Bridging the boundaries of corporate language competence in multinational teams

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Author's note:

The data collection for this study was approved by St Mary's University Ethics committee was submitted and approved prior to the research being launched. All participants received full information about the research project and consent forms were completed by each of the participants. All interviewees were voluntary adults, fully informed and aware of their commitment by participating in this study.

ABSTRACT

Few studies to date examined the emotional unrest that results from communication across cultures in multinational teams (MNTs). Through examination of 12 in-depth interviews and a focus group of respondents from MNTs, this study investigates the impact of language-induced emotions in MNTs resulting from a corporate language mandate. Even with highly proficient linguists, MNTs still experience collaborative difficulties caused by language differences and associated emotions. Issues identified include loss of information, ambiguity over equivalence of meaning, variability in sociolinguistic competence and problems of adjustment to cultural norms. The research also pinpointed several lingua-culturally adaptive behavioural strategies relating to international leadership.

KEYWORDS: language, culture, emotional impact, multinational teams, leadership, strategies

Introduction

In a global environment, organisations are becoming increasingly diverse in relation to culture and language. Language diversity of the employees, combined with varying social contexts in which groups and teams operate, makes the understanding of intercultural interaction a vital prerequisite for success.

A comparison of nationally based, mono-cultural teams with multinational teams (MNTs) has shown that both types of teams face similar procedural and interpersonal challenges (Behfar, Kern, & Brett, 2006). A multinational team (MNT), as defined by Snow et al. (1996, p. 32), "entails differences among members in language, interpersonal styles, and a host of other factors. Such differences can create a balance (cohesion and unity) or an imbalance (subgroup dominance, member exclusion, and other undesirable outcomes), depending on how they are handled''. The necessity to communicate, to share knowledge, network and build relationships are all essential challenges for most companies and are all dependent on how language is used (Holden, 2002, cited in Welch & Welch, 2020).

Existing literature on International Business (IB) language-sensitive studies highlights the increasing level of research interest into language diversity in MNTs. Our paper focuses primarily on the few studies that have either directly or indirectly recognised the impact of language diversity on the emotions of MNT members and its consequences. Global organisations require such teams to perform at their best (Butler, 2011) by enjoying the rewards of diversity whilst avoiding potential pitfalls (Stahl et al., 2010).

MNTs typically operate virtually across time zones and frequently require use of a common language. However, under closer examination, how good is their communication and how does this language mandate impact the emotions of the team members? Emotions act as key drivers for motivation by prompting bursts of energy to elicit action (Izzard, 1993). Both motivation and emotion stem from the same Latin root 'movere', meaning to move. In view of this, the study focuses on deepening our understanding of the impact of emotions within the multilingual context of MNTs.

To achieve this, it is important to first consider the role of the corporate language and that of MNTs as well as the research contributions made to date.

The role of a corporate language in international business

The area of language diversity in IB has only come to the fore over the last three decades and continues to develop as a field of enquiry (Tietze & Piekkari, 2020). It has been alluded to as "the most neglected field in management" (Reeves & Wright 1996, backcover) or "the forgotten factor" (Marschan, Welch,

& Welch 1997, p. 591). Indeed, there is still much to discover about the role of language in multinational corporations (MNCs). As Maclean (2006, p.1377) appropriately points out, "Companies deal with language challenges every day. They cope, the world continues to turn. How they do so, however, remains largely absent from the literature." Since this highly pertinent statement, scholars focused on the role of the corporate language and how it related to other languages (Angouri, 2014; Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). Furthermore, language-based research has started to examine a view of language that is more related to social practice, and this research has focused on the context of headquarters-subsidiary relations (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2005; Björkman & Piekkari, 2009; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Harzing & Pudelko, 2014; Luo & Shenkar, 2017). As highlighted in their review of recent studies, Karhunen et al. (2018), state that meaning is created by taking actions in the world, and analysis needs to focus on how such actions are enabled or constrained in multilingual contexts through the distinct uses of language within groups with different social practices.

Unsupported multilingualism in exchanging information cross-border can lead to countless problems, such as critical exchanges and misunderstandings, culminating in lengthy discussion as well as lost revenues that affect the bottom line (Neeley & Kaplan, 2014). The problems arising when English is used for cross-border communication are highlighted in a recently published book focused on communication strategies of Chinese and French businesses. Tréguer-Felten (2018) describes how speakers of *good* English often fail in their communication because of their own culturally-embedded communication strategies. In this sense, English becomes a synthetic outer wrapper of culturally-led acts of communication. The consequence of proper communication becomes an illusion of true success.

The vital role of multinational teams

MNTs typically communicate via the corporate language, usually English, which can lead to differences in language proficiency levels between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) (Li et al., 2019). When the pressure and strain to communicate in a foreign language is felt by employees, depending on the context, negative emotions bubble up and shape their capacity for action and so can impact performance. Up until now, research into the area of MNTs and how their leaders manage the emotions induced by differing proficiency levels in the corporate language is limited (Ayoko & Konrad, 2012; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015). Those that have researched the area of IB look more at the challenges of working in a cross-cultural context and the inherent leadership challenges (House et al., 2004) or the cultural differences in how emotions are expressed

(Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, before embarking on our study, it is important to examine the most pertinent findings to date in the context of IB as well as the role of MNTs.

The emotional impact of language barriers

Instead of defining emotions as properties of the mind, emotions should be situated at the interface between mind and context and are both navigated and informed by social context. Cross-cultural research into emotions suggests that emotions align closely with cultural models of self and relationships and therefore emotions draw from cultural models in creating reality (Wierzbicka, 1999). Therefore, by incorporating social context into the definition, emotion is not separate from culture but aligned with it (Mesquita, 2007).

Similarly, language can be interpreted through a number of different lenses according to culture and values (Stadler, 2018). To date scholars have tended to focus on cultural differences in relation to team management. Whilst culture does play a role in relation to language, the specific language elements and their impact on emotions within the team have been omitted (Holden, 1987; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999; Welch, Welch & Piekkari, 2005; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Wang, 2020). This is because of the general assumption that English is accepted everywhere as the language of business. Furthermore, in view of the fact that language has been regarded in IB literature as a minor problem that can be solved by a corporate language, translators, translation software and linguistically competent employees (Welch, Welch & Piekkari, 2005), there has been little cross-fertilisation of ideas between disciplines, and this might explain the lack of research in language (Harzing & Feely, 2008).

Peltokorpi and Clausen (2010), in their exploration into the causes and consequences of cultural and linguistic barriers between the Nordic regions and Japan, maintain that language and cultural values have different consequences in intercultural communication. They encapsulated this into three reasons: firstly, a shared working language does not guarantee perfect understanding because cultural values establish themselves through language usage and communication styles tend to create obstacles to receiving and decoding the message effectively (von Glinow, Shapiro & Brett 2004; Henderson 2005). The diversity of language does not only allude to the variety of different mother tongues, but also to people hearing in different ways as their different mechanisms for interpretation make sense of the information received. The second reason emphasises a second-language speaker's reluctance to speak up. Indeed, it has been found that very often this results in fewer ideas being contributed, less active roles undertaken and subjects, difficult to express, being ignored (Corder,

1983). Thirdly, language barriers often form socially divisive constructs, stronger than cultural values because of the functional and psychological barriers they impose on social interaction (Giles & Johnson, 1981; Harzing & Feely, 2008).

Indeed, this appears a commonly held approach. Voss, Albert and Ferring (2014) also endorse this in their case study focused on MNT work in Luxembourg. The authors highlight the anxiety caused by misunderstandings due to language proficiency; it can even impact coordination within the team (Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Tenzer, Pudelko & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2021). Communication style frequently differs between team members according to their cultural background; some cultures prefer a more direct, others a more indirect, implicit approach to communication and this, too, can contribute to misunderstandings and conflicts. Despite multinationals adopting corporate languages for communication at work, other languages are often used in informal situations between co-workers (Lauring & Selmer, 2010). Hence, employees prefer to communicate with those with whom they identify and feel comfortable with. Again, this often leads to *in and out* groups, creating a culture of exclusion – the *them and us* scenario. Similar situations leading to the formation of silos can also start out when lower proficiency speakers, searching for words, briefly switch to their native language during meetings to ease their anxiety. Such instances of code-switching are often deemed as "annoying, rude and disrespectful" (Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2017, p. 24) and can cause negativity in others because they feel excluded from the conversations they do not understand (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015; Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). This has also been termed "linguistic ostracism" by Dotan-Eliaz, Sommer and Rubin (2009).

These few studies have made important contributions in bringing the emotional impact of language barriers to the fore. The studies emphasise the important challenge of ambiguity and misunderstandings but fail to observe any of the properties that govern conversation or the importance of establishing speaker meaning. Understanding the cultural and linguistic influences on team affective states is a key to building a cohesive team climate (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2020). These aspects are amplified in the case of language barriers apparent in speech. This study addresses this gap by examining the distinct complexities of language and drawing on them in the findings. Hence, we arrive at our first research question: *How does the emotional impact of mixed proficiency levels in the corporate language manifest itself in MNTs?*

By investigating the emotional responses triggered through communicating in a foreign language, several contributing factors are likely to be uncovered. The concept of speaker intention and speaker meaning (socio-pragmatics) is particularly prevalent in cross-lingual communication. Although some previous studies in the IB context give a cursory mention (Aichorn & Puck, 2017; Tenzer & Pudelko,

2015), most authors do not consider the challenges of speaker intention and the key differences in the conventions of conversation: the conscious choices made by individuals in speech, the key constituents required in order to make conversation a success, the conversational manoeuvres marked by signals of direction which result in anxiety and ambiguity. All of these challenges become amplified through differences in language and culture and culminate in language barriers that elicit emotions. This essential new component feeds into and informs the research we conducted in this study where we explore in depth how language barriers elicit emotions, the challenges of which the respondents are aware and how these can be diminished.

Aims of this study

Contrary to earlier studies in IB, which highlight anxiety and frustration as a result of lack of proficiency in the corporate language (Dragojevic et al., 2017; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Neeley, Hinds & Cramton, 2012; Roessel et al., 2019), our study builds on extant research by analysing the elicitation of emotions through cross-cultural interactional (pragmatic) meaning, drawing on the disciplines of linguistics and psychology. Our second research question is *What are the potential challenges that arise for MNTs and what strategies do they apply to address them?*

It investigates how communication can only succeed when the emotional impact of different ethnographies embedded in the speakers' utterances is taken into consideration. This includes the context (and challenges) surrounding the interpersonal communication and the ethnocentric bias of the speaker's native language. An added factor to be examined is the language proficiency level of the sector. With reference to the EF English Proficiency Index (cited by Tran & Burman, 2016), our study examines the extent to which respondents from an industry sector with a higher proficiency level in the corporate language experience emotional responses to speaking a corporate language at work. The information technology sector is a different sector to the one highlighted in the previous study by Tenzer and Pudelko (2015) where the focus was on large automotive organisations based in Germany. The teams consisted of consultants, where communication skills are an integral part of their service offering and where, particularly in Information Technology, much of the terminology has been generated in English and shared globally (Ehrenreich, 2010).

Materials and methods

Given the lack of research into the impact of different linguistic proficiency levels on emotions in MNTs, it was decided that a qualitative, exploratory and inductive approach would be the most

appropriate. Without any preconceived ideas about the emotional challenges of multilingual settings, it allowed us to listen and learn from the research participants' subjective perceptions based on 12 semi-structured interviews with two MNTs and the views of the focus group composed of MNTs members from different multinational organisations from the same sector.

The purpose of the focus group was to triangulate the results from the interviews. The focus group discussion tabled questions that explored further the research questions and resultant key themes highlighted in the interviews. A comparison could therefore be drawn between the responses from the individual semi-structured interviews with the responses of a socially interacting group. Focus groups are frequently used in combination with other methods but not often acknowledged as part of a triangulation strategy (Caillaud & Flick, 2017).

By drawing on different perspectives or sources, it is possible to utilise different bearings to attain a correct position and validate the answers to the research questions (Valentine, 2005). They provide an additional, collective dimension to the perceptions of MNT members of speaking a common corporate language with different levels of language proficiency. Hence, in this study, the participants could discuss their opinions and experiences with other MNT members who share a similar working environment.

Conducting a focus group online brought many benefits to this study. The fact that most global MNTs operate virtually most of the time (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Zander, Mockaitis & Butler, 2012) meant that the participants were familiar with the medium of video conferencing (Zoom). The focus group was conducted in September 2020 amid the COVID restrictions and, at that time, would have made it extremely difficult to conduct this meeting face-to-face. In any event, for MNCs with globally dispersed MNTs, this is a familiar environment. Since then, the use of online focus groups is becoming increasingly popular as a research method (Gamhewage et al., 2022).

In selecting participants for the focus group, 8 new respondents were sourced from the professional services sector, the same sector as for the semi-structured interviews. As they were not all members of the same MNT, it was possible to gather a variety of viewpoints from different MNT perspectives to draw comparison with the results from the semi-structured interviews.

Participant selection and data collection

By using an inductive approach of the project, allowing the exploration of the *how* aspects (Pratt, 2009), participants were sourced who would provide a wealth of information at a personal level which fits perfectly with the aim of the study. Based on the EF English Proficiency Index (cited by Tran & Burman, 2016) professional services along with consulting and engineering sectors achieve the highest

proficiency levels. Literature on language in International Business reveals that studies to date have focused on different industries with, according to the English Proficiency Index for Industries, potentially lower proficiency levels (EF English Proficiency Index, as cited by Tran & Burman, 2016). Tran and Burman (2016) also highlight that the larger the business, the greater the fluency levels. Our study investigates the impact on emotions of working with mixed proficiency levels and cultural differences among MNTs with a potentially higher command of the corporate language.

Personal experience of cross-border collaboration had confirmed the importance and relevance of cross-cultural and cross-lingual interaction and why communication impacts outcomes in teamwork. To source participants and raise awareness, a YouTube video was posted on LinkedIn (Weinzierl, 2018), highlighting salient points from published literature to date and the potential findings of the planned study. The research proposal attracted a significant level of interest and leaders of MNTs working across language barriers/differences were approached.

For the semi-structured interviews, two teams from two different global information technology corporations, both engaged in consultancy, showed a particular interest in participating.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, twelve research participants took part in the interviews – six from each of the global information technology companies. For the purposes of the study, the teams from the two multinational corporations (MNCs) are referred to as Tech 1 and Tech 2. Tech 1 participants were members of a global marketing team, specialising in the Industrial sector and part of a large information technology consulting firm, headquartered in the US. Tech 2 participants were members of a global Design Thinking team also from a global information technology firm with headquarters in Germany and the US.

Table 1: Summary of semi-structured interview participants

Participant pseudonym	Location	Team Leader	Gender	Career level	Level of English (self-assessed)	Interview type
Tech 1						
KC	US	Yes (global)	M	Senior	Native	Skype
KA	Belgium	No	F	Mid	Fluent	Skype
LR	US	No	F	Mid	Native	Skype
SZ	Italy	No	F	Mid	Fluent	Skype
RS	Germany	No	F	Mid	Fluent	Skype
EP	Finland	Yes (regional)	F	Senior	Fluent	Skype

Participant pseudonym	Location	Team Leader	Gender	Career level	Level of English (self-assessed)	Interview type
Tech 2						
JM	UK	Yes (global)	M	Senior	Native	Face-to-face
AF	Germany	No	F	Mid	Fluent	Skype
HT	US	No	F	Senior	Native	Skype
ML	Germany	No	M	Mid	Fluent	Skype
HH	Japan	No	F	Mid	Fluent	Skype
FR	Chile	No	M	Mid	Fluent	Phone call

The interview participants were not only members of global teams that collaborated virtually, but also were members of their own local and regional teams. The participants comprised nine women and three men and were 75% mid-career and native speakers of the company corporate language, English. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 100 minutes.

For both Tech 1 and Tech 2, the corporate language is English. However, locally, the team members communicate predominantly in their local languages (for example, French, German, Italian, Japanese). If participants were interviewed in their native languages, richer results might have been obtained. Talking about emotions is difficult at any time but in a foreign language, it can be especially challenging (von Glinow et al., 2004). The use of a translator was considered but discounted as it might have detracted from building a rapport where the team members felt they could speak freely on a one-on-one basis. Hence, it was decided that the most expedient way was to conduct the interviews in English. The semi-structured interviews took place between August 2018 and November 2018. The composition of the semi-structured interviews sought to draw on some of the themes identified in the literature review and to gather material to answer the research questions. The questions were looking for critical incidents, experienced by the interviewees, and the specific triggers that elicited emotions from speaking the corporate language, English, in international team collaboration. The interviews focused on the matter of working with different levels of linguistic proficiency in the corporate language and cultural differences.

In selecting participants for the focus group, additional respondents from the professional services sector were approached, the same sector as for the interviews and significant interest was shown from the respondents who volunteered. As they were not all members of the same MNT, based on their seniority levels and backgrounds, they were reflective of an equivalent global group, and it was therefore possible to gather a variety of viewpoints from different MNT perspectives to compare with the results from the interviews.

This method required collecting data from a purposefully chosen group of eight individuals rather than a statistically representative sample of a broader population. Table 2 shows the composition of the eight individuals who took part in the focus group.

Table 2: Summary of focus group participants

Participant pseudonym	Location	Native Language	Team Leader	Gender	Career level	Level of English (self-assessed)
Focus Group						
AI	India	Hindi	-	M	Mid	Fluent
DB	UK	French	-	M	Mid	Fluent
MW	Germany	Dutch	Yes	M	Senior	Fluent
EY	UK	Korean	-	F	Senior	Fluent
DK	France	French	Yes	F	Senior	Fluent
PM	Germany	English	Yes	M	Senior	Native
SC	Hong Kong	French	-	F	Senior	Fluent
AM	Argentina	Spanish	Yes	M	Senior	Fluent

The respondents were situated in a variety of locations globally, as can be seen in the above table, and therefore the focus group was conducted via Zoom video conference and lasted 75 minutes. Participant information sheets were sent to each candidate so that they were prepared for what the process entailed. On agreeing to participate, each participant assessed their own level of proficiency in English (their corporate language). The understanding of fluency for this study will be that it indicates a smooth manner of speaking, calling up linguistic knowledge whilst under the pressure of near instantaneous processing (Lennon, 2000, cited in Foster, 2020).

Details of the questions asked in both the interviews and the focus group can be found in Appendix 1.

Data analysis

The process of Thematic Analysis was used to analyse data for both studies as it allows the researcher to identify, report themes within the participants' understanding and to analyse patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following process of analysis was followed. It should be stressed that the approach was highly iterative and reflective as it requires the researcher to move back and forward between phases:

Phase one: Familiarisation with the data. The researcher re-read the responses of each interview candidate and the focus group respondent several times to become completely immersed in the content.

Phase two: As a highly iterative activity, the coding process was conducted by hand. Doing it this way allowed the researchers to find commonalities and relationships in anticipation of generating themes.

Phase three: In generating the initial themes, not only the frequency of the themes was considered but also the saliency of each individual code in its relevance to the research enquiry (Buetow, 2010). The data was collated into two tables according to its relevance to the research question.

Phase four: Reviewing the themes: at this point, the themes were verified against the data set to determine whether they tell a convincing story and also one that answers the research question. This phase often requires the researcher to check back and forth several times as some themes often have a pattern of shared meaning supported by a central concept or idea.

Phase five: Defining and naming themes: Here the researchers developed a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of the theme and required them to devise an informative name for each theme.

Phase six: Writing up: During this phase, the researchers wove together the analytic narrative and data extracts to contextualise the analysis.

From the philosophical point of view, the enquiry for both studies adopts a critical realist approach as this best suits the nature of the two research methods conducted with the MNT members. Both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group explored the assumed reality of the participants as they collaborate with their fellow MNT members both globally and locally by examining in detail their everyday experiences as they work across language barriers (Brönnimann, 2021). The reality perceived by the respondents through experience is multi-layered and complex and as such can affect behaviour (Fleetwood 2005). This is reflected in how the research questions are addressed in the next section.

Trustworthiness and Reliability of the study

Assuring the maximum level possible of quality and objectivity in qualitative research is now recognised as essential when validating knowledge creation (Ahmed, Dunya et al., 2011, D'Cruz et al., 2007, Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizion, 2009).

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, a process of parallel coding and analysis took place with the research results. The two analysts worked separately to analyse, identify and define initial themes to assure the same or near the same results were obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before embarking on

the whole process of parallel coding, a leading expert in qualitative methodology, verified the alignment of the coding approaches of the two analysts by reviewing a sample. On completion, the two analysts' results were largely concurrent and, where initial agreement was not immediately present, this was resolved after a short discussion.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: How does the emotional impact of mixed proficiency levels in the corporate language manifest itself in MNTs?

Contrary to Tenzer and Pudelko's (2015) study, where language and culture were separated, our findings revealed a tightly coupled relationship between language and cultural factors which culminate in three distinct areas that triggered emotions: **Accommodation, Muted Expression/Constraint and Opacity/Uncertainty/Ambiguity.**

a. ***Accommodation/Adaptability****:* In daily team collaboration, team leaders and members regularly employ measures to work around, make space for and adapt to the challenges of interaction with team members with differing levels of proficiency in the corporate language. The semi-structured interviews identified that these fell into three distinct categories:
    i. Emotional: The emotions elicited are either felt by the individuals themselves or at a distance, through observing others.
    ii. Cognitive: Feelings can be changed by altering the mode of thinking.
    iii. Practical: Practical measures are undertaken to allow for potential challenges.

For example, emotional accommodation was required and given by Interview Respondent HT as she saw her time slipping away when working with her multilingual team. She felt frustrated that she was delivering the training in English, and her course delegates needed extra time whilst they translated for each other, but also empathised with their situation.

> "… on the one hand it can be a little frustrating, I have kind of a luxury that I don't have to speak their language … I feel that because they are working so hard to learn my language or speak my language … I think it takes some extra empathy." (HT)

There were several incidents both in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group that triggered the accommodation of emotions. For example, Focus Group respondent, AI feels frustration at the misunderstanding with his Chinese supplier:

> "… and we said – but on the call you said OK – and that can be frustrating. Later we learn that in China it's common to say OK and it means 'I am hearing you', but you still need confirmation." (AI)

Unlike previous IB language-sensitive studies (Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017; Wang et al., 2020), different types of accommodation in the face of language barriers have been identified after analysis of the interviews: emotional, cognitive and practical. The anecdotal evidence illustrated that some form of accommodation was a key reaction to language barriers. It could be emotional or cognitive, or a practical measure to achieve successful collaboration. Practical measures could take the form of foresight in making practical arrangements to enable better understanding or simply allowing more time for clear translation. When such practical measures are not implemented, tension was liable to arise that could augment any latent emotions, such as stress or frustration, already present. Team leader Interview Respondent JM expressed annoyance at his own lack of foresight in adapting his plans to be able to listen to a conference call headed up by a team member from the Far-East with a marked NNS accent. The background noise of driving in the car meant that he could not hear his colleague speaking clearly enough to follow the call to the extent of asking the questions he would have liked, and this caused him to feel annoyance.

> "It was annoyance really. I should have seen who was presenting and thought a bit deeper into it – rather than this is a call – I should have been more respectful to the person who was presenting and make sure I was in an office like this with a headset on." (JM)

b. Linguistic Constraint/Muted expression*:* Language proficiency levels were shown to inhibit the voices of less proficient speakers of the corporate language in contributing to team discussion. This constraint was likely to trigger emotions that were expressed by NNS as fear, frustration, nervousness and sensitivity. The feelings of anxiety or nervousness were also referenced by Focus Group Respondent DB, who debated the root cause and highlighted the signs that occur:

> " … Of course it depends on the people as well but at work sometimes you can feel people turning silent in calls or do not answer questions." (DB)

This comment suggests that the *silence* could be due to a fear of *loss of face*, possibly as a consequence of poor proficiency level or cultural reasons. For example, in the Far East, team members do not speak up in front of their managers in collective meetings (Kitayama, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2004).

The respondents in the semi-structured interviews also expressed how they experienced anxiety at presenting in the corporate language. For example, Respondent AF expressed feeling at a disadvantage when speaking in English formally in front of others.

> "… for sure I feel the language differences. I always think I cannot make myself – I am not as eloquent as other people are and I always think that I cannot make myself as clear as I would in German." (AF)

As can be seen from these examples, these emotions were either felt by the individual themselves or felt by others observing the constraint in their colleagues.

Being muted and constrained by linguistic proficiency requires recognition from managers and colleagues alike in making practical arrangements in some form or being observant and mindful of others' needs. To alleviate such pressures and be productive and successful, leaders need to create an open communication where all team members can express themselves both in writing, informally and vocally and to manage time so that such arrangements do become integrated into MNT collaboration.

c. Opacity/Uncertainty/Ambiguity: Incidents provoking uncertainty and ambiguous responses were also a key theme that elicits emotions. The ambiguity was either the result of cross-cultural pragmatic misunderstandings or misread cultural signals.

An example from the semi-structured interviews highlights this vividly. As part of her professional development, semi-structured Respondent HH attends an international course at a German university. Although the course is attended by 90% German participants, 10% are non-German speaking and the course is entitled 'international' therefore the course content was expected to be conducted in English. Despite this, very often the course leader would start addressing the whole class in German, forgetting 10% of the participants who are non-German speaking. Respondent HH describes how she felt isolated by this but was reticent to cause a stir by coming forward to let the instructor know that

she did not understand. Then one day, when this happened again, another member of the class put up their hand.

> "… so I think it's unfair that I didn't say anything even though I felt uncomfortable. In this class, one Swedish girl finally expressed her feeling by saying – "What's that?" – a little bit ground break! And finally, the instructor realised – aah – this is something offensive to foreigners … ok this is what we are talking about in German. And I was so amazed and somehow thankful to her … I was afraid to speak up." (HH)

Respondent HH was afraid to speak up herself for fear of loss of face. As a Japanese participant in the course, her cultural background reinforced this emotion significantly. Sitting there, she was not sure if all the other non-German participants did not understand – or was it just her? To put her hand up and openly state her inability to understand could mean serious embarrassment. She also acknowledges her frustration at her instructor in not recognising this and acting earlier to maintain the class interaction in the agreed course language – English.

The ambiguity of reading and understanding true responses of others when communicating through different levels of language proficiency in the corporate language leads to significant insecurity and the forming of perceptions. Not only is the speaker communicating a message in translation but how that message lands and is understood by the other person in their own cultural context is completely different, as was stated by Focus Group Respondent DB:

> " … Sometimes, it makes you nervous as it can be lost in translation even if we believe people understand, the meaning of a word can be understood differently from a country to another." (DB)

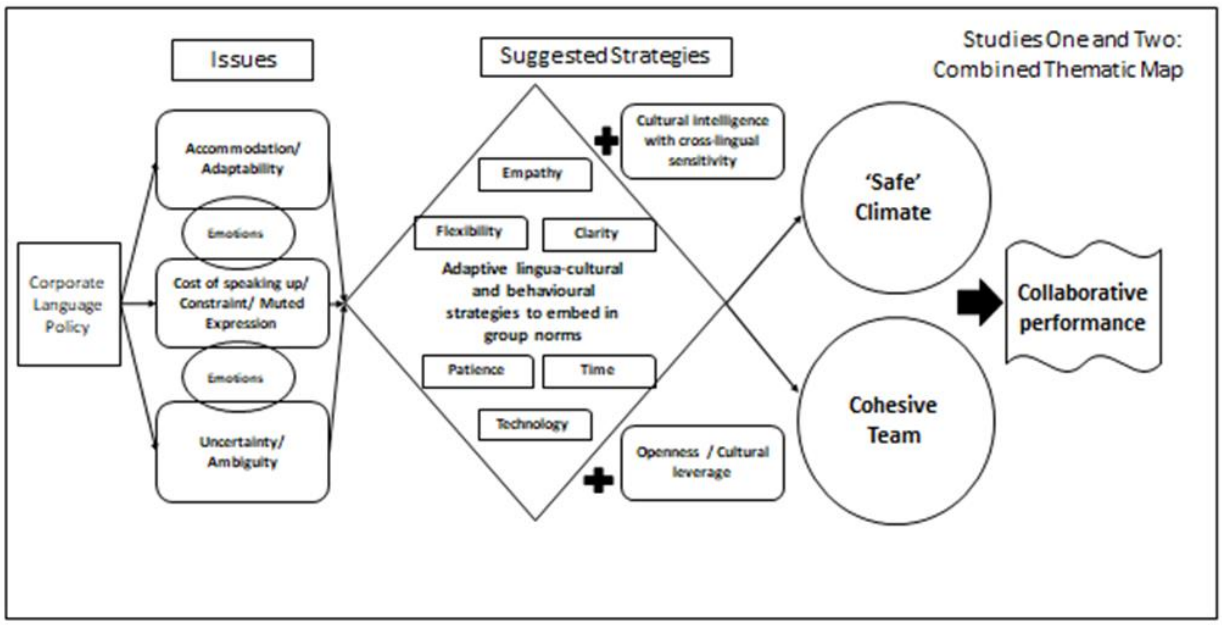
In the face of such multilingual communication across cultures, several examples of potential ambiguity, pitfalls and sensitivities are visible – all of which require either cognitive accommodation coupled with the readiness to learn from others or determination to play by the rules to reach the required register for effective communication.

Clearly highlighted is the importance of context in language and cross-lingual ambiguity. The examination of this challenge is new to language sensitive studies in IB, and examples have been provided to illustrate each theme. The participants do not suggest a solution for every challenge; in

some cases, the essential message is one of raising awareness. From the responses, there are several perspectives supporting effective team leader intervention to improve the outcomes of MNTs.

Each interview respondent raised aspects of cultural difference relating to the context of their interactions between NSs and NNSs in the corporate language, thus emphasising the importance of considering language and cultural context together when exploring language-sensitive challenges. Figure 1 presents an overview of the findings from both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

Figure 1: Illustration of key themes and strategies identified in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group



Whilst there is a strong alignment of the themes identified in both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group, a different emphasis was identified in relation to how emotions were expressed. Those in the focus group expressed them predominantly either as observations or at a distance whereas in the semi-structured interviews, there were several instances where emotions were the respondents spoke of experiencing the emotions themselves. This may have been influenced by the collective setting of a focus group and the exchange of opinions in front of others; the more confidential setting of the one-to-one interview allowed one to delve into each participant's personal thoughts and feelings.

What are the potential challenges that arise for MNTs and what strategies do the teams apply to address them?

The second question explores the complex communication issues faced by the research participants when collaborating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

A. Challenges

Ambiguity and Uncertainty caused by language-induced misunderstandings and mistranslations was highlighted in some form by all the participants in both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group. Certain instances highlighted how language is never expressed in a vacuum; context is necessary for full meaning to be established.

A characteristic example of this can be found from Focus Group Respondent AI's description of a conversation with Chinese colleagues. He had assumed that 'OK' denoted agreement by them to carry out a specific piece of work, only to discover one week later, on the planned delivery date, that the work agreed had not even been started. Moreover, the Chinese maintained that they had never agreed to do the work:

> "… and we said – but on the call you said OK – and that can be frustrating. Later we learn that in China it's common to say OK and it means 'I am hearing you', but you still need confirmation." (AI)

A similar problem was experienced by other participants, who highlighted emotions such as the frustration and tension that occur when the intended message is not understood by the receiver (in spite of the appearance of agreement having been reached).

This aligns closely with Respondent AF's account in the semi-structured interviews of her experiences where she received verbal agreement from her Chinese colleagues, only later to discover that this was not the intended message. Her experiences of working with the Chinese made her feel uncertain in how to read the signs – the language said one thing but clearly there was more to understand:

> "… it makes me feel insecure because … I have experience with Chinese people who say yes, yes, yes! And then afterwards they would not do anything for different reasons, but they wouldn't say it openly. So that's a little bit difficult – at least the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty." (AF)

The above illustrates how language is never expressed in a void and needs to be understood against the context and culture in which it is used - a vivid example of cross-cultural pragmatics. Thus, Chinese children are taught from a young age to develop their ability to understand implicitly, for in Chinese

culture, inference is a key part of interpretation (Meyer, 2014). From the perspective of an outsider to the culture, the words cannot be taken at face value. Their interpretation requires knowledge of the culture and context.

Another example of uncertainty in interpretation was recounted by Respondent DK from her experience of adjusting her approach to performance feedback when delivering it to an English manager. She explained that when feedback was conveyed in the French way to non-French team members, particularly British, it was likely to cause offence, due to cultural expectations. This is because France is a high-context culture where meaning is not explicit. French feedback recipients generally look for what is hidden between the lines and expect feedback to be critical and negative (Bacouel-Jentjens & Brandl, 2015). Focus Group Respondent DK explained how she discovered the need for performance feedback delivery to be adjusted when sent to an English manager. Her reason for this was that when it was conveyed in the French way, it was likely to cause offence, due to cultural expectations.

> "…take the French, they are very assertive and contradicting, if you would speak the way you would normally speak, so just translate it, you would be extremely aggressive and possibly cause offence. … an English manager will always start with, what worked well, what didn't work so well and so on. As a French, not used to the British culture, you will hear what worked well and your focus and ears will be closed when the actual feedback comes. So, they think it is all going very well when it is not." (DK)

In the UK, a popular social science concept is the *feedback sandwich*, used by a feedback giver to highlight to the feedback receiver their good performance followed by some constructive feedback (declaring lower-level performance), finishing again in a positive vein with generally good news (Schartel, 2012). This supports pragmatic theories of intended meaning, common ground and cooperation, which are found in English culture – a high-context culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). It suggests that in the UK, a feedback receiver should not consider their performance to be excellent when the feedback giver softens the initial approach with some positive feedback prior to reporting on weaker performance. This is an interesting example, highlighting the low-context communication culture in France (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001), where an explicit and direct approach to communication in performance management discussions is preferred.

Uncertainty over levels of proficiency was also identified as leading to other challenges, for example, what might be lost as a result of speaking up. Individuals felt held back by the potential consequences of their lower proficiency in corporate language. This theme is also reinforced by other concerns, revealed in the following section.

Linguistic constraint

In alignment with the semi-structured interviews, the Focus Group participants reported their NNS colleagues feeling threatened by the consequences of speaking up in the corporate language, describing situations where NNS team members felt held back in their contributions to meetings, as highlighted by Semi-structured Interview Respondent FR:

> " … it will be very challenging because I have not enough of the fundamentals in terms of communication skills with other languages in order to obtain this information." (FR)

Whilst acknowledging reticence in speaking up, Focus Group Respondent MW highlighted that there may be other root causes, for example, cultural norms in group setting.

> "… I think we also have to think about the cost of speaking up – some people could be uncomfortable with speaking in front of the manager in a country that is big on hierarchy, so I think it is often difficult to learn the meaning from a wider aspect and a broader issue when it comes to language." (MW)

An example of this in the Far East is *multiple face* where social obligations force individuals "to be many things to many people" (Lewis, 2012, p. 95).

The anxiety generated when team members are forced to present their colleague's work at short notice, emphasises the vulnerability and potential loss of face felt by NNSs when asked to speak in front of an audience without due preparation, as recalled by AM when a colleague declared:

> "…Guys, I am not going to present this because I don't speak English, I don't speak English well. And everyone in the team gets nervous and says … but you've got to present this, you're the one who made the presentation – you know everything about it." (AM)

Presenting another's research at short notice is challenging even as a NS, but the exposure is greater for a NNS. This highlights the need to accommodate the requirements of other team members when faced with such tasks (Baider & Cislaru, 2014). Semi-structured interview respondent HH highlighted this aspect where she expressed her vulnerability in sharing her lack of understanding with her colleagues and was fearful of losing face when attending a class at a German university.

The *cost of speaking up*, highlighted by MW as a source of anxiety and uncertainty, has been raised by other researchers (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015). Aichhorn and Puck highlighted in their study (2018), that insufficient proficiency in the corporate language leads to significant anxiety which may be increased by comparison with others whose level of proficiency is

greater or who are native speakers (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994; Ewald, 2007; Tóth, 2010; Young 1992).

The Lack of Trust

In their study (2017), Tenzer and Pudelko highlight the potential impact on trust formation and knowledge sharing from negative emotions that result from different linguistic proficiency levels in MNTs. The challenges of uncertainty, the fear of exposing one's linguistic deficiency and the anxiety produced in these situations can create a barrier to sharing information. In exploring further examples of stilted collaboration, Respondent EY told of her experience of legal negotiations moving from a position of reticence to share information to one of openness and trust when her client's opposition recognised not only her fluency in the Korean language but also a sense of cultural affinity. Respondent EY recounts the negotiations as follows:

> "… I think that was a huge contribution to them. They felt that they could trust me, not only because of the language, but because I could read the sensitivity between the two cultures." (EY)

This example shows how leveraging cultural knowledge and affinity can reduce challenges in negotiations in business situations.

Knowledge exchange is significantly influenced by the perceived trust between individuals and the extent to which an overlap exists between members of dyads within a group (Yildiz 2016) and, in light of the fact that the speakers of different native languages hold different 'bundles' of knowledge, this only reinforces the advantage of language diversity in MNTs (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Furthermore, trust is the glue that holds most collaborative relationships together (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2014). A lack of trust can also be triggered by a negative perception of language competency and its relationship to one's position in the organisational hierarchy.

Hierarchies

The idea that organisational hierarchy is related to proficiency levels was also highlighted by Focus Group Respondent DK:

> "… we tend to consider that below a certain level of hierarchy, it has to be in the local language and when it's corporate teams, project teams, transversal teams, the assumption is that they can speak the corporate English, and they don't have to speak their local language. So, there

> is a correspondence between the level and the hierarchy and the ability to speak English." (DK)

In the context of multinationals, this function has been identified as *gatekeeping* in that it can divide NSs (often in the context of home country nationals working in the corporate language) from local employees operating in their home contexts (Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 2014; Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017). As expressed by Respondent DK, there is an expectation that below a certain level within the organisation, proficiency in the corporate language was unlikely. This reinforces a sense of perceived superior status by corporate language speakers and may lead to the disempowerment of employees who lack language competence (Vaara et al., 2005; Logemann & Piekkari, 2015).

Such perceptions of language proficiency level corresponding to organisational hierarchy are not uncommon and are known to affect the organisational hierarchy (Yamao & Sekiguchi, 2015).

A strong command of the corporate language allows employees to transfer knowledge and collaborate with their fellow team members with ease. This is an important way for the organisation to achieve competitive advantage, by operating efficiently through its intra-organisational set of connections (Kogut & Zander, 1993, cited in Peltokorpi, 2015). Knowledge transfer often requires a process of expression that makes tacit and explicit knowledge held by the individual becoming more explicit and accessible to others, thus enabling collaboration and exchange of thoughts and ideas (Welch and Welch 2008). In international negotiations, multilingual skills are essential to achieve a successful outcome (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001; Henderson, 2005; Schweiger, Atamer, & Calori, 2003, cited in Beeler & Lecomte, 2017). However, as one might expect in an international setting, language not only emboldens fluent speakers of the common language, but also handicaps those who are the less adept (Bourdieu, 1991; Vaara et al., 2005). This view is endorsed by the interview participants. The variance in English proficiency by the NNS English speakers in the team required both team members and team leaders to adapt, making supplementary arrangements to ensure that the smooth flow of communication, essential to team collaboration, continues.

B. Strategies identified

The participants suggested several strategies to mitigate the challenges experienced in their interactions between NS and NNS in MNTs.

Flexibility

Several of the respondents emphasised the need for flexibility in approach toward working with language diversity. The potential for misunderstandings and ambiguity was ever present. An attitude of *helping out* coupled with respect and tolerance, as highlighted by Focus Group Respondent SC, was suggested as necessary to ensure smooth operation.

> "… It's really about trying to be flexible and understanding and make it as easy as possible for the teams to do that they have to do and being easy about the ask you need from them and by when, and to give them support and then provide that support in an as simple and flexible way as possible." (SC)

This supports the findings of other scholars in promoting linguistic awareness to support productive group collaboration (Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, & Torgersen, 2018; Ngo & Loi, 2008).

Providing Clarity

In light of the ever-present possibility of misunderstandings and ambiguity, the participants emphasised the need to provide clarity. A recommendation by one participant, Respondent PM, to keep language simple is reminiscent of the suggestion by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2013), that grammar and structure are less important and what matters is shared understanding of specific expertise. The importance of grammatically correct language was also debated in the study by Nurmi and Koroma (2020), who found that when language was over-simplified, it failed to convey the accuracy required. However, the overall recommendation from the focus group participants was to use simple sentence constructions and vocabulary wherever possible.

Differences in time-zones, available technology and diverse working practices provide constant challenges in working cross-border virtually (Henderson, Stackman, & Lindekilde, 2016; Vuchovski et al., 2023). One participant, Respondent AM (Focus Group) recommended a post-call review with team members either by phone or in writing to ensure that a common understanding had been established. This approach supports Respondent HH's strategy (Semi-structured Interviews) who ensured clarity by following up with an email, giving a short summary. In addition to following up video and conference calls in writing, one participant, Respondent SC (Focus Group), recommended that captions be displayed on the screen during video-conference calls to enhance clarity of content:

> "I find this a lot in the current project I work in – there's a lot of large deployments of systems, there's a lot of people on the call – sometimes over 100. Not everybody is a) extravert, b) able to digest the information and c) think what that means for their country and have time to ask a question. So, I think it's important that you give people the opportunity to reflect and then

> play back and ask additional questions – so maybe have a follow-up, multiple times in French with the French team or give them time to join another call with another team."(SC)

A post-meeting call to clarify the points discussed may help the NNS, mystified by discussion in the corporate language, particularly when many people are on a call with high-speed conversation. This supports the comments by Respondents EP and HT in the semi-structured interviews.

> "… they kind of woke up and understood that we have a person here or a couple of personnel here who cannot join the discussion if a discussion is going on in any other language that they do not understand … It is part of my job to ensure that everybody in the team first of all understands each other and secondly gets along. If they can't do that, then at least I make sure that everybody understands each other." (EP)

> "… my colleagues who have the most difficult time with English are definitely my colleagues from Asia … and when they do speak up, it's like very broken English – so yes, I think it's a combination of both (language and culture). I think it's my job as facilitator and co-worker to create a space where you know your ideas are valid so whatever you need to get the message across, do it." (HT)

They endorse the need for additional intervention by a team leader, both as observant facilitator and moderator, who alerts the team to the mix of languages present and allows for more time for NNS contributions.

This view aligns with Semi-structured interview Respondent KC's approach who is also very aware of the need to adapt to lingua-cultural norms. When presented with a team call where all the participants were German speakers, he decided to wait for the call summary:

> "I knew that if I joined the call, then that call would be conducted in English." (KC)

Allowing more time

The strategies, highlighted in both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group to ensure more clarity and a common understanding is reached, take time to implement. Extra time needs to be allowed to facilitate a shared understanding (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). This was also emphasised by Focus Group Respondent MW:

> "…You have to act as a moderator and make it clear that there is a big mix of languages in the group that people are given more time and ask for their opinion." (MW)

And borne out by Semi-structured interview Respondent HH's concerns which emphasises the value of being ready to take time to achieve a common understanding:

> "… they [the Japanese people] tend to spend more time to come to one conclusion and after they have a complete status quo of a certain goal, the level of work is very, very, high, probably. The big problem of working with Japan, is that other people have more time to iterate along the way, their level of completeness is not that great along the way … Japanese tend to be very perfectionist – before they are ready, they will not share the result." (HH)

In semi-structured interview Respondent KC and others emphasise the requirement for additional flexibility by all members of the team, to facilitate common understanding. This may be needed due to misinterpretations or missed deadlines. The very nature of working in a multilingual environment calls for adaptability, also stressed by Semi-structured interview Respondent RS:

> "… so depending on who you have on the call, I find myself trying to speak slower or trying to find a more simple wording and just to ensure that if there are people on the call, who don't understand, they can follow and understand what I am trying to get across." (RS)

Cultural and linguistic sensitivity

As highlighted in earlier, the challenge of the linguistic constraint led to several suggestions from focus group respondents, in particular, the need for cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Indeed, given differing proficiency levels leading to a reticence to speak up, Respondent DK highlighted the importance to leverage differences and to include colleagues with perceived lower proficiency levels in English to create an environment where the individuals do not feel judged or threatened:

> "… so, I guess being in a multi-national environment, having a common language and having a common basis and confirming that this is solid – that's the understanding but also playing the strength of cultural language intimacy and proximity to get to a good result. So, working in a multi-national environment, not thinking only about what's common but what's different and can be used as an opportunity." (DK)

Respondent PM, in support for a climate of openness, recommended the introduction of ground rules early on, so that that team members feel sufficiently comfortable to speak up and even *push back and ask for clarification* without being judged. This supports the idea of negotiation of meaning, the process by which two interlocutors identify and resolve communication breakdown with requests for clarification to address comprehension difficulties. Such sensitivity helps to establish trust but can only be created when promoted by the team leader with ground rules, as set out by Respondent PM.

The concept of ground rules to support cultural and linguistic differences has long been supported by researchers (Earley & Gardner, 2005; Gluesing et al., 2003). Indeed, when new groups are formed and begin work on projects before considering rules and procedures, conflicts are more likely (Lau &

Maurnighan, 2005). However, few substantive empirical studies support these claims (Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2017). In their study, Vigier and Spencer-Oatey (2017), test the implementation of rule development in three culturally and linguistically diverse project teams. Where differences in language proficiency levels were greater, it took longer for the rules to become established, while feelings of inequality and imbalance were stronger. Although the study appeared slightly artificial in nature, in that the teams were only formed for a short internal corporate programme and solely observed in their early stages, it indicated the need for further research into the use of leadership and ground rules in establishing a non-judgemental *safe* climate.

Several focus group participants (Respondents DK, PM, EY, DB and AM) called for greater awareness of emotions of fear and mistrust that can occur in a language-diverse team and strongly advocated cultural awareness and knowledge in cross-border interactions, particularly socio-pragmatics. For example, Respondent DK supported the need for an awareness of socio- and cross-cultural pragmatics when she highlighted that a knowledge of the English language from the non-native speaker perspective was very different to that spoken by English NSs.

> "…Absolutely. It is a mistake to think that working internationally is just sharing the same language because English as a foreign language is certainly very different from the native English spoken by the Brits. You need to know what group you are in and what the cultural levels are." (DK)

The importance of raising awareness of differences was emphasised by many participants, in particular by Respondent DK, who described a team-building exercise she had experienced which used caricatures of the different nationalities in the team. In spite of the light-hearted vein in which this was expressed, and the support received from the rest of the group in relation to team building through humour, such exercises risk reinforcing prejudices, prevalent in MNTs (Henderson, 2005).

Indeed, whilst the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1980, 2001) and House's (2004) GLOBE project may supply a reference point in relation to general cultural knowledge, there is a danger of stereotyping at individual level, causing offence (Brewer & Venaik, 2012; Fiske & Durante, 2016). Stereotyping and generalisation often arise innocently in MNTs. Similar remarks to those, expressed in jest by Respondent DK, were echoed by semi-structured interview Respondent AF where she expressed views on different nationalities, culminating in the creation of generalisations. Initiatives are needed to steer away from such concepts and promote the concept of the individual as a composite of many cultures, as promoted by Rosinski (2008).

The concept of composite cultural identity, sometimes termed as a *glocal identity* (Robertson, 1995), stresses the *local* within a global environment and embraces the idea that people become integrated into two, three or more cultures. This may happen as a result of exposure to a variety of environments, for example, frequent business travel, educational initiatives, immigration and international partnerships. The concept of a global citizen is not new but is recognised today as including previous and new local ethnic identities. In this sense *glocal identity* may be considered as a new ethno-cultural identity, complemented by acculturation strategies (Bobowik et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2003; Tubin & Lapidot, 2008). Multilingualism plays a significant role in facilitating this social and multicultural freedom of movement and contributes to world-wide collaboration (Soldatova & Geer, 2013).

The practice of code-switching (alternating between two or more languages in conversation) is often regarded as an instance of the expression of ethnic and cultural identities and instances of this can lead to negative emotions in NSs. Indeed, this was reported as an example of foreign language anxiety by other scholars (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015; Aichhorn & Puck, 2018). Although some references were made in this study, it was not a predominant concern amongst the participants. Ethnography-orientated sociolinguists and psycholinguists consider code-switching an expression of ethnic identity, the product of voiced social meanings, shaped by the speaker by code-switching (Gumperz, 1982). Nevertheless, every act of speaking or even keeping silent can signify choice of an identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). The speaker selects the language that represents the most convenient recourse for them at the time. Therefore, together with the language they select, the most convenient identity is adopted at the same time (Morlan & Byrne, 2023; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006).

Furthermore, analysis of the focus group findings identified an interesting strategy, also raised in the semi-structured interviews, that crystallises in the form of cultural leverage, learning from cultural difference, the reframing of cultural norms to allow an individual to see a cultural difference to their advantage. Some focus group members also raised the matter of national cultural stereotypes humorously. This was discussed in conjunction with the notion of composite cultural identities and the use of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) to develop better collaboration. Although CQ does not correlate with cross-lingual sensitivity, the concept, brought together in combination or as an extension, is a new concept and calls for further research.

The concept of cultural intelligence (CQ) is the capability to cross boundaries and work effectively in multiple cultures. Therefore, it requires the ability to interact effectively with individuals from all cultural backgrounds. As a cognitive and behavioural concept, CQ effectively operates *above cultures* and encompasses twenty items and four different theoretical dimensions (Metacognitive, Cognitive, Motivational, and Behavioural) that correlate with each other and can be measured on the CQ scale

(Ang et al., 2007). Considerable research has taken place in recent years into practical applications of CQ in organisational psychology in the areas of leadership and intercultural adjustment (Ang, Van Dyne and Rockstuhl 2015; Kadam et al., 2021; Nosratabadi et al., 2020). These mainly take the form of addressing bias and of openness to experience and are included in the fundamental four dimensions or capabilities (intellectual efficiency, ingenuity, curiosity, aesthetics and depth) (Ahmadi, Shahmohammadi, & Araghi 2011; Saini, 2018). Assessments have been made as to how each of the dimensions correlate to competencies. Although all sub-factors of behavioural CQ relate to verbal and non-verbal or prosodic (tone, rhythm, pauses, pose and imitation by the speaker) communications skills, few scholars have directly addressed the correlation between language proficiency and CQ. Albana & Yeşiltaş maintain that high scores in CQ can even soften the negative impact of language ostracism and the reluctance to share information (2022), and a positive relationship has been identified between foreign language fluency and overall CQ (Khorakiwala 2008; Chen & Fang, 2022).

CQ covers not only knowledge of the world, but also of cultural diversity and cultural settings. So, it can support the formation of identity in a multilingual environment and thus with a MNT. Through meta-knowledge and meta- an individual may retain their primary cultural values whilst adopting a new vision of the world. Adding a dimension of specific language sensitivities and an understanding of cross-cultural pragmatics to the concept of CQ would allow provide a more complete construct, measuring and developing culturally intelligent international managers in MNCs.

Leveraging cultural diversity

In her example of using her understanding and linguistic knowledge to create a better solution for both sides of a negotiation, respondent EY gave a vivid example of cross-cultural and cross-lingual leverage to achieve unity in diversity taking advantage of and developing tangible differences and alternative points of view to bridge cultural and other boundaries. By considering cultural orientations and different mind-sets, one can avoid stereotyping and achieve mutual understanding (Rosinski, 2008).

Very few studies have explored the area of cultural and cross-lingual leverage. Distefano and Maznevsky (2000) conducted a study of cross-cultural teams with scant reference to language but highlighted the aspects that can be employed to create a leverage of ideas in MNTs. Whilst acknowledging that every team is unique, they compiled a set of principles that map differences developed within the team with a view to synergising them. In the process, compromise is avoided, and new approaches are reviewed in order to develop a fuller understanding.

As reported in the study by Brannen and Salk (2000), negotiations appear to be a common context for cross-cultural leverage, as in the case of Respondent EY's experience in negotiation with her client's

opponent. The study by Brannen and Salk reports the testing of assumptions in the context of creating a group culture in a German-Japanese joint venture, showing how negotiated outcomes are possible (2000). Another study reports the use of boundary spanning and cultural leverage in relation to negotiating cultural identity (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011).

The participants of both studies also suggested strategies to alleviate the linguistic challenges experienced working in a MNT. Whilst a strong alignment of the themes is evident, a different emphasis was identified in relation to how emotions were expressed. In the focus group, the accounts of emotions are always given as observers rather than experienced. This may be due to the fact that a focus group setting allows for groups to discuss openly and does not safeguard privacy to the same extent as a one-on-one interview. Furthermore, an interesting strategy emphasised in the focus group, also raised in the semi-structured interviews, crystallises as cultural leverage, learning from cultural difference, the reframing of cultural norms to allow an individual to see a cultural difference to their advantage. Some focus group members also raised the matter of national cultural stereotypes humorously. This was discussed in conjunction with the notion of composite cultural identities and the use of CQ to develop better collaboration. Although CQ does not correlate with cross-lingual sensitivity, the concept, brought together in combination or as an extension, is a new concept and calls for further research.

Contextual positioning of the themes

The alignment of themes identified in both the interviews and the focus group highlights the cogency of the findings. Nevertheless, it is important to draw comparison with the difference in weighting of the themes in the focus group discussion. The respondents were asked about the emotions felt in relation to having to communicate in a corporate language (English) when collaborating with other team members. Some included emotions, particularly as the result of misunderstandings and exposure in speaking up. However, emotions were not raised as frequently in the focus group as they were in the interviews. Furthermore, the variety of critical incidents where emotions are expressed is not as visible in the focus group; their statements are more inclined to take the position of an observer, for example “that can be frustrating” (Respondent AM) or “… and there is some tension” (Respondent AI). Furthermore, the emphasis, particularly at the beginning of the discussion, is on opacity, ambiguity and misunderstandings, and practical accommodation (including techniques to work around the issues). Emotions (observed) are then raised to describe the feelings resulting from the ambiguity, the cost of speaking up or constraint (muted expression) and trust in a similar way to the interviews.

The reasons for the difference in emphasis are likely to stem from two areas, namely, the collaborative experiences of the participants working with multi-lingual team members and the group environment.

A semi-structured interview is more intimate. The interviewee can share personal experiences. The online focus group environment has a different ambience. In this case, a group of eight participants from around the world who had not met each other before came together online. Although the focus group participants were all happy to share experiences from their collaboration cross-border, nothing shared was of a particularly sensitive nature or from a situation where respondents made themselves vulnerable. Furthermore, the focus-group meeting lasted just over one hour, while the semi-structured interviews lasted over 14 hours and were one-to-one meetings with guaranteed anonymity.

The themes were couched in questions that would stimulate a response easily. Direct questions for incidents where the participants had experienced emotions resulting from proficiency levels in English were unlikely to elicit an immediate response. Therefore, the moderator introduced the relevant issues in such a way as to be both accessible and targeted, to extract the data, for example:

“Tell me about your experience of working with colleagues with different proficiency levels in the corporate language and any issues that arise that cause emotions to bubble up and affect communication. How do they deal with any issues that arise?”

Although focus groups and semi-structured interviews are similar in that they are conversational and informal in tone (Longhurst, 2003), semi-structured one-on-one interviews allow one to build rapport and trust more rapidly - interviewees are prepared to give details of events that are more sensitive to them. However, focus groups provide a setting that is closer to *real life*, because the discussion runs freely with minimal intervention from the moderator (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998, Gundumogula, 2021).

When directly compared, the key themes identified in the focus group produce distinct matches with those of the semi-structured interviews. The data from the interviews, due to its volume and richness, gives more critical incidents and strategies than the focus group, but, as shown in Table 3 below, the key themes highlighted in focus group were also raised in the semi-structured interviews.

Table 3: Key themes from Semi-structured Interviews matched to participant responses from Focus Group

Key themes	Semi-structured interview (example quotation)	Focus Group (example quotation)
Accommodation (practical), Flexibility, Adaptability	"… on one hand it can be a little frustrating because I know it's eating up precious time that you have with people. I also feel that, as an American, I have kind of a luxury that I don't have to speak their language … I feel that because they are working so hard to learn my language or speak my language."(HT)	"…. It's really about trying to be flexible and understanding and make it as easy as possible for the teams to do that they have to do and being easy about the ask you need from them and by when, and to give them support and then provide that support in an as simple and flexible way as possible." (SC)
Muted expression, Cost of speaking up	"… for sure I feel the language differences. I always think I cannot make myself – I am not as eloquent as other people are and I always think that I cannot make myself as clear as I would in German." (AF)	" … I think we also have to think about the cost of speaking up – some people could be uncomfortable with speaking in front of the manager in a country that is big on hierarchy so I think it is often difficult to learn the meaning from a wider aspect and a broader issue when it comes to language." (MW)
Opacity, Uncertainty	"… it makes me feel insecure because I don't get really a lot of feedback and I don't know how to deal with the things they say because … I have experience with Chinese people who say yes, yes, yes! And then afterwards they would not do anything for different reasons but they wouldn't say it openly. So that's a little bit difficult – at least the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty." (AF)	"… and we said – but on the call you said OK and that can be frustrating. Later we learn that in China it's common to say OK and it means 'I am hearing you', but you still need confirmation. If you hear OK, it does not mean that I will deliver the work in the time specified, but OK I hear what you are saying." (AI)
Hierarchies	"… I feel that the person speaking English as their native language has more confidence or feels more in control of the situation as they know how to deliver the message … and I think for the non-native speaker they feel that not only can they deliver their point effectively, but they think – am I doing it properly? And this makes people self-conscious." (HT)	"…, we tend to consider that below a certain level of hierarchy, at least for our generation, the coming generations might be better, but when you go below a certain level, it has to be in the local language and when it's corporate teams, project teams transversal teams, the assumption is that they can speak the corporate English, they can speak English and they don't have to speak their local language. So, there is a correspondence between the level and the hierarchy and the ability to speak English." (DK)

Key themes	**Semi-structured interview (example quotation)**	**Focus Group (example quotation)**
Lack of trust	"… it was really nice because you talk about something else and you get to know the person as a person which immediately improves the relationship and you discover new anchor points that you have on a personal basis … you connect there on a certain level. It improves the working relationship because you also tend to be more responsive to that person if you get to know them better." (KA)	"… So the negotiation went really smoothly because I knew what the other side wanted and I could adjust the expectations from my client. I don't know whether that is the trust because of the language but I did feel some sort of trust issue there." (EY)
Clarity	"… If you have the feeling that they have not understood it, you might then repeat it several times, without making them lose their face." (ML)	"… you can have a meeting and probably the best thing to do is to follow up that meeting with some individuals to check that everyone has a common understanding and the instructions are clear. So I think if you were doing that kind of team meeting just with a single nationality, you probably wouldn't need to have quite so much follow-up to ensure that everybody has the same outcomes. So, I would say follow-up and the kind of personal touch – there's probably more work there than one might have with the same nationality in the team." (PM)
Time	"… it takes time in terms of getting information across and making sure that they understand what's being said and I think I always have this lingering thought – did they really understand what I meant by this?" (HT)	"…You have to act as a moderator and make it clear that there is a big mix of languages in the group that people are given more time and asked for their opinion." (MW)
Cultural leverage	"… so, we hear all the differences and we realise maybe we are not doing this right because we are trapped in our – fixedness. When we about ways people are working in other countries, we think – maybe this is the way forward for Japanese – maybe we can try this, maybe we can do this. Yes. Or maybe we think we cannot do this." (HH)	"…if you look at the efficiency of a project or a meeting, you may be taking longer but overall the value that multi-nationals bring to the whole organisation or the project weighs much higher and overall I believe it saves time, in fact because you don't learn the language and cultural differences that quickly and you would have to start with someone who has those abilities." (EY)
Cultural and linguistic sensitivity/Cross-	"… it's like a heightened level of consideration and concern to make sure that what you are communicating is effectively	"…Absolutely. It is a mistake to think that working internationally is just sharing the same language because English as a foreign language is

Key themes	**Semi-structured interview (example quotation)**	**Focus Group (example quotation)**
lingual sensitivity	received … my name begins with an L and an R. The letters are really difficult to pronounce for Japanese people. So even just saying my name is difficult." (LR)	certainly very different from the native English spoken by the Brits. You need to know what group you are in and what the cultural levels are." (DK)
"Safe" climate	"… and it was very clear we have been talking about it for months and she had been thinking about it, but she didn't think it was her place to test something different to what the rest of the team was thinking …" (EP)	"…But I think the other thing that comes across is the need for offering openness for discussion and acceptance for which language can be a barrier. It is important that people feel they can push back and ask for clarification and those ground rules need to be set very early on in the game so that people always feel comfortable about asking for confirmation or for an explanation. (PM)
Cohesive team	"… but what I want to promote is how do these countries learn from each other – not only in a positive way but I want them to feel engaged with us as a worldwide team." (KC)	"…We all think in a different way so we can all have a right to different solutions for the same problem. So we going to have difficulties; we might have to do a pre-meeting and sometimes also a post-meeting but what we take out of it is so much greater than if we were to work in one specific country to draw out a solution for whatever it is we are doing." (AM)

Contribution to IB language-sensitive literature

Previous studies that have reported negative emotions as a result of language barriers have raised awareness that a challenge exists (Aichorn & Puck, 2017; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999 Giles & Ogay, 2006; Scott, 2007; Neeley, Hinds & Cramton, 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015; Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2017). This study highlights the key themes of *accommodation, muted expression and opacity/ambiguity* which elicit emotions in the face of language differences. In contrast to previous IB language-sensitive studies in this area, this study identifies the key theme of *accommodation/ adaptability*, breaking it down into three categories in which team members show accommodative behaviour: emotional (present/absent), cognitive and practical. It also reports *muted expression (also referred to as linguistic constraint)* as a key theme which, although mentioned in a few other studies (Aichorn & Puck, 2017; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999), this study highlights how this can elicit emotions not only in those feeling reticent to speak a foreign language but also how emotions bubble

up by those observing them as well. The third theme identified is *opacity/ uncertainty/ambiguity* has been raised in a couple of extant IB language-sensitive studies but not directly in relation to emotions. This study demonstrates how this linguistic ambiguity can elicit emotions. It also provides full detail and examples of sociological aspects of language that are directly related, such as speaker intention, cross-cultural pragmatics, negotiation of meaning, to enable recognition of these instances for future studies and MNT leaders.

Moreover, the selection of MNTs from the professional services/consulting sector, as a basis for the research study, is new. In contrast to previous studies (Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015) who chose sectors with lower levels of proficiency, Automotive and Telecom, according to the Workforce English Proficiency by Industry Index (EF Proficiency Index, cited by Tran & Burman, 2016), this decision supports the notion that even with higher levels of proficiency in the corporate language, emotions continue to bubble up when collaborating across language barriers. MNTs made up of members with mixed proficiency levels impact emotions across all business sectors, even when the interlocutors are from a sector identified as demonstrating the highest level of fluency in English – professional services, consultancy (EF English Proficiency Index, as cited by Tran & Burman, 2016).

Additionally, this study differs from some studies which seek to uncouple language and culture (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015). Cultural context is essential for the understanding of meaning in language and the roots of human responses, as borne out through the results (Jiang, 2000; Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). This study, by conserving the cultural link, provides a fuller representation of the bond between language and culture, as illustrated by the many examples of cross-cultural pragmatics and contextual scenarios provided by the participants of both studies. Furthermore, by viewing the world through the *prism* of critical realism it can be detected that the way knowledge is held and communicated by individuals originates from their culture, environment and experience (Joseph, 2004).

Also, this study employs a multi-methods approach, which highlights the impact of the data collection method on the emphasis of the results. To our knowledge, this is the first study in IB language-sensitive literature to collect data using a focus group. This approach emphasises a different dynamic through gathering the perceptions of different team members in a group environment. The team members discussed how they felt about the challenges of collaborating in the corporate language, English, in a multilingual environment. This dynamic highlighted the open environment where the moderator facilitated the discussion.

Furthermore, using two qualitative methods also raises awareness of two different dynamics in reporting the findings. Interviews yielded more incidents where distinct emotions were personally experienced and observed. The perceptions of the focus group reflected findings through a group dynamic. The challenges and strategies correlated and reinforced those of the first study as well as proposing a slightly adjusted emphasis with additional strategies to mitigate the critical challenges.

Finally, both studies generated several strategies, suggested by the participants, to combat many of the root causes of emotional triggers in MNT collaboration. In contrast to other studies that suggest reactive measures to deflect emotions (Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015), many of them promote preventative measures to halt the root cause.

Theoretical Framework

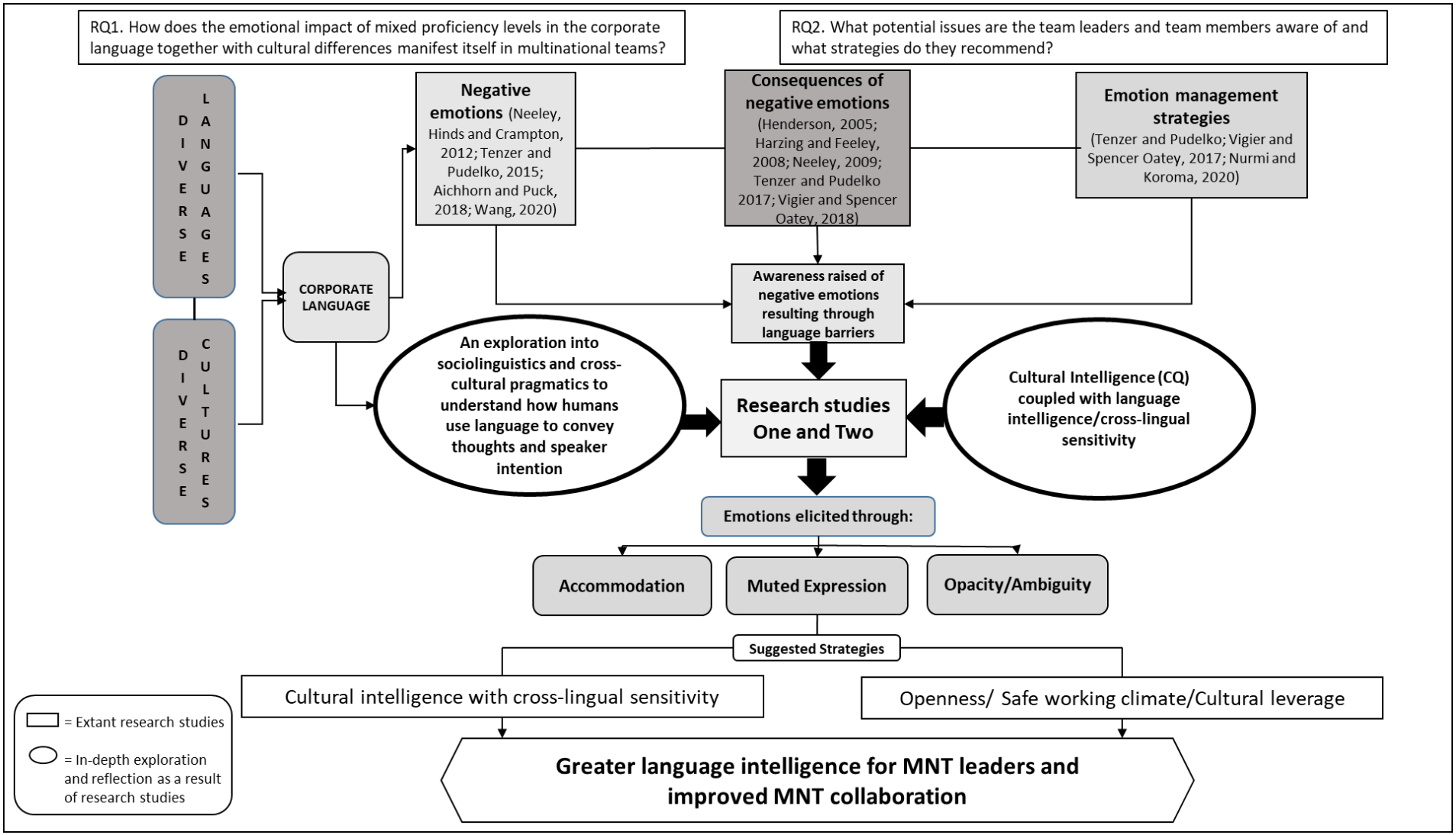
The results of the analysis have been incorporated and our theoretical framework (See Figure 2) and highlight the novel contribution to IB language-sensitive studies in language-induced emotions in MNTs.

Studies that have reported negative emotions as a result of language barriers have raised awareness that an issue exists. This study highlights the key themes of *accommodation, muted expression and opacity/ambiguity* which elicit emotions in the face of language differences. In contrast to previous IB language-sensitive studies in this area, this study identifies the key theme of *accommodation* and subdivides it into three categories in which team members display accommodative behaviour: emotional (present/absent), cognitive and practical. It also reports *muted expression* as a key theme which, although alluded to in other studies, this study highlights how emotions are triggered not only in those feeling inhibited in speaking a foreign language but also how emotions are triggered in those observing them as well. The third theme identified is *opacity/ambiguity*. Again, also termed as uncertainty (as highlighted in the focus group), has been raised in a couple of extant IB language-sensitive studies but not directly in relation to emotions. This study demonstrates how this linguistic ambiguity can elicit emotions. It also explores why this is so and provides detail and examples of sociological aspects of language that are directly related, such as speaker intention, cross-cultural pragmatics, negotiation of meaning, to enable recognition of these instances for future studies and MNT leaders.

The results from both the interviews and the focus group highlight strategies to mitigate the challenges faced by MNTs in the face of language barriers. On closer analysis and in consideration of

the emphasis of accommodation, some of these results suggested similar actions to those of CQ but with greater knowledge of language (language intelligence). Other strategies emphasised strongly the need for an environment where they felt *safe* and not judged by their language proficiency. This would also diminish the feeling of being constrained from speaking up and allowing an individual to speak up in the case of misunderstandings. Other strategies focused on a feeling of open-mindedness and readiness to build a cohesive team. These align with other MNT studies but nonetheless are especially important in a multi-lingual team environment where sensitivities may easily be exposed. One other strategy was that of leveraging cultural diversity. Already widely reported as a key to innovation and borne out in this study, this aspect can greatly contribute to building new synergies and improved cross-border collaboration.

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework



Limitations

Our study has several limitations, which suggest directions for future research in this area.

Firstly, the proficiency levels of the MNT members of both studies were self-reported as 'fluent'. Working arrangements did not allow the testing of linguistic proficiency. An opportunity to test proficiency levels might have provided greater clarity in relation to the precise proficiency level in the corporate language of each team member. However, the degree to which this would have influenced the findings is debatable. This is because the findings of previous studies (Neeley, Hinds & Cramton, 2012; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015) (using different sectors with lower proficiency levels) and of this study (using data from a sector with generally higher proficiency level in English) indicate that collaborating with team members of mixed proficiency levels elicits emotional responses in MNTs. Secondly, what is key to this study is how these emotional responses manifest themselves in the key themes, not reported in these earlier studies. The suggested strategies presented through this study focus primarily on recommendations for MNT leadership to enact and develop through their team leadership style. As emotions continue to play a role even at higher levels of proficiency. It is recommended that further research in the form of studies, using different industry sectors with different proficiency levels, to demonstrate their value in diminishing language proficiency asymmetries and to extend the insights from participants.

Thirdly, the semi-structured interviews were based on global MNTs operating mostly virtually. An opportunity, to carry out additional studies with MNTs operating physically together would have allowed a comparison between the results of virtual teams with face-to-face teams. Fourthly, although the sample included a variety of ages, the two teams were relatively small to allow comparison between experiences of younger and older generations; only three respondents had entered the labour market before all the cross-border mergers of the 1990s. Also, bearing in mind shifts in educational policy and changing markets, age and global working experience may have an impact on non-native speakers' language proficiency and acuity for CQ. Thus, future research could include additional variables such as individual characteristics e.g. example, age, education and global experience. Furthermore, different sectors, such as international retail and manufacturing, might yield useful results because, so far, very little language-sensitive research has been conducted in these sectors.

Fifthly, whilst the interviews and focus group data have captured dynamic data in relation to critical incidents triggering emotions, it would be useful to explore additional research designs, for example, capturing emotions in real-time, as suggested by Kouamé & Liu, (2021), who propose the exploration

of intra-individual differences under observation through the use of diaries and other qualitative approaches. Stimulated recall is another instrument that can be used to gather what people are thinking as they interact. In this case, research participants either listen to a recording or view a video recording of their behaviour in a certain situation and are then invited to reflect on their cognitive processes during the recorded event (Dempsey, 2010).

Final Thoughts

This study contributes to the growing literature on language diversity in MNCs by emphasising the crucial role of leadership in managing emotions and resultant challenges in MNTs. It also brings to the fore an added layer of complexity in relation to the concept of diversity in the workplace. Whilst much of the literature promotes the ease of knowledge sharing and communication through the adoption of a common corporate language, many of the challenges continue to be dismissed. This in-depth investigation shows that MNCs cannot simply assume that they have written off communication challenges by using a corporate language, but that its use needs to be tempered by specific leadership behaviours and lingua-cultural strategies. The study advances the research into emotions as a result of language barriers by highlighting key triggers that elicit emotions and also highlights the fundamentals of language that provoke the challenge. The contribution of our study to IB language-sensitive literature is comprehensively presented in the end of the paper.

A common thread running throughout this study is the call for MNCs to invest time in the development of language management in organisations. Misunderstandings and ambiguity, reluctance to speak up, misfired communication and uncertainty can result in loss of information and strategy misalignment. Whilst the mandate of a standard language allows the ease of a universalist approach in general communication, it is vital that MNT leaders are ready and equipped to help guide their team members in communicating across lingua-cultural barriers by leading with empathy in creating a *safe* climate, setting down ground rules, demonstrating CQ and cross-lingual sensitivity. By following these strategies, negative emotions will be minimised, and team productivity will grow.

Appeals for diversity awareness currently embrace gender, age, ethnicity and race. Inclusion of language diversity would elevate the importance of the role of language and highlight how humans transfer thought in all social interactions both in the workplace and personally and should be integrated into International human resources management diversity initiatives.

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Appendix 1

1. **Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews**

    1. Tell me about your team's composition and context.
        a. What does your team do?
        b. How many of you are there in the team?
        c. How long have you been team leader of the team?
        d. What nationalities are there in the team?
        e. Is there a language policy at your organisation?
        f. Are you expected to communicate in a foreign language with the other members of your team?

    2. Do you feel that there are language differences? How do they affect you?
        a. Could you take a minute to reflect on how these language differences affect you and when you are ready, tell me about them.
        b. I've heard you say these emotions [ ]. Can you confirm that these are due to language differences.
        c. Are there any other feelings?
        d. Could you describe a specific situation in which language differences caused you some kind of emotion.
    3. Is English your native language?

How do you feel about having to communicate in a foreign language at work? **OR**

How do you feel about working with people who have different levels of English in your team?

        a. How do you rate your level of English? What is the highest qualification you hold in English language?
        b. How does it impact team work and collaboration?
        c. How does it impact your personal productivity and achieving your goals?
        d. How do you think your team members feel about these issues?
    4. How do you think these issues can be mitigated?
        a. How responsible do you feel to help mitigate these issues?
        b. How much training have you been given in dealing with multinational teams?
    5. Could you take a moment to think of an instance where language differences caused some emotions in your team?

6. So far I've talked about language. I'd like to think about cultural differences in your team. Do you think there are cultural differences in your team?
    a. Can you explain what these are?
7. For you, how do cultural differences impact the language barriers in your team?
    a. Are there cultural differences in your team
    b. Can you describe what you mean by this?
8. Do you have different feelings when communicating with some entities of your team in preference to others? Why is this?
9. How do you think cultural differences influence communication within the team?
    a. How do you think cultural differences influence team collaboration?
    b. How do you think cultural differences influence your individual work load
    c. How do you think cultural differences influence your personal productivity?
10. What are the different cultural styles within the team?
11. Can you take a moment to reflect on the feelings you told me about. Are they due to either language, culture or a combination of both?
12. Are there any positive emotions you feel from working in a multinational team? Do you promote these emotions?
13. How do bilingual team members impact you and the team? Do they have a mitigating effect in any way?
14. Is there anything else we have not talked about that you think we should include?

2. Themes tabled at Focus Group

General perceptions of the issues that arise from working with mixed proficiency levels in the corporate language within a multinational team:

1. Introductory question to understand each participant's team activities

a) Global/local team size

b) Nationalities

c) Understanding of the corporate language policy and how they enact it

d) Use of corporate language

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2. Experience of working with colleagues with different proficiency levels in the corporate language and any issues that arise that cause emotions to bubble up and affect communication. How do they deal with any issues that arise?
3. Experience, either first-hand or observed, of a fellow team member feeling held back because of their proficiency levels in the language.
4. Experience of power structures forming, a feeling of “them and us” relating to proficiency level in the corporate language when collaborating cross-lingually. Recommended strategies.
5. Exploration into the theme of uncertainty in understanding from both the speaker and the listener. Recommended strategies.
6. Each participant stated themes they found most significant from the discussion.