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# (B)ELF in multicultural student teamwork

## (B)ELF in der multikulturellen Teamarbeit von Wirtschaftsstudierenden

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**Abstract:** Many researchers agree that multicultural teams are a “double-edged sword” with the potential for high levels of creativity and production, but also conflict. This paper argues that effective communication is vital for developing “virtuous,” rather than vicious, circles and that research into (B)ELF offers an insight into what effective communication in multicultural and multilingual teams can look like. The conceptual frame develops research into ELF and BELF by also drawing on organisational and management research to examine team processes and the role of language within them. The second part of the paper presents illustrative examples from data collected in an ethnographic study from an English-medium marketing master’s programme at WU Vienna. The students’ teamwork project comprises an international market entry simulation and can be seen as a training ground for managing both business content and team processes. The findings indicate that both the ELF context and the ELF talk furthered the development of rapport, and that the students’ “casual talk” supported their “work talk.” The paper finishes with a call for more empirical research into language use among recent business graduates and how to prepare students better for a globalised workplace.

**Keywords:** ELF, BELF, multicultural teamwork, rapport, language in IB

**Zusammenfassung:** Aktuelle Forschungsergebnisse belegen, dass multikulturelle Teamarbeit zwar oft von Konflikten geprägt ist, aber dennoch auch über ein hohes Potential für Kreativität und Produktivität verfügt. Die vorliegende Arbeit will anhand von Situationen, in denen Englisch als Arbeitssprache in multikulturellen Teams verwendet wird, zeigen, wie effektive Kommunikation erfolgreiche Teamarbeit fördern kann. Der konzeptuelle Teil des Artikels kombiniert sprachwissenschaftliche mit betriebswissenschaftliche Forschungsergebnissen, um Einblicke in die Rolle der Arbeitssprache in Teamprozessen zu gewähren.

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Der empirische Teil illustriert diese Einblicke anschließend anhand einer ethnographischen Studie eines englischsprachigen Masterprogramms an der Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass zum einen der multikulturelle Kontext und, zum anderen, die Interaktion zwischen den Studierenden, den sozialen Zusammenhalt im Team positiv beeinflussen. Des Weiteren konnte festgestellt werden, dass Gespräche über informelle Themen arbeitsrelevante Diskussionen und Kommunikation erleichtert.

**Schlagworte:** ELF, BELF, multikulturelle Teamarbeit, interkulturelle Kommunikation, internationale Betriebswirtschaft

## 1 Introduction

Both the corporate and educational sectors have seen a massive rise in teamwork in recent decades, and as the world becomes more interconnected, these teams are also becoming increasingly heterogeneous (DiStefano and Maznevski 2000; Kassis-Henderson 2005; Stahl et al. 2010b), with English often used as the “working language” or lingua franca of such teams (Kassis-Henderson 2005: 75). To date, there has been a substantial amount of research into multicultural teamwork in organisational and management studies even since the turn of the century alone (see Maznevski 2012; Stahl et al. 2010b; for an overview); some on teamwork in business educational contexts (e. g. Behfar et al. 2006; Berg 2012; Kassis-Henderson 2005; Kelly 2009; among others); and very little from the perspective of English as a lingua franca (Batziakas 2016; Hynninen 2012, 2013). To my knowledge, however, there is no existing research that investigates multicultural teamwork in a business (educational) context from the perspective of ELF, or drawing on the business practices reported in studies on BELF (*English as a business lingua franca*; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). This paper therefore aims to fill that gap. It begins by proposing BELF as a theoretical framework for analysing language work in multicultural teams. It then presents a study of BELF in a multicultural team on an English-medium marketing master’s programme at the WU Vienna University of Economics and Business (henceforth WU Vienna) before finishing with some conclusions and implications for BELF research.

## 2 ELF and BELF in multicultural teamwork

The use of English as the working language of a multicultural team is by definition the use of English as a lingua franca. An extensive discussion of

how to define ELF *per se* seems superfluous in *JELF*; this paper broadly follows Jenkins' (2015) overview of the first two phases of ELF in conceptual terms, though I depart from her view that the repositioning of ELF within a framework of multilingualism constitutes a third phase of ELF research. Rather, I argue that multilingualism has long been an integral part of conceptualising ELF (see e. g. Hülmbauer and Seidlhofer 2013), even though English remains in the foreground in international business contexts, where it is seen as being "indispensable" (Tietze 2004: 176). I suggest that the third and current phase of ELF research focuses more closely on the specificities of interaction in a particular context and how these shape and are shaped by the demands of that context (e. g. Björkman 2013; Kalocsai 2013; Mauranen 2012; Smit 2010).

In business contexts, managers describe English as a "tool" (Ehrenreich 2010: 417; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010: 399) for communication in the multicultural organisation, where functional, professional or corporate codes and cultures can be as important as national ones (Stahl and Voigt 2008: 165–166, 172). Even when language is topicalised in management literature, analyses of English as/or a lingua franca tend to reflect a more strategic orientation, with references to English as a "lingua franca" being viewed more or less as a synonym for a "shared," "common" or even "corporate" language (e. g. Piekari and Tietze 2012) and as such as a relatively stable and "discrete, unified, pre-existing system" (Janssens and Steyaert 2014: 636). Janssens and Steyaert's "provocative" understanding of English as "a 'glocal' language, a hybrid language enacted in a social process" or "multilingual franca" (Janssens and Steyaert 2014: 636) is thus fairly revolutionary in management and organisational studies (though cf. Brannen et al. 2014). However, it strongly reflects both the second and third phases of ELF research and their conceptualisation of ELF as being dynamic and hybrid on the one hand, and highly context-specific on the other, as described above.

One important exception is BELF, which, since its proposal, has acknowledged inspiration from ELF research while highlighting the fact that its proponents contextualise it firmly in the field of International Business studies (Kankaanranta et al. 2015; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). Based on international managers' reported use of communication strategies, BELF is conceptualised as being "highly context-bound and situation-specific," and "BELF competence calls for clarity and accuracy in the presentation of business content, knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions, and the ability to connect on the relational level" (Kankaanranta et al. 2015: 129, based on Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). In other words, effective BELF communication means "communicating *facts* as well as communicating *with people*" (Ehrenreich 2010: 419; original emphasis).

This dual understanding of language use in business contexts complements conceptualisations of ELF with a more general focus, and merits further empirical attention. To date, there have been a small number of interesting and insightful ethnographic studies into workplace interaction from a(n) (B)ELF perspective (e. g. Cogo 2012; Ehrenreich 2010; Pitzl 2010), but these have largely focused on relatively established employees with considerable experience in the multicultural workplace and who have, to some extent, learned what “works”; there is very little on employees in the early stages of their careers or, indeed, students and graduates. On the one hand, sociological and technological changes mean that their exposure and attitudes towards English can be very different from the older generations who comprise the managers that are often the preferred subject of research conducted in businesses (Ehrenreich 2010: 428); on the other, they are still learning both the facts and how to communicate with people from all over the world. Multicultural teamwork on international master’s programmes at a business university offer a unique microcosm in which to observe how students beginning to embark on an international career are using English as their business lingua franca and practising the skills they will need when they enter the professional world. The next section offers an overview of research into multicultural teamwork and synthesises these findings with the dual focus of BELF, namely, *communicating facts* and *communicating with people*.

## 3 The role of language in multicultural teamwork

### 3.1 The challenges of multicultural teamwork

Many researchers agree that multicultural teams are “double-edged swords” (Berg 2012: 408; cf. also Kirkman and Shapiro 2005: 39; Stahl and Voigt 2008: 171–172), i. e. “diversity can have both positive and negative consequences for group processes and outcomes” (Kirkman and Shapiro 2005: 40; cf. Maznevski 2012; Stumpf 2010), with higher levels of interpersonal conflict and communication problems leading to greater potential for frustration, dissatisfaction and mistrust; miscommunication and stress; missed opportunities and false assessments of colleagues’ skills and behaviours; decreased commitment and a higher turnover of team members, lost investment of time and resources, and disappointing outcomes (Garrison et al. 2010: 30; Stahl et al. 2010b: 692). Even “*perceptions of differences*” (Garrison et al. 2010: 30; my emphasis) alone can

be enough to have a negative impact on team relations and performance. However, it has also been found that teams with high levels of heterogeneity can perform on a par or even outperform their more homogenous counterparts, particularly in areas such as potential and actual productivity; utilising the resources available to the team and having “a reduced tendency towards group-think” (Stahl et al. 2010a: 444); creativity and innovation, especially in problem solving; and, somewhat paradoxically, higher levels of team satisfaction and identity (Berg 2012: 407–409; DiStefano and Maznevski 2000: 45–47; Earley and Mosakowski 2000: 45–47; Garrison et al. 2010: 28, 30; Maznevski 2012: 190; Stahl et al. 2010b: 703; Stumpf 2010: 303, 306–307). In their review of research on cultural diversity and cross-cultural dynamics in multicultural teams, Stahl et al. find that “although cultural diversity serves as an initial condition, its ultimate effects on team outcomes may be dependent on *whether consequent internal processes develop into virtuous or vicious circles*” (Stahl et al. 2010a: 444; my emphasis).

Language and communication are key for managing expectations, roles, strategies and activities as well as the development of team cohesion. While this is important in a monolingual or monocultural team, it is fundamental in a multicultural one. It is, however, also more complex. In their work on teams in basically monolingual settings, Donnellon argues that “[t]eam work is essentially a linguistic phenomenon” since “teams do their work through language” (Donnellon 1996: 6), and Salas et al. identify “the development of shared mental models [...], achievement of mutual trust [...], and engagement in closed-loop communication” as the “coordinating mechanisms” (Salas et al. 2005: 559) for effective teamwork. Consequently, the more (linguistically and/or culturally) heterogeneous the team members are to start with, the more work they have to put in to develop these shared mental models and effective forms of communication for doing their work.

On the one hand, therefore, multicultural/ELF-using teams not only have to contend with the challenges of achieving the team’s objectives but also with the added complexity of cultural and linguistic diversity which, if not managed carefully, can impede the development of shared mental models, inadvertently damage trust, and hinder effective communication. On the other hand, acknowledging and utilising diversity as a resource can also result in high levels of creativity and productivity. In the next sections, this paper will attempt to show how the demands of the multicultural (B)ELF context can in fact represent an advantage, as the students’ response to these demands helps the team to develop cohesion as well as to approach the task goals in a way they might otherwise not have done in a more linguistically and culturally homogenous context.

### 3.2 Trust and rapport in multicultural teamwork

Like all business communication, effective team communication cannot only be task-oriented but must also be relationship-oriented. However, as Koester argues, “the interplay between transactional and relational goals can be multi-layered and complex” (Koester 2006: 144), even in primarily monolingual contexts; multilingual contexts have even more layers and are even more complex, as what is standard practice for one may well be “rapport-challenging” (Spencer-Oatey 2000) for another.

In student group work, building rapport can be described as “a way of promoting the in-group by increasing the cohesion between members” and defined as “communicative acts promoting social concord” (Ådel 2011: 2933). The concept of positive rapport, which is found primarily in linguistics research, also closely reflects descriptions of trust from organisational studies. Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action” (Mayer et al. 1995: 712) and can also be linked to communication (Pinjani and Palvia 2013: 145). There is, however, still relatively little work on language in multicultural teamwork to date, particularly with regard to socialisation processes (see Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011; Tenzer et al. 2014; for an overview). Carrying out communicative acts which promote in-group cohesion is simultaneously complex and essential in multicultural groups, particularly when using a lingua franca. From the business perspective, team efficiency must be balanced against team effectiveness, i. e. the minimum amount of time needed to produce substantial output requires a certain amount of time “lost” on trust- and rapport-building activities. Ehrenreich also reports that “English-medium interactions are described as being more tiring and also taking longer than those in one’s mother tongue” (Ehrenreich 2010: 421).

However, it can also be argued that the participants in (B)ELF interaction are largely aware of the challenges of the multicultural context and frequently do actively orient themselves towards positive rapport management. From its beginnings, ELF research has “pointed to *mutual cooperation* as a major characteristic of ELF communication, along with *a strong orientation towards securing mutual understanding*” (Jenkins et al. 2011: 293; my emphasis). BELF scholars, too, have highlighted the importance of developing a relationship with business partners, since “the better you know the other party, the better you know what kind of communication to expect from him or her and how to communicate” (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010: 392). The focus on the message over grammatical accuracy, endeavours to pre-empt misunderstanding (Jenkins et al. 2011: 293; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010: 396) and use of Firth’s (1996)

oft-quoted strategy of “let it pass” can be seen as measures aimed at enhancing rapport as well as conveying information.

At the same time, however, “let it pass” is not always appropriate in the business context, nor in the educational context. One of the reasons that heterogeneous teams are seen as being more creative is their potential for “healthy” disagreement (Angouri 2012: 1567), which is itself “a *sine qua non* in decision making and problem solving talk” (Angouri and Locher 2012: 1551). Secondly, while Kankaanranta and Planken’s (2010: 296) informants claimed grammatical accuracy was relatively unimportant, they nevertheless emphasised the importance of clarity and accuracy in discussing business content (cf. also Kankaanranta et al. 2015). Consequently, if business graduates do not learn the business content accurately as students, this will disadvantage them when they enter the workforce. In short, it is imperative to create an environment where meaning can be challenged and negotiated “safely,” with disagreement “support[ing] learners in the development of more sophisticated arguments than they might have achieved otherwise” (Hüttner 2014: 198). This environment requires a high level of cohesion and positive rapport. The next section presents a highly cohesive student team working in ELF to negotiate and construct the meaning of the business content they needed to meet their task objectives.

## 4 BELF in multicultural teamwork at WU Vienna

### 4.1 Data set and methodology

The data presented in this paper is part of a larger research project conducted at WU Vienna. While no institution can be said to be representative of the vast and varied European higher education landscape, it can be argued that, due to WU Vienna’s position as Europe’s largest business university, its mid- to high overall ranking,<sup>1</sup> its geographical location and strong academic and corporate networks, it is an excellent case study for examining ELF in business-oriented higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, QS ranked WU at joint 45th out of 200 business schools worldwide and the FT at 43rd out of 85 European business schools (<https://www.wu.ac.at/en/the-university/about-wu/rankings/>; accessed 5 December 2016)



The complete data set comprises audio and video recordings of two teams working on a team project involving a computer program that simulated market entry in six Asian countries (specifically China, India, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand and South Korea), the teams' Facebook group conversations, their written case studies that were a separate part of the project, and reflective interviews conducted after the project was concluded. The teams took on the role of the marketing department of a US-based fast-moving consumer goods company producing toothpaste and had to make various decisions on aspects such as advertising, pricing, distribution, etc. After discussing the input they were given (a substantial amount of geographic and demographic information), they had to draw up and carry out a market analysis, then discuss and decide on the marketing strategies outlined above, and enter these into the computer program. This then ran the "decisions" through its algorithm to give them their results in terms of profits, market share, sales volume, etc. They repeated this several times to simulate a ten-year period and all the teams in the class were then ranked against each other in terms of their "profits." It was deemed "very realistic" by the professor in terms of both content and the multicultural team setting, based on his own and his MBA students' considerable industry experience in similar professional contexts.

The data presented in this paper focuses on one team only, MktgA, which consisted of four students, two male and two female, two of whom were Austrian (Carina,<sup>2</sup> Christian) and two international students, one Chinese (Qingling) and one Romanian (Benone). This can be considered a highly functioning team as not only was it ranked first among the teams in its class by the simulation, but it also showed a high level of team satisfaction in the reflective interviews conducted afterwards. The next sections focus primarily on comments from these reflective interviews, which were analysed using content analysis, and the section of the meeting data in which the students develop and carry out the market analysis. This comprised two meetings of approximately two hours each, resulting in a corpus of 34,785 words of interaction which was closely analysed with a discourse-pragmatic (Smit 2010) approach, first to examine how the students developed team cohesion and positive rapport, and then to investigate how they negotiated and constructed meaning in terms of business content. In both cases, taking a discourse-pragmatic approach reflected an understanding of language as both constituted by and constitutive of social realities at the level of the discourse itself and at the level of the interaction, i. e. the team processes.

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

## 4.2 Shared authority, authorship and mutual trust

The students' comments in the reflective interviews at the end of the team project indicated that authority for both the task and for language was shared across the group, and that the team members trusted in each other's ability and judgement when it came to the task. Although the computer program had (arbitrarily) designated Christian the team leader, each of the team members, including Christian himself, claimed that this was in name only. Instead, they insisted, authority was shared amongst the team members:

- (1) (Christian, reflective interview)  
 Researcher: and was there a group leader?  
 Christian: (1) I really I really wouldn't say so actually no no (2)
- (2) (Carina, reflective interview)  
 it was not that someone was the leader and everyone followed or something it was just everyone had his role and it was like a a yeah like a team
- (3) (Qingling, reflective interview)  
 I think for the most part we just discussed together and made decisions [...] all together
- (4) (Benone, reflective interview)  
 Researcher: was somebody a group leader (.) or the group leader  
 Benone: officially Christian @@ unofficially @@ we didn't choose anyone [...] we didn't have roles we were no leaders @@@@

The analysis of the meeting data revealed that Christian actually did often take the lead in initiating new topics, which is usually "a privilege of the Chair" (Lesznyák 2004: 123), and in bringing the discussions back to the main topic when it strayed. However, these roles were also taken on by each of the other team members at various points. Furthermore, all the students emphasised that everybody contributed to the teamwork, and that it was important to understand each other's strengths:

- (5) (Qingling, reflective interview)  
 I think every one of us contributed and every one of us had some good ideas [...] we did the proper analysis of the data and we also we really discussed it and made the most of each other's opinion

- (6) (Benone, reflective interview)  
 maybe sometimes I'm too crazy but @@@@ they accepted it and probably I compensated with the fact that I was passionate about the application and everything [...] sometimes we tend to share the labour equally and not to think about what in which area can someone be successful
- (7) (Christian, reflective interview)  
 um almost every decision [was made together] I think one time Benone was still in Romania and this was actually this case we were actually supposed to do our decisions Carina Qingling and myself were supposed to do the decisions together but we we got a little sheet of help from Benone @@@
- (8) (Carina, reflective interview)  
 I think we were a team (.) it's kind of like <L1de>eingespielt {used to working with each other, attuned to each other}</L1de> [...] it was like a team where everyone had his position and had his task but we did everything together [...] it just works out if they are all together because one player is not doing anything or winning anything I think that made a difference yeah.

Furthermore, the students seemed not only to recognise but to appreciate the diversity of the team, their range of knowledge and experience, and their different working styles, reflecting good business practice in multicultural teamwork as outlined by DiStefano and Maznevski in their description of high-performing “creator” teams, where “differences are explicitly recognized and accepted, even nurtured, and their implications are incorporated into every facet of the group’s processes” (DiStefano and Maznevski 2000: 48). For example, both Carina and Christian also commented that Benone thrived on the “game” form of the simulation/application, while Christian also said Benone was “our little brain”, the one who “came up with sophisticated calculation” in Excel. Carina noted that the other three were more concerned about presentation formatting than she was; Benone confessed that “when I’m sober [i. e. not ‘crazy’] I’m a freerider”, but that in this group his team members responded positively to him being “crazy” and that motivated him to be passionate about and highly engaged in the game. Qingling commented that “Chinese people are more reserved” and “even if I had some thoughts in my mind I wouldn’t necessarily say them”; Carina too, noticed this difference, saying “Qingling is probably sometimes really focused and quiet and then she tells it in a really structured way whereas I probably just talk without thinking a lot”. On the other

hand, Carina also pointed out that Qingling had the broadest vocabulary in the team (“she knows the words”).

When it came to writing and checking the case studies, each team member wrote an individual part of the text and then the team integrated them into a whole. One or more of the team members then “proofread” or “checked” it, making some minor changes; who this was seemed to depend entirely on who happened to have the time or inclination to do it, as it was different for each of the two cases. These changes, however, were also discussed by the team until everyone agreed, giving a “final product” (as Qingling put it). Thus the team members jointly assumed both authorship and authority of the texts, reflecting results from Cogo’s study of a small but highly multicultural IT firm, where she found that “authority of a text is [...] shared among all the staff instead of resting on one individual” (Cogo 2012: 299). This can be seen as a development of Jenkins et al.’s (2011: 293) argument mentioned earlier that “mutual cooperation is a major characteristic of ELF communication” and reflects the joint construction of disciplinary meaning more commonly observed in studies of spoken ELF interaction, especially in similar educational contexts (e. g. Hynninen 2012: 20; Smit 2010: 350–370).

To sum up, the team members quickly got to know each other’s strengths and established an environment based on equality in diversity, which facilitated sharing authority and authorship of texts whether they were part of spontaneous spoken interaction or formal written case studies. Despite Christian being nominally the team leader, authority for both carrying out the tasks and the language used to do so was shared amongst all four team members. While the lack of a clear team leader or a chair could be a disadvantage in more structured meetings, for these informal and exploratory meetings where the students were trying to get to grips with the genre of the case study, the input for the market analysis, and the mechanics of the simulation itself, this “nurturing” of individual strengths and interests was highly constructive. At the same time, sharing authority and authorship of the language in formal and informal contexts both reflected and helped to strengthen the team members’ trust in each other.

### 4.3 “Casual talk”

One observation – or criticism – that was made by all the team members in their interviews was that they spent a lot of time on the project, with comments ranging from “[the fact that we spent a lot of time on the project] is a neutral

thing @@ we achieved good results so it was good” (Qingling) to “we were super unefficient [*sic*]” (Benone). It can be argued that, as reported by Ehrenreich’s (2010: 421) managers, working in BELF simply takes more time than working in an L1. This may be due to the extra effort that working in an L2 requires, or because BELF interlocutors spend considerable amounts of time checking, clarifying and confirming things they would not need to with L1 counterparts (Kankaanranta and Planken 2010: 396). It may also result from higher levels (and extensive cycles) of disagreement due to the wider range of cognitive (and cultural) resources available in the group (cf. Angouri 2012: 1567).

Alternatively, it could be said that much of this “unefficient” time was spent discussing things “which were not really beneficial for us not really important maybe for the project” but meant that “we had a lot of fun” (Christian; though all the team members stressed that this teamwork was “fun”). As there was no monolingual control group, it is impossible to claim that this is directly related to the team being multilingual or multicultural. However, it could be argued that the diverse experiences of the individual team members meant they had more to discuss and contribute than a more homogenous team might have had on the one hand, and a greater need to keep talking until they found common ground on the other.

Some of these discussions were extensions of a task-related topic, such as whether dubbing is used in advertising in China and whether Western products or people should be given Chinese names. As such, the diversity of the group and its cultural resources can be said to contribute to both the quantity and quality of these discussions in terms of the overall task objectives (i. e. evaluating the potential of a market). In contrast, some were completely off-topic and essentially thematically redundant, as in the example below.

- (9) 1 Christian: philippines  
 2 Benone: ye:ah philippines is as <81>japan</81>  
 3 Qingling: <81>philip</81>pines about the <82>same</82>  
 4 Benone: <82>the</82> same as japan  
 5 Qingling: about the same people as japan=  
 6 Benone: almost the same as japan you know what <83>i</83>  
 7 Qingling: <83>yeah</83> (2)  
 8 Benone: <84>mean</84>  
 9 Christian: <85>yeah</85>

- 10 Carina: <85>it's like</85>  
 11 Qingling: <85>yeah yeah</85> <86>yeah yeah</86>  
 12 Carina: <86>the same</86>  
 13 Christian: <86>or really</86> similar like two <87>point five</87>  
 14 Carina: <87>two point</87> five  
 15 Qingling: thai  
 16 Carina: thai i:s  
 17 Benone: thai <pvc><ipa>t-hai</ipa></pvc>  
 18 Carina: not too many people  
 19 Christian: like in the movie uh <88>hangover two?</88>  
 20 Qingling: <88>south korea?</88>  
 21 Christian: you know? (.) si<89>lent</89>  
 22 Benone: <89>yes</89> yes and that tattoo you know @@@  
 23 Christian: yeah but i never actually i never got the joke (.)  
 24 Benone: of <90><un>x</un></90>  
 25 Christian: <90>un</90>til i di- until i did my exchange semester  
 26 in the states because in in  
 27 the german <pvc>synchronisation</pvc>  
 28 they say t-hailand <ipa>tɪ: 'hai lænd</ipa>  
 29 and it doesn't make sense but i think  
 30 the joke about thailand <ipa>'θai lænd</ipa> is  
 31 that it's actually it's part of the leg  
 32 Carina: a:h  
 33 Christian: thigh it's part of the leg or something like that  
 34 it's <L1de>oberschenkel {thigh}</L1de>  
 35 Carina: mhm  
 36 Christian: at least people in the states told <91>me that</91>  
 37 Benone: <91>ah you</91> watch the movies here in german  
 38 Christian: huh? (.) yeah almost <92>every</92>  
 39 Benone: <92>aww</92>  
 40 Christian: yeah that's  
 41 Carina: they are mostly in german  
 42 Benone: ours are with translation  
 43 Carina: mm <93>no we're</93>  
 44 Qingling: <93>we have</93>  
 45 Christian: <93>no without</93> translation (.) oh your in romania=  
 46 Benone: =in romania yeah yeah yeah it's better  
 47 Qingling: <94>we have it too</94>

- 48 Christian: <94>yeah it is</94> better <95>for sure</95>  
 49 Benone: <95>you can listen</95> to yeah english  
 50 Carina: there are just some small cinemas where you can watch  
 51 english movies (.) or the the original=  
 52 Christian: =and in most of the cases they give just random  
 53 german titles to the english <96>film</96>  
 54 Carina: <96>yeah</96>  
 55 Benone: <96>ah</96> the same in romania <97>no connection</97>  
 56 Christian: <97>so sometimes</97> when you talk to americans about a  
 57 <98>movie</98>  
 58 Qingling: <98>ye:ah</98>  
 59 Christian: you know the movie probably <99>but the title is</99>  
 60 Carina: <99>but you don't realise</99>  
 61 Christian: SO different  
 62 Benone: yes <100>yes</100>  
 63 Christian: <100>just</100> a random name=  
 64 Qingling: =yep (2)  
 65 Christian: don't get it why (1)  
 66 Benone: yeah for example the hangover in english is hangover  
 67 in romanian is the BIG hangover (.) what's the point  
 68 <1>@@@</1>  
 69 Christian: <1>@@@</1>  
 70 [...] ((students continue to talk for ca. 2 mins about films;  
 71 Qingling goes to bathroom))  
 72 Benone: so: <17>thailand</17>  
 73 Qingling: <17><un>xx</un></17>  
 74 Christian: <17>which grade</17> for thailand

This extract illustrates a very clear switch between on-topic talk where the team is discussing how many points to award each of the potential markets in terms of their urban population (lines 1–18) to a completely unrelated and lengthy off-topic discussion about films triggered only by Benone's unconventional pronunciation of "Thai[land]" (lines 17–71) and then reverting back to the original discussion of how many points ("which grade"; line 74) to award Thailand in line 72. After this, the team continued with the market entry analysis and did not return to the topic of film again. Incidentally, in contrast to the more common patterns of Christian bringing the group back on-topic, in this case it is he who takes them off-topic in line 19, and Benone who brings

them back in line 72. Chairing and team leadership roles are, therefore, very flexible in this team's meetings.

In her study of meetings in ELF contexts, Lesznyák (2004: 117–118) describes the “suspension” of the topic under discussion as “topic digression,” a notion which is not dissimilar to Pitzl's (2010: 84) conceptualisation of “waffle” as explanations that are “superfluous to task goals” in similar contexts.<sup>3</sup> Rather, these digressions tend to be purely relational (Koester 2006) or, as Qingling called it in the reflective interview, “casual talk”, supporting the development of common ground and thereby also team cohesion (Greenberg et al. 2007; Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1998). Explicit efforts to build team cohesion is particularly important in (B)ELF contexts, where the diversity of the team members means it cannot be taken for granted.

By asking whether his colleagues know the film *Hangover 2* (line 19), Christian attempts to find such shared interests which Benone affirms, adding a detail from the movie to strengthen his claim “yes and that tattoo you know” (line 22). Once some common ground has been established, Christian makes a risky move and confesses that he did not understand a joke in the film (lines 23, 25–31). In BELF/multicultural team contexts, language asymmetries can be a cause for anxiety and asking for clarification a sign of weakness (Ehrenreich 2010: 422; Hinds et al. 2013: 555; Tenzer et al. 2014: 526–527). Given that “one of the most common functions of humour is the construction of ingroup cohesion and solidarity” (Holmes and Marra 2002: 377), admitting you have not understood a joke is essentially articulating your exclusion from the ingroup. Christian's language-oriented “confession” can therefore be interpreted as a demonstration of his trust in the other team members by showing a “willingness [...] to be vulnerable” (Mayer et al. 1995: 712) which in turn can help to strengthen reciprocal trust and encourage cooperative behaviour from his colleagues (Jonsen et al. 2012: 370). At the same time, taking this risk in superfluous “casual talk” is arguably safer than in important “work talk.” Conversely, it could also be argued that this self-exclusion from an English native-speaker ingroup aligns him more closely with his non-native colleagues, and establishes “emotional solidarity” with the other ELF speakers (Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011: 18).

If they are not linked to a power imbalance, the identification and acceptance of (cultural) differences can be a positive factor in diverse teams

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<sup>3</sup> NB: this definition differs somewhat from House's (1999) and Maher's (2016) description of “waffle” in purely linguistic terms such as the use of supportive linguistic moves (e. g. modification) or as compensation for lacking knowledge of standardised routines.



(DiStefano and Maznevski 2000: 48). Indeed, in a context which is explicitly and emphatically described as “international” – namely the marketing master’s – highlighting difference paradoxically strengthens group identity. Exploring each other’s cultural background therefore performs an important role not only in getting to know and understand the other person and their behaviour, but also in constructing the team as part of the international English-medium/ELF marketing-master’s community. Getting to know each other can take the form of “storytelling,” individual experiences and socialising (Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen 2011: 18), and frequently includes translanguaging practices. As such, linguistic hybridity contributes to the construction of a hybrid socio-cultural interaction.

The topic of films and subtitling/dubbing practices creates a “safe” proxy which allows the students to discuss cultural differences and similarities without it becoming too personal. A difference is identified in that Austria dubs films, whereas Romania uses subtitling (or “translation”, lines 37–49); this subject even permits a mild criticism of the other’s practices (“it’s [subtitling’s] better”, line 46). In other contexts, such a move could be perceived as extremely face-threatening; with this “safe” topic, Christian is happy to concur (“yeah it is better for sure”, line 48). Qingling, too, offers the Chinese perspective, although it is somewhat lost in the overlaps, and her efforts at alignment are not acknowledged as much as they could be. Though Benone and Christian continue to dominate the conversation, all four seem engaged in finding common ground through the use of different titles for the films in translation to a greater or lesser extent (lines 52–69). Again, Christian’s comment in lines 56–61 (“so sometimes when you talk to Americans about a movie you know the movie probably but the title is SO different”) highlights the “emotional solidarity” with other non-native speakers of English and their mutual exclusion from a (hypothetical) native-speaker ingroup.

In this extract, we also see how certain individuals act as local “nodes” (cf. Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999: 386–387), becoming an interface for language, local culture and individuals. Though the context here is quite different from Marschan-Piekkari et al.’s “nodes” as a nexus between managers, headquarters and subsidiaries, the function is essentially the same: to bridge a knowledge gap resulting from linguistic or cultural differences. Both Christian and Carina take on this function in two different ways. Carina explains in lines 50–51 that “there are just some small cinemas where you can watch English movies or the original”, which could simply be her own contribution to the discussion of cinema-going practices in their own country; however, given that she is Austrian and Vienna-based, this information

can also be interpreted as a key piece of survival information for international students such as Qingling, who hardly speaks any German and would otherwise be unable to go to the cinema at all. Christian, in contrast, uses direct translation from English into German of the word “thigh” (“it’s part of the leg or something like that it’s <L1de>oberschenkel {thigh}</L1de>”, lines 33–34) to make the joke accessible to those who speak German (primarily Carina, but perhaps also Benone). It is curious that this is an overt and marked instance of code-switching used for strategic didactic purposes, whereas his use of the false cognate “synchronisation” for dubbing in line 27, borrowed from the German term *Synchronisation* and given anglicised pronunciation, goes unnoticed and unmarked until Benone clarifies its meaning several lines later (“ah you watch the movies here in German”; line 37). This instance of “let it pass” (Firth 1996) might suggest that the other students are using rapport-enhancement strategies by allowing Christian enough space to tell his story; on the other hand, it might simply be that they accept the word due to similarities in their own L1 (cf. Ehrenreich 2011: 25–27; Hülmbauer 2011: 147–149). Given that Benone does seek clarification later, though, the former seems more likely, at least in this case.

This digression is almost three minutes long in total and cannot be said to contribute anything to furthering the students’ understanding or analysis of the market. There is a clear switch to the off-topic talk in line 19 and a clear return to the original topic in line 72. Nevertheless, the discussion helps to build rapport within the team at a number of levels. First, it functions as a platform for establishing shared interests – essential in a highly heterogeneous group – based on a discussion of film. Secondly, Christian’s “story” both shares background knowledge about him and, to a certain extent, makes him “vulnerable” by exposing a former weakness. On the other hand, it can be argued that this very weakness – not belonging to the linguistic ingroup of US English native speakers (NES) – serves to strengthen his bond and “social empathy” with the other non-native speakers (NNES) in his team. Additionally, the discussion of different dubbing and subtitling practices in their various countries highlights cultural differences in a “safe” context, and common ground in the fact that films are often titled differently in translation, again highlighting a difference from NES contexts which they share as NNES. Finally, off-task talk often affords a chance for students to act as a cultural or linguistic node, explaining or “translating” local phenomena to their international colleagues, and vice versa. In short, both the multicultural ELF context and their ELF (trans)languaging practices make an important contribution to building rapport and developing cohesion in the team.

#### 4.4 “Work talk”

Traditionally, managers report that business-oriented talk is generally easier than small talk in another language (Ehrenreich 2010; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). However, as is seen above, this does not seem to be the case for the current generation of graduates (cf. Ehrenreich 2010: 428). In the reflective interview, Qingling presents the opposite case: rather than finding business-oriented talk easier than small talk, she claims that “this kind of *casual talk* [...] makes our interaction really natural *so when we go into the working mode we [...] maintain that smooth communication*” (my emphasis). In more formal terms, “psychological safety has been found to promote team learning behavior and team performance,” psychological safety being defined as “a shared belief that the team is a safe environment for interpersonal risk taking” and “characterized by interpersonal trust, respect for the competence of all team members, and care and concern about members as people” (Schaubroeck et al. 2011: 864). The rapport-enhancing effect of the students’ “casual talk,” as illustrated in the previous section, therefore forms a continuously evolving basis of trust and interest in each other. This creates a safe environment for carrying out their “work talk” and drawing on their business competence in the negotiation and construction of meaning. Both the ELF context and the processes of the students’ ELF talk contribute substantially to these developments.

The detailed analysis of the students’ talk showed that they did spend a considerable amount of time on negotiating and constructing meaning from the input data they were given on the six Asian countries in order to evaluate them as potential target markets. As such, it is inherently a language-intensive task. It could be argued that this would also be the case in monolingual settings; however, the following example illustrates how having practice of their “casual talk” in ELF contexts seems to contribute to the development of virtuous, rather than vicious, circles in this team’s communication.

The analytical focus of the research project examined this from the perspective of EXINTEX, or *exploratory interactive explaining*. This framework develops Smit’s (2010) INTEX (*interactive explaining*) framework from her study of an English-medium hotel management programme and expands it to take into account the complexities of peer-to-peer explaining in the absence of an epistemic authority such as a teacher. One of the main developments was the identification of challenges and counter-challenges as a key strategy for testing the robustness of an explanation. Clearly, challenges have considerable face-threatening potential (cf. Muntigl and Turnbull 1998). Creating a sense of psychological safety in the team environment through rapport-building strategies – such as “casual talk” – is therefore essential if both the task objectives (transforming

the input data into decisions to make “profit”) and teamwork goals (high levels of team cohesion and satisfaction) are to be met. Extract (10) below is an illustrative example of this “work talk” and how the students negotiate, challenge, and construct the concept of “urban population” as a criterion for the market analysis, and then evaluate Japan as a target market against this criterion. The numbers refer to their scale, with zero being highly unfavourable, and four being highly favourable.

- (10) 1 Carina: nah but we can just say that in china there are a lot  
2 of people and a lot of them living in urban areas  
3 Christian: mhm  
4 Carina: so (.) this is four <45>but</45>  
5 Christian: <45>it's</45> still a four  
6 Carina: yeah it's still a four=  
7 Benone: =still a four  
8 Carina: in japan we have NOT that many people and also (1)  
9 not so many=  
10 Benone: =no there are (2) two or three or something=  
11 Carina: =yah so (.) because so many of them are living  
12 in urban areas that they get a higher score than  
13 <46>two</46>  
14 Benone: <46>yeah</46>  
15 Carina: or than one or what did i have <47>two</47>  
16 Benone: <47>and the</47> level of civilization in japan is higher  
17 than <48>for others</48>  
18 Carina: <48>yeah yeah</48>  
19 Christian: but in japan for example you could concentrate on  
20 the three major cities because there you have  
21 a population of forty percent out of the whole population  
22 (.) in china? you have sixty four urban percent  
23 for urban population (.) but only two point eight percent  
24 for the lar- three largest cities=  
25 Benone: =true  
26 Qingling: but you also need to take into consideration that  
27 china is huge and there are so many so many cities  
28 and <49>japan has less less cities</49>  
29 Carina: <49>there are so many million</49> <50>cities</50>  
30 Christian: <50>mm</50>  
31 Carina: yeah two tier one tier yeah  
32 Benone: yeah

- 33 Qingling: so if you only count three largest cities then  
 34 it's not um same thing  
 35 Christian: yeah (.) mm  
 36 Benone: for me china is four (.) here (.) but how's japan?  
 37 it cannot be four because <51>they are</51>  
 38 Carina: <51>yeah</51> they were two before for just population  
 39 Christian: just two yeah  
 40 Carina: then maybe two point five because so many  
 41 of the population living in <52>urban</52>  
 42 Benone: <52>ye:s</52>  
 43 Carina: areas  
 44 Christian: mhm=  
 45 Benone: =yes=  
 46 Carina: so two <53>point five<53>  
 47 Benone: <53>yes yes</53>so two point five for japan (.) india

In contrast to their “casual talk,” the team’s “work talk” was characterised by disagreements and challenges that served to help them learn the terminology and process the information they were confronted with in the task. Such challenges have the potential to be quite threatening to the individual team members’ face as well as the rapport in the team as a whole. Yet in the example given here, and in the rest of the interaction under analysis, there was no sign that this was the case; in this example, the round of agreement tokens around the final decision (lines 40–47) indicates that team cohesion has been restored. The emphasis on how much “fun” the students had in all their reflective interviews also suggests that these (frequent) challenges did not impair the team’s overall positive working climate. The ELF context, and the absence of a single recognised epistemic authority for content or language (i. e. a teacher), thus creates a space where all are equal and disagreement is accepted as an important means of developing robust concepts and to collaboratively construct the criteria for the market analysis. These results concur with recent research into the language of decision-making and problem-solving in work and education contexts, which perceives disagreements as expected and preferred, and even conducive to creativity and learning (e. g. Angouri 2012; Fujimoto 2010: 316; Hüttner 2014: 196; Sharma 2012). Additionally, the relatively informal context of the team (i. e. being outside the classroom) and the development of a psychologically safe space through their casual talk as described in the previous section supports Hüttner’s observation that “unmitigated disagreements appear to be evidence of easy and trusting relationships” (Hüttner 2014: 196). In short, one could argue that practice in negotiating and constructing meaning in the students’ ELF “casual talk,”

where linguistic and cultural differences are more salient, help to “maintain that smooth communication” in “work talk,” and pave the way for more contested discussions centring around the higher-stakes content topics.

The extract starts with Carina summarising the criterion (“there are a lot of people and a lot of them living in urban areas”, lines 1–2), assigning a value of four (“highly suitable”), and a round of agreement from the other team members. Again, this shows how the various team members shared the chairing role; at the end of the extract, it is Benone who summarises the final conclusion (“so two point five for Japan”, line 47) and moves the discussion onto the next market/topic (“India”). At the beginning, though, Carina continues as chair as she moves the topic from China to Japan, which does not rate as favourably: “in Japan we have NOT that many people and also not many [...] because so many of them are living in urban areas [...] they get a higher score than two” (lines 8–9, 11–13), which is supported by Benone adding an additional justification based on comparatively high living standards (“the level of civilisation in Japan is higher than for others”, line 16–17).

In lines 19–24, Christian initiates the first challenge, suggesting they should narrow the focus of the criterion to the three largest cities only and backing up his proposal with facts and figures as well as a contrast (“[in Japan] you have a population of forty percent out of the whole population (.) in China? you have sixty four urban percent for urban population (.) but only two point eight percent for the lar- three largest cities”). We then see a “stepwise” (Hüttner 2014: 198; Sharma 2012) process as the students negotiate the various arguments and stances.

Christian’s challenge is swiftly counter-challenged by Qingling, perhaps drawing on her role as the team’s country expert, who argues that “China is huge and there are so many cities” (lines 26–28). Carina immediately forms a peer alliance (Kangasharju 1996: 293; Sharma 2012: 13–15) with Qingling, demonstrating this alignment discursively: overlapping and paraphrasing Qingling’s argument in two different ways, first as “there are so many million cities” (i.e. cities with a population of over a million inhabitants; line 29) and then as “one tier two tier” (line 31). Qingling then summarises her argument again in line 33–34, making her point more explicit: “so if you only count three largest cities then it’s not the same thing”. Faced with this barrage of arguments, Christian indicates uncertainty (cf. Sharma 2012: 16) in line 35 with his hesitant “yeah (.) mm”, a considerable downplay of his assertive proposal in lines 19–24. Following this sign of vulnerability, Benone assumes the role of chair and mediator, summarising the arguments so far (lines 36–37) and prompting an alternative proposal from Carina (“maybe two point five”, line 40) that represents a compromise between both positions (cf. Sharma 2012: 23). Christian indicates his realignment with the team

by confirming and repeating Carina's recap of a previous criteria ("just two yeah", line 39) and finally concedes explicitly, if not very enthusiastically, in line 44 ("mhm"). Carina's suggestion meets with a general round of agreement and the discussion moves on to the next topic.

In the students' "work talk", the absence of an epistemic authority such as a teacher means that challenging and counter-challenging prove to be key strategies for negotiating and constructing the criteria they need to conduct their market analysis and fulfil the task. The business educational context means that disagreements are expected and unmarked. Even though these disagreements are also largely unmitigated, the collaborative approach to constructing meaning and the positive atmosphere developed through their ("casual") ELF talk prevents disagreements from becoming conflicts, and rather results in a stepwise process towards a consensual resolution.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper began by outlining key findings from ELF and BELF research with regard to multicultural teamwork and highlighted the dual understanding of language in (multicultural) business contexts as communicating facts and communicating with people (Ehrenreich 2010), or, in other words, having a focus on understanding and expressing business content clearly and accurately on the one hand, and building rapport with your business partners on the other (Kankaanranta et al. 2015; Kankaanranta and Planken 2010). It highlighted the importance of effective (B)ELF communication as the key to initiating virtuous, rather than vicious, circles in multicultural teamwork and thus turning diversity into added value instead of added problems. It argued that effective team communication should not only be task-oriented but also relationship-oriented, and outlined theories of trust and rapport which can be applied in multicultural teams to address relational as well as task goals.

The empirical section then presented a highly functioning, multicultural student team and some findings and illustrative examples from their interaction in meetings and comments from reflective interviews conducted after the project was finished. Overall, the team members reported high levels of satisfaction with the team and the project, which can be attributed to shared authority and authorship of their work, high levels of trust and rapport, and a combination of "casual" or relational talk creating a positive team atmosphere and "work talk" which constituted the actual task processes. It was found that the "casual" talk contributed to strengthening ingroup cohesion through the students making

themselves vulnerable, seeking common ground and acknowledging and embracing differences. This positive climate established a baseline for “work” talk which was considerably more challenging and face-threatening, yet never seemed to overstep its boundaries and actually damage the team’s relationships since disagreements were expected and worked through collaboratively to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion. The linguistic hybridity and cultural diversity of the ELF context meant the students engaged with the task, and with each other, at a deeper level than they might have done in a more homogenous setting. Of course, this is only one very small case study and bears all the usual challenges of highly qualitative analysis. It is also important to bear in mind that the student context is different, and has different pressures and challenges, from “real” business practice, however realistic a simulation might be. An important implication for BELF research is therefore the need for more empirical research investigating actual language practice among recent graduates and to find out how to optimise content and language teaching in business schools to prepare students for the reality of the modern business world. Taking all these factors into account, it is hoped that this paper nevertheless offers an insight into multicultural student teamwork and reveals that the students are using the opportunities afforded them to gain experience both in processing content knowledge and in developing their interpersonal skills – through English as their *lingua franca*.

## Appendix: Transcription conventions

Transcriptions use the VOICE transcription conventions ([https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/transcription\\_general\\_information](https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/transcription_general_information)).

<1> word </1>	overlap
=	other-continuation
(.)	brief pause
(1)	longer pause (in seconds)
:	lengthening
?	rising intonation
WORD	emphasis
@	laughter (in syllables)
wo-	word fragment
<un>x</un>	unintelligible speech
<pvc> word </pvc>	pronunciation variations and coinages
<ipa> </ipa>	phonological representation of variation
<L1de> wort </L1de>	non-English speech, L1 German
{words}	author’s translation
((words))	contextual information



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## Bionote

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