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“Cool my doubt is erased”: constructive disagreement and creating a psychologically safe space in multicultural student teamwork

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Abstract: This paper investigates the roles of disagreement and trust in multicultural teamwork on an English-medium master’s programme at an Austrian business university. The teamwork project – assigned by the content teacher – took place mostly outside the classroom and simulated business practice both in terms of the tasks and the multicultural context. Each team comprised two Austrian students and two international students, resulting in an English as a lingua franca (ELF) setting. The teams were observed and audio-/video-recorded, with the analysis focusing on an early stage of the project where they laid the groundwork for the team mental models in terms of establishing the team goals, relationships and communicative practices. Additionally, retrospective interviews were conducted at the end of the project with each of the team members and the lecturer to gain emic insights into the project. The findings suggest a symbiotic relationship between disagreement and trust, in which high levels of trust and the construction of a psychologically safe space allow the team members to disagree with and challenge each other without damaging their relationships, leading to better decisions. In turn, these decisions can contribute to a sense of shared success that strengthens the team’s joint identity.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca (ELF), English-medium instruction (EMI), multicultural teamwork, disagreement, epistemics, trust

Zusammenfassung: Diese Arbeit erforscht die Rolle von Nichtübereinstimmung und Vertrauen in multikultureller Teamarbeit im Rahmen eines englischsprachigen Masterstudiums an einer österreichischen Wirtschaftsuniversität. Das Teamprojekt wurde vom Vortragenden erstellt und fand hauptsächlich außerhalb des Hörsaals statt. Die Aufgabe und das multikulturelle Team simulierte eine berufliche Tätigkeit in einem Kontext, wo Englisch die *lingua franca* bzw. Arbeitssprache war. Die Teams wurden bei ihrer Arbeit beobachtet und mit Audio und Video aufgenommen. Die Analyse fokussierte auf einem frühen Teil des Projekts, wo die Teammitglieder

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Grundlagen für ihre Ziele, die Gruppenbildung und ihre gemeinsamen kommunikativen Praktiken etablieren konnten. Interviews mit den Teammitgliedern und dem Vortragenden wurden auch am Ende des Projekts durchgeführt, um Erkenntnisse aus ihrem Blickwinkel zu erhalten. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Teams, wo Vertrauen vorhanden ist, es sich erlauben können, Nichtübereinstimmung auszudrücken und Beiträge von anderen Teammitgliedern in Frage zu stellen, ohne die Beziehung zu beschädigen, was zu besseren Entscheidungen führen kann. Diese Entscheidungen führen wiederum zum gemeinsamen Erfolg und einer gestärkten Teamidentität.

Schlagworte: Englisch als Arbeitssprache, Englisch als Unterrichtssprache, multikulturelle Teamarbeit, Nichtübereinstimmung, Gruppenbildung, Vertrauen

1 Introduction: at the intersection of English-medium instruction (EMI) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) in multilingual university settings

Some of the most frequently cited motivations for implementing English-medium instruction (EMI) are to attract foreign students and “enrich learning through joint study with students from different national/cultural backgrounds” (Wächter and Maiworm 2014: 54). Teamwork is often perceived as a useful pedagogical tool for encouraging students to engage with and benefit from diversity in the international classroom (Lauridsen and Lillemose 2015: 21), a means of facilitating “deep” learning (Fransen et al. 2011: 1103) and an important skill in terms of employability (Anderson and Lees 2017). For students with different first languages, teamwork on an English-medium programme (EMP) may be their first experience of actively working with their international peers and of communicating in English as a lingua franca (ELF).

In the last five years there has been growing acknowledgement of the overlap between research into English-medium instruction, which tends to take a pedagogy- and policy-oriented perspective, and studies of English as a lingua franca in higher education contexts, which have a much stronger focus on interactional data, though there are still only few works which take both perspectives into account (e.g. Björkman 2013; Smit 2010). To date, research into EMI has generally aimed to gain the “big picture” with large quantitative surveys mapping the spread of English-taught programmes in Europe (Wächter and Maiworm 2014) and beyond (e.g. Dearden 2015), or have focused primarily on attitudes towards and the challenges embedded in the implementation of EMI in specific institutions (e.g. Dimova et al. 2015; Doiz et al. 2013; Smit and Dafouz 2012; Valke and Wilkinson

2017; Wilkinson and Walsh 2015). However, it rarely examines actual classroom practice, particularly from an interactional perspective.

In contrast, research into English as a lingua franca in academic settings, initiated by Mauranen (2006) with the development of the ELFA corpus, has largely been placed at the opposite end of the spectrum. ELF(A) research has a strong focus on pragmatics as well as a tendency to use methods that are oriented towards corpus or conversation analysis and which may acknowledge, but rarely engage with, the broader context of the institution or the discipline. Recent topics of ELF research in academic settings are pre-empting misunderstanding and achieving communicative effectiveness (Björkman 2013; Mauranen 2012); language choice (Mortensen 2014) and language regulation (Hynninen 2013); standard and non-standard morpho-syntactic language usage (Björkman 2013) and epistemic stance (Mortensen 2010). While lectures are – for obvious reasons – a major source of data for ELF research in academic settings, groupwork has also attracted attention (Björkman 2013; Hynninen 2013; Mortensen 2010, Mortensen 2014). Nevertheless, although these studies have offered excellent insights into how students negotiate and construct meaning, they generally do not examine it in the context of developing content knowledge or disciplinary literacy.

A second strain of ethnographic studies on peer-to-peer ELF interaction in academic settings has examined relational talk, looking at the construction of meaning and translanguaging practices in social contexts and casual conversation (e.g. Kalocsai 2013; Konakahara 2016, Konakahara 2017; Matsumoto 2014). Not surprisingly, the attention of these studies has also been on achieving understanding as an ultimate interactional goal rather than on the role of meaning creation for fulfilling concrete learning outcomes. Consequently, there is still a lack of research that investigates the interplay of the broader institutional or disciplinary context, which shapes the policies leading to and the implications of implementing EMI, with the actual communicative practices of ELF interaction in these settings.

This has led to the development of more integrative theoretical frameworks such as Dafouz and Smit's (2016) conceptualisation of English-medium education in multilingual university settings (EMEMUS), which aims to highlight the interplay of policy and practice and acknowledge learning spaces outside the classroom. To date, the major ethnographic studies that investigate ELF/EMI contexts such as Smit (2010) and Gundermann (2014) and which have an explicit interest in content teaching are firmly located in classroom settings. They are thus almost exclusively concerned with teacher–student interaction in which there is an inherent power imbalance in terms of epistemic authority. While teachers may be willing to concede or share linguistic authority with their students, they generally retain (exclusive) authority over content knowledge

(Smit 2010: 357). Even while acknowledging the interactive nature of explaining in an English-medium hotel management programme, Smit's (2010: 355–359) study shows that, although the lecturers drew on or invited their students to negotiate how to express their knowledge, the understanding that the lecturers had that knowledge was rarely contested. In epistemic terms, the lecturers' *epistemic status* as being more knowledgeable, with the corresponding access and rights relative to the domain of knowledge in question, is jointly recognised by both lecturers and students (see Heritage [2013: 376] for an overview and further explanations of epistemics in conversation).

In contrast, teamwork is an example of a learning space outside the formal, temporal and spatial boundaries of the classroom, a space where power is arguably decentralised and epistemic hierarchies flattened. A teacher's epistemic *stance* displaying "unknowing" may not be indexical of their epistemic status but rather has the purpose of inviting a "display" answer from the students that "are ways of producing and publicly ratifying knowledge related to teacher-defined learning objectives" (Jakonen and Morton 2015: 89). In contrast, the same epistemic stance taken by a student is more likely to be understood as being indexical of an "unknowing" epistemic status. Consequently, participants in peer-to-peer interaction "have no previous institutionalized roles to rely upon, but asymmetries are made relevant in the moment-by-moment interaction" (Melander 2012: 246; see also Jakonen and Morton 2015: 75). As such, this kind of interaction "constitute[s] a rich site for the investigation of how participants organize an activity for learning, and for exploring how a distribution of knowledge is established and changed" (Melander 2012: 233). In practice, this means that the participants must continually monitor, negotiate and renegotiate their epistemic positions in moment-by-moment interaction. As a result, explanations proffered need to be tested for robustness, leading to a high level of "challenging and counter-challenging," or constructive disagreement (Komori-Glatz 2017). This serves the purpose of either demanding further support for an argument to evidence its robustness, to correct false statements, and/or supplement partial explanations.

This paper thus examines how students use disagreement to strengthen their claims in the process of disciplinary knowledge construction, while also attempting to bridge the gap between previous studies into communicative effectiveness in content-oriented and relational ELF talk. It synthesises previous conceptualisations of disagreement in pragmatics and previous ELF research with management and organisational studies perspectives, and argues that it is essential for a team to develop a shared "mental model" of communicative practices in order to be able to employ and benefit from constructive disagreement. Drawing on data collected from multicultural teamwork on an English-medium master's in marketing at one of Europe's largest business universities, it examines how the participants perceive

disagreement in the context of their teamwork and then analyses the interplay of constructive disagreement and trust in the development of a psychologically safe space and the pursuit of their team goals.

2 Theorising constructive disagreement

Early politeness theories (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987) suggest that disagreement, i.e. “the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker” (Sifianou 2012: 1554), is generally a “dispreferred response” marked by hesitation or mitigation (Leech 2014: 202) since it is perceived as being “uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offence” (Sifianou 2012: 1555). Muntigl and Turnbull even claim that “disagreements [sic] are inherently face-threatening because they express disapproval of the other person” (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 242). However, recent developments in pragmatics research have offered a more nuanced understanding of disagreement, e.g. to distinguish it from negatively marked “conflict” (Angouri 2012: 1567). They also show an appreciation of how variable responses to disagreement can be, depending on culture, context, identity and personality, among other factors (Sifianou 2012: 1555–1560). Some scholars argue that disagreement may strengthen the “bonds of antipathy” (Coupland 2000: 2), i.e. the back-and-forth of disagreement can be perceived as sociability rather than disaffiliation (Sifianou 2012: 1556). Others claim that disagreement is a desirable response in certain situations since it may be “part of the expected speech situation” (Locher 2004: 94) or because it is perceived as encouraging creative problem solving (Angouri 2012: 1567) and deeper learning (Fransen et al. 2011: 1103; Hüttner 2014: 198).

In her examination of PhD supervision meetings where English is used as a lingua franca, for example, Björkman found that “expressing disagreement may be critical for task completion and for the enculturation of the student into the research community” (Björkman 2015: 223). A further discussion of disagreement in other ELF academic groups can be found in Toomaneejinda and Harding (this volume). Bjørge argues that “the ability to handle conflict talk while taking into account rapport management” belongs to “students’ communicative competence within the field of economics and business studies” (Bjørge 2016: 116). This reflects findings from research into both ELF and English native-speaker interaction that suggest disambiguation can be a higher priority than alignment in business contexts (Wolfartsberger 2011: 173), potentially resulting in higher levels of acceptance for disagreement in such settings. Disagreements are also seen as “natural ingredients of academic talk” (Björkman 2015: 223), although papers from an ELF perspective

place particular emphasis on managing “the appropriate expression of disagreement” as a “central skill” due to the added complexity of negotiating the intercultural aspect of ELF communication (Bjørge 2012: 423).

In team contexts, Decuyper et al. argue that “constructive conflict,” i.e. “a process of negotiation or dialogue that uncovers diversity in identity, opinion, etc. within the team [...] and leads to further communication and some kind of temporary agreement” (Decuyper et al. 2010: 117), is an important element in learning processes (Decuyper et al. 2010: 128) since it prevents the danger of groupthink (Decuyper et al. 2010: 121; cf. Dreu et al. 2003: 747). Research into (monolingual) team contexts reports that there is “considerable evidence that [dissent] stimulates divergent thinking and enhances the quality of thought and decisions of the group” (Nemeth et al. 2004: 367). However, the same studies also emphasise the distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict and point out that “teams benefit from task conflict when they cultivate an environment that is open and tolerant of diverse viewpoints and work with cooperative norms preventing those disagreements from being misinterpreted as personal attacks” (Dreu et al. 2003: 747). In other words, team members must “believe they can participate openly and actively without fear of suffering adverse personal consequences, such as being derogated for their ideas and observations or for the manner by which they express them” (Schaubroeck et al. 2011: 864). The development of intra-team trust and a shared understanding of the team as an inherently collaborative entity is an essential element of constructing such psychological safety.

3 Constructing a shared mental model in multicultural teamwork

Shared mental models are an essential coordinating mechanism in effective teamwork and can be defined as a “shared understanding or representation of team goals, individual team member tasks, and the coordination of the team to achieve common goals” (Salas et al. 2005: 565). This includes a common understanding of appropriate communicative behaviour (Fransen et al. 2011: 1106). Studies discussing disagreement in the context of effective communication in ELF settings examine the role of mitigation in the “appropriate” expression of disagreement and other face-threatening acts (e.g. Björkman 2015: 214–221; Konakahara 2017: 326, 335, 339; Wolfartsberger 2011: 175–176). In particular, the use of “but” is reported as being one of the most common markers of disagreement, while “I think”, laughter and hesitation are typically used as hedges (e.g. Björkman 2015: 220; Bjørge 2012: 415, 419–420; reflecting Locher

2004: 114–142). It is striking that mitigation is often perceived as being necessary for respecting the other’s face wants, yet studies examining transactional ELF talk in university contexts report that the participants “seemed to take unmitigated disagreement in their stride” (Bjørge 2012: 128; cf. Björkman 2015: 216). Furthermore, there are even some indications that disagreement itself plays an important part in establishing or upholding identities (especially critical, academic ones; Björkman 2015: 221–223). Understanding the role of disagreement in a given discourse community – regardless of whether it is an institution, discipline or team – and how to express it appropriately are thus essential aspects of effective communication within and identification with that community.

High levels of cognition- and affect-based trust are linked to the development of such shared mental models within a team and the perception of disagreement as an acceptable speech act. Cognition-based trust is grounded in confidence in the other’s competence, reliability and dependability (McAllister 1995: 26), while “emotional investment” expressed through “sentiments of care and concern” form the basis for affective trust (McAllister 1995: 54). Trust thus influences team members’ willingness to share information, accept the risk of relying on the other members to meet deadlines and fulfil subtasks, and interpret behaviour – such as disagreement – as intentionally damaging or not (Salas et al. 2005: 569). It is conceptualised as “confident positive expectations of another’s conduct” (Lewicki et al. 1998: 439) as well as the “*perception* of a positive orientation” (Mayer et al. 1995: 719; my emphasis). Consequently, a team which has developed high levels of trust amongst its members is likely to perceive (unmitigated) expressions of disagreement as constructive feedback, or, in multicultural teams, the manifestation of differing cultural expectations or linguistic patterns rather than (intentional) rudeness. Through acquiring, participating in and co-constructing knowledge, an effective team develops “a shared discourse and identity” (Decuyper et al. 2010: 115). Ideally, these draw on and to some extent align the resources the individual members bring to the interaction while balancing the demands of the task and context. In contrast to more social contexts, these demands comprise concrete academic learning outcomes as well as purely relational and communicative goals.

4 Study design and methodology

4.1 Setting and data set

The data for this paper was collected on an English-medium master’s programme in marketing at an Austrian business university as part of a larger

Table 1: Overview of the participants.

Team	Name	Nationality	Home language	Bachelor degree (city)
MktgA	Benone	Romanian	Romanian	Budapest
	Carina	Austrian	Austrian German	Vienna
	Christian	Austrian	Austrian German	Vienna
	Qingling	Chinese	Mandarin Chinese	Beijing
MktgB	Fabian	Austrian	Austrian German	Vienna
	Igor	Russian	Russian	St Petersburg
	Maria	Austrian	Austrian German	Vienna
	Rafael	Brazilian	Brazilian Portuguese	Lisbon
	Lecturer	German	German German	

Note: All names are pseudonyms which reflect the participants' country of origin but have in no other respect any resemblance to their actual names.

study (Komori-Glatz 2017). The data was collected from two teams, each consisting of four students (self-selected, comprising two Austrian and two international students; see Table 1) in parallel classes – MktgA and MktgB, respectively – on an international market entry course. These teams were observed and audio/video-recorded over the course of a project which, although it was an integral part of the course, mostly took place in meetings outside their scheduled class time. The complete project comprised preparing and playing a computer simulation programme and writing two case studies on an unrelated but similar topic. The computer simulation, which was selected by the lecturer, required the teams to take on the role of the marketing strategy department in a US-based company wanting to enter the Asian market. In this part of the project, the teams also had to design and conduct a market analysis and present their results and decisions in class. The computer simulation calculated their “profits” according to the decisions taken and entered into the programme, and “ranked” them against the other teams in their class. The lecturer thus claims that the simulation was “very very realistic” in terms of both the task and the multicultural team setting. This project comprised 70% of their class grade, with the remaining 30% being their participation in open class discussions.¹

The full data set comprised two main data subsets, namely, the meeting data and retrospective interviews conducted individually with each of the team members and the lecturer once the project was finished. These interviews were used to gain the participants' own perspectives on the project, drawing on these

¹ 20% for each of two written case studies, 20% for a presentation about the results of the computer simulation, and 10% peer evaluation from their team members.

views as the basis for the in-depth linguistic analysis of the meeting data. Since the project was designed and the teams' results assessed by the lecturer, the latter's views were also considered important for triangulation purposes. The interview with the lecturer also highlighted the market analysis at the beginning of the project as key to having success in the simulation.

Accordingly, the construction and execution of the market analysis at the beginning of the project was chosen as the focus of the study. This was a sub-task with clear discursive and temporal boundaries (5 meetings held on 4 days) and amounted to approximately 9.5 hours of interaction/70,500 words. It was also the most demanding part of the simulation in terms of negotiating and constructing content knowledge, while its position in the early stages of the project suggests that it played an important role in negotiating and establishing the teams' mental models. The relevant meetings were transcribed verbatim using the VOICE conventions.²

Of course, using naturally occurring data means that there are some discrepancies between the groups. The most important for this topic was that one member was missing from each of the meetings in the MktgB group due to other commitments. The descriptive statistics and comparisons are therefore only used to identify general trends and as an impulse for in-depth qualitative research. Nevertheless, having two parallel groups offered some valuable insights and a more critical evaluation of the findings than the analysis of a single team or of teams doing different activities or working in different contexts.

4.2 Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach based on the two main data subsets. The first subset was the retrospective interviews, which aimed to gain an insight into the participants' beliefs and interpretations relating to the project through a qualitative content analysis. A fuller explanation of this process in the context of the larger study and a detailed presentation of the results can be found in Komori-Glatz (2017: 70–96). In brief, the findings from these semi-structured interviews were obtained through a combination of “concept-driven” and “data-driven” coding approaches (Schreier 2014: 176). Initial categories based on previous research were defined and refined by identifying similarities to and differences from other examples in the data and (in later rounds) units coded in the same category, expanding and collapsing the codes as necessary, and recoding the data set until the categories were stable and a systematic coding

² See the appendix.

process could be carried out using the finalised framework. This (re)iterative process can be regarded as ensuring a level of intra-rater reliability (Smit 2010: 188). The analysis of the interviews focused on the participants' linguacultural background and their views and experiences of teamwork and language in general and in this project in particular.

The second data subset comprised the meetings, or interactional data, which was analysed using sociocultural discourse pragmatics to access the participants' actual (language) practices and examine how the participants interpreted and negotiated the task and their local epistemic identities on a moment-by-moment basis. This approach synthesises discourse pragmatics (Blum-Kulka 1997; Smit 2010) with sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer 2004). These share a basic understanding of meaning as jointly constructed and language "as a social and cultural phenomenon" that cannot be separated from the "inherently contextualised nature of communication" (Blum-Kulka 1997: 38, 58), although their analytical lens is somewhat different. Discourse pragmatics develops the approach of traditional pragmatics and speech act theory to examine "extended sequences of text and talk" (Blum-Kulka 1997: 38; see pp. 42–47 for an overview), while retaining a strong focus on identifying the illocutionary force of utterances and a strong basis in politeness theories (Blum-Kulka 1997: 50). Sociocultural discourse analysis shifts the analytical lens to "incorporate a concern with the lexical content and the cohesive structure of talk" and to consider not only "the processes of joint cognitive engagement, but also [...] their developmental and learning outcomes" (Mercer 2004: 141). It examines how interlocutors "use language to introduce new information, orientate to each other's perspectives and understandings and pursue joint plans of action" (Mercer 2004: 166). The sociocultural discourse pragmatic analysis used in this study thus takes "the basic tenets of discourse pragmatics – speech acts and politeness and how these are manifested in extended talk – to examine how the participants pursue their joint intellectual activity with its clear learning outcomes" (Komori-Glatz 2017: 108).

As with the content analysis, the categories used for this analysis were generated by means of an iterative process using findings from previous research as a starting point for the development of a coding framework. However, for this data set the initial codes for the construction of meaning for task-related concepts drew strongly on Smit's (2010) taxonomy for interactive explaining (INTEX) and ELF research into (mis)understanding (e.g. Björkman 2013; Cogo and Pitzl 2016; Mauranen 2012), while the starting point for constructing the categories for relational talk were primarily studies into (mono-lingual) workplace interaction (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Koester 2006). Again, a detailed exposition of the theoretical background and development of the coding frameworks can be found in Komori-Glatz (2017).

5 Findings

5.1 Participants' background and expertise

While a detailed discussion of the participants' beliefs about teamwork and language is beyond the scope of this paper (see Komori-Glatz 2017: 75–100), it is relevant to note that the team members had a relatively homogenous level of expertise both in terms of language and content knowledge. None had previous experience of EMI for more than an exchange semester and some had had no exposure to English as the medium of instruction at all, though most had used English at some point in their studies beyond dedicated language classes. The Austrians all spoke German (or an Austrian dialect thereof) as their first language and all the international students were learning German, although most were only beginners. German thus represented a common language of interest, but not a feasible medium for sustained communication. All had done their bachelor in business studies, though some of the international students had done more general degrees or a specialisation in finance, while all the Austrians had specialised in marketing. Consequently, it can be argued that there were no institutionalised epistemic “expert” roles, and thus these positions had to be negotiated in situ and on a moment-by-moment basis.

5.2 Views on disagreement

While the participants were not asked explicitly about disagreement or conflict in the retrospective interviews, almost all topicalised it in some form in answer to questions about what made a team successful in general and/or why they thought their team obtained the results they had in particular. Answers (even within the same team) range from describing their interaction as “very harmonious” and “we didn't have any dispute” to “we were really arguing a lot on everything”. When probed further, however, even the participant who claims they did not have any disputes clarifies “we also talked discussed together about for example [another team member] said I should change something and in the end I would tell him that okay this is good or I think mine is better”. Such comments support the idea that having diverging views improves group thinking and decisions (Nemeth et al. 2004: 367). On the other hand, the statement that “we were really arguing a lot on everything” is hedged with “but always in a bit unserious way”, which in turn reflects the concern with respecting each other's face even while disagreeing with their contributions. In the retrospective

interview, the lecturer states that in their experience of teaching this course, the members of the successful teams

are open in the way that they discuss issues and don't shy away from putting in proposals just because possibly the majority of the group may reject them so it's a very open atmosphere they can propose something discuss this and nobody is cross if his or her proposal is not selected.

Constructing a team mental model that encourages discussion and even dissent within an open, positively oriented and respectful "atmosphere" emerges clearly as a theme across the interview data. There is some difference between MktgA, who tend to focus on how much "fun" they had as a whole group, and MktgB, who indicate that they were not fully integrated and that this contributed to making the wrong decision in their final rounds, which in turn cost them their pole position in the class rank. Igor's tendency to work by himself seems to have distanced him a little from the rest of the team, even though the others are quick to acknowledge the contribution he brought as a finance specialist and the effort he put into the project. Nevertheless, while in retrospect they recognise the value of his proposal to introduce all the items in their product range at the end, more than one of the other members of the MktgB team suggest they would have been more open or willing to accept that proposal if he had been "more into the whole discussions more in the whole process".

It thus appears that MktgB has a well-developed mental model of communicative behaviour for when things go well but lack a shared understanding of "individual team member tasks, and the coordination of the team to achieve common goals" (Salas et al. 2005: 565) to some degree. However, letting a faultline develop between Igor and the rest of the team seems to have led to a weakness in "understanding how [the team members] process things how they make decisions how they cope with things how they would argue" and how to make "the best out of it" (retrospective interview). Had they been able to better appreciate Igor's competence in financial strategy and his way of working, they might have been more willing to accept his (correct) proposal and retained their position at the top of the class ranking. Instead, there is some suggestion that he is not fully integrated into the team itself:

we were like um making the decisions thinking about it talking about the different countries and [Igor] was more like this calculating guy in the background and saying nice and intelligent things but it was more like a supplier than like a team member.

In contrast, the MktgA team seems to have a better sense of the other team members' strengths and modus operandi, and how to put these to effective use

for achieving the team’s goals. Indeed, the differences in the way they talk about the person who did the bulk of the calculations are striking:

Benone was our little brain @@@ [...] he came up with sophisticated calculation what he did in Excel [...] he did it in his leisure time actually we are not supposed to work on the project but he just enjoyed it you could see Benone really loved this style of group work because for example he doesn’t really love to present or [...] to participate in class that much.

The quantitative analysis of the practices used in the interactional data also shows that Benone brings the most *challenges & counter-challenges* in MktgA (see Komori-Glatz 2017: 147–151), which could imply that he is the most adversarial participant but also highly engaged in the team discussions. An example of these practices in the interaction will be presented in the next section. While this role bears the risk of being seen as a destructive force with high face-threatening potential, MktgA’s mental model has been (implicitly) constructed not only to accept this but to actively welcome it and view the disagreement itself as a resource. Even so, challenging another’s epistemic stance of knowing seems to be tempered with respect for their right to claim that status:

We were really arguing a lot on everything and taking a lot of time for everything but it was it was not that someone was annoyed by anyone else it was more that we all knew that it’s good that we do it like this.

Hence the continuous moment-by-moment – at times even second-by-second – negotiation of local epistemic identities as “knowing” or “unknowing” seems to have functioned particularly well in MktgA, where the participants’ trust in each other’s ability and goodwill allows disagreement and diverse ways of working to fall on fertile ground. At the same time, MktgB were under much more time pressure than the other team and thus had fewer opportunities to develop a shared mental model. Additionally, as the lecturer pointed out, “fun is not everything”, and ultimately the MktgB team did finish with a higher net profit (the criterion for task success) than MktgA, even though they came third in their class while MktgA led the ranking in the parallel class. The sequence in the final round where the dispute about introducing the full product range emerged was also fairly brief and relatively insignificant to the non-participant observer. Nevertheless, the fact that it was topicalised repeatedly in the MktgB interviews as well as in the class discussion suggests that it should not be overlooked, and highlights the importance of gaining the participants’ perspectives. It also has implications for team effectiveness in terms of the potential for longer-term cooperation and facilitating information flows beyond the team’s temporal boundaries (Stahl et al. 2010: 444).

5.3 Doing disagreement

The repeated use of *challenges and counter-challenges* as a means of testing the robustness of each other's explanations represents a marked difference to previous research into explaining in EMI classroom contexts (Smit 2010), where the teacher–student relationship and their relative epistemic authority is generally based on institutionalised roles. However, in peer-to-peer interaction, students cannot rely on such roles, and must negotiate their epistemic status within the team on a moment-by-moment basis. While they may orient themselves to a more knowing team member, they may also feel the need to test the robustness of another's claim to a more knowing epistemic status. Typical communicative practices for doing so are conceptualised in the present study as *challenges and counter-challenges*, reflecting those reported in Muntigl and Turnbull's (1998) taxonomy of disagreement. These may include “uttering the negated proposition expressed by the previous claim” (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 233), usually with a “bald-on-record directness” (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 245), or using “an interrogative, appearing with question particles such as *when, what, who, why, where* and *how*” (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 229; original emphasis) which “question[s] an addressee's prior claim and demand that addressee provide evidence for his/her claim” (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 230). Despite the similarities in form, though, there is an important difference between the family contexts at the heart of Muntigl and Turnbull's (1998) study, where challenges are made with the intention of closing down the topic of discussion by implying that the other party cannot provide evidence for their claim, and the challenges found in this data, which generally open up and even further the discussion. Despite their bald-on-record directness, there seems to be an inherent goodwill in the challenge and an expectation that the other party is able to substantiate their claim. Indeed, such challenges are often followed with explanations that offer concrete examples as evidence, as illustrated in Extract (1) below.

(1)

- 1 Rafael: number of competitors the sales the sales table six (1) um
- 2 decreasing manufacturing costs it's table nine (1) cost
- 3 reduction (1) what does it mean
- 4 (4)
- 5 Maria: it's cheap <25> e:r </25>
- 6 Rafael: <25> ah </25>
- 7 Maria: it's twenty five percent cheaper to produce in china than to
- 8 produce in <26> wherever </26>
- 9 Rafael: <26> is that it </26>

- 10 Maria: we are based =
 11 Fabian: = yep
 12 Maria: are we an american company?
 13 Fabian we are an american company i think. (.)
 14 Rafael: is that it
 15 Maria: yep <un> xxxxx </un> manufacturing costs based on initial
 one hundred
 16 <27> million </27>
 17 Rafael: <27> ah no it's </27> like after <28> you </28>
 18 Maria: <28> a:h </28>
 19 Rafael: reach a certain volume you can decrease your costs by twenty
 20 five percent <29> that's how </29>
 21 Maria: <29> but why </29> is it relative to home market
 22 (3)
 23 Rafael: no i dunno (.) but i remember that they were talking about
 24 this here building plants blah blah blah
 25 (2)
 26 Maria: well i think that this is just additional information and this is if
 27 we produce in china it is (1) twenty five percent cheaper than
 28 to produce in the u s.
 29 Rafael: might be (.) okay (.) ah wait ((reading)) table nine shows the
 30 percentage in costs of goods sold that can be expected when
 31 products are manufactured in (original land) ((/reading)) yah
 32 Maria: perfect
 33 Rafael: so exactly what you said so i think the table's important
 34 Maria: yah so it would be the cheapest to go to (.) <30> thailand </30>
 35 Fabian <30> thailand </30>
 36 Rafael: <30> thailand </30> (.) the:n <31> for the </31>
 37 Fabian <31> but just for </31> the manufacturing
 38 Maria: yeah =
 39 Rafael: = yeah
 40 Maria: of course
 41 Rafael: then there are the shipping costs

Rafael: opens this sequence by asking explicitly about a term that comes up in one of the tables in their input material (*cost reduction what does it mean*; lines 2 and 3). After a relatively long pause, Maria offers first a brief explanation (*it's cheaper*; line 5) and then repeats it with a supporting if somewhat vague example (*it's twenty five percent cheaper to produce in China than to produce in wherever*; lines 7 and 8). Rafael's query in line 9 (*is that it*) is repeated in line 14, indicating that he remains

unsatisfied with this explanation, even though Fabian confirms it with a *yep* in line 11. Maria's reference to the original text of the table to support her argument in lines 15 and 16 implies that she, too, perceives a simple "yep" as an insufficient response to Rafael's question and draws on the text as an epistemic authority. This prompts an alternative interpretation from Rafael (*ah no it's like after you reach a certain volume you can decrease your costs by twenty five percent*; lines 17, 19, 20), to which Maria responds swiftly with a bald-on-record counter-challenge *but why is it relative to home market* (line 21). After a three-second pause, Rafael first parries the challenge with a turn-initial *no* (line 23) and then an attempt to support his interpretation with a vague reference to an external source, presumably the lecturer and the teaching assistant (*I remember that they were talking about this here building plants*; lines 23 and 24). This interaction thus shows how local epistemic identities emerge and shift on a moment-by-moment basis as Rafael adopts first an "unknowing" stance (line 3), then a "knowing" stance (lines 17, 19, 20), and then orients himself to a higher (but absent) epistemic authority. This challenge is again countered by Maria, who repeats her original interpretation but makes the example more precise, drawing on an explanatory side-sequence in lines 10–13 to strengthen her argument by stating *if we produce in China it is twenty five percent cheaper than to produce in the US* (lines 26–28). The interactional import of this side-sequence thus only becomes visible at this point. Without access to the *they* invoked in line 23, this refinement of her position sends Rafael back to the source text as the only verifiable source of information, which eventually leads him to ratify Maria's status as more knowing, concurring *so exactly what you said* (line 33). This in turn allows Maria to take the discussion to the next step and summarise the implications for their decision-making process, with the whole team ultimately coming to the same conclusion (*so it would be the cheapest to go to Thailand*; line 34–36). This reflects an "altered distribution of knowledge and participant identities" and the development of a learning trajectory (Melander 2012: 246) as all the team members are able to interpret and provide the correct action by the end of the sequence. Nevertheless, Fabian still checks the parameters of the concept by confirming *but just for the manufacturing* (line 37), which again is met by a vocal round of agreement in lines 38–40.

While it could be said that the extensive round of negotiating the concept of cost reduction is inefficient and even unnecessary – given that Maria essentially offers a correct interpretation in her initial response – this example supports Nemeth et al.'s (2004: 367) claim that dissent can refine thought processes and decision-making. Firstly, a more cohesive group emerges at the end of the sequence, with their jointly constructed conclusion *it would be the cheapest to go to Thailand* reflecting the development of their epistemic status. This proposed action was confirmed by the lecturer in the class wrap-up session as being a key result of the market analysis. Secondly, the explanation itself has become

considerably more precise from *it's cheaper* in line 5 to *if we produce in China it is twenty five percent cheaper than to produce in the US* (lines 26–28).

Similar – often even longer and more convoluted – examples could be found across the interactional data in both groups. In most cases, as in the present example, once the team is satisfied that the matter is settled, they simply move onto the next topic (*then there are the shipping costs*; line 41). The need to ask for an explanation and acknowledge a knowledge gap, and the subsequent challenges and counter-challenges, thus seem to be an accepted part of the team's mental model of appropriate communicative behaviour that furthers their joint goals rather than perceived as face-threatening acts against the individual person. This reflects Bjørge's suggestion that the participants in her study “may have developed a shared approach [as a community of practice] when it comes to handling disagreement when using ELF” (Bjørge 2016: 127–128) and Björkman's observation that disagreement episodes in academic talk are frequent and may indeed be “critical for task completion and for the enculturation of the student into the research community” (Björkman 2015: 223). In the present context, disagreement contributes to the construction of and enculturation into the team's community of practice and the development of their shared repertoire, which in turn supports their initiation into the disciplinary community and their identities as (future/simulated) international marketing managers. Challenges are generally issued with minimal mitigation (about two-thirds have no mitigation at all, while a sixth use a “yeah-but” pattern) and utterances expressing explicit thanks for an explanation are relatively rare and often marked, comprising under 5% of closing patterns in both teams, suggesting that (constructive) conflict is an integral part of developing consensus in these contexts. This would also seem to reinforce the idea that “academic talk is both conflict- and consensus-friendly” (Björkman 2015: 221).

Nevertheless, even constructive disagreement takes its toll on team relationships. Particularly intense or extended sequences of negotiating and constructing meaning are often followed with an (occasionally wry) expression of gratitude and/or a sequence of off-topic talk that seems to have the function of releasing tension and restoring team cohesion. For instance, this exchange followed almost 15 minutes of discussing various concepts (including the sequence in Extract [1]):

(2)

- 1 Fabian: [...] we only have to pay one cent
- 2 Rafael: < 53 > it's always < /53 >
- 3 Fabian: < 53 > with south korea < /53 >
- 4 Rafael: one cent
- 5 Fabian: one cent yeah
- 6 Rafael: cool (1) my doubt is (.) erased (.) thanks < 54 > @@ < /54 >

- 7 Maria: <54>@@</54>@
 8 (3)
 9 Rafael: do you shave every day? during the week
 10 Maria: @@@@
 11 Fabian: uh every two days (2)

As in Extract (1), the (lengthy) episode of negotiating the meaning of a concept in the input material ends with alignment at the linguistic and content level (*we only have to pay one cent/it's always one cent/one cent yeah*; lines 1, 2, 4, 5). Rafael's expression of gratitude in line 6, while presumably genuine, is marked by laughter, indicating that it is a somewhat unexpected response, as is his abrupt switch to a completely off-topic subject. The discussion about their shaving habits lasts about 40 seconds and highlights shared ground, including a quip from Maria which allows her to join in the discussion. This use of off-topic talk to relieve tension and to restore cohesion reflects findings from studies on workplace discourse (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2003: 91, 93, 99; Koester 2006: 154).

Interestingly, disagreement in off-topic talk can also serve to mitigate tension as it allows the participants to grow together over the “bonds of antipathy” (Coupland 2000: 2). The data showed several instances of banter (contestive humour) and teasing in MktgA, which supports Hüttner's observation that “in informal conversations, unmitigated disagreements appear to be evidence of easy and trusting relationships” (Hüttner 2014: 196). This paper suggests that this is equally the case in work-related discussions.

6 Conclusions and implications

The findings of this study suggest that disagreement can not only facilitate better decision-making and deeper learning but also strengthen the relationships within a team. Disagreement that leads to more precise knowledge construction and progression towards the team's task goals can result in higher levels of trust in the other's competence, while the “bonds of antipathy” and the sociability of engagement in lively discussion can contribute to stronger team cohesion. This was illustrated by the examples from the interactional data, which showed high levels of psychological safety and trust among Fabian, Maria and Rafael in the MktgB team. At the same time, though, Igor's (unavoidable) absence from the group during some of the meetings and a perception (on his own part as well) that he preferred to work alone even when he was present created something of a faultline in the team with relatively severe consequences later on. In contrast, the highly integrated mental model of the MktgA team seemed to make more constructive use of disagreement and divergent working patterns.

The implications of this are twofold. On the one hand, students need to be aware of – and not refrain from using – disagreement as a means to refine their decision-making processes and to take advantage of the diverse resources of their team members. Yet they also need to put the time and effort into developing a shared mental model of “understanding how [the team members] process things how they make decisions how they cope with things how they would argue” and how to make “the best out of it” (retrospective interview). On the other hand, lecturers and curriculum designers need to take this additional temporal, cognitive and psychological burden into account when planning team projects and ideally integrate extra time, and perhaps even specific tasks, into the project to allow students to get to know each other and develop skills for building a shared mental model. Finally, it should be noted that – despite the issues in MktgB – both teams can be seen as models of good practice, particularly in terms of integrating local and international students and employing inclusive language practices. There is therefore an urgent need for further research into (student) teams that are less high-functioning and contexts where more is at stake. While contexts with higher stakes require a strong base to develop a solid team relationship, identity and culture that will lead to effective decision-making, they also have numerous other factors that may take priority over this. Additionally, though the students in the present study were diverse in nationality, they shared a high proficiency in English and a strong academic background in business studies. This homogeneity is unlikely to be the norm once they enter the workforce. With an eye to employability, therefore, universities need to give students the opportunity (and the time) to practise developing the skills, the language and the flexibility to construct a psychologically safe space where disagreement leads to improvement rather than conflict.

Appendix: transcription conventions

Transcriptions use the VOICE transcription conventions (https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/transcription_general_information).

<1> word </1>	overlap
=	other-continuation
(.)	brief pause
(1)	longer pause (in seconds)
wo:	lengthening
word?	rising intonation
@	laughter (in syllables)
<un> x </un>	unintelligible speech
((words))	contextual information
word.	falling intonation
(words)	uncertain transcription

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Bionote

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