Language in Intercultural Communication: A Case of Working Environments

Niina Kovalainen

Katja Keisala

Laurea University of Applied Sciences
Keskikatu 3 a, 04200 Kerava, Finland

Abstract

In this paper, experiences of sharing a common foreign language in intercultural communicative contexts among foreign students and ITC experts will be introduced as case studies with a view to applicability of lessons learned to other sectors. Recruiting internationally entails that an increasing number of people exercise their occupation in two or more countries and therefore building a third culture (cf. Kramsch) in intercultural communication contexts as well as reciprocal learning is paramount. Highly skilled professionals and students are increasingly going international, pulled by higher income and life opportunities elsewhere, or pushed by lack of opportunity at home. Globalization and geographical distance also have an effect on expectations of intercultural communication parameters. Transnational mobility of students and skilled migrants is facilitated by technology, globalization, easier transport and communications, and active recruitment by countries that are facing skills shortages. What kind of professional competences are needed; what is the role of language skills; which languages are used, with whom and in what kinds of situations? How do nonverbal skills and accents affect the third culture? A work place third culture needs to incorporate and self-analyze individual attitudes, social skills and emotional competence in order to successfully exist, since work and everyday life contexts are largely shaped by individuals' readiness and willingness to use and learn languages in a manner needed or required.

Key words: Third culture, communicative competence, shared foreign language

1. Introduction

With globalisation, foreign language skills have become a core competence for nationally and internationally effective businesses (Väyrynen 2000: 32-33). But how can we make sure that the languages used inside a given company are the correct ones for the immigrant or transnational workers to feel at ease and enable them to work effectively? English as a *lingua franca* is dominating the working environments in international –and sometimes even national- businesses, and it has a clear position in higher education institutes as well. This is a double-edge sword: English as a language both hinders and aids the acculturation and socialisation process of an immigrant worker or student. Would it be better to use the nation's official language(s) or stick with English? Which decision will produce a more amiable and effective, sustainable outcome?

Recruiting internationally entails that an increasing number of people exercise their occupation in two or more countries. Around 90 million people are currently working in countries other than those of their birth. Not just low income workers migrate to rich countries, but also highly skilled professionals are increasingly going international, pulled by higher income and life opportunities elsewhere, or pushed by lack of opportunity at home. These movements are occurring between high- and low-income countries, "developed" and "developing" worlds, but also among highly-industrialized and "developing" countries, with different, but linked impacts and challenges in each case.

Transnational mobility of skilled occupations is facilitated by globalization, easier transport and communications, and active recruitment by countries that are facing skills shortages. The total number of skilled migrants is unknown but, obviously, it is a minority of those who move.

Just who the skilled are is a matter for discussion. They include those with advanced degrees, students in tertiary education, businessmen and professional managers, but also usually encompass those with more practical skills (cf. Skeldon 2006, 2007). Migration is not the only opportunity to join to an international work community, however. The amount of virtual work has increased in many areas. In the area of information and communication technology, many of the employees stay at their home countries while working in the international work community by utilizing technological communication tools. In this kind of a virtual work community an employee might have foremen and colleagues from many countries.

Different sectors of the economy naturally require different forms on language and intercultural communication skills. As Pitkänen (2011) writes, in health care knowing national languages is a must, whereas Raunio & Säävälä (2011) note, in “blue-collar” occupations more emphasis is put on doing the work, and not as much on socialising –and there appears to be very few problematic issues in intercultural communication in the metallic industry. Intercultural communication in international expert organisations is carried out by using a common language, English, in daily communication. This supposedly creates an equal basis for all workers and there are few problems in *work-related* communication. The situation in higher education seems to be very similar, as Kovalainen (2011) points out. This kind of jointly created *third culture* (cf. Kramsch; Tiittula 2005: 134) usually results in better and more effective communication than using someone’s native language (for term definition, see chapter two). Regardless of the job sector, intercultural communication skills are needed and required when transnational movement and cooperation in the given company increases (Nokkala 2007: 214). Therefore these skills are also required from all higher education graduates (Nokkala 2007: 52; Ministry of Education 2009: 10).

The transnational arena of higher education transcends and alters communication, and it can also hinder students from building social relationships between native and foreign degree students. How are students able to or aiming at utilising the transnational or intercultural networks and their possibilities? Is a lack of skills in a given language a hindrance or a barrier? Is language merely a tool for positioning, or do students define their identities through native or foreign languages? In order for making it easier, and sometimes even possible, for higher education students to stay in Finland after acquiring their professions, tertiary education has to become even more international. Without adequate societal adaptation, language skills and constructing a social, societal and psychological support network it will be an enormous challenge to utilise one’s own professional skills and consequently, to stay in that country (Koulutus ja tutkimus 2003-2008; Tiede, teknologia, innovaatiot 2006; Forsander et al 2000; Forsander 2002; Pitkänen 2005). At the present moment a part of Finnish companies is recruiting personnel from abroad while at the same time the immigrants, returnees and refugees in our country are without work.. There is a large dichotomy in the situation, and an effort has to be made to correct it. The change has to begin in the field tertiary education.

Even if there are very few problems in the working or studying environments, not knowing enough about the surrounding native language(s) can result in a false sense of society, i.e. if working or studying is the only way of attaching oneself to the place of residence, there will be problems in other social communication situations in everyday life. Obviously some workers or students are not in a foreign country to stay, some are there simply for a fixed period of time. But for the ones who are planning to stay, long-term integration to the society and socio-cultural acculturation are dependent of knowing local language(s). Language skills, personal and social attitudes as well as transferring professional skills to the new working environment are the key areas that hinder immigrants finding jobs.

ICT experts face new challenges when their work communities have become more fragmented and diverse. More and more functions have been outsourced or moved to low cost countries, which increases the need for intercultural communication, often happening in a virtual environment. There is an increasing amount of international projects and cooperation in the ICT business. In addition, employees need to get along with colleagues of various backgrounds in their local work communities because of the global movement of labour and specialization of work tasks. At the same time work processes lean increasingly on communication and cooperation. Employees of other areas of business have faced similar developments than those from the field of ICT, at least in some degree. As a result, the skills of intercultural communication have more and more importance in the work life. Although intercultural communication includes much more than a language, a common language sets the basis for communication. Without a common language it is almost impossible to participate in communication and interaction.

Employees must share a common language also to be able to integrate into their work community. English has become a working language for many. When English is a foreign language for most of employees, they do not necessarily share a common understanding of meanings, terms and rules of discussion. In this paper we examine linguistic factors that affect communication in cases where participants use a shared foreign language. What kind of linguistic challenges employees face when constructing a common and shared basis for their communication and how do they have solved those challenges?

This research paper is based on empiria gathered in the areas of information and communication technology and higher education students. By investigating the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of individuals of foreign origin and their mainstream colleagues and fellows in different intercultural interaction arenas we aim to understand the capabilities needed for different agents to live and work side by side in environments that are becoming even more transnational and multicultural.

Half of the research material consists of twenty interviews of the ICT experts, who belong into the same work community but work in different countries and represent various nationalities. The interviewees represented various national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and were in different organizational positions, including foremen and subordinate positions. Both genders and many generations were represented even though men under 50 years old were in majority. Among the twenty interviewees there were two Chinese, four Finns, three Germans, eight Indians, two Portuguese and one Brazilian. Most of them worked in the units located in their national countries, and at the moment only one of them was an immigrant. Some of them had worked abroad earlier and many had immigrant fellows in their working unit. However, units are not very multinational or intercultural, since most of the employees represent local citizens.

Similar experiences of intercultural interaction were studied in diverse intercultural interaction arenas in higher education institutes of Helsinki, Tampere and Joensuu. The group of respondents (31 in total) consists of people of foreign origin (n= 17) and their Finnish fellows and colleagues (n= 14) covering (1) people who are citizens of Finland and (2) people who were born abroad, are currently living in Finland, but do not enjoy citizen status in their country of residence.

2. Defining the Core Concepts

2.1 Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence in different professions will inevitably take different forms and requires different skills from individuals. Intercultural communication can be defined on the basis of the terms of *culture* and *communication*. When communication is both verbal and non-verbal exchange of opinions and thoughts between individuals and groups in social events, intercultural communication can be seen in this research as communication between such social groupings whose shared images of the symbolic reality they themselves have created are not completely correlative to each other. In a given social context communication means trying to bring the different worldviews and meaning attributions closer to each other through and with the help of verbal and non-verbal interaction. Intercultural communication is also supposed to overcome any possible value hierarchies and emotional and cognitive differences, which may be obstacles on the way to reaching communicative competence. The term *intercultural* can only be defined by the people in that specific social situation, i.e. communication is intercultural if there is an aspect of the counterpart they do not feel they can relate with or understand. Cai et al (2000) found out in their respective study of intercultural negotiation situations that contextual collectivism increases the joint profit, but that *culture in context* perspective facilitates both the negotiation and enhances the understanding of the cultural values of others. The following definition by Spitzberg et al is significant for the aims of the present paper, since it articulates that there exists a dissimilarity of expectations, which complicates creating shared meanings. For Spitzberg et al, intercultural communication is

“a symbolic, interpretative, transactional and contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviours that should be used to create shared meanings”.

(Spitzberg et al 1993: 58)

The main idea in this article is to consider the larger communication arena (professional context), the space in which the intercultural communication is realised (communication between the people in that specific context), the language of communication (joint, or foreign to either of the parties) as well as identity (a kind of a result of all of the before-mentioned aspects). The aim is not to simply describe the interpersonal communication situations between people from different cultural backgrounds, but more to analyse the aspects of intercultural communication competence that lie behind the described intercultural communication situations in order to produce a guideline for seeing intercultural communication competence at work as a normal part of worker initiation process. This way transnational or immigrant workforce would be seen as an invaluable asset, by making them appreciate the (possibly) new working and communication culture better and letting them feel more at ease. The aim of this research is to provide empirically validated knowledge needed to enhance successful intercultural communication in work communities.

Understanding intercultural communication and the meaning of interculturalism requires social, cultural and linguistic skills and abilities to function in different (working) environments. In this article the analysed environments are professional working environments that have intercultural features. *Intercultural communication* can be seen as a switch, as a transaction, and as a symbolic process to which all the meaning attributions of the (multi-) cultural participants belong. According to Gudykunst et al (1997: 17) *intercultural communication* is a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meanings between people from different cultures. A very broad definition, but if one does not know the definition of culture it is virtually impossible to know what is meant by the first definition. Intercultural communication could be defined as cultural variance in perception of social events and objects (cf. also Knapp et al 1987: 1). Usually intercultural communication is defined as communication between people who speak different languages (Lustig et al 1993: 157), but, as one might immediately guess, it is not quite so simple. According to e.g. Dodd (1982: 8) intercultural communication can be defined as communication between people of different cultural backgrounds, i.e. social, political, or economic backgrounds.

Almeida (2004) conducted a study about university students' perceptions of communication competence and researched three interconnected aspects, namely language use, the communication of beliefs or cognitions and social interaction, through examining thematic structures, repetitive patterns of phrasing as well as concept clustering (Almeida 2004: 359). Almeida (2004: 357) found out that three characteristics emerged from the analysis results. The first was the conception of *competence as performance quality*. The second was the different views of *communication competence, varying from physical to intellectual*. The third characteristic was the concepts of *communication competence being a social competence*. The students appear to see competence in terms of performance that they evaluate in both positive and negative terms (Almeida 2004: 363). Almeida (2004: 363) also notes that the aspect of self-consciousness is very important in researching communication competence. The aspect of using a foreign language tends to hinder people's views on their cultural knowledge and skills.

An interesting research has been conducted by Kirra (2000). Kirra concentrates on Finns' perceptions of problematic phenomena in their communication with non-Finns. The author has defined these problematic incidents to be situations experienced as funny, irritating, embarrassing etc. Some of the most intriguing findings as far as the present research is concerned are:

- Finn or non-Finn lacking language proficiency
- Non-Finns perceived as too direct (in their actions)
- Expectations about the amount of talk
- Finns gestures misinterpreted by non-Finns
- Degree of expressiveness, emotion and animation

When these kinds of findings or indications are added onto an intercultural context, they will inevitably be visible in the results of the present research.

Because culture is a social phenomenon, separating it from the surrounding society is problematic. We do not appear to be, in fact, researching culture, but its social structures. Social structures only appear to be a concrete expression of an abstract culture. In the present study the respondents will have to define the concepts of *culture, intercultural and foreign language* themselves.

One hypothesis might be that respondents will see interculturality as either a linguistic or national dimension, since these two aspects of intercultural communication in a working or studying environment are both easily perceived as well as easily generalised.

Intercultural communication can be approached in many interdisciplinary ways. For example, it can be seen from the viewpoint of social sciences, developmental communication, or humanistic sciences. This research concentrates to the social sciences' and humanistic approach. We follow Kool and Thije (2001) and consider the intercultural communication as a general communication situation where communication becomes possible only if the participants construct common and shared basis of meanings and practices. From the social constructivist viewpoint the communication situation is understood as an on-going process where the participants negotiate of meanings (including assumptions, norms, possible roles and values) according which the situation is progressing. This viewpoint supports the anti-essentialist picture of individuals, and helps us to reflect the ways of bringing the cultural and often unconscious assumptions, norms, roles and values affecting the communication into the daylight. The most essential competence of the intercultural communication appears to be the ability to jointly negotiate and develop that cultural framework in which interaction and communication may take place. This framework may be called a third culture, a hybrid culture, a team culture, an interculture or a state of negotiating reality (Friedman & Antal 2005, 2008; Koole & Thije 2001: 575; Saastamoinen 2009: 59.). In this type of a situation there are no pre-existing meanings, but they are created in the process. The process itself is social, since the act of one participant affects the act the other participant(s). The participants are constructing their communication situation together by responding to each other's behavior. Misunderstandings are a part of the process in which shared understanding is constructed (Koole & Thije 2001: 584), and it is important that they are clarified.

2.2 Transnational Communication Skills

The ability to jointly negotiate and develop a cultural framework upon which interaction and communication may be based may be considered as a competence consisting of many skills relevant to intercultural or transnational communication. *Transnational communication skills* can be described as both altering society and accustoming to it (Mendenhall et al 1984:109). It can be seen as an ability to imagine, analyse and creatively approach local cultures; technical and cultural development projects on a local level; knowing local traditions and negotiation strategies; knowing business life, laws and public life; or as an ability to use English or other dominant language and information technologies. But at the core of all these aspects lies intercultural communication, i.e. an ability to understand and process new (social) environments (Cummins 2000: 8), readiness for information transfer and acting together in social contexts (cf. e.g. Lasonen et al 2009; Friedman & Antal 2005, Holden 2002; Hammar-Suutari 2005: 115; Sercu 2004). For instance respecting others, patience, empathy, curiosity, openness, humour, uncertainty acceptance (Lasonen et al 2009: 111) as well as an ability to listen to others and create a reciprocal relationship (Byram 1997, Sercu 2004) are important aspects in intercultural communication. Information can be public or context-related specific, subjective information. Koehn and Rosenau (2002) add listening and understanding to the previous list, whereas Fantini (1997) emphasises an ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language (Lasonen et al 2009: 116) without changing the meaning of the message conveyed.

Koehn and Rosenau (2002) have suggested the concept of intercultural communication to be somewhat replaced with the concept of transnational competence which entails aspects of social interaction. Behavioural-communicative competence is a dimension that can very well be used in contexts other than intercultural communication, e.g. when moving from education into working life. Communicative transnational competence according to Koehn et al (2002: 105-127) consist of the following aspects that will be used as the basis of the present research article.

1. *The ability to use the other party's or a commonly shared language*
2. *The ability to interpret or to use an interpreter*
3. *The ability to communicate nonverbally in an acceptable manner*
4. *The ability to listen to messages related to cultures*
5. *The ability to commit to a meaningful dialogue and to enhance reciprocal self- disclosure*
6. *The ability to avoid and resolve communicative misunderstandings when communicating with different styles*

According to Taft (1981: 73) the most important thing is to know the other party's language orally and in writing. Other researchers (Brislin 1993: 215, Lustig et al 1996: 184) emphasise the willingness to use the language of the other party, whereas Hannigan (1990: 103) and Mendenhall et al (1984: 114) add listening to the list. Dinges (1983: 196) writes that being able to sustain meaningful dialogue and reciprocal self-disclosure is in the core as well. Ngai and Koehn (2001) remind that nonverbal communication (gestures, expressions, postures, use of space and other nonverbal aspects) is challenging to interpret, but crucial. Among all these aspects it is important to communicate in a relaxed and appropriate manner (Taft 1981: 76, laFramboise et al 1995: 518), and to be able to change your communication according to feedback if so needed (Taft 1981: 77). It is important to remember that one does not have to master all the important aspects mentioned above, but to be able to compensate the weaker skills with the stronger skills one has-transnational communication is always context-related (Mendenhall et al 1984: 116; Lustig and Koester 1996: 57-8). How you present yourself will always have an effect on communication, and your personal cultural identity is formed in relation to the power relationships within and outside your own community.

Kramsch's (1993, 2006), Kramsch et al (2008) concept of symbolic competence / third culture/ third space is at the core of this research. According to Kramsch (2006), Kramsch et al (2008) in situations of third culture where people use a shared language, which is not a mother tongue to either party, communication ends up being of better quality than in situations where someone's native language is being used. A co-operative orientation that supports both communication and shared goals is easier to accomplish in social situations where other aids, such as shared and commonly known rules of action, common (professional) background knowledge, clear contextual restrictions such as time constraints or other resources, can also be utilised in order to help communication. When discussing about intercultural communication competence it is important to notice that the most important factor in effective, successful, reciprocal and equal communication is all individuals' approaching the communication situation from the perspective of thirdness. No-one's own cultural background, however it may be defined, should be the starting point or define communication rules. The concept of symbolic competence entails the notions of communicative and intercultural competence that makes thirdness a requirement for the entire communication context.

2.3 Critical Reflection in Constructing a Third Culture

In this paper we emphasize the skills needed in constructing a third culture. We follow here Caroline Ramsey (2005: 226) who suggests that we should focus on how we cooperate and negotiate with others instead of focusing on what we know about others. Constructing a third culture refers here to the process of interaction, in which participants consciously or unconsciously create, maintain or constitute their shared cultural framework.

A third culture does not need to be equal and it may favor some participants over others. However, as Kramsch (2006), Kramsch et al(2008) point out, the perspective of thirdness is an important requisite for effective, successful and reciprocal communication. Also Riitta Saastamoinen (2009: 50-59) argues that in constructing a third culture a group should aim at creating a shared understanding of cooperation without anybody's domination. We assume that in the areas where learning and innovation is crucial, as in the education and ICT, it is even more important than elsewhere to emphasise the perspective of thirdness and the equality of a third culture. Learning and innovation becomes easier with more voices and viewpoints.

Friedman and Antal (2005: 74-78) argue that to be able to participate in the construction process of a third culture we need to become conscious of our models of interpretation and action. We need to know when to stop our automatic action and start negotiating of the reality. We have developed our personal models of thinking and behaving through socialization, cultural impacts and reflective thinking (Holliday et al 2008: 157). However, we might not know how our background limits our thinking and action before misunderstandings or poor results in intercultural encounters (Cunliffe 2004: 412). We can still learn to question our models through critical reflection and critical self-reflection. According to Gray (2007: 497), if reflection is about examining the justifications of your beliefs, critical reflection is about examining on what those justifications are based, and what are their consequences. For Cunliffe (2004: 407), critical reflection means that you are insecure towards the basic assumptions, discourses and practices you use in describing the reality. Critical self-reflection is about redefining how you approach problems and also from which framework you observe, believe and act (Gray 2007: 497).

Nowadays critical reflection is considered very significant in learning the skills of intercultural interaction and communication (For example Berger 2001; Cunliffe 2004; Gray 2007; Hedberg 2010; Holliday et al 2008; Morgan & Dennehy 2004; Neville 2007; Spelman 2010; Ramsey 2005; Vince 2002).

A common language is an important factor when negotiating of meanings and practices of communication, i.e. constructing a third culture. People need a common language to be able to negotiate of shared set of rules, roles and expectations which guide their communication. When a common language is a foreign language for most participants of an intercultural encounter, its meanings and terms are not shared, however, but must also be negotiated. The terms used in discussions search their meanings in the cultures of participants. If cultures are not shared, there exists variety of possible meanings. If participants are not aware of the existence of various meanings, and if they are not able to explore and negotiate them, they will face serious misunderstandings. Misunderstandings also happen because the participants may not understand a common language perfectly, or do not speak it very well. Various pronunciations and intonations may also be difficult to understand. Moreover, people use a foreign language easily in the ways they use their native language. For example, in different cultures people express politeness in different ways, and the normal way of talking in one culture may be impolite in another.

The current research is based on examining intercultural communication and its components. The hypothesis is that intercultural communication is possible and effective only if the participating individuals share a common foundation of meanings and practices, meaning that individuals need to know, which communicative and professional practices are appropriate and meaningful. These practices include written and oral communication in different languages as well as virtual communication. If the participants of the communication situation are from different cultural backgrounds, this kind of shared basis may not exist or it may not be substantial. In the virtual communication environments differences in interpreting the meaningfulness of different aspects of intercultural communication are even greater, since the possibility misinterpret one's behaviour and information given is larger, due to lack of face-to-face contact and other factors of the virtual environment. Therefore it is vital that participants are able to create and sustain a shared communicative basis by negotiation, and a common language is in the core of this negotiation process. When this common language happens to be a foreign language to all participants, the manner in which this language is used, has to be negotiated as well. Otherwise the participating sides are not able to build a solid foundation for the communicative process. In the present research it will be interesting to investigate the kinds of problems or challenges do the respondents face in their work/ study environments when creating this third work place culture, as well as possible solutions to the above-mentioned issues that could be used in the future.

3. Higher Education and ICT as Areas of Intercultural Communication

3.1. Finnish Higher Education

International student mobility can be seen in various ways, but it is important to distinguish student exchange (shorter periods of time) from studying for a university degree in a foreign country. The respondents in the present research were all degree students, who had committed to living in Finland for the duration of their studies. The interviewees were students of Finnish or foreign origin, who were studying for a Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral degrees in Finnish universities or universities of applied sciences. Foreign degree students, living in a new country for a longer period of time, have to adapt to their new living environments on a deeper level than exchange students. Some degree students might also consider staying in the country after finishing their degree. In Finland the most prominent degrees are Master's and Doctoral degrees.

The process of internationalising higher education has been fairly slow, but the goals have diversified quite significantly along the way (Nokkala 2007: 11). The Bologna process aimed at creating a European educational area before the year 2010, which also explains the rise of number of degrees in English in Finland. According to CIMO in 2009 there were 279 English degree programs in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences, which make Finland the leading country in Europe (Aalto 2003: 35-6; Nokkala 2007: 11-13). Most students come to Finland from African and Asian countries.

Table 1. Countries of origin of foreign degree students (Statistics Finland, 2009)

	Universities of Applied Sciences	Universities, Bachelor's degree	Universities, Master's degree	Total
Europe	1 927	402	1 396	2 919
· EU countries	1 111	234	944	1 980
· EEA countries	1 139	243	983	2 057
Africa	1 006	28	265	393
North America	92	19	138	210
South America & The Caribbean	79	11	98	170
Asia	1 494	126	1 086	1 670
Oceania	17	4	12	20
Unknown	17	5	29	52
Total	4 632	595	3 024	5 434

The number of foreign degree students has been rising steadily on this millennium. From 2000 to 2004 the rise was approximately forty percent, and in 2010 the number had nearly doubled. However, if the number of foreign students in Finland is compared on an international level, it is clear that the number is fairly small. In 2008 there were approximately 9000 foreign degree students in Finland, which is three percent of the total amount of all students in Finland. It has been a goal for the Ministry of Education that the number of foreign students, as well as personnel, will still be raised. In the current development plan for education and research (for years 2007-2012) expanding the basis for recruiting students for training for researchers. At the same time different financial and social aids are being made more visible in order to enable foreign students to stay permanently in Finland (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Recruiting foreign higher education students provides various benefits: they can internationalise higher education, create multinational and multicultural study environments, and utilise their degrees by remaining in Finland after graduation. It is, therefore, critical to create such a higher education system that enables foreign students to stay in Finland and work here. All students do not wish to obtain a job here, though, and not all students find a permanent job even if they would like. According to the Ministry of Education (2007) it is paramount to offer the students enough Finnish and Swedish language courses. In addition to Finnish language course offerings, students have also expressed their dissatisfaction towards foreign language teaching as well as getting information and services in English (Nokkala 2007: 13).

The arena of higher education is typically a transnational environment, where people need various skills in communication and social interaction. There is no-one who would not need a basic understanding of intercultural communication and transnationalism. It is not realistic to assume that internationalization can happen simply through foreign language education, language courses, international courses or short periods of student exchange, but it requires more thorough and long-term planning and dedication. Niemelä (2009) has researched Finnish higher education students who study in English degree programs. According to her internationalism can be seen as learning and knowing about one's own field of study in an international level and thus learning how to responds to different social situations. In her study higher education students listed important skills to be related to work life, and obtaining a degree in a foreign language was seen as an asset in international working environments. One of the main goals of higher education is to prepare students for the working life, but the situation becomes more complicated when working life diversifies and working force consists of representatives of different nationalities and languages. What happens when the employer is a foreign company? As transnational cooperation increases intercultural communication skills are needed regardless of where one works (Nokkala 2007: 214). The new strategy of internationalization by the Ministry of Education (2009: 10; cf. Nokkala 2007: 52) emphasizes that all higher education graduates can be expected to have the basic skills of internationalization, i.e. social and communication skills, language skills and diverse cultural knowledge.

It is an ongoing process to define oneself in relation to foreign languages, different identities and intercultural environments. With whom do I belong to? Belonging and identity have an important role when intercultural communication competences are being discussed as well, since one's own image of cultural identity is formed through communication, within a social environment and its relations to the surrounding world.

A changing, dynamic identity is a contemporary aspect (cf. Dufva et al 2002) on the arena of higher education, too. Living in a new country and new social environments it will take some time to find one's own, new identity. Therefore in higher education the sense of community, collectiveness and good quality communication can be used to aid in building an identity and getting a sense of how intercultural communication works in the new surroundings.

As it has already been stated, language and using a foreign language are at the core of intercultural communication in higher education, too. The transnational arena of higher education transcends and alters interaction, and can also be an obstacle in building bridges between Finnish degree students and degree students of foreign origin. How can students utilize or attempt to utilize all the transnational and intercultural networks and their possibilities? Are poor language skills an obstacle or a hindrance? Is language merely a tool for positioning oneself or do students define themselves through their native language or foreign language?

3.2 Virtual Communication in the Area of ICT

ICT experts are highly educated professionals. Usually having knowledge of English and a strong professional culture makes it easier to obtain a transnational career. However, even those experts who choose not to emigrate are increasingly a part of a multinational and intercultural work community. Designing and producing ICT products is often segmented and given to geographically distant units of a company or outsourced to companies in low-cost countries. The work models emphasise continuous communication between experts as well as experts and customers, as products are designed via a communication process where knowledge of requirements of a given product increases. Customers, ICT experts, their foremen and other professionals working for the project organisation may be located anywhere, and intercultural communication is a normal, daily action for most.

Geographical distance between fellows or partners of cooperation affects communication in various ways. Many challenges in intercultural communication are solved more easily in face-to-face encounters than via virtual communication. For example, the tendency of building divisions between "we" and "they" is stronger in virtual work communities, affecting communication negatively and increasing the amount of conflicts. Moreover, solving conflicts is more difficult when there are no natural possibilities for informal discussion. (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews 2006: 34.) It is more probable that cultural and organizational differences are larger when members of the work community work and live far away from each other. Hence, in a virtual work community there is a large amount of conscious and unconscious cultural assumptions and expectations that are utilized in interpretation of events and behavior of colleagues. Constructing a third culture is vital, since without it employees interpret their colleagues by utilising meanings present in their own, local cultures. In the absence of a third culture the probability of misunderstandings increases. (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews 2006: 33; Bjørn & Ngwenyama 2009: 227.)

However, it is more difficult to construct a third culture in virtual work communities where less information is shared than in face-to-face communities. The tools utilized in the communication have various effects, too. First of all, people feel more insecure when they cannot utilise facial expressions and gestures in communicating by phone, chat or e-mail. Secondly, constructing a third culture slows down when people do not learn to know each other due to a lack of face-to-face connection, resulting to difficulties in understanding others' beliefs and practices and to false expectations. (Berry 2011: 189-195.) In addition, members of a virtual work community do not necessarily know restrictions or advantages of technological communication tools, and are not able to utilise them in the most beneficial ways (Grosse 2002: 22).

Virtual communication has also some benefits compared to face-to-face communication. When communicating via an e-mail or a blog, you do not have to wait your turn and you are not interrupted before you have made your point. You can take your time to read messages and think them through, and also to formulate your answer and a point of view. For many it is easier to read and write a foreign language than to listen and speak it. E-mail discussions are also easily shared with others and they serve as documents or memos of discussions. Gregory R. Berry (2011: 189-198) claims that virtual communication is more issue-specific than face-to-face communication, and emphasises the efficiency of issue-specific communication. In issue-specific communication, ideas presented by participants as well as feedback given to colleagues are more direct, and evaluations of fellows are based on their work rather than their personality.

Moreover, there are fewer problems caused by stereotyping, power relations, personalities, group forming and political conflicts, and learning of all participants increases when different points of views are represented.

4. Empiria

4.1 Higher Education Students

The interviews were conducted approximately at the same time in each participating city between September 2008 and March 2009. In all the cities, the topics and the main questions were largely the same, but because of the differences in their spatio-cultural contexts, there will be some variations. The recordings lasted for approximately 40 to 80 minutes and they were conducted in various locations, e.g. researchers' offices, libraries or meeting rooms in respective work places.

The basis for all the interviews was a semi-structured questionnaire, whose topic areas did not vary between interviews. The interview recordings were transcribed and analysed qualitatively, using interpretative content analysis. The coding scheme for the common analysis was created on the basis of the common theoretical-conceptual framework. The results were analysed according to theoretical concepts related to communication competence, intercultural communication competence, foreign language skills as well as, partly, also to transnational communication.

In this article the topic of intercultural communication competence is approached through the experiences and opinions of individuals who will emphasize the aspects that are of value to themselves. The interviewees were all degree students, as it was thought that completing a university degree in Finland requires a longer residence in Finland. In total 31 students were interviewed from three universities and two universities of applied sciences in Helsinki, Tampere and Joensuu. The interviewees represented various different faculties and major subjects. Eight of them were studying for a Bachelor's degree, ten for a Master's and 12 of them for a doctoral degree. The respondents were mainly women, 21 of them being women and 9 men. The interviewees were recruited with the help of student organisations and university personnel, and they came from 12 countries (in addition to 14 Finnish students): Brazil, Ghana, India, Japan, China, Latvia, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Thailand, Russia and Vietnam. All Finnish respondents spoke Finnish as a native language, and the foreign respondents 12 different languages (Akan/Twi, Arabic, Berber, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Polish, Romanian, Thai, Russian and Vietnamese). They had been living in Finland for various lengths of time, from a couple of weeks to nearly twenty years. Also the statuses of residence varied from permanent residence to yearly renewable student permissions. A majority of the respondents had come directly to Finland to study, but some of them had also been studying abroad before coming here. Only a small minority of the Finnish respondents had been studying outside Finland, but some of them will have to complete a mandatory study placement abroad as a part of their degree. The length of this placement varied between six weeks, one semester and one academic year.

4.2 ICT experts

The interviews were conducted during the spring 2011. The Finns were interviewed face-to-face, the German fellows and six Indian fellows via a video-conference and rest of the interviewees by phone. The face-to-face interviews as well as the video-conferences were conducted in conference rooms of the company in question. During other interviews the researcher sat in her office at the university and respondents sat in the conference room of the company. Interviewees were recruited with the help of their managers from higher levels of organization.

The topics and the main questions were the same for everyone. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire with topic areas, and supplemented by other questions arising from observations of the interviewer or from the answers of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The recordings last approximately from 40 to 50 minutes. The interviews were analysed qualitatively using interpretative content analysis. The coding scheme was created on the basis of theoretical and conceptual framework and documents of the company.

Interviewees represented various national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and were situated in different organizational positions including foremen and subordinate positions. Both genders and many generations were represented even though men under 50 years old were in majority.

Among the twenty interviewees there were two Chinese, four Finns, three Germans, eight Indians, two Portuguese and one Brazilian. Nineteen of the interviewees worked in the units located in their home countries, so only one of them was an immigrant at the moment. A Brazilian fellow was working in the unit in Portugal and shared the same native language with the fellows of his local work community. The Finns spoke Finnish, the Germans German, the Chinese China, and the Portuguese and the Brazilian fellow Portugal as their native language. The native languages of the Indian respondents included many Indian languages. The Finns were interviewed in Finnish and others in English.

The ideas of sense-making presented by Karl Weick (1995) have been significant in the analysis of the data. Sense-making is an activity through which people understand, construct meanings, put things in their frames and pursue common understanding. According to Weick (1995: 6-9), problems do not exist naturally, but they need to be constructed by utilising the material occurring in disturbing and unclear situations. Respondents have been asked to present their understanding of challenges and problems of intercultural communication. They have set the problem, selected relevant issues and events, and created consistency to make clear what is wrong and how to correct it. They all presented rather similar challenges, problems and solutions, and they had a common understanding of the fellows who should change their behavior. The researchers have not aimed to find a true story, but an understanding of how the respondents perceive the intercultural encounters in their work community.

5. Results: Effects of Language Choice

5.1. Higher Education Students

By international comparison the number of foreign students in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences (former polytechnics) is small. Finnish high quality education free of charge, high quality research, internationally significant research areas and the smoothness of practical arrangements interest foreign students. Foreign students adapt well to the Finnish universities/universities of applied sciences and they view the Finnish way of working efficient, free and relaxed. English is a widely spoken language in campus areas. Foreign students do not learn Finnish, since in the academic context, they manage very well in English. Without language skills in Finnish, foreign students do not get Finnish friends or other social contacts. As a consequence, they face problems in their socio-cultural integration and, in particular, major difficulties in getting employed after completing their degree or during their studies. In leisure time Finnish and foreign students socialize in their own groups. Among Finnish students, English language skills and intercultural interaction skills are often superficial. Both Finnish and foreign students would like to learn intercultural interaction skills, but they cannot imagine what kind of skills would be needed. Often they assume that it is enough to be able to speak English.

Intercultural communication skills and language skills were at the core of creating social networks, and politeness in communication was discussed in various interviews, in both respondent groups. Foreign students were confused that Finnish students did not greet them, and felt that it was impolite: *"It is disturbing when you are not greeted, cold"* (Alise 25 years); *"Sometimes not being greeted hurts, I don't feel insulted, but..."* (Chang, man 34 years). Also Finnish students introduced challenges related to greeting, as they felt awkward when foreign students came too close. Personal space was seen as a challenge in intercultural communication, as the following quote from a Finnish student illustrates: *"I told him I was Finnish, could you please not stand so close"* (Liisa, 27 years).

All respondents felt that communication skills have a large, or even the largest, role in working together. The data illustrates many challenges as well as possibilities. Foreign students divided Finnish students into two groups: the ones who talk, and the ones who do not. Some people were seen as more open to intercultural contacts and communication, whereas the more passive Finns were seen to "warm up" more slowly. It was a general consensus that older Finns do not wish to use foreign languages as much as younger people, and that they do not wish to converse as much, either. One foreign respondent notes, however, that this seems to be a common situation in other countries as well. Some foreign students complained that one cannot speak or laugh loudly in a public place, and some felt the lack of nonverbal behavior (or, occasional absence) is disturbing, even though they understood it: *"There is no body language in Finland"* (Bianca, 44 years); *"I don't expect Finns to show their emotions a lot and that leads into problems sometimes"* (Alise, 25 years). One foreign respondent felt he could, after years in Finland, communicate in a completely "Finnish way":

Respect the bubble”: All touching, respect the bubble, and don’t be over-expressive, try not to change yourself but find a small part you can. (Jorge, 29 years)

One challenge in intercultural communication was small talk. Foreign respondents claimed that Finns cannot do small talk and that there is not enough of it, unless talking privately to one’s best friend(s). The Finns in turn told that they cannot approach small talk as “empty speech”, but that it has a true meaning for them.

I don’t like when Finns always tell negative things when I ask them how they are---it’s nothing personal... (Bianca, 44 years)

How are you is a real question. (Kaisa, 46 years/Finn)

All in all both respondent groups had a positive outlook on managing intercultural communication situations. They also realized differences as well as similarities between communication cultures. However, some foreign students hoped that Finns would tell them in a more direct manner if things are not going the way planned. Now they have to guess:

”to see their posture and face and see, okay this is not going in a good way” (Jorge, 29 years)

“sometimes you can see in their face that they are not supporting me, but still they say yes –you do not need to be so polite (Tereza, 45 years)

Using English and Finnish in intercultural communication situations was a very clear breaking point in the data. One Finnish student wished only to use his native language, because English as a language has too large a foothold in the world as it is. Another Finn told that when people are talking in English in the coffee room, he does not enter at all –an answer received from a foreign student, vice versa. The purposes and needs of using languages were also very diverse. In studying environments all respondents felt at ease using English, since it is a common language of communication on the campuses alongside Finnish:

At the university people are just student, you can’t tell who’s Finnish and who is foreign, they all speak English. (Lauri, 29 years/ Finn)

The student culture transcends Finnish and other cultures. (Alise, 25 years)

A Finnish student suggested that foreign students told themselves, if they are annoyed when Finnish is spoken to them/ with them. A foreign respondent, however, saw the situation in a completely opposite way by stating that he would be perceived as a difficult and annoying person: “*You cannot ask people to speak English, you would be attacked personally*” (Jorge, 29 years). The same respondent added that he had tried to study Finnish during many semesters, but left it since it was too difficult, and you can manage in English well. Another foreign student had studied Finnish for only two weeks, but aimed at using it every day. He was pleased to realize that he was using Finnish with his friends, without having really consciously made an effort.

Both respondent groups felt that the main goal of communication was its efficacy, or being understood. Using a shared language, English, in situations where neither participating side speak it as their native language, can also bring forth problems and challenges. One respondent had thought about this:

“Language is a tool that can make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable at the same time. Accent, mode and style is important. Using a common language makes people venerable, because behind same words are different backgrounds.” (Nuria, woman 23 years)

Another important aspect highlighted was that no-one should have to give up their native language. Choosing to use a foreign language and communicating in an intercultural and multinational working environment was seen as a challenge because it also affect one’s national identity: “*I’m not Finnish because I don’t speak Finnish.*” (Hoa, woman 22 years). Becoming friends was also seen to depend upon language choice. Some respondents felt that when communicating in a foreign language you cannot create a real friendship. Becoming friends was also seen to depend upon reciprocal self-disclosure. One Finnish student told that he wishes not to share anything about himself to foreign students “*because they’re soon moving away to another country anyway*” (Lauri, 29 years/ Finn). A part of the respondents felt that they are telling more about themselves when English was being used.

Especially Finnish students told that using English helped them converse more freely, to give more about themselves:

I will tell more about myself in English, because the language has more ambiguous meanings and formalities, you can talk in a less strict way. It is easier for you and perhaps for the other person. (Laura, 25 years/ Finn)

A part of foreign respondents felt that their native language was more important as the common language, English, or the position of Finnish. Using English also had an effect in their communication:

My personality changes depending on the language I use. In my mother tongue I am shy, timid, because the Japanese society is with me, I have to be polite and I cannot say things directly. In English I am tentative, accommodating, one filter, but still you can say things directly. I am outspoken because I want to be understood. (Nuria, woman 23 years)

I tell more about me in English, it is a neutral zone for me, just a tool. Russian is a part of me, English is a sort of a buffer, I don't reveal myself. (Alise, 25 years)

Both respondent groups agreed that as soon as communication deepens, the more one needs good language skills. Respondents reported quite often having been in situations where choosing a language was problematic:

If things are not translated into English, people do not acculturate so easily. But if things are translated (into English), they do not learn Finnish and do not acculturate. (Alise, 25 years)

If someone is foreign, there is a shift to English. But who are you to decide what's important for me or not? I will speak to someone in my mother tongue and I don't care if you understand or not, because that's what you do to me. (Jorge, 29 years)

Sometimes English creates ridiculous situations, when there is a shift to English because of one person who is not taking part in the conversation, if he just happens to be listening to us. (Jussi, 31 years/ Finn)

Finnish students told that even though they were interested in other foreign languages as well, they still felt that English was the most important language in intercultural communication. Many respondents felt that it was easier to be social in English than in Finnish, and that they felt small talk was easier in English as well. For this reason they sought the company of their foreign peers, so that they could use and practice their English skills. This in turn might have annoyed some foreign students, who would have wanted to enhance and practice their Finnish skills. A student of foreign origin told that she had problems with people who spoke Finnish: "(...) I understand something in Finnish and they wish to make their English better, but they are very embarrassed if they do not remember a word (Xui Li, Woman 22 years)

Some Finnish respondents felt that Finland is practically a country with three official languages, and some foreign students agreed as one of them stated that he will never ask if you can speak English or not, he will just use it regardless. The issue of language choice becomes even more important when changing into the working environment and to every day communication outside university contexts. A foreign respondent, a graduate, noted that Finland is not a country of two official languages (he did not know about the official status of Swedish), since he had noticed an emphasis on Finnish language skills when positions were being filled. Students who were already in working environments put effort into learning Finnish, and all their colleagues saw that as a positive aspect.

Table 2. Arguments for and against Finnish and English.

For Finnish	For Finnish	For English	For English
Finnish students	Foreign students	Finnish students	Foreign students
Knowing Finnish will aid in your career. You have to know the basics, if you are staying. You have to learn Finnish if you wish to get inside Finnish culture. Finnish language is an important part of being Finnish. Knowing Finnish will enhance the quality of your life. You will be respected and honoured. Learning Finnish is your duty. Learning Finnish is important for your well-being.	Without Finnish skills you cannot get a job. Without Finnish skills you cannot survive in the work life. You will be appreciated if you can speak Finnish. Finnish is exotic.	English in the language of official communication. You can get by in English. English skills aids in adapting to Finland. Learning a new language is difficult. Language is everyone’s personal choice.	Everyone talks English in Finland. You can live in Finland in English. You will be understood in English. Learning Finnish is difficult. There is no motivation to learn Finnish.

Intercultural communication skills are at the core of creating, sustaining and transferring third culture. Where foreign student hoped for more social interaction both inside and outside classrooms, Finnish students felt they needed more possibilities in internationalization at home. Most of the Finnish respondents emphasized that they were not “Finnish”, but more “international”. Being international as well as all transnational networks were seen, without hesitation, as positive aspects. Being intercultural was mostly defined as being open and open-minded and positive towards cultural otherness.

The results of the present study indicate that even though Finnish students have had potential possibilities in intercultural learning, they have not always made the most of these possibilities, which has resulted in somewhat superficial skills in foreign languages and communication. Due to the cyclic nature of higher education studies as well as lack of lasting social relationships the students were not able to learn these skills on a deeper, a more meaningful level, but intercultural communication was mainly just practicing English skills. The meaning of knowing English as a language was over-emphasized, whereas the need for appropriate communication skills was underestimated. Most respondents in the present study had no clear picture of what intercultural communication entails.

Not one of the respondents in the present study mentioned having had serious communication problems or conflicts and they noted that minor problems they are able to handle well in their everyday lives. Social situations were, nevertheless, a challenge to both parties, even though for different reasons. Some foreign respondents had difficulties in understanding the Finnish silence and the apparent lack of nonverbal communication. They also felt that they were unable to get into the common culture without knowing Finnish, as the quotes below indicate:

If things are not translated into English, people don’t adjust so easily. But if they are translated, they do not learn Finnish and adjust. (Alise, 25 years)

If someone is foreign, there is a shift to English. But who are you to decide what’s important for me or not? I will speak to someone in my mother tongue and I don’t care if you understand or not, because that’s what you do to me. (Jorge, 29 years)

5.3. ICT experts

The interviewees work in the framework of one program that includes many projects. They communicate with international clientele and with their foremen (managers), subordinates and fellows working in the same and other units located globally. Hence, cooperation and communication is often intercultural and also virtual.

A significant amount of communication happens via technological communication tools including e-mail, chat, phone and video conferencing. Most of the interviewees spend a lot of time especially in phone conferences and sending e-mails. Some of them have travelled to other units to meet the fellows with whom they usually work virtually.

The official work language of the company is English, which is a foreign language for most. Local languages are also used in the local units, especially in informal discussions and during breaks. However, a local language is usually replaced with English when a foreign fellow joins the group. Only in China employees prefer Chinese in formal and informal discussions, since they feel they do not know English well enough. In India, English is used more widely than elsewhere, since most of the Indian employees know English well but do not know many local languages. In all units there were employees who avoid communication across borders because they feel they do not know enough English themselves or that English of their fellows is too difficult to understand. Employees are not expected to speak perfect English as long as they understand each other well enough to cooperate. It is a company practice that employees do not point out language mistakes of their fellows.

All interviewees told that they need communication skills at their work, since networking, international cooperation and communication across borders are central parts of it. Some even claimed that communication skills are more important than technical skills. Experts who considered communication as the central content of their work did not design or produce programs but communicated with clients, project organizations, the various levels of the company, as well as with teams and team members. All of the interviewees were interested in intercultural communication and willing to learn more. They connected the term intercultural communication to communication with their immigrant fellows or fellows working abroad.

The company emphasizes in its documents that difference should be respected and used as a learning possibility. Behavioural and communication skills of the employees are evaluated every year, and showing respect to other cultures and people as well as the capacity to listen to everyone are relevant in that respect. Hence, it is not a surprise that the interviewees emphasized the importance of listening the views of everyone in the conferences. For them it is a good communication situation when everyone presents their views and everyone is listened to.

I think they have to be open first, open to receive different information came from different outsource background people. And they also need to communicate with people, they need to be also capable to express their own opinion to others. I think it's, let's say, language skills especially it's a key - - I think it's very important to our times. (A16/Chinese)

They saw that these principles are based on their work model, called an agile method. Every interviewee wanted to learn more of their work, and hearing different and even critical views was considered to enhance the learning processes. Most interviewees complained, however, that not everyone presents their views openly. Especially Chinese employees were seen to be too inactive in discussions. Chinese interviewees told that they always express their views in team meetings and participate in discussions, but in the international conferences they are more shy. They emphasised, however, that Chinese fellows understand advantages of open communication and are committed to learn it.

I think the most of the thing I know about this multinational company is you can speak very straight. Sometimes it is against our traditional Chinese way. I think it's very open and you can charged by saying, not by people. You can think regarding to one error you want, I think it is very good. (A16/Chinese)

Using English as a common foreign language in the area of ICT creates some challenges for communication processes. The challenges mainly concern the lack of language skills, the understanding of different accents, and the effects of local cultures to the communication styles.

The English language skills of the employees vary a lot. Some employees started to study English as children, while others started when joining to the company. Especially Chinese employees had a shorter history of learning English than others. This is why they prefer discussing in Chinese even when there are some participants who do not know Chinese at all. It is also common that the Chinese team members first discuss in Chinese and then someone translates the conclusions to a foreign fellow or a manager. When in international conferences the Chinese fellows are expected to participate in English, they cannot necessarily express their views and even following the conference might be difficult.

Conversations can also be very difficult if the participants speak with different accents. Especially the Chinese accent is considered to be difficult to understand by most of the fellows. An Indian expert describes the communication with Chinese fellows in the following way.

Yeah, it's very hard to understand them when they speak, because they have this slightly different accent. I'm just trying to describe how they speak, it's more like, they use their nose there more when they speak, they speak more through the nose, kind of, and they are also fast. Even faster than us. So it's tough to understand that. (A7/Indian)

Most Europeans also find the Indian accents difficult, although they told that they have got used to it with time. None of the interviewees complained about the accents of the Finnish, Germans or Portuguese fellows. Especially the German accent was mentioned to be very clear. It might be a surprise for British and North American fellows that others do not easily understand their accents, words and linguistic structures.

The interviewees told that they prefer using the e-mail with those fellows whose accent they find difficult to understand. It is often easier to understand written English than the spoken one. However, most of the interviewees think that the possibilities of misunderstandings, frustration and inappropriate behaviour increase when using e-mail communication compared to face-to-face communication or phone calls. Even though e-mail is seen to be a good communication tool in fortifying what has already been agreed, it is not as good in negotiations. When one person misunderstands the point of the long e-mail chain, the seriousness of the mistake grows with the amount of participants.

I've seen some mail things going on with slight misunderstanding, and there will be hundreds of people sitting in different cities, and then each one interpreting it their own ways and there is a huge change in the topic that you didn't want to. (A7/ Indian)

The interviewees did not want to emphasize the significance of cultural differences in communication, but admitted that different ways of communication often make them frustrated or angry. Different communication styles are seen as results of different cultures, and many interviewees felt they need more information of other cultures. They saw that this kind of information is hard to achieve when you never actually meet your foreign fellows and see their living and working conditions. Especially Finns, Germans and Portuguese found the Chinese culture difficult to understand, and did not know how to improve the communication with their Chinese colleagues. The Finns felt that they do not know enough of the Indian culture either, and they felt themselves insecure when communicating with Indian fellows. They told that if you do not know the living world of the other person, you cannot know how you should express your views to him/her and how you should interpret his/hers messages.

When they answer, Yes yes yes, we will take care, and three months past and nothing happens, then I think, how should I say things, how should I confirm messages, to make them clear, so that they know what they are doing. That they don't just say Yes yes. (A1/Finn)

Formal communication of the company is well structured, and especially in teleconferences employees know how to express their views. A common understanding is achieved by utilising technical and professional terms, but sometimes employees still do not notice that they interpret a term or an expression differently, resulting in misunderstandings. Continuous misunderstandings increase frustration and deteriorate the atmosphere of the work community. All interviewees told, however, that they aim to solve misunderstandings and increase this way their knowledge of differences in communication. After a long shared working history the amount of misunderstandings decreases. Since the Germans have worked with the Indians longer than the Finns, they do not have the problems described by the Finnish fellows anymore.

[W]e in the project have long experience now with the Indian colleagues and also the Indian colleagues with us, so that means they know quite well what we expect and we know better what we can expect from them. (A5/ German)

All respondents felt that building personal contact with foreign fellows is difficult. Without personal contact it is difficult to understand other person's views and communication style.

It was apparent that the ICT experts feel more insecure in informal communication than in formal communication. It was reported that on occasion when an employee had a chance to travel to another unit, s/he could not create the connection to his/her fellows because of a lack of communication and language skills. A shared professional knowledge does not seem to help in informal situations, although in formal communication it has a crucial role.

[C]ommunication not at work or small talk or things like that could then be a bit hard if values are very different/.../ I missed somehow to get more personal contact with these people/.../ if it is a bit hard to get personal contact then of course all interaction together is more difficult. (A5/ German)

As long as we talk most of technology, whether a person is belonging to South India or person belonging to United States or person belonging to Finland, anyway technology remains the same. (A11/ Indian)

The ICT experts have noticed that their fellows may be annoyed by their way of communicating. For example, the Indian interviewees told that Germans and Finns might get angry if their statement is interrupted even though in India interruptions are normal. On the other hand, the communication style of the Finnish fellows seems to be difficult to accept for most of the others.

[T]heir answers are very short and hard somehow, so maybe I have felt hurt a little bit personally in the beginning /.../ when I had more exchange or phone call then I got used to it somehow and also understood that that is how they are /.../ that is somehow their style. (A5/German)

Still, the communication style of the Europeans, including the Finns, received very little criticism. The "Chinese" and the "Indian" communication styles were criticized most, also by the Chinese and the Indian interviewees themselves.

So that kind of cultural differences are there, people in India are less open, and people outside India, not only Finland, Americans like that, are more open, and they talk straight over, that is what I like /.../ That is part of managing values also, that is openness. (A11/Indian)

The ICT experts use many strategies to clarify meanings and build a common understanding. They have adopted the company's communication culture based on open and direct communication. Most of them are ready to state their views and the reasoning behind them, to listen to others and pose questions, and to give and accept criticism. In phone conferences they explain their views more slowly than in face-to-face contexts, and aim to use simple terms. They clarify vague meanings of terms as soon as they realize different interpretations exist. They are also willing to clarify misunderstandings and to learn better ways of communication by analysing their own role and testing new ways of action. The ICT experts utilize e-mail communication in verifying and sharing the messages and their interpretations. They use e-mail messages a lot especially with the fellows who speak a form of English they find difficult to understand. Also those who cannot express themselves in English prefer writing their views down and sending them as e-mail.

So the problem is largely on the phone, kind of talking, so the simplest thing that can be said is that, Maybe it could help if could put all those things you told me in e-mail and send it. So sending an e-mail is simplest way to do it. (A9/Indian)

Especially Indian experts listen and observe their foreign colleagues in order to learn how they should be communicated with. Both Indian and Chinese interviewees emphasised the adaptation of the communication styles of their European fellows, practical solutions, friendliness and the ability to control the emotions. Especially Indian interviewees wanted to avoid denouncing their Finnish fellows as impolite.

"At the first we are trying to speak in the gentle way. And see that the person responds. Then we can get to know, Okay, he's more interested in this part, or He is having doubts on this, or how he is thinking, we try to understand that. And then we try to respond." (A13/ Indian)

"The other person was impolite, but it was not impoliteness, it was just his frankness, honesty (= honesty) in his attitude." (A10/ Indian)

Some interviewees utilise the ideas of cultural differences to understand better their colleagues' communication styles.

They emphasised that one should always consider how the culture affects to the communication style of the other. They believe that a certain Indian or Chinese way of communication exists, and that they could learn it by studying the Indian and the Chinese cultures. It should also be mentioned that the communication education given by the company supports this kind of thinking, since it has contained presentations of various national styles of communication.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The case of ICT experts demonstrate that intercultural communication in an intercultural context cannot be based on the language and communication skills of the individuals. It should instead be based on the third culture shared by everyone working in the company. The foundation of the third culture lies in the organizational or educational context, including structures, values and norms, behavioural models and practices. The politics, norms and resources of the organisation restrict the understanding of appropriate and inappropriate ways of action. (Bjørn & Ngwenyama 2009: 229-230.)

The more global and multicultural the context, the more important the organizational context. In a multicultural organisation there is always more variety of possible meanings. In a virtual work community this is only highlighted when the members of the community are part of the local units and represent local cultures. Respondents in the present study illustrate that in situations of third culture where people use a shared foreign language, communication can end up being of better quality than in situations where someone's native language is being used. This is possible if the people have a cooperative orientation. Thirdness as a requirement for the entire communication context is very a demanding aim, but with a longer period of cooperation it is possible to achieve. Then individuals identify themselves with others, who all jointly create the communication context (cf. Kramsch 2006, 2008).

In the examined ICT company, the role of the organizational context has been taken well into the consideration. The documents of the company state explicitly that the different views should be respected, listened and learned from. Respecting different views is a value from which managerial and working models are derived. These models are the basis of the company's third culture. The personnel have been assisted to adopt the values, models and practices of the company by educating them. In addition, the evaluation criteria of the personnel are based on the company's explicit values and common practices. The evaluation criteria offer a rather clear and detailed picture of how an employee is expected to behave.

In the educational settings intercultural communication appears to be evident, but still somewhat neglected, since there are no clear rules, guidelines or instructions for either party. This is suspected to be due to the cyclical nature of studying, but degree students are left in a linguistic and communicational limbo: aspects of interculturality are not approached, discussed or taught enough. Too much emphasis is placed upon language, and especially English, skills. Communication competence is perceived as performance quality and measured with English skills. Communication competence is not seen as an intellectual quality or physical quality, but more as an individual, not a reciprocal, social competence. People seem to be too self-conscious in using foreign languages, which inevitably alters communication and the way in which people perceive others. There needs to be a degree of self-consciousness in order to be competent in intercultural communication, but usually using a foreign language hinders people's views of their own cultural and communication skills, too. People still think of interculturality being a national or linguistic dimension.

It is clear that the communication can be very difficult if some of the participants do not know enough English. Learning a foreign language is a hard task, however, and the employer should do all it can to offer enough English lessons customised to special groups. The employer could also design a plan for learning English for those without sufficient language skills. The plan should be made together with an employee as a part of the recruiting process, and it can include also informal learning and oblige an employee to study English also on his/her free time (Heimonen 2010).

In the educational institutes the situation is a bit different, since there the native language of a given country would be needed and somewhat preferred outside classrooms. Teaching and learning Finnish would enable to students anchor themselves to the social environment and to show them different aspects of communication and culture as well, i.e. to educate themselves about their own communicational and cultural backgrounds.

The key question is how higher education could aid foreign students acquire Finnish language skills and therefore make it possible for students to create a third culture at their study environments, since the language divide appears to create challenges. Some foreign students noticed themselves, how very challenging, or in fact, impossible, it was for them to engage in a meaningful dialogue in Finnish or Swedish. However, they had biased opinions of knowing and using Finnish (Swedish). The wish to enhance one's language skills and an uncertainty of managing challenging communication situations in a foreign language was mentioned in various interviews. Some foreign students stated that it was difficult to learn Finnish (Swedish), because Finnish students wanted to speak English with them. Some foreign students reported that they felt discriminated if Finns change the language of communication into Finnish when they are present, but also to avoid situations where Finns are talking in Finnish with other Finns. This kind of communicative behavior does not allow a third culture to be created, but linguistic grouping instead.

Since the people with good language skills also have linguistic challenges in their mutual communication, knowing English seems not be the only condition for the fluent communication. People in different parts of the world speak and interpret English language differently. People need a common etiquette of communication, so that they know how things are expressed properly and in an appropriate way. The need to know how to express things does not concern only formal and working and studying contexts, but also informal chat.

Informal chat is a weak point of the communication in the examined company as well as in the higher education institutes, and the interviewees do not know how to get to know their foreign colleagues. Without informal chat it is difficult to construct common and shared ways of expressing information and interpreting messages. Despite the apparent shortcomings in either arena in the present research, there are clear indications of striving towards transnational communicative competence, since people are using and sharing a foreign language, trying to listen to and interpret cultural messages. The ability to commit to a meaningful dialogue and to enhance reciprocal self-disclosure is a demanding goal and when using a foreign language it is sometimes quite impossible to achieve it. Working or studying contexts do aid in achieving the goal, but in informal situations the shared communicational and interpersonal context may be missing. However, (cf. Koehn et al 2002: 105-127; Mendenhall et al 1984: 109), these intercultural interactions may largely take place as translocal, rather than transnational, communications. In this respect the differences and similarities between different professional arenas, due to their different social spaces and ways of acting, would be more important.

The ability to negotiate of a situation, and values, principles, assumptions, practices and roles which define it, is the necessary skill in constructing a third culture and successful intercultural communication. It is highly important that participants of a communication situation are able to negotiate what is the situation all about, what are its aims, which norms and rules are followed, and what kind of roles are possible. The ability to negotiate is a skill to be present in the situation without knowing the assumptions and expectations of another participant. The person who can negotiate of a situation is able to examine and articulate the silent, culture specific assumptions, which are behind the behaviour and the communication of him/herself and the other. A big amount of misunderstandings frustrated the interviewees in the present study, so there is a real need to try to diminish them. The amount of misunderstandings would decrease if employees were better able to negotiate of their communication and construct a third culture by negotiating. However, many interviewees did not have enough skills of negotiation, what made them to reason that they need more culture specific information and to assign difficulties in adjusting different communication styles together to being personal attributes of the other participant(s).

People should be helped to improve their skills of negotiation by offering them a possibility to educate themselves in intercultural communication. This education should not be based on national stereotypes or national communication styles but on the growing ability to critically reflect of one's own communication style and reasons behind it. By becoming able to realise the effects of silent and culture bound assumptions and expectations to one's own reasoning, behaviour and communication, one learns to make relevant questions to the other to bring forth the silent knowledge behind his/her reasoning and action. Articulation of the silent knowledge is a first step in the process of constructing a third culture by negotiating (Friedman & Antal 2005: 70).

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