Master Thesis U.S.E
Language as a Conflict Facilitator: How Multicultural Teams Perceive Conflict

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the perceptions of individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds regarding conflict deriving from language differences in multicultural teams, focusing on language barriers as an indicator of the different forms of communication in multinational corporate contexts. The findings revealed that while language barriers can lead to minor misunderstandings, the main facilitator of conflict in multicultural teams is the differences in communication styles, which stem from cultural diversity and values. In contrast, language is perceived as merely a tool that reflects these. The current findings emphasized the need for companies to implement more training extended to every employee to create cultural awareness and promote cultural sensitivity for an effective and fruitful conversation between employees.

JEL codes: F23, D83, Z13, M14

Keywords: Conflict, Culture, Language, Diversity, Communication, Multicultural Teams

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1. Introduction

The value of foreign languages in the realm of international business has been acknowledged and widely accepted. However, there has been a notable lack of research and discussion on the relevance of language in international management and multicultural teams. Language has become a forgotten factor in multinational management even though it fundamentally impacts multinational teamwork (Marschan, 1997).

The increasing diversity of the workforce in contemporary times, characterized by a blend of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences, has contributed to the creation of dynamic and multicultural work settings where politics and social experiences play a significant role. This transformation can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century when global economic changes prompted organizations to adopt a more international approach to operations and management. In response, national economies became more open, leading to the liberalization of trade and commerce.

This thesis deals with issues concerning conflict deriving from language differences in multicultural or global teams, focusing on language barriers as an indicator of the different forms of communication in multinational corporate contexts. Studying language as a conflict facilitator in multicultural teams can contribute to various interdisciplinary fields, including intercultural communication, conflict resolution, organizational behavior, and team management (Méndez García & Pérez Cañado, 2005). By examining how language affects verbal and non-verbal communication and how it may lead to conflicts that affect team dynamics, it is possible to develop effective strategies for managing conflict in these teams. The insights acquired from this study can also help individuals be more culturally sensitive and effective in communicating by developing cultural intelligence, ultimately improving teamwork and team dynamics.

The importance and societal relevance of this topic lie in its potential to enhance multicultural collaboration within an organization, address communication challenges, and how they impact the emergence of conflict and its resolution. By investigating these aspects, the present thesis aims to contribute to the development of intercultural competence within

organizations and provide solutions for effective conflict resolution practices, fostering harmonious teamwork in multicultural organizational environments.

In order to achieve the purposes of this paper, a theoretical basis for the original research is required. Therefore, the literature review will be divided into three main topics: Culture and Cultural Clusters, Organizational Culture, and Multicultural Teams, and Cultural Intelligence and Communication in multicultural teams, focusing on the role of language in these teams. As culture imbues various facets of human conduct, employees in a multicultural business milieu may find it advantageous to possess a proficient understanding of culture and its effects (Javidan et al., 2006).

Organizing the literature review in this manner will facilitate a methodical approach toward the overall process employed in this study. This will involve comprehending the perceptions and strategies employed by members of multicultural teams when confronted with language-related conflicts, identifying the explicit and implicit attributes of multicultural teams, and evaluating how cultural differences can either promote or hinder their success.

The main research question that guides the present thesis, which reports on the results obtained from interviews with people involved in multicultural teams, is:

- How do multicultural members perceive conflict deriving from language barriers?

The following sub-questions will facilitate the researcher to provide an answer to the main research question:

o SQ1: How do multicultural teams perceive language differences and language barriers as sources of conflict in their work environment?

o SQ2: What communication strategies are employed by multicultural team members to overcome language barriers?

o SQ3: What role can language play in conflict resolution in multicultural teams?

o SQ4: How do interviewees balance the influence of their cultural values in communication within a multicultural team?

- o SQ5: How important is cultural intelligence perceived in a work setting by the participants?

Hence, this paper's primary purpose is to question our current understanding of the role of language and cultural values in the perception of conflict. For that, the perceptions of individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds regarding conflicts that arise from language barriers in MCTs were investigated. It sought to address the gap in the existing literature on the role of language in such conflicts. The findings revealed that while language barriers can lead to minor misunderstandings, the main facilitator of conflict in multicultural teams is the differences in communication styles, which stem from cultural diversity and values. This highlights the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity training for effective organizational communication. The study suggests the implementation of stricter policies regarding conversations in native languages other than the ones chosen as the corporate language to promote inclusivity and cooperation among team members. However, organizations should also provide opportunities for individuals to address language barriers and improve their proficiency to enhance effective communication. The diverse insights provided by the participants contributed to the methodology and enriched the findings and conclusions of the research.

The in-depth qualitative analysis allows us to link important factors that impact communication, such as communication styles, cultural values, language proficiency, and cultural sensitivity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Cultural Clusters

The world is now a global village, and there is a constant migration of ideas, people, and information across different geographical regions. The workforce is increasingly diverse, with a mix of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. This has led to a more vibrant and multicultural work environment where politics and social experiences are prominent.

Culture is one of the most discussed concepts in literature due to the multiple interpretations it might have. When discussing the definition of culture, it is inevitable to mention Geert Hofstede, the father of cross-cultural research (Carraher, 2003). According to Hofstede (1994), culture refers to the shared mental programming that separates individuals belonging to one particular group from those belonging to another.

Consequently, culture is a collective phenomenon learned from one's social environment but should not be confused with personal traits or individual personality (Zein, 2012). Zein (2012) addresses culture as a compilation of values, norms, beliefs, customs, institutions, and forms of expression that reflect people's thoughts, feelings, actions, and interests.

Pires and Macedo (2006) suggest that when discussing culture, it is crucial to consider the process of an individual adapting to the norms and practices of their group. Culture is critical in shaping social meaning, rules, and norms, strengthening or weakening a group. Culture is a reflection of the shared values and beliefs among members of a group. These values and beliefs are communicated through various symbols, such as stories, myths, rituals, and specialized language. These symbols influence how individuals from a particular culture think, behave, and make decisions (Pires & Macedo, 2006).

As a matter of fact, the definition of culture is a very vague and complex social construct that encompasses a vast array of human phenomena, and it is plausible that individuals may have different criteria when defining it (Gustav, 2012). Gustav (2012) points out that every author has different definitions of culture that are demonstrated by their own research, sometimes even incompatible with others, but the common feature of these frameworks is the incorporation of the concept of diversity. Lang (1997) suggests that attempts at defining culture in a precise way are rather futile. However, to conduct the present empirical research, it is crucial to have a clear definition of culture. Merely using the term without defining it

may result in a lack of direction for the research. Therefore, following Gustav's (2012) recommendation to clarify this concept and the framework to be adopted, for the remainder of this thesis, culture will be defined as the set of norms, values, habits, and traditions that influence how humans react to specific situations, behaviors, and other stimuli.

Cultural clustering is a practical approach to summarizing intercultural similarities and differences (Gupta et al., 2002). This approach provides numerous managerial and practical benefits, including more effective placement of international assignees, the establishment of compatible regional units, and the ability to predict the results of policies and practices across national boundaries (Ronen & Kraut, 1977, as cited in Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). By utilizing cultural clustering, multinational corporations can make more informed decisions that take into account cultural differences and similarities, ultimately improving their overall performance in global markets.

Societal cluster classification

Anglo Cultures	Latin America
England	Costa Rica
Australia	Venezuela
South Africa (White Sample)	Ecuador
Canada	Mexico
New Zealand	El Salvador
Ireland	Colombia
USA	Guatemala
Latin Europe	Bolivia
Israel	Brazil
Italy	Argentina
Portugal	Sub-Sahara Africa
Spain	Namibia
France	Zambia
Switzerland (French Speaking)	Zimbabwe
Nordic Europe	South Africa (Black Sample)
Finland	Nigeria
Sweden	Arab Cultures
Denmark	Qatar
Germanic Europe	Morocco
Austria	Turkey
Switzerland	Egypt
The Netherlands	Kuwait
Germany (Former EAST)	Southern Asia
Germany (Former WEST)	India
Eastern Europe	Indonesia
Hungary	Philippines
Russia	Malaysia
Kazakhstan	Thailand
Albania	Iran
Poland	Confucian Asia
Greece	Taiwan
Slovenia	Singapore
Georgia	Hong Kong
	South Korea
	China

Figure 1 - Societal cluster classification (Gupta et al., 2002)

The primary factors that hold the most significance in categorizing societies are religion and language, geographic location, ethnicity, and values and attitudes toward work.

(Gupta et al., 2002). This author's research claims the existence of ten cultural clusters. Before this scholar, others have used other criteria to group countries into clusters, such as geographic proximity (Furnhamet al., 1994), mass migrations and ethnic social capital (Portes & Zhou, 1994), religious and linguistic commonality (Cattell, 1950), and social and psychological variables (Haire et al., 1966; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). There is no consensual and widely accepted way of clustering countries.

2.2 Organizational Culture and Multicultural Teams[1]

According to Katzenbach and Smith (1999), a team is a group of people that share complementary technical, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills and are equally committed to a common working approach toward a goal for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

Narrowing it down to multicultural teams (MCTs) are defined as task-focused groups composed of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and nationalities (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001).

Zander and Butler (2010) point out that multicultural teams (MCTs) have emerged as a result of the ongoing process of globalization and the integration of multinational corporations. MCTs are viewed as an appealing approach to addressing local nuances while simultaneously achieving global coordination. Indeed, Snow et al. (1996) claim that MCTs are the "heart of globalization" due to their significant organizational role in seeking augmented efficiency and the connection between the company, country, and cultural borders.

According to Fleury (2000), cultural diversity is the presence of individuals with varying identities who coexist within a shared social system. This concept emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and valuing the unique qualities of each employee. Additionally, Chevrier (2003) cites Alderfer and Smith (1982) and d'Iribarne et al. (1998), and Triandis (1994) to

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[1] The use of the term "multicultural" rather than "multinational" or "international" is preferred in this thesis because, in this way, the emphasis is on the culture of the stakeholders and players and not the geographical location(s) of the project.

suggest that organizations need to acknowledge that individuals who are situated within a particular cultural context are likely to share particular worldviews. These worldviews may encompass attitudes towards cooperating, managing conflicts, accepting authority, and communicating culturally appropriately.

Organizations are socially constructed realities that arise from the communication and cognitive processes of the individuals within the organization (Morgan, 1997, as cited in Shafi, 2018). Schein (1990, p.17) defines organizations as a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a particular group as they learn to manage their problems of external adaptation and internal integration within the organization.

Organizational culture is a crucial dimension of the work environment and significantly impacts how tasks are performed, goals are achieved, and people are directed toward achieving objectives. Culture shapes decision-making, thinking patterns, emotional responses, and reactions to opportunities and threats. Culture is deeply ingrained in individuals and unconsciously influences their behavior, affecting their performance and vice versa (Stare, 2011).

The formation of organizational culture is grounded in the collective experiences of its members, and typically, distinct cultures are cultivated by enterprises over a prolonged period through regular usage and practical implementation. These experiences incorporate shared perceptions of objectives, purpose, principles, outlooks, and anticipations; regulatory frameworks, guidelines, mechanisms, and processes; incentives, rewards, and motivational strategies; risk management practices; perspectives on leadership, governance, and decision-making; ethical and professional codes of behavior, working hours, and operating conditions (PMI, 2013).

The significance of organizational culture lies in its ability to moderate the impact of societal culture on project team conduct. Research reveals a connection between organizational and societal cultures and the intermediary function of organizational culture in enabling or obstructing project accomplishment (Seriki, 2007). While organizations are typically situated within a specific national culture, it does not imply that they automatically adopt the same organizational culture.

The focus of modern management research on the effectiveness and efficiency of intercultural and interpersonal processes in MCTs has increased over the years since inefficient multicultural teams drain the organization's resources rather than create value (Adler, 1991). According to Ochieng and Price's (2010) research, multicultural teams are perceived to perform superior to monocultural teams, particularly in situations where judgment and creativity are required. Chevrier (2003) acknowledges heterogeneity among teams as an advantage since it yields a more extensive range of perspectives, augmenting the collective resources that MCTs can bear on intricate problems. Miller, Fields, Kumnar, and Ortiz's (2000) literature concurs with this perspective, stating that diversity within a team fosters innovation and creativity because having multiple perspectives and worldviews during the problem-solving process allows for a broader range of potential solutions to be considered.

Therefore, in order for the company to benefit from the significant gains in productivity provided by multicultural teams (Townsend et al., 1998), Marquardt and Horvath (2001) suggest assembling team members from diverse cultural backgrounds to collaborate as a team can foster numerous perspectives and innovative strategies to confront problems and challenges. This approach can leverage the collective energy and synergy of the team to deliver better outcomes (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001).

While multicultural teams may offer varying viewpoints and approaches, there is a lack of consensus on the fundamental conditions, probable outcomes, and overall impact on performance that such diversity entails (Ochieng & Price, 2010)

Nevertheless, Chevrier (2003) contrasts her previous viewpoint by highlighting the impact of cultural differences in team dynamics, suggesting that they may cause ambiguity, complexity, and confusion. Additionally, Miller et al. (2000) contended that members of homogenous teams might find it easier to communicate and comprehend each other due to their shared language, vocabulary, semantics, and reliance on common verbal and nonverbal cues.

Hofstede (2001) claimed that although the multiple cultures within a project may reach a consensus regarding the operational protocols and mechanisms, they may hold divergent

views on conflict resolution methods, proving that determined work practices that are effective in a particular cultural setting may not yield the same outcomes in a different cultural context (Zein, 2012). Therefore, Zein (2012) emphasizes that recognizing and adopting culturally appropriate strategies within a team may lead to comparable or superior levels of efficiency. Hence, MCTs should prioritize minimizing conflicts and enhancing efficiency and cooperation (Zein, 2012).

Shenkar and Zeira (1992) recognize that cultural heterogeneity within a team might be the source of difficulties, such as conflict, misunderstanding, and poor performance. In line with this, Marquardt and Horvath (2001) pointed out five of the most typical challenges as being: effectively handling cultural diversity and conflicts deriving from the differences; managing geographical distance and distribution that can lead to disengagement; coordination and control concerns; and establishing and maintaining team cohesion.

Considering all of this, it is possible to establish that the various national, linguistic, social, and cultural origins of multicultural team members account for both their strengths and weaknesses (Marquardt & Horwarth, 2001: 4)

Furthermore, multiculturalism has a more significant impact on projects due to their nature of involving multiple parties or organizations, requiring the formation of provisional working bonds with individuals who may belong to dissimilar corporate cultures (Zein, 2012). The creation of global teams as a way to attain international success (Méndez García & Pérez Cañado, 2005), even if the heterogeneous nature of the team poses far more problems than that of a monocultural team, has been an overwhelming topic for some companies since several obstacles – such as cultural differences, long distances and different time zones and language differences and the costs (Marquardt & Horwarth, 2001: 4) – may arise but it is a challenge that companies must face in this global era.

O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) have examined the significance of leveraging cultural differences to secure a competitive strategy in the global market. The moderation and control of the effects of cultural heterogeneity on team dynamics, collaborative approaches, and overall performance in pursuit of shared goals and visions is a crucial role played by leaders and managers. By doing so, they act as liaisons between team members

connecting them to the aforementioned collective objectives (Zander et al., 2012). This entails using the leader's proficiency to comprehend and communicate across multiple cultures, building and preserving business teams in a global setting, and supporting the intricate process of promoting teamwork.

It is imperative for a global manager to implement cultural sensitivity and diplomacy, foster a professional and interpersonal environment based on respect towards all parties, and promote clear communication and efficient intercultural problem-solving (Adler, 2022).

A very profound and interesting discussion can be performed on the role of the leader and how he/she can cope with cultural divergence. Nonetheless, the focus of this thesis is on the team members and how they cope with conflict arising from the team's multiculturalism.

2.3 Cultural Intelligence and Communication in MCTs

Defining communication is extremely hard as it is such a multi-dimensional and imprecise concept. Despite this, in order to proceed with the analysis of this concept in this thesis, it is essential to adopt a working definition. Therefore, the present study regards communication as a social phenomenon involving the exchange of information between individuals and a professional practice that can benefit from implementing suitable tools and regulations to enhance the efficacy of the conveyed information.

According to Ochieng and Price (2010), there is evidence that suggests that multicultural teams composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds outperform those that are homogenous since they can contribute with a broader range of perspectives, skills, and personal attributes to benefit the team. Effective communication and integration among team members create the conditions for a stronger team culture. However, these teams are influenced by distinct perceptions of the environment, potentially resulting in adverse effects on the social cohesion of the team (Ochieng & Price, 2010, pp. 449-460). Furthermore, different interpretations of the business context can ultimately impact the success of a business (Heinz, 2014).

According to Heinz (2014), this includes the interpretation of multiple nonverbal cues such as spatial perceptions, time, body language, facial expressions, and social patterns and

behaviors. Conflicts and their resolution may also be influenced by differing cultural norms and approaches to reaching an agreement.

Jehn et al. (1999) and posteriorly, Ely and Thomas (2001) argued that diversity within a team leads to an increase in the variety of perspectives, styles, knowledge, and insights that team members can use to bear complex problems. Perception refers to the cognitive process through which an individual attends to, structures, and comprehends information to construct a coherent and meaningful representation of the external world (Kotler, 2000).

According to Ochieng and Price (2010), it has been established that effective communication plays a crucial role in managing expectations, misconceptions, and misunderstandings that may arise in MCTs and that employing good communication strategies is vital for establishing, nurturing, and sustaining strong working relationships. Therefore, one can assume that to attain this is necessary to have a solid interconnected communication system with a clear establishment of lines of responsibility and conflict resolution processes (Ochieng & Price, 2010).

Butler and Zander (2008) developed the 4Cs model to be applied in multicultural groups focusing on two concepts, composition and communication, that could evolve into conflict or creativity. The first two Cs, composition and communication, work as the model's base and have been the object of research by many authors, such as Gluesing and Gibson (2004) and Govindaran and Gupta (2001). The C referring to conflict negatively impacts the team and results from getting the first two Cs wrong (Butler & Zander, 2008). On the other hand, correctly managing the first two Cs results in the fourth C, creativity. The composition of MCTs revealed to be crucial in establishing and determining value-based boundaries, while the C referring to communication requires developing interpersonal skills essential in an international business context (Butler & Zander, 2008). Regarding composition, Butler (2006) emphasizes the need to manage the negative consequences of diversity by considering a team's cultural composition. The challenges that arise in MCTs are due to the pattern of differences, which leads to faultlines, and the dispersion of differences, which influences the strength of faultlines (Butler, 2006).

Lau and Murninghan (1998) developed the concept of faultlines recurring to the example of a group composed of two distinct and non-overlapping subgroups, young Hispanic women and old Caucasian men; the members of the group fall into two demarcated subgroups based on demographic characteristics so a strong faultline is present (Lau & Murnighan, 2005, p. 645). The number of subgroups and faultline intensity is correlated with the consistency in individual characteristics apparent to the group members. For instance, the more homogenous demographic attributes such as age, race, and gender, the more homogenous the intra-group processes and interactions will be (Lau & Murnighan, 2005).

Applying the concept of faultlines, Butler and Zander (2008) explain that the pattern of differences influences their existence. The pattern of differences refers to the number and size of demarcated subgroups where the social sorting rules are different across them (Butler, 2006). As previously mentioned, the strength of the faultlines depends on the dispersion of differences (Butler & Zander, 2008, p. 199), so on the degree of dispersion among individual members' demographic characteristics (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Lau and Murnighan (1998) recognize that a group may vary on attributes other than demographic ones; however, they emphasize the latter's relevance compared to others. Therefore, according to Chatman and Flynn (2001), more demographically diverse individuals will result in more heterogeneity within a group that will be less likely to establish and adopt cooperative norms compared to more homogenous ones.

Regarding the second C, communication is achieved through people, and it thrives through them (Piekkari & Zander, 2005, p. 8) by creating an environment where members of MCTs need to communicate with each other across language barriers, improving intrafirm communication in the long run (Butler & Zander, 2008). The importance of language in multicultural teams is widely recognized, and managing language diversity properly is crucial to achieving cohesion in multinational enterprises (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000). The ability to communicate effectively has been strongly linked to the effectiveness and performance of MCTs (Tsui et al., 1992), so one can assume that communication difficulties derived from dispersion in proficiency in a common language, facing threatening acts, and use of task communication cues affect the multicultural corporate environment (Butler & Zander, 2008).

The dispersion of proficiency in a common language is the most immediate barrier (Butler & Zander, 2008). Buckley et al. (2005) point out that sharing a common, or even similar, language helps to standardize language in an MCT and that a culture-embeddedness perspective on language, despite facing many difficulties, is possible in a culturally diverse corporate environment (Piekkari & Zander, 2005).

However, a common vocabulary, grammar, and syntax do not necessarily involve smooth communication (Buckley et al., 2005) since linguistic and paralinguistic cues can differ even when a common language is used (Brett et al., 2006) because semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics play essential roles in speech. Besides the speech, also how one interprets what is being said. Team members often overlook cultural differences because they assume that a shared language also means a shared cultural context and fail to recognize that their cultural backgrounds may differ and affect their perspectives (Henderson, 2005). Moreover, even if people speak the same or similar languages, their preferred communication patterns may differ depending on their nationality (Zander, 2005). For instance, Brazil and Portugal speak Portuguese; however, Portuguese from Portugal (PT-PT) has a much more complex grammar than the one spoken in Brazil (PT-BR); additionally, PT-BR words usually have double meanings.

Regarding facing threatening acts in communication, Matveev and Nelson (2004) suggest that team members should possess solid cross-cultural communication competence, which includes having developed interpersonal and team effectiveness skills, the ability to manage cultural uncertainty and cultural empathy. In multicultural teams, both linguistic and paralinguistic cues can be misinterpreted, resulting in face-threatening acts that can be managed through politeness strategies (Morand, 2003)

In order to promote team effectiveness, MCTs should prioritize the expression of differences rather than suppressing them. Additionally, teams should strive to be synergistically integrated by employing effective communication, and collaborative conflict resolution, as suggested by Maznevski (1994).

According to Young (1998), an effective member of an MCT should be able to establish an interpersonal relationship with a foreign national via an effective exchange of both verbal

and non-verbal communication. Being interculturally competent goes beyond having knowledge of a culture and a language; it also involves possessing affective and behavioral abilities such as empathy and charisma, inquisitiveness, and the capability of handling anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998). Nowadays, organizations seek to hire employees who possess cultural competence, as Harvey and Novicevic (2001) noted, because cross-cultural skills have become more important in a multicultural society. Consequently, employees must be able to navigate their new cultural surroundings, which requires the ability to interpret and understand the concept of culture – a skill referred to as cultural intelligence (Shafi, 2018). Hence, cultural intelligence refers to an individual's capability to work effectively across distinct cultures without allowing cultural differences to hinder their performance in an unfamiliar cultural setting (Shafi, 2018).

In order to make the most of the creative abilities coming from a diversely composed team, Butler (2006) highlights the importance of having effective communication that can address and prevent conflicts from disrupting the team's progress.

Jehn (1995) points out three types of conflicts that can negatively affect team performance: task, process, and relationship. When these happen in the right proportions and at the proper stages of a task lifecycle, they can improve decision-making and performance (Jehn, 1999). However, unlike the other two, relationship conflict is highly unlikely to be beneficial at any point in the process because teams with high levels of conflict among the team members perform less efficiently together and produce less creative results (Butler & Zander, 2008). According to Jehn (1999), process conflict is beneficial at the outset when it is time for the team to assign tasks, while task conflict should arise right around the critical mid-point.

Butler and Zander (2008) recur to group faultlines to structure the three types of intragroup conflict. These authors claim that the stronger the faultlines, the increased conflict at the expense of creativity. Therefore, having a diverse team is, also in this case, more advantageous for group performance, compared to having a homogenous team, as it allows for greater creativity (Butler, 2006). Nevertheless, awareness of the teams' faultlines and how they affect intragroup conflict is vital to manage the conflict within an MNC. Also, by understanding composition and communication issues, teams can manage all three types of conflict more efficiently (Butler & Zander, 2008).

2.3.1 The power of language

According to Méndez García and Pérez Cañado (2005), language is often perceived as a tool for controlling and coordinating activities and as a means to establish personal relationships within the MCT.

Gumperz and Gumperz (1996) claim that for practical reasons, there is a tendency to interact within cultures that share the same language since linguistic-related challenges in MCTs increase the likelihood of conflict. This illustrates that first language relatedness acts as a resource for group cohesion.

Language is a fundamental aspect of an MCT (Marschan, 1997), and even though the language of business communication is English, it is not rare the occurrence of misunderstandings related to non-native proficiency in the language, even in members with vast experience (Heinz, 2014). Another aspect pointed out by Heinz (2014) that can deteriorate work relationships is having side conversations in the native language and disregarding others that do not speak the same language. Misunderstandings can arise among coworkers in the same organization due to how individuals interact and interpret each other's remarks (Heinz, 2014).

Language is reported to work both as a barrier and a facilitator for intercultural communication.

Marquardt and Horwarth (2001) claim that language differences work as a barrier to a team's integration and proficiency in problem-solving. Additionally, having limited proficiency in a language can act as an obstacle to effective intercultural communication, which can lead to negative consequences, such as struggling to comprehend messages, being excluded from tasks conducted in the corporate language, forming isolated groups of individuals who are unable to communicate effectively with their colleagues (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), as well as experiencing misunderstandings in international and intercultural contexts.

On the other hand, Lagerström and Andersson (2003) assert that using a corporate language is an effective way of overcoming communication barriers within an organization, treating language as the "corporate glue" that binds together MCTs. In this context, the corporate

language refers to the predominant language used in global teams and the specific jargon utilized in a particular profession, company, or institution (Chevrier, 2003). Méndez García and Pérez Cañado (2005) also point out the language as a tool for opportunities such as networking and the possibility of attending training courses.

Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) position language as a source of power since competent speakers of the company's language have a unique advantage in networking, an essential element in the workplace, and expressing their ideas in meetings and discussions. Furthermore, individuals with good language skills have access to more information, and as a result, they possess the power within the organization (Marschan et al., 1997).

Nowadays, English is the language of international business and commerce, so it is extremely important for individuals whose cultural and linguistic background differs to dominate the English language. This implies that native-level speakers of English hold a more privileged position than non-native speakers of either language (Marschan et al., 1997) since they master both the language and the tone and other paralinguistic aspects.

Lagerström and Andersson (2003) focus on the fact that every non-native English speaker speaks the language differently because they incorporate their own cultural and linguistic background in their speech. Méndez García and Pérez Cañado (2005) reflect on the fact that non-native speakers of a specific corporate language also benefit from certain privileges, such as interlocutors tending to turn a blind eye to eventual mistakes in their English speech either in an oral or written register.

"A researcher cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p.3)

3. Methodology

The significance of research methodology lies in its ability to not only elucidate the procedures employed in the research but also to uphold the standard of the study and substantiate the choices made by the researcher throughout the project. Therefore, implementing a solid research methodology is a pivotal aspect of any scholarly inquiry, serving as a fundamental framework for conducting research and, ultimately, ensuring the credibility of the results and findings.

3.1 Pre-study

For the conduction of the research in the present paper, a prior qualitative pre-study was carried out to determine and explore potential communication attributes and strategies to be further explored in the main study.

The participants of the pre-study were bachelor students from diverse nationalities that attended a workshop about communication techniques with Dr. Mathias Boënne as tutor. Ten participants were in the workshop, six of them Dutch, two Spanish, one Hungarian, and one French.

The workshop began with an introductory game where the participants were standing in a circle and needed successively to clap in the direction of a colleague, and the dynamic was getting faster and faster. This exercise aimed to highlight the importance of eye contact in effective communication.

Second, the participants were asked to form pairs, and the distribution was the following:
- Spanish + Spanish,
- Dutch + French,
- Dutch + Hungarian,
- Dutch + Dutch,
- Dutch + Dutch.

After being paired up, the groups of people of the same nationality started talking in their native language. The second exercise began with writing an hobby in post-its as well as the

topic of a project they have been working on in their bachelor course. Afterward, it was asked for them to explain the topic of their own project with the hobby of their pair.

It was observable that this communication strategy made it easier for the listeners to comprehend the main idea of the interlocutors' project. The latter found it harder to adopt the other person's reality – hobby – as an example to dismantle an idea to make it simpler for comprehension. During this exercise, two out of the three groups with the same nationalities kept communicating in their native language.

Compared to these two groups, it was observable that the other participants were using their hands more expressively in the conversation as a non-verbal tool. This worked as a way of complementing the speech and overcompensating for the eventual lack of words or difficulty expressing some ideas in their non-native language, English.

As a third and fourth exercise, the participants were asked to describe as detailed as possible their favorite bar or restaurant and a place where they felt safe. The interactions during these exercises were very similar, even though describing their safe spot was much less intuitively visual, so they needed to include more detail. During these exercises, all participants spoke in English. It was observable that the groups of people with the same nationality had a speech much more focused on the emotions they associated with the bar/ restaurant and their safe place. On the other side, pairs with people of different nationalities had a more sensorial way of communicating, using the five senses to picture the scenarios to their partner to make them understand the mental image of those places as clearly as possible. People with the same nationality were influenced by familiarity with the other party's cultural values, so they felt more comfortable expressing feelings in a more subjective and personal way.

The instructions for the next exercise were to explain to the other participants why Utrecht would be the best student city in the world. Contrasting with the previous dynamic, it was possible to observe that people who had previously relied more on emotions in their speech were now expressing themselves in a more sensorial way because they were now speaking to people of diverse nationalities.

Lastly, as a final exercise, it was asked to the participants to do a pitch on "Why is yellow the best color."

3.2 Sample collection and procedure

Considering the exploratory nature of the research, which aims to investigate a relatively unexplored phenomenon and identify its key components (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), the research follows a qualitative methodology approach. This approach is based on the participants' subjective interpretation and experience to gain insights and information regarding the subject. Qualitative research is highly convenient since it allows one to obtain much more information regarding a human phenomenon; having a restricted number of participants gives a more personal and considerable depth of detail, despite involving a posterior generalization for the entire population (Jackson et al., 2007). Additionally, an inductive research approach is preferred because the conclusions regarding the analysis of the collected data are drawn concerning the findings from the literature used to establish a theoretical framework.

Therefore, considering the multiple theories about communication in multicultural teams, the qualitative approach is more suitable for analyzing and interpreting more objectively. However, due to the lack of research focused on the impact of language in multicultural communication, it was necessary to establish a solid methodologic framework.

The results coming from qualitative research are rather descriptive than predictive, as it focuses on studies of narrowed groups of participants to answer the investigation prompts. Qualitative data establish an audience's range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it in certain situations or experiences by characterizing and not measuring a phenomenon's attributes, characteristics, and properties. Qualitative methods in team management include in-depth interviews with individuals, focus groups, and in-context observations (Teis & Teis, 2006). Nowadays, these sessions can be conducted in person and online.

With this, semi-structured interviews with members of diverse nationalities integrated into multicultural teams were conducted. Additionally, the participants were from different countries with different native languages and or dialects.

According to Quivy and Campenhoudt (2005), a semi-structured interview is a preplanned interview that utilizes an interview guide or a script. The advantage of this technique is that the researcher can identify topics to be covered beforehand, resulting in a structured interview and greater control by the researcher while still having the flexibility to adapt the questions or make new ones throughout the interview process.

Considering the goal of this thesis, the interview script aims to interview participants inserted in multicultural teams. Additionally, they are required to fulfill the following prerequisites:

- Be inserted in different organizations,
- Different positions
- Different nationalities (preferably, also belonging to different cultural clusters).

The selection interview process was not restricted to corporation employees due to the importance of also exploring the perspective of students who are not yet inserted in the labor market but belong to multicultural teams in some organizations. However, on the date of the interviews, all the participants were working or doing internships.

From the data obtained from the interviews, two focus groups were formed according to the information obtained from the interview to put into perspective similar/ different opinions and experiences as a way of promoting discussion.

A total of eight individual interviews were administered during the initial phase. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1. However, the importance of it being able to be flexibly adapted during the interviews must be recognized. This adaptability can consist of the addiction, removal, or merging of questions as well as changing their order, allowing the interview to retain the element of openness and objective comparison between interviewees (Pollock, 2019). According to Pollock (2019), by doing so, new ideas and accounts of personal experiences can come into the interview discussion, which is highly advantageous when gathering qualitative data on the perceptions held by interviewees.

Taking advantage of the ease of communicating with people located in other geographical areas and as a way of having the most diverse and dispersed sample possible, some interviews were conducted online. However, when possible, the preference was always for in-person

interviews since observation of nonverbal communication of the interviewee is perceived as extremely important, such as body language and gestures, among others. Online interviews are conducted using Microsoft Teams, while offline interviews are conducted face-to-face at an agreed-upon location.

The maximum duration of the interviews was set to twenty-five minutes, with the possibility of an extension to thirty minutes. The purpose of implementing a time limit for this interview is to prevent fatigue and ensure that both the interviewer and interviewee remain fresh and engaged. By doing so, the aim is to maintain optimal responses and avoid the negative effects of diminishing returns. It is of utmost importance to emphasize that specific topics and questions have been given priority for investigation within the limited time frame of twenty-five to thirty-minute interviews, irrespective of their relation or similarity to other factors.

Following the initial eight interviews, there was a subsequent round wherein two focus groups were formed based on the data gathered from the individual interviews. The following criteria determined the composition of these groups:

- Group A: ensures homogeneity among participants regarding their perspectives and viewpoints,
- Group B: including individuals with contrasting ideas and perspectives to foster diverse discussions.

3.2.1 Description of the participants

All eight participants who participated in the study belonged to different organizations except participant number 1 and number 3. However, even though they both work for Tesselate, they hold different positions in different departments. Additionally, participant number 1 is currently assigned to a project with the ING group. The eight interviewees belonging to different institutions, each having a unique role in this process and each with their own vision of the organization they represent and the team they are integrated into, contributed to this study by providing insights into their personal experiences of the issue under study in this research work. However, in order to avoid overlapping experiences within the same organization and, therefore, redundancy, it was stipulated from the beginning that participants 1 and 3 would never be integrated into the same focus group.

Additionally, to ensure the fulfillment of the requisites outlined for the sample selection, there is a total of nine nationalities in the sample since participants 2 and 8 have dual citizenship. Therefore, nine out of the ten cultural clusters, as classified by Gupta et al. (2002), are represented in the sample.

The diversity in the participants that constituted the sample of this research enriches the data collected, as their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives provide a broader range of insights and viewpoints and a significant enhancement in the validity and reliability of the findings.

Below, all the information of the nine participants is summarized in Table 1:

Participants	Sex	Nationality	Cultural cluster	Company	Position	Nature of work	Exposure to cultural diversity before	Duration of the interview
1	M	Belgian	Germanic Europe[2]	Tesselate (&ING)	Consultant	Remote	Yes	23 minutes
2	M	Turkish & Bulgarian	Arab Culture & Eastern Europe[3]	MediaMonks BV	Student + Treasury analyst and data visualization specialist	Hybrid	No	15 minutes
3	F	Indian	Southern Asia	Tesselate	Business consultant	Hybrid	Yes	20 minutes
4	F	Argentinian	Latin America	Cerebra Nootropics	Student + warehouse worker and translator	In person	No	13 minutes
5	M	Philippian	Southern Asia	Nordea	Deal administrator and collateral officer	Hybrid	Yes	22 minutes
6	M	Portuguese	Latin Europe	Glia	Software and infrastructure engineer	Remote	No	19 minutes
7	F	Chinese	Confucian Asia	FrieslandCampina	Student + Global Category Marketing Intern	In person, mostly	Yes	11 minutes
8	M	Angolan & Portuguese	Sub-Sahara Africa	Ducap & Cª, Lda	Electrical and control engineer	In person	Yes	16 minutes

Table 2 – Description of the participants

Due to the highly significant relevance of the influence of the interviewees' teams on their experiences and testimonies expressed in the interviews, Table 2 outlines the composition of

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[2] It was considered part of the BENELUX group. Since the cluster classification adopted in the present research work does not mention Belgium, the BENELUX classification makes it possible to insert Belgium in the same group as The Netherlands: Germanic Europe.

[3] Bulgaria was also not part of the Cultural Clusters classification adopted in this research. Therefore, considering the criteria used by Gupta et al. (2002), the researcher of this thesis considered it relevant to insert it in the Eastern Europe cluster.

each participant's current team. However, it should be noted that Participant 8 discussed a past MCT experience during the interview since he is currently a self-employed worker and working alone, hence not part of a team.

Participant	Current team composition
1	Moroccan, Portuguese, Philippian, Belgian, and South African
2	Turkish, Brazilian, Spanish, and Chinese
3	Dutch, Indian, Italian, and Portuguese
4	Dutch, Italian, British, and Argentinian
5	Dutch and Philippian
6	Portuguese, Estonian, Russian, and Croatian
7	Dutch, Belgian, and Singaporean
8	Portuguese, Angolans, and Namibians

Table 2 – MCT composition

3.2.2 Interviews: empirical results

The interviews were structured and conducted by the author of this paper, Joana Pedroso Madeira. To prevent possible influences and biases from the interviewer on the participants, the interviewer sought to avoid using suggestive or sensitive language. However, to ensure that the answers obtained from the interview met the goals of this study, some questions required additional clarification or reformulation for the participant, and there was the need to resort to examples. This could have been due to the fact that neither the interviewer nor any of the participants had English as a first language. Also, it is relevant to mention that participants 6 and 8, whose first language is the same as the researcher of this paper, preferred to be interviewed in Portuguese claiming that the insights provided would be more complete this way, and Participant 8 has minimal English proficiency.

Additionally, when the first contact was established and before starting the interview recording, every participant was informed and agreed about the ethical considerations regarding their privacy data through the interview process. Their interviews were recorded for transcription purposes, and the gathered data was processed anonymously. The two

interviews that were conducted in Portuguese were manually translated by the author of this paper.

The organization of the material collected, its systematization, and its condensation are crucial research steps. Therefore, the respondents were informed that their interviews would be transcribed using a software program, Descript, which offers a transcription feature in 22 languages, among other services (Descript, 2023).

The analysis of an interview based on its transcription aims to explain the relevant information and meaning contained therein. Since most of this information and meaning is not perceptible or might not seem relevant during the first reading, it is necessary to proceed to successive readings and analysis (Bertaux, 2005). Considering this, the NVIVO software was used to code the interviews according to the objectives established in the interview guide (Appendix 1).

According to Bertaux (2005, p99), thematic analysis is based on the report of each of the participants' insights regarding the topic that one aims to study and analyze, to later compare the contents of these passages from one interview to the other.

Considering this, it was considered convenient and of extreme relevance for the research present in this thesis to be based on a thematic analysis, which allows the uncovering of relevant elements that give meaning to communication; examining how often these elements appear made it possible to assess their meaning for our analytical objective (Bardim, 1977).

So, by adopting thematic analysis as the approach to seek to capture themes and insights related to the collected literature and the goal of the research, it was necessary to organize the information regarding these topics and insights. For that, it was conducted a process of creation of codes and categories that re-enforce current theory. Using NVIVO, the table presented in Appendix 2, was elaborated; it summarizes concisely the outputs of the individual interviews. The similarities between the narratives of the same phenomenon or situation were coded using sets of colors and categories that, in turn, were divided into sub-categories in order to be able to organize the elements that constitute excerpts of relevant information for the approach of the research question in question. In addition, it is suggested

that, in each of these excerpts, themes that recur in several interviews and that constitute a thematic core around which information will be saturated in an inquiry based on experiences should be grouped, which will prepare its thematic organization. (Poirier et al., 1999).

After coding the quotes obtained from the interviews according to the objectives outlined when preparing the interview guide, the evidence table present in Appendix 3 was prepared with the following items:

- *Company policy* is a first-order level code to assess if the organization has specific rules or policies to strategize more effective communication within its various teams.
- *Easier to communicate within the same language/ culture* to evaluate how the participants picture multicultural communication compared to communication within their own same culture.
- *Side conversations* since many participants pointed out that even though the corporate language is English, people still have side conversations in their own idiom, especially locals, which are hard or even impossible to follow and take part in.
- *Role of Language in the Emergence of Conflict* is used to evaluate how participants weigh language and cultural values in situations of emergence of conflict.
- *Language barriers* category's purpose is to understand how barriers deriving from language diversity within an MCT impact the participants.
- *Example of a conflict resolution experienced* wherein the interviewee was given space to share a personal experience regarding conflict resolution.
- *Accuracy & Precision vs. Cultural Sensitivity* is a first-order level code to balance the interviewee's ability and approaches towards effective communication in the context of their MCT while influenced by their and others' cultural values.
- *Conflict resolution* serves to identify how participants perceive how influenced conflict resolution is by a remote work environment and to identify the strategies they use as an approach to a conflict.
- *Privileged position in debates* category reflects the personal perception of the participants of how language proficiency or cultural proximity might be related to power and privilege positions.

- *Strategies that non-native speakers can adopt to fight this privilege* serves to clarify how the interviewees strategize to balance the fact that they are not in a privileged position due to their cultural background or language skills.
- *Recruitment preferences* to assess what qualities and skills the participants would prioritize in case they had the opportunity to select their team members; the perceived importance of cultural intelligence qualities and language domain when compared to other skills.
- *Language proficiency strategies* assesses how participants deal with their own or their colleagues' varying levels of language proficiency and their strategies to address those.
- *Language as a tool* evaluates how language can be incorporated within the work environment to embrace multiculturalism and implement efficient communication.
- *Influence of non-verbal communication* assesses how participants perceive the importance of non-verbal communication, whether written or regarding body language, compared to verbal communication.
- *Values* categorizes values and relevant characteristics brought up during the interviews that the participants considered relevant when approaching language and culture at a corporate communication level.

Thus, this coding procedure resulted in the elaboration of 15 categories that constitute the primary tool for organizing the parts considered to be relevant to achieve the research objectives.

From the elaboration of this table, it is possible to visualize the general panorama of the data that shows 54 emerging categories, three of these with ramifications. It should be emphasized that the categories of analysis were not determined prior to the fieldwork; these were built from the analysis of data collected after all interviews. According to Bertaux (2005), fragments of statements should not be used in an isolated way. In this way, a statement given in an interview about a generalized phenomenon can only be understood and inserted in a context after analyzing the implications of the environment surrounding the topic.

Below is presented Table 3, referring to the Coding Scheme of Exemplary results, while all the processed data collected during the individual interviews is presented in a separate document.

Goal	First order concepts	Second level themes	Total number of references	Participants	Quotes
To assess the interviewee's ability to effectively communicate in the context of their MCT while influenced by their cultural values	Accuracy & Precision vs. Cultural Sensitivity	Balance both	3	1	*"That [the fact that different cultural backgrounds require some cultural sensitivity] is definitely true. I think for that you need the people to be okay with different proficiency in the language and I believe that's what they're trying at ING, what they're trying to do a bit more. So they're trying to make people aware of cultural differences, of different proficiency levels in the language, and they try to make people then accept these in advance before you get to the point where conflict resolution is needed. I believe that is necessary especially for the people who come from the Dutch background in our case, I think. I think that that's something they try to do proactively at the moment itself. Like I said, you have these facilitators who try to balance that communication that the talking at that moment."*
				2	*"(…) you start to try to explain the things in a more detailed way by giving more time on it. And, you know, there's a stance, in between all the different cultures that you have to keep up with, to be polite and to keep that sensitivity or to respect that sensitivity. So, you need to be in that stance and you need to keep that balance not to be understood wrongly. You need to keep that stance and you need to invest more time to explain things in a better way, in a detailed way to the other person so that you can deal with some specific things on the whole process, let me say"*
				3	*"Yes, I think so [need to balance accuracy and precision with cultural sensitivity]. Yeah. Yeah."*
		More focus on cultural sensitivity	4	1	*"(…) But first and foremost, they [the company] try to proactively make people aware of the differences and try to make people to keep that in mind during the conflict resolution time to make sure that you give ample time to other people to talk even if they're not as proficient as you. So especially in a proactive way, that's the main goal of ING."*
				5	*"Yes, of course. In my situation now, coming from the Philippines, based on my experience, we don't normally speak straightforwardly. We are very polite. When we are writing our emails, we normally greet the person, ask the person how are, how is the day going… When I moved to Europe… they are more very straightforward, short and direct. So yes, I also changed a lot and I shape how I communicate based on the nationality that I'm, I'm talking with. "*
					"Yeah. Well first… how do I balance it? Well, I am a person that is not very neutral, I would say. I don't like being dominated as well. So if there is, for example, suggestions that conflicts with what I believe, then I normally jump into the conversation and let my voice to be heard. In a way that I still communicate with them and the way I communicate is shaped based on their culture. So, it's still connected. So I don't need to sound arrogant,

					just because I don't believe to what they say, but still the way I talk to them is still based on, the culture, communication they do. So, I adapt on that as well.”
				7	*“Before I started the internship, I immediately told them that this is my first time working in an international team. If I say something wrong or inappropriate, please bring that out and correct me. It would be really helpful for me and also my future. But now… the point is that I'm a Asian women working in a Dutch culture, so usually they are the ones being super careful with me when they talk to me. So I, it's, it's usually not my problem and I notice that my managers are like… when they talk something they're really care for or act like “Oh, don't take it personally”, or “It's just a market thing”.”*
		More detailed conversations and more focus on accuracy	2	2	*“try to explain the things in more detailed way by giving more time on it. “*
					“invest more time to explain things in a better way, in a detailed way to the other person”
		No need to adapt the speech	1	3	*“I don't think so because if you already started working in multicultural things or with international people, and… if you have this in your mind that you need to focus on your culture or language, this is not good. Because you need to accept that you're going to start with the multicultural environment, so you need to be the to accept the culture or the language difference from others. If this was not my thinking… I should not go and work in a multicultural environment or a multicultural language world.”*
		Something to learn more	2	4	*“That I want to learn way, way more. But because coming from Argentina, there's not that much cultural diversity really […]. Whereas here, I encounter myself with people from different religions, different ethnicities, and of course I never want to say the wrong thing, so I'm trying to learn as much as I can, so I'm being respectful towards everybody so that I think I can still improve.”*
				7	*“Before I started the internship, I immediately told them that this is my first time working in an international team. If I say something wrong or inappropriate, please bring that out and correct me. It would be really helpful for me and also my future.”*
		Yes, there is the need to adapt the speech	1	5	*“Yes, of course. In my situation now, coming from the Philippines, based on my experience, we don't normally speak straightforward. We are very polite. When we are writing our emails, we normally greet the person, ask the person how are, how is the day going… When I moved to Europe… they are more very straightforward, short and direct. So yes, I also changed a lot and I shape how I communicate based on the nationality that I'm, I'm talking with. “*

Table 3 – Coding Scheme of Exemplary Results

3.2.3 Focus groups: composition and criteria

After the data obtained from the individual interviews was processed, it was possible to verify some participants shared either very similar or very distinct opinions. Hence, those were identified, carefully grouped, and contacted to be part of the focus group round that they were already informed about and agreed to participate in. Therefore, Focus Group A (FGA) was constituted by Participants 1 and 7 (P1 and P7, respectively) because they both shared considerable homogeneity in their perspectives and opinions. Focus Group B (FGB) was formed, having as its main criteria the divergence of ideas between participants 2 and 6 (P2 and P6, respectively). The formation of these groups was carefully pondered in order to foster diverse discussions and obtain a more significant output. The discussion guide of both focus groups was distinct from each other and was elaborated based on the outputs obtained from all four of these participants' individual interviews. The focus group question guides are presented in Appendix 5 and 6.

3.2.4 Focus Groups: empirical results

Following the results obtained from the round of individual interviews, focus groups seek to evaluate the degree of agreement or disagreement. Therefore, the focus group was a way of validating the initial outputs and further exploring different angles of the participants' insights by promoting a space for discussion between the interviewees. This subchapter reports the results of the focus group.

The maximum duration of the focus groups was set to be no longer than fifty minutes. FGA was 45 minutes long and FGB lasted 42 minutes. In the first minutes of both sessions, the participants introduced themselves and provided a brief professional contextualization to the other participant in the same group. Posteriorly, the session included the participants being asked questions that aimed to compare the influence that the other interviewee sharing the same session would have on the insights obtained regarding those obtained from the individual interviews. As a way of facilitating this comparison, the subsequently presented table present in Appendix 5 was elaborated to summarize the findings obtained from this round of this methodology after coding.

4. Combined data analysis

The present chapter will present the qualitative results obtained from the individual interviews used to conduct this research. Posteriorly, the results from the conducted focus groups provide further evidence and support the findings. Direct quotes from each interview and focus group will be used to underpin the results. The results are divided thematically into five sub-sections based on the five sub-questions of the research.

4.1 SQ1: How do multicultural teams perceive language differences and language barriers as sources of conflict in their work environment?

The first sub-question explored situations of the emergence of conflict and if language played a facilitator role.

Overall, more than half of the participants reported that it is easier to communicate within the same culture or language. Participant 1 (P1) reported that the fact that most people that constitute his team are not speaking their first language makes it harder to express themselves clearly and understandably:

> *"(...) most of us don't speak our first language with each other. (...) we're able to speak in English, but it's not our mother tongue, so sometimes we can't express exactly what we want to say in that other language, which makes it harder to express what we want and to make clear how we feel about things and how we want to fix issues."* (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

Complementary to this insight, Participant 8 (P8), who was working in a country whose official idiom was his first language, mentioned the importance of adapting to the working environment to attain effective communication. More specifically, the interviewee reported:

> *"So… I had to adapt. (...) Because at first, when I arrived there I spoke as they said "the European African Portuguese" (...) I spoke and they didn't get me… didn't understand me. I had to start using their expressions, their words, and when I asked for something I needed, I had to end the sentence with a "ya" so they would be able to understand that that was really the end of the sentence. After some time, we understood each other well. (...) the first couple of months (...) it was a bit hard for me. And for them too, obviously. They also didn't always understand and then they started to understand what I said and even pick some patterns in my speech and the way I spoke."* (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

What is particularly interesting about this quote is that it also highlights the role of different dialects, even if team members share the same mother tongue, which can also make communication harder due to the different expressions and words.

In contrast with his insight, Participants 3 and 6 (P3 and P6, respectively) claim that this ease in communicating in the same language might not mean that this contributes to conflict avoidance. In fact, P6 points out that the fact that teams communicate in the non-native language of their members can help to alleviate conflicts:

> *"I think it helps alleviating them* [conflicts]*... I think the speech is a bit more careful comparing to when a person is using their native language. I truly believe this is the main point... because... as we are using English and the English that we use on your daily basis is more related to the work setting, you already know more or less what to do... you incorporate the appropriate language and the posture...therefore is harder for someone to disassociate from that in a level that could escalate to a conflict by speaking in a different tone, for instance..."* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

Additionally, P3 provides an example of a conflict situation that she witnessed in an organization:

> *"(...) two girls fought because of some incident issues (...) they both were from different countries or regions. So that was the conflict."* (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

These last two insights lean towards the fact that these participants believe that language does not play a facilitating role in the emergence of conflicts. However, while P3 claims that she does not consider either language differences or cultural values to have a role in the eventual occurrence of a conflict, P6 explained during his individual interview that he believes that cultural aspects affect the corporate environment regarding the emergence of conflict.

> *"(...) I don't think that this* [different cultures and languages] *could be a reason for the conflict because we all speak English. (...) so I don't think that there would or there should be the reason for conflict. But yes, if somebody comes and pokes you because of language or discriminates you because of the language, that is a different thing. But for me, I never felt that. So, for me, it's not a reason to conflict because of the language or barriers."* (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

> *"Culturally, people from Estonia are much more closed... the communication is very short... very succinct so it's not prone to conflicts. Normally, their communication is based on sharing facts, so it's very quick and easy to reach a conclusion because they do not digress in their speech, they are very straightforward and direct."* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

Furthermore, during Focus Group B (FGB), P6 established a connection between cultural values and communication styles. The interviewee defended that those different cultural backgrounds influence communication styles to be prone, or not, to the occurrence of conflicts.

> *"I can also agree that the cultural differences could make like the speech, the different opinions or like the conflict more engaging or not. Because like I said in the example with the Estonians and the Russians, they are like really straight to the point. So, it's very hard to engage in conflict with them. But other cultures might be easier just because they are like more proponent to have*

*like more not a factual like speech or have a more opinionated or are more comfortable…
discussing. So, I think cultural values for sure are what could engage in more differences.”*
(Participant 6, 22/06/2023, Focus Group B)

Aligned with this interviewee is P2, who was in the same focus group and emphasized the
concept of multiculturalism as an influence on communication styles:

> *“I think it's about multiculturalism. Like, let me, I think it's more focused on the cultural related
> things because when you have the debate with someone, you can easily see that they're, how can
> I say, they're trying to prioritize some things (…) the most valuable things, uh, for their culture.”*
> (Participant 2, 22/06/2023, Focus Group B)

Nevertheless, participant 2 does not fail to point out that he believes that both cultural and
language differences are equally relevant fosterers of conflict:

> *“I think language really, really plays a role here. Also, multiculturalism also plays a huge role
> in here because, as I mentioned before, the way that we understand each other is very different.
> Or the way that we grow up in our countries differs with each other so that we understand things
> in a different way or we understand the processes in different way.”* (Participant 2,
> 31/05/2023, individual interview)
> *“It's hard to have the communication (…) but of course, you can have the communication in
> English, but trying to understand the way that the two parties, or the people understand each
> other (…)”* (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)
>
> *“(…) it's not the main issue that we have the different communication. I mean, like… we are
> coming from different language backgrounds, language-related… let me say cultures. But it
> depends on the situation, I think, because, if you're trying to deal with someone who does not
> have much confidence in English, let me say, or that specific language, , that's a problem for you
> to communicate. But also, (…) it depends on the culture too. Like it depends on the
> communication styles too, I think.(…) So I think those two parts are the main contributors of this
> thing”* (Participant 2, 22/06/2023, Focus Group B)

During FGB, P6 reinforced that he believes cultural and linguistic diversity within a company
or a team to be a barrier to the emergence of conflicts regarding these aspects.

> *“I agree with the opposite. I think when a company has like more diverse people, language
> speakers, I think it's more easy to have a culture of respect and it's less likely to have engaging
> conflict. I think… like from my experience when I was working in a fully Portuguese company,
> conflict was much easier because of the native language. I think native languages bring us
> problems and in English we restrain for saying like bad things, I think, and it's easier to prevent
> conflict.”* (Participant 6, 22/06/2023, Focus Group B)

During the round of individual interviews, P7 claimed that the fact that English is the
corporate language inhibits the eventual facilitating role to a conflict and pointed out
experience as an inhibitor of cultural values also playing a facilitating role:

> *“No, I don't think so* [that language works as a conflict facilitator] *because in a team everybody
> has almost perfect as English, and they don't have language problems.”* (Participant 7,
> 28/05/2023, individual interview)

"I also don't think that's the case [that conflict could emerge from different cultural values] *because in the team everybody is senior and they have rich experience and they only focus on a certain area (…) they have their own regions and also before that they have all experience in different countries. Like for example, my manager now, she's a Dutch, but she studied in Norway and stayed in Asia for like a year before. And also the team previous manager, she stayed in Africa and Asia for like seven or eight years in total, and they are very aware of the culture difference and they have a broad experience. So, I don't think that's a problem. And also they communicate a lot with a team over the world."* (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

P8 has a similar opinion with P7, that neither language or cultural values can foster conflict. However, the reasons pointed out are different:

"No, in my case no. Obviously, there were times that I said "Do this in this way…ya" and then… they didn't but it was more because they didn't know how to do that in that certain way, so they would do it differently. Language conflict no, it never happened." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

"Not really, because obviously I was in an African country… I am white and I was in an African country… there is a lot of talk about racism (…) the disdain towards white people, especially those who were colonizers like the Portuguese… I didn't feel any of that. Quite the opposite, actually (…) So, I don't remember ever feeling racism towards me or that they interpreted things differently than what I was trying to say… I really never felt that. I always tried to explain myself in the best possible way, or at least the best I could and play with them… make it chill. I never felt anything like that". (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

Further in his individual interview, this interviewee proceeds to point out the importance of being aware of the cultural context when communicating, since the backgrounds might differ a lot.

"Especially in places where people didn't have the same inputs as we did, that is… didn't grow and evolve as a country or as a culture the same way as we did… with few or none communication with different cultures. Either we know very well and are fully aware of what we are saying and talking to them, or else, yes, there could be some kind of conflict." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

Similarly to P7, participant 5 establishes an analogy with conflict being related with language proficiency by saying that it influences communication, which can ultimately result in conflict.

"it depends on the level of English proficiency the person has. There are some cases wherein you receive emails or you communicate to someone that you don't… or I don't even know what does that mean for and even though that person that I'm talking with someone that speaks English… but in my case, since English is my third language, I still really struggle to really absorb one by one what that person is saying to me or telling to me. So, I would say it depends on the level of proficiency. But there are some people that use very complex language and there are some people that use very basic language, but I always prefer that it should be simple and understandable." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

This interviewee does not believe that a conflict due to language would emerge straight away, but there would be a need for clarification during dialogues where the native language is not English:

> *"I will not say make a conflict. But it will raise questions, I would say. More clarification. (…) but there might be misunderstandings, or more further questions I would say."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

P1 provides uses the Dutch people working in his organization, but not in his team, to point out that different nationalities with different cultural values reflect that in communication through the language, which might sometimes result in conflict situations:

> *"Um, no… I don't think the language is really gonna cause a problem. It's more… it's more the different values."*
>
> "*Dutch people are quite direct in their communication and that's something that I feel is very different from many other cultures. They're very different from (…) the culture from the people in the Philippines, but also the people in Morocco who we work with… for them that direct language, is new. And so, what I've seen a few times is when the Dutch people talk to them that's taken a bit in a way as if it's a personal attack or if it's kind of a… too harsh communication compared to what they're used to. And that could lead to conflicts in the way that people don't like that and have problems with that. I think that would create more (…) I think it's the language of communication… that can lead to these issues for sure."* (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

Interviewee number 1 also points out that the company is aware of these differences and have taken action through policies and mandatory training sessions:

> *"they have put special attention on explaining to the Dutch people to be aware of these cultural differences and act upon these differences and be careful in how you talk to people. Don't be as direct as you would be towards a Dutch person, for example"*
>
> *"(…) we had some mandatory trainings in the company to change that a bit and to make people aware of the fact that (…) there's a lot of side conversations in Dutch. It's not really nice (…), because they might feel a bit like left out. (…) And that's also like something important to kind of build a team's atmosphere. And we've had some trainings on that that I think it helped a bit."* (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

This last quote touches on a topic that many participants drawn attention to. In fact, all the participants of the present research study that were inserted in teams with Dutch speaking people claimed that side conversations in their native language is reoccurring and most of the interviewees admit they feel left out. For instance, P7 explains that Belgians and Dutch people, even though they have linguistic differences, have side conversations in Dutch.

"And also… sometimes the Dutch and Belgium people talk in their own language, but still they have different words. (…) when they have small talk or when within the company, but outside the corporate talk they use Dutch. And I don't talk of course because I don't understand them" (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

Even though P7 said that she was not to be able to participate in a conversation in another language, she admitted that it would also be easier to communicate in Mandarin if she had more Chinese people in her team. Similarly, interviewee 3 admitted she would also somewhat disregard other people that were not fluent in the language if she was having a conversation:

"This was the big challenge I faced, but I cannot clearly call it discrimination because they [Dutch] never discriminate. I didn't feel like that was the discrimination because of the language. But yes, I think that would be a common aspect when if I was only sitting with four people English speaking or Hindi-speaking, so I would start speaking Hindi (…) I didn't feel I was discriminated, but it should've been taken care. At least, I personally think so." (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

During FGA, P1 shares his experience within ING in which he reinforces the ease that many people feel in communicating in their native language with other native speakers, and sometimes it is just a matter of confidence in the communication skills on their first language when compared to English:

"(…) what I see in ING is that people will try (…) the Dutch people, if they have a problem, they will first try to talk in Dutch and then they will see if they can solve the problem. And only then when they realize (…) they will switch to English (…) they're more confident in their own language, so they want to try that at first (…) But it's also a bit natural, right? That you're more comfortable in your own language if you have people who speak your language. Sometimes it's easier to explain your problem or the questions you have." (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

During the same focus group session, participant 7 proceeds to opine that the language difference is not a reason for conflict, even though she experienced being left out of conversations in Dutch. She presents personality and personal values as conflict facilitators instead:

"No, I don't think languages play a role in this. (…) after a while then people get familiar with each other, they know what kind of a person…that each other is. (…)And what the people do and what kind of person might cause be problem or just their behavior and what they think. But I don't think it's a big issue, especially after a while" (Participant 7, 19/06/2023, FGA)

Faced with this point, P1 agrees and establishes a connection between culture, personality, and communication styles:

"Personality and culture are of course… two things that are a bit related. It's a bit of a difficult line there, I think, between personality and culture, but I think in the end, it's always more personal, I guess. A rude person will be rude, whether that's in English or whether that's in Dutch, I guess. And the direct person will be more direct than a person who is less direct. I guess

language will be a bit of a filter though, because if someone is not as confident in another language than their own language, maybe they will be a little bit less direct or a little bit less rude or whatever. But personality always comes out... right? It's very hard to contain that and another language is not gonna stop a person from talking in a certain way. So I think it serves a bit as a filter but personality will always come out" (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

4.2 SQ2: What are the communication strategies employed by multicultural team members to overcome language barriers?

The second sub-question guiding this research aims to investigate the various approaches, techniques and methods that team members from diverse linguistic backgrounds employ to bridge the gap created by language differences.

During the individual interviews, there were pointed out two situations where participants face language barriers in their working environment. Participant 7 mentioned that a lot of her marketing job requires research of information, which is not available in English, which makes her job harder:

> *"The problem to me is because this is a Dutch company and their customer are bakers and restaurants, and I'm doing marketing jobs, so I need to search a lot of like online advertisement and target on websites. However, many of them are only in Dutch because their target are Dutch people, and this is the hard part that I don't appreciate and also because I'm doing a global job and also when I search something like, for example, the trend and market and new product in Italy or France, and they're all in their own language on Instagram or Facebook. So, I need to use translator all the time for those."* (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

Also, interviewee number 5, whose main job task is to create instructions that are followed by other colleagues, mentions how language barriers have an impact on his job tasks:

> *"(...) If I send a simple instruction and if that instruction was not successfully captured correctly, what I normally do is that I call the person and say like "What was wrong on the instructions? Why was this not accomplished the way it should be?" (...) so those kinds of things. So, my strategy is really to investigate how other colleagues as well as sending instructions what words they use instead. (...) So, I think using words that are uniform and clear to others, will be a good strategy to use instead of making a new words, which also defines the same thing."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Additionally, when asked to provide an example of a conflict deriving from language barriers, this participant used this to explain that the way someone intends to deliver a message might not be the same as some other person receives it:

> *"Currently I'm working with a team that creates instructions and we have another team that executes those instructions (...) And sometimes on my part, I know that it is very simple and very direct, but when the person who executes the instructions probably absorbs the instructions in a different way. Then that's the beginning of the conflict in my workplace wherein we need to step in and be like "Hey, (...) why did you do this?... But I instructed you to do this."(...) I know when*

I write the instruction, it is clear to me what needs to be done, but for the person that received those instructions, it is possible that they absorb the instructions in a different way which can result in a conflict and more things to be done instead of just in a simple way." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Although P5 gives great emphasis to language barriers faced when performing work functions, he also recognizes these hindrances can also be reflected in work relationships:

"You still have kind of like misunderstandings… or you absorb wordings or you understand wordings that might be offensive, but on their part it's just a normal. So this kind of thing [understand the impact of language differences in a MCT] *is very, very interesting for me."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Contrastingly, P1 illustrates a situation where two people from different cultural backgrounds engaged into a conflict due to divergencies in communication:

"But we had a case in a team of ours not so long time ago where there was an argument between someone from a local background, Dutch background, and someone with a Middle Eastern background. And that conflict couldn't be resolved in the way that actually should've been resolved. And that led to one person leaving the team. And the basis of that conflict was purely the way, how people were talking to each other, and how people took certain communication and that only proves that there's still work to be done and even in the current environment, where there is a lot of talk about toxic environments and protecting employees. In my opinion, (…) they didn't try to kind of resolve the issue and to find a solution for both." (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

This quote reflects that even though companies recognize the relevance of a good work environment, there are a lot of aspects where they can still improve regarding team dynamics. In fact, when asked about their perception of an eventual privileged position of native English speakers or locals in discussions or debates, seven out of the eight participants recognized that this privilege existed, even when not related to power positions. However, when it comes to the privileged group, opinions were divided. Participants 2, 4 and 6 emphasized the importance of language in this privilege dynamic by stating that only English native speakers are in this position:

"Not Dutch because I know that a lot of Dutch people sometimes don't feel maybe as comfortable with English or they sometimes struggle as well to find certain words, which is completely understandable being that English is also not their first language. For British people, yes, of course they will be in advantage. Maybe they won't struggle the way that we do." (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

"In my company, not in my project…but in my company I have people from the United States and that might happen with them…but they don't work in engineering, so we never have any type of communication with them…I can't really measure that because everyone with whom I have direct communication don't have English as a native language." (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

"If they have a more privileged position? Yes, they have. They have because, for example, we have a British person in there, in the finance department. He talks very correctly… and also

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because of the accent. Let me say, you cannot understand him… and you need to, you know, make him say the things again and again so that you can understand. And, because of this, they act more dominant in communications because the common language is English… they are talking like faster with different words that you didn't hear before, so they act more dominant and it gets harder for you to understand and get familiar with the whole process or the discussion, let me say." (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)

P3 adds that, due to the fact that they are familiarized with the country's context, locals also share a privileged position with the native English speakers:

"For me, if I talk honestly in my workplace, I never feel that. But I think sometimes maybe some employees have faced that. So I cannot tell if that is… if this is personally my experience, but yes you can feel the superiority of the language because they know everything about this country and about it. So yes, it's the common human tendency. They can feel superior. I never felt that, but yes, it could be a reason for people to engage into conflict, because it is a very common human tendency if you know everything about a particular place or the language or everything, so you feel superior… it's the human tendency" (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

It is important to noticed that the interviewee emphasized that *"They can feel superior. I never felt that (…)"*, which shows that even if that privilege is not evident to everybody, local people or English speakers feel that they are in a privileged position, even if internationals do not recognize that.

On the other hand, regarding P1, P5, and P8, they all give different explanations as to why local people have that privilege while excluding the possibility that language is a factor and, therefore, claiming that native speakers of the used corporate language do not have a privilege. P1 points out that local people have this privilege due to having a more experienced background:

"I would say yes, but… yeah, they do. But that's not because of the language they speak, that's more because they have a more experienced background. But they definitely have a more prioritized position." (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

In turn, P5's answer reflects the feeling of a clear dominance of local people towards him:

"I will be honest, yes, they are. Even though you don't want to be dominated by them… you know… still they have the final call in in many moments and that's something that I already accepted. Especially like in my team right now, I am the only Asian, so whatever I say might be dominated with small ideas, especially if that person suggested is Dutch. So yes, they dominate a lot." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

In order to analyze the insight provided by interviewee 8, it is important to recall that this participant was inserted in a team abroad whose language was still his own even if it was a

distinct dialect. Additionally, this participant clarified at the beginning of his individual interview that his African background plays a big role in his life, and even in communication:

> *"I am [P8], I am 37, and I have Angolan citizenship as well as Portuguese… because I was born there and my dad is both Angolan and Portuguese. My mother is Portuguese and… despite the fact that I am white I embrace the Angolan culture, my Angolan side, let's say more than I embrace the Portuguese… even in the language… when you do the translation of this to English won't be possible to spot it, but I am going to say it so it is on record… I speak Portuguese but the… the African variation, not the dialect, more like some words and the accent let's say. I was born in Cabinda, Angola, and came to Portugal when I was around 2 (…)"* (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

Therefore, one relevant aspect of his answer regarding privileged positions is that he gives more importance to day-to-day specific situations that might reflect different cultural values united by one same language. So, when questioned about integrating a team of locals in a country that, even though he did not grow up into, it is also his, and about an eventual privileged hold by locals, his answer was:

> *"Oh yes, absolutely. Because I remember that it happened many times that they turned to me and said "Boss, this need to be more isolated because it will get too hot, ya", or "Boss, put this equipment higher because this is a gazelle habitat, and people come here to hunt them, ya" and even "When you go to that café or that restaurant, ask for this fruit as the flavor for the juice instead because the people of this village always mix up these 2 fruits, ya". I was in an amazing position there, because it was their environment and I was a foreigner that was very well integrated. So, I have no doubt that those, their inputs helped a lot."* (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

Contrary to the other seven participants, P7 defends that there is no privilege held by either native English speakers or locals.

> *"No, no! (…) if they cannot explain something in details, they just first tell me like "Hey, we have to speak in Dutch because we cannot talk this in English" and then after that, also explain the topic to me… Just one more thing, because I also stayed in Switzerland and also Germany… they do this way more than the Dutch people. They just don't even tell when they're speaking German."* (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

Furthermore, on this topic, interviewees were asked what strategies did they adopt to fight this privilege and the answers resulted in three main strategies: do not overreact, work on self-improvement, and socialize with the privileged group.

Participant 5 mentioned all three strategies on his answer:

> *"What I learned is that… try to learn their language as well. You don't need to be perfect. You don't need to be so professional. Start with basic and I would say that the way they appreciate you learning their language also increase your chances that they will not dominate you when it comes to brainstorming or giving ideas. I would say like that… so you kill the dominant part first*

by learning very basic. And be social, socialize with them first before the brainstorming moment comes, I think… so you can kind of… avoid the moment where you cannot or it's really difficult to share your ideas, to formulate what you need to say, especially if you're not very familiar with the language. So, I would say socialize first before the meeting or whatever it is and try to gain their confidence first, and then you strategize yourself when do you need to say those kinds of ideas instead of just dumping them because they give ideas, but they are Dutch. But at the same time, if you make conflict directly instead of just listening first… I think overreaction as well might cost a domination, in this case. It might be that your ideas will never be heard if you try to make conflict with them in an improper way" (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

From a different perspective, also participant 8 defends that socializing with the privileged is extremely important to learn from them and absorb certain behaviors:

"Besides ending every sentence with "ya"? Eat with them many times… have lunch and dinner with them, socialize not only during work hours, but also after… have dinner with them and their families, and talk to their kids. Try to talk to them in a more chill way than just talking about work." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

However, the most popular strategy among the participants consists on self-improvement, either involving learning the language or being more patient and vocal about it:

"Practicing more. Just practice. You know, don't give up. Keep going, don't be embarrassed. If you cannot find a word, I'm sure people will help you out. And with patience, you can always help the other person understand what you're trying to say." (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

"What I see more and more is that people within ING try to learn to speak Dutch, which is a weird way… thing to do, if you ask me. The issue is often that… I mean within the team, we communicate in English (…) The problem is really when we start communicating with other teams (…) not multicultural teams, and they would then send us emails or messages in Dutch, and then you get issues. I think these are very difficult to solve. I mean, for us as a team, difficult. It would have to come from higher up from ING. But what can people themselves do about it… I know that some of them speak out, sometimes when they hear Dutch, they really ask like "Could we… could you speak some English?" even if they're not talking to them. But if they're like a bystander or so to kind of feel more included and to make people aware of the fact that they're not speaking or that they're speaking a language and not everyone understands. It's difficult, I think." (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

Still, as a way of evaluating the impact of language barriers on communication, interviewees were asked how non-verbal communication influences working interactions. Participants evaluated this importance compared to verbal communication and presented two different points of view regarding written communication in conflict resolution. The latter will be explored further in this paper.

Participants 8 and 5 claimed that non-verbal communication is equally important to verbal communication since it serves as a complement:

"Yeah, indeed [nonverbal communication plays a role]. Sometimes you absorb more the message if expressions are available, like hands movement, looking into the eyes or stuff like that. You absorb more and you pay attention more to the details than just, you know, reading the chat. And sometimes the way you read it might be in a different way than the person who sent it wants you to receive. (...). I cannot say if remote or in person creates more misunderstanding because it has multiple variables (...)" (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

On the other hand, P4 recognizes the importance of non-verbal communication but it claims that verbal communication plays a major role in communication:

"It definitely influences, I don't know if more than words, but it depends... sometimes non-verbal communication can tell a lot of... maybe... for example, if I'm trying to read someone out and they're not responding, or I don't know them, the non-verbal part tells me their level of interest and... interest and commitment, I would say. So, this tells me, maybe they are not being responsive because something was going on. So, I think verbal is a little bit more important, but nonverbal still plays a role. One hundred percent. Always." (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

4.3 SQ3: What role can language play in conflict resolution in multicultural teams?

This third sub-research question seeks to explore the ways in which language can impact the process and outcomes of conflict resolution in multicultural teams.

For that, the individuals involved in the research were asked how they believe that language impacts conflict resolution in a multicultural team.

Firstly, it is relevant for one to notice that every participant that works remotely or hybrid, except P5, pointed out that conflict avoidance is easier when working remotely:

"It is easier in this aspect, because when a person writes a message tries to be as succinct... as clear as possible... and even does a fact check before pressing send and send the message. When a person is talking in a meeting, usually the ideas flow rapidly and directly from their head to their mouth and you can see the reflection of this in their speech... it's easier for a person to make a mistake or not be seeing the whole picture. When we send a message, we have the possibility of re-reading it and re-reading what other people have said... something that in a videocall or a face-to-face conversation is not possible and there is no rewind button to go back to what it was said. There [in a text message] *everything is already there... the facts are already displayed in a temporal, chronological way and it is easier, that is, you do not lose the thread to the skein... a person will not repeat arguments because there are already a message where those arguments were exposed. So I think (...) that discussions end up ending very quickly and efficiently by using this method. (...)I really believe that it's way more difficult to be in a meeting discussing something than to discuss it in a couple text messages."* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

"when I work remotely is rare but I'm more free and have less conflict with people. So, for example, when there's like an argument going on online, I can always take a moment and sit down like, "okay, I don't want to look at it now", and I will reply later on. So if I see the person sometimes it gets so intense and it might turn to be like a fighter argument. And that's one thing that happened in my previous job as well (...) like, "okay, I'm not replying to her for three hours" and then later on "okay, it's not a big deal". Or even say that they will send a voice message or

have a call later on. We have like a moment or a break, after the thing happened." (Participant 7, 19/06/2023, FGA)

"(...) it depends on the situation because sometimes you can avoid the conflict if you're working remotely because you don't have to communicate like face-to-face or you are not physically in there so you can like... pretend not seeing the message or not seeing the conflict... but at least you can have time (...) And after that you can provide a more efficient answer or more efficient response to the situation that can help solve it faster (...) but at the same time, I think other side.. I mean, this could make the things to be solved in a longer span of time, I think. So it needs some kind of a balanced sense, you know, it depends on the person also, I think." (Participant 2, 22/06/2023, FGB)

The last two previous quotes, referring to P7 and P2, respectively, bring up a very curious insight into the discussion. While they affirm that it is easier not to engage in conflict while working remotely, P2 recognizes that in case of conflict, its resolution takes longer due to have the situation solved. P7's answer proves this point, since she confesses to ignoring messages that can result in conflict.

On the other side, interviewee number 5 does not share the previous point of view with the other participants in the study. P5 considers the remote aspect of his work to be harder, because it involves one to engage into his own interpretation of written communication, which can create misunderstandings and consequently conflicts:

"I think the hard part is the remote, because most of the time you really understand everything by yourself. You absorb everything by yourself. Instead of just having a talk to your colleague at the office. So, yes, remotely creates more conflicts and misunderstanding, I would say. I've been on the company for quite a while... meaning to say I'm already familiar to what I'm doing in general, then I will be more confident in just chatting with person because that person might have less misunderstanding towards me. Since I just started to work, in January, I still prefer and I feel that remotely creates a misunderstanding if you are a newbie." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Furthermore, P5 emphasizes the strategies he uses when communicating online and compares it to in-person communication:

"Now, if you are gonna write that or you gonna email someone, make it short, and instead, if more explanation is needed, then I would suggest that you make a call instead, especially if you have a different nationality because it might cost misunderstanding. So, I think... because in my case, when you speak to a person, you can easily sense if you are on the same tone... or page. Meaning if you understand each other by just listening to the tone and when you do call instead of writing, it is easy as well to raise questions if there is words or clarification that the receiver needs, I would say (...) there are a lot of ways (...) to avoid misunderstandings of course or conflict." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

During Focus Group A, P1 also debates against remote work since it takes away an important part of communication, the non-verbal aspect:

> *"(...) I'm trying to think if that's a positive thing or a negative thing in fact, because it kind of takes away the body language... I'm going towards a negative side actually. I think it would be better if you have the body language, besides your words, what you're trying to say... I think that would be a healthier situation than when it's purely words on the screen."* (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

Contrarily, P6 advocates for written communication in remote work since, according to his experience, it not only helps to avoid conflicts but also provides the team members with a faster resolution of them:

> *"Based on my experience, when it was in person, face-to-face, those discussions of ideas took longer... it was more difficult to reach a conclusion because it seemed that everything went into some sort of a very cyclical mode. In my specific team, we usually try to deal with these conflicts via text messages (...) which reflects on the number of meetings... we have very few (...) If it's something that involves more time or more discussion (...) these channels are public because they also serve to share ideas... other people from other teams may have an opinion on that matter and may have something to contribute to the debate. For example, if we are in a meeting and there is one or two people missing... this because it is not mandatory for us to attend any meetings... so if someone is not there it is possible that they are missing an opportunity or an important point. That is why the written communication in Slack is used."* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

Regarding the conflict resolution methods, participants were inquired about how they perceived talk as a conflict solving strategy. Participant 2 and 4 defended its effectiveness:

> *"(...) since you use English as a common language to understand each other, both people or both parties give more detail, give more specific things, they give examples, they simulate things so that both parties can understand each other (...) you just have to talk things out"* (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)
>
> *"Well, sometimes it's the only way that you have to communicate. You can encounter different problems or issues and teamwork as well as talking things out is always the solution. Always, always, always, always."*
>
> *"I don't know... I think you can talk things out. I mean, as long as you share the same language, most likely English, you can end up talking things out and explaining your culture or your point of view or where you come from, and that sometimes... you know... with a little bit of patience, you can make things work out."* (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

On the other side, interviewee number 6 pointed out talk as ineffective to create team buildings dynamics in his team but admitted that if he was facing a conflict situation, that dialogue would be his primary strategy:

> *"For instance, my manager is a person that is actually very different form people from the same culture [Estonia]... he is way more talkative, way more outgoing and he even tried to make our team more communicative and closer together even outside of the work setting...but all attempts turned out to have very little or no success at all"* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

"I will try like to speak with the person. I have some situations that I have been in the past when I was really uncomfortable with something or some situation (...) I ask for like a one-to-one conversation with that person in private to speak what that made me feel and just like for that person to be aware, not to be like "you are guilty of that". More like "I had this perspective, I felt like this way and I wanted to share to you how I felt with this situation". Just like, just share the situation from my point of view, not blaming the person (...) try to engage in a nonviolent communication and try to always be on the other's person shoes (...) Otherwise, I wasn't gonna do anything. I was just ignoring so it would like pass by without any fuss." (Participant 6, 19/06/2023, FGA)

In turn, P8 reflects that the success of talking as conflict resolution strategy depends on the situation and on the people involved.

"Okay, so… it really depends. Because there are many times when the dialogue is not enough. You need to complement it with a practical example, you need to show objects, speak in a different way. Because that's what this is really about… even when we think we are being clear and speaking fluently, but because even though they speak the same language as we do, with a different dialect, they feel like… and even I felt like something more than communication was missing and it was definitely needed. It is often necessary either to use drawings or other methods so that they can truly understand and we can all act accordingly to that conversation… perform tasks, build relationships within the team etcetera." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

This raises an interesting point, since the interviewee admits engaging into strategies to complement the language as communication tool. Additionally, he further enumerates other strategies, such as asking and offering help, adapting the speech to match the language proficiency of other team members, and seek to improve and learn the language dialect.

"Either you are fluent in that language or else there could really be conflicts. (...) What often happened to me, was that there were always one or two people that worked with me who could speak the more local languages. And then, when I spoke to them, either in English or Portuguese and they would "translate" it, let's say, into their local languages. Although they use English, they speak a lot of Afrikaans there, which has nothing to do with the languages I speak. They, by themselves… when one was not understanding, they translated that for him and managed that for me… because I didn't know how to speak their dialect. And it always worked very well." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)
" (...) when the difference is very big not only in terms of language but also in culturally, try to find interlocutors who can be that bridge to complement the communication… to help to overcome that obstacle to reach them in an effective and cordial way. And of course, always be open to what they say, to what they ask and to how they react, and obviously take it as chill as we can, so they don't feel threatened and don't think we are really there to boss them around and for them to do what we don't want or don't know how to do, or that we don't care about them. They are very important and so are we" (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)
"In the beginning, I spoke and they didn't get me… didn't understand me. I had to start using their expressions, their words, (...) After some time, we understood each other well. (...) until I got used to it, it was a bit hard for me. And for them too, obviously. They also didn't always understand and then they started to understand what I said and even pick some patterns in my speech and the way I spoke." (Participant 8, 30/05/2023, individual interview)

Other participants showed openness to asking and offering help to colleagues in order to fight these barriers deriving from discrepancies on language proficiency. P5 had previously mentioned that when assigning tasks and giving instructions he seeks to ask for feedback in order to assess if he is being clear to other team members.

> *"(...) We normally try to understand or absorb that this person might have English as his or her fifth language. What is important to us is I think we raised the concern if the grammar or the instruction itself is not understandable itself, I would say, especially in my current work. You experience that because we have a lot of colleagues from different countries (...)"* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Regarding this openness to ask for help and offering to help, P4 and P6 emphasize the importance of being patient during the communication process:

> *"Patience. Patience. Patience. Just trying to, you know, be understanding of the situation and just hear them out and be patient and try and help them out with questions like "Is this what you meant?" or "Can you please try to give me an example to clarify this?". Just letting them know that there's no rush and that you wait until they can tell you what they want to say."* (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

> *"But it's easily solvable... we make a break there...take a minute to gather thoughts, or someone tries to help complete a reasoning or an explanation, but always in English...even when it's someone of the same nationality. [...] If the person is not that comfortable with the English language, we give him or her space to talk... try not to interrupt. If the person asks any question or has any doubt, we try to help but what I have been noticing is that there are people, even from other teams with whom we have weekly presentations, with a very elementary level of English... you can spot that difference... and in this presentations everybody keeps a level of respect and professionalism to keep them going."* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

Also, participants 2, 3, and 5 give relevance to patience as a important part of efficient communication between people with varying levels of language proficiency. P1 proceeds to talk about his experience in his company which gives a lot of emphasis to trainings and focus on patience:

> *"They* [the company] *try to proactively make people aware of the differences and try to make people to keep that in mind during the conflict resolution time to make sure that you give ample time to other people to talk even if they're not as proficient as you. So especially in a proactive way, that's the main goal of ING."* (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

Even though this participant was the only one to reveal to have this type of trainings, others' experiences and opinions seem to converge towards the same point. Similarly to other five interviewees, P2 emphasized more than once during his individual interview the importance of being able to match his own speech to the level of proficiency of the other interlocutor:

> *"Depending on the level, you understand, of course the level of other people speaking a certain language... I mean like how he or she uses it, and so that you try to catch that level. Let me say, if someone is really talking like... perfectly, you are trying to get close to that level, but if the*

level is like lower, you try to get down to the lower level so that you try to make the whole thing more basic to be understood." (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)

Similarly, interviewee number 6 brought up the importance of adopting a more careful speech to make sure the conversation does not lead to misunderstandings and conflicts:

> *"Well…I think the speech is a bit more careful compared to when a person is using their native language. I truly believe this is the main point… because… as we are using English and the English that we use on a daily basis is more related to the work setting, you already know more or less what to do… you incorporate the appropriate language and the posture…therefore is harder for someone to disassociate from that in a level that could escalate to a conflict by speaking in a different tone for instance…[…] In my teams the communication is very succinct…very direct and I, who am in the minority nationality-speaking, also end up doing exactly the same thing. I am also more direct, succinct and clear"* (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

4.4 SQ4: How do interviewees balance the influence of their cultural values in communication within a multicultural team?

The fourth sub-research question is important to understand cultural sensitivity, effective cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution and enhancing team dynamics since it aims to provide insights into managing cultural values for inclusive and productive communication.

Therefore, after providing strategies that aim to make communication between people with different language proficiency, participants were asked how they balance the accuracy and precision of their speech with the need for cultural sensitivity, if they recognized that there was a need for that. Regarding this question, only interviewee 3 claimed that there is no need to make that balance during conversations.

> *"I don't think so because if you already started working in multicultural things or with international people, and… if you have this in your mind that you need to focus on your culture or language, this is not good. Because you need to accept that you're going to start with a multicultural environment, so you need to be the one to accept the culture or the language difference from others."* (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Participants 2 and 5 claim that there is a need to adapt the speech in order to accommodate a certain cultural sensitivity and the language skills of the other interlocutor to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.

> *"(…) you start to try to explain the things in a more detailed way by giving more time on it. And, you know, there's a stance, in between all the different cultures that you have to keep up with, to be polite and to keep that sensitivity or to respect that sensitivity. So, you need to be in that stance and you need to keep that balance not to be understood wrongly. You need to keep that stance and you need to invest more time to explain things in a better way, in a detailed way to the other person so that you can deal with some specific things on the whole process, let me say"* (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)

"In my situation now, coming from the Philippines, based on my experience, we don't normally speak straightforwardly. We are very polite. When we are writing our emails, we normally greet the person, ask the person how are, how is the day going… When I moved to Europe… they are more very straightforward, short and direct. So yes, I also changed a lot and I shape how I communicate based on the nationality that I'm, I'm talking with. […] how do I balance it? Well, I am a person that is not very neutral, I would say. I don't like being dominated as well. So, if there is, for example, suggestions that conflicts with what I believe, then I normally jump into the conversation and let my voice to be heard. In a way that I still communicate with them and the way I communicate is shaped based on their culture. So, it's still connected. So I don't need to sound arrogant, just because I don't believe to what they say, but still the way I talk to them is still based on, the culture, communication they do. So, I adapt on that as well." (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

However, the perspectives of these two participants are distinct because while P2 prefers to provide more details in a conversation to make sure his speech is accurate and easily understood, P5 shows much more focus in cultural sensitivity.

Interviewee 1, in turn, claims:

"I think for that you need the people to be okay with different proficiency in the language and I believe that's what they're trying at ING, what they're trying to do a bit more. So they're trying to make people aware of cultural differences, of different proficiency levels in the language, and they try to make people then accept these in advance before you get to the point where conflict resolution is needed. (…) I think that that's something they try to do proactively at the moment itself. Like I said, you have these facilitators who try to balance that communication that the talking at that moment." (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

This excerpt from the individual interview shows the importance not only he but also the organization he is inserted in gives to balancing both accuracy and precision with cultural sensitivity during communication. During focus group A, P1 points out a gap in company policy and training:

"In ING, they try to work a bit proactive on these things (…) like a whole lot of trainings that you need to do and some of these trainings are about cultural sensitivity and communication. So they try to kind of prepare you for these type of situations, but it's difficult. It's not the same as when it actually happens (…) the way how you will actually change your behavior or act in the right way, it needs to come via real life situations." (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

"the focus is more on cultural sensitivity than it is on conflict resolution (…)There is not much focus on conflict resolution, honestly. It's mainly on avoiding problematic situations, which is a good point actually (…) It's all on proactively and then thinking that "oh, we're gonna avoid the problems", but of course that's not how things go. Conflicts will arise and then you don't have any training background to solve that. […] I think it should be a part of the training, which I'm not really sure why it is not right now (…) I think it's a bit of a gap in the training (…)" (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

This gap regarding the fact that companies usually focus more in conflict avoidance than conflict resolution training was also pointed out by participant 7 during FGA:

"I would agree that most of the companies would try to avoid those problems instead of giving a solution after the problems happened. So, it also happened the same in my last experience in China (...) all the training we had was to avoid problem instead of solving the problem."

This reflects the inability of the company to adopt a generalized conflict resolution strategy that would work with every culture inserted in the company MCTs.

Furthermore, participants 4 and 7, that both hold internships positions, claim that this balance between an accurate and precise speech with cultural sensitivity is something that they are open to learn more about, since they recognize that sometimes is not perceptible to them if they are being culturally insensitive.

"That I want to learn way, way more. But because coming from Argentina, there's not that much cultural diversity really [...]. Whereas here, I encounter myself with people from different religions, different ethnicities, and of course I never want to say the wrong thing, so I'm trying to learn as much as I can, so I'm being respectful towards everybody so that I think I can still improve." (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

"Before I started the internship, I immediately told them that this is my first time working in an international team. If I say something wrong or inappropriate, please bring that out and correct me. It would be really helpful for me and also my future." (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

4.5 SQ5: How important is cultural intelligence perceived to be in a work setting by the participants?

The fifth and last research question is considered significant for the present study for understanding the value of cultural intelligence in fostering workplace diversity, intercultural competence, communication and collaboration as well as conflict resolution.

Since every individual is influenced by the surrounding environment and how one interprets it, the question "If you had the chance to choose the participants in your MCT, what qualities or features would you prioritize in selecting them?" was made to make the interviewees reflect on the characteristics or skills they consider to be more important in a work setting. Initially, the question did not make any mention of language skills, culture or cultural setting to evaluate how participants would, or not, incorporate it in their answers. In fact, one can find it curious to note that, at first, almost all participants did mention cultural values but not language, except P3 and P4 that revealed to prioritize other soft skills:

"I think I would prefer to see if the person has in deed team spirit. I also work in the recruitment process specifically to my team and the English proficiency is not an impediment. (...)" (Participant 4, 28/08/2023, individual interview)

"I will choose the team work, conflict management, time management, everything, because that makes a team better. So yes, I will not go with the language because we know that we are choosing people for the multicultural environment, so we should not go for the language, I guess." (Participant 3, 01/5/2023, individual interview)

Additionally, P1, during his focus group dynamic, defended soft skills over language proficiency and cultural values.

"No, I think that's indeed more how I interpreted the question. And when I look at my team, if you're in daily contact with customers, for example, it's often more important that you have very good language skills. And in that case, I would say that's an important factor… the language skills. But if that is less important for the work itself, then I think other soft skills would definitely be at the same level. I think we're in a fairly middle ground here." (Participant 1, 19/06/2023, FGA)

However, after, when asked if, comparing to language skills, there would be cultural values that they would like to integrate in their team more than proficiency, only participant P2 gave preference to language skills in the recruitment process:

"I would prefer the language skills because there are a lot of people in here and you have to communicate, but you cannot communicate effectively without going specifically into all the technicalities of the process. Communication is the most important part because you can get the other skills easily in a shorter time period. But the language proficiency or the ability to use the English language is much important. I think." (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)

In fact, only participant number 6 claimed on his individual interview to prefer cultural values more than language and other soft skills. In his answer, the interviewee establishes a connection between certain soft skills deriving from cultural values. Furthermore, during the FGB dynamic he reveals that one of the skills he prioritizes more is conflict resolution skills.

"I think I would prefer to see if the person has in deed team spirit. I also work in the recruitment process specifically to my team and the English proficiency is not an impediment. I believe that we are facing an impediment if at a cultural level we think the person is not a good fit. But if the person is an introvert, that is not a reason for exclusion, obviously." (Participant 6, 30/04/2023, individual interview)

Moreover, P4 and P7 raise an interesting point regarding the level of proficiency in the corporate language. They point out that there is a elementary level of proficiency that must be required but besides that they do not consider overall that language proficiency should be an exclusion criteria, even though P7 also argues that depends on the job position:

"(…)I think that's always a benefit, like getting different points of view and definitely putting emphasis on soft skills, because they are also pretty valuable. So as long as your English is not literally horrible, then it's fine." (Participant 4, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

"I think the language only needs to reach the standard line. It doesn't need to be perfect, like communication level is enough. I think it still depends on the job. If the position requires a lot of communication, paperwork or even goes online posts, it must be at a professional level. Otherwise, it's a communication level that is enough." (Participant 7, 28/05/2023, individual interview)

Following this, it was sought to evaluate how the interviewees recognize the relevance of language as a tool to understand cultural differences and promoting conflict resolution within a MCT.

The following excerpt from P2's individual interview mentions the importance of language when trying to build relationships in a MCT, language training and conflict resolution training:

"I mean language definitely plays a crucial role (...) within a team with many nationalities…multicultural, let's say. You either embrace that it is a powerful tool to have effective communication and build relationships with empathy, or you will have a conflict. There is a need to integrate language proficiency and cultural awareness like I already said, into conflict resolution training. With this, you can be more effective in resolving conflicts in multicultural teams. For example, you can have language training programs (...) [to] have a better understanding among team members. The cultural awareness that I talked about before is more to understand the communication styles through have an open mind to the others' background in the country they are from and this also helps in a conflict situation. (...) You need to listen other ideas and perspectives with an open mind and if you don't understand something also understand that and address that in a friendly way with the other person." (Participant 2, 31/05/2023, individual interview)

Focusing on conflict resolution trainings, this was a topic also brought up by interviewees 1 and 3:

"For me, I think the actual training is more useful, more helpful. It makes you think more about the topic itself, and it makes you realize when there is conflict resolution needed, it makes you think back at these actual trainings and the things you read about, you practiced, you heard about. For me, that really works. It really makes you think and realize that moment, "Okay, I should behave in a different… or I should talk in a different way, or I should listen in a different way". To me, that helps more than the soft way of training… this is my idea. And I have to say that the training that we have at ING, it's not really focused on conflict resolution as such. So there's still kind of a gap, I believe in that. We do learn a lot about cultural differences. We learn about cultural differences on the work floor, on different ways of communication, but the aspect of conflict resolution is barely touched upon. So in that respect, I think there's still some way to go." (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

"We should definitely do that [integrate conflict resolution training] *if we are working in a multicultural team; definitely the training is the most important part. (...) I would recommend conducting some meetings, maybe weekly, or twice a week, for the training of the language, for the training of the culture, for the training of how to handle people with this culture or with this language."* (Participant 3, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Just like interviewee number 2, P3 also establishes a connection between language and cultural training and so does P5 since, according to him, language is the primary tool of communication and, when applied incorrectly, can cause misunderstandings and conflicts which can also be solved through dialogue.

> *"It's a main factor and one factor of that is to be able to understand your colleague… knowing the fact that person is speaking the other language or trying to understand you in a language that he or she might not be familiar a hundred percent. So, I think in, in my company now, they are very into that kind of thing that when they send information, there is always a substitute English translation for that, or there's a English translation so that everybody aside, if you are non-Dutch speakers, they can also understand what's going on, not only with your department, but also what's happening to the company. And at the same time it creates engagement, opportunity, (…) awareness and at the same time, it makes the company as well… they are not only caring about one segmented part, which is the Dutch people, but also the other employees."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

Participant 5 proceeds to defend that if someone in the team needs particularly more attention due to deficiency of proficiency in the language, it is the company's responsibility to address the problem and promote language trainings opportunities that would be helpful to minimize or solve the problem:

> *"(…) if one of my team that needs really attentions with deficiency of the language that the company is using, I believe that the company should also be responsible to give to that person some type of learning opportunity or trainings, there's a lot of platform that can be helpful to what that person needs."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)

In fact, the fact that the responsibility on make sure that its employees have the opportunities to improve and overcome these difficulties should fall on the company was brought up by more participants. P1 even adds that the company he is working for right now should improve in this aspect, since he believes there is a gap in the training in regard of this topic:

> *"What also happens is that the managers of each team try to promote… like give feedback so those people can, for example, take courses to improve that aspect. Yeah…but that is a bit of a more specific strategy of each manager of each team and it's not something that other employees of the company can intervene or give feedback, but odds are that that is something that is already being worked on with someone within that specific team."* (Participant 5, 01/05/2023, individual interview)
> *"I feel that there's not a lot of attention going to the language aspect. Not as much as there is for cultural backgrounds in all honesty. So that is something that could improve, I believe, at ING."* (Participant 1, 04/05/2023, individual interview)

By promoting language training, companies facilitate communication between employees within the work environment, which can result in a sharing of experiences that would allow to create a bigger cultural awareness since members of the organization would be able to express themselves more clearly, share experiences and ideas and this would contribute to a

bigger understanding of these differences between cultural backgrounds. With time, this would contribute to a development in the collective cultural intelligence of a team.

5. Discussion and implications

This chapter is devoted to the discussion of the sub-research questions in light of the results obtained. The primary aim of the present study is to understand the role of language and cultural values in the perception of conflict. This research also aimed to compare distinct participants with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and reveal potential similarities and differences regarding their experiences in MCTs. The relation between the answers presented in the previous section will be discussed and substantiated.

The first three sub-questions that this study sought to answer were relevant to measure the importance of language in the emergence of conflict.

Heinz (2014) claimed that the occurrence of misunderstandings related to a non-native proficiency in the corporate language is not rare. In fact, the findings of this study corroborate this point since many participants recognized that their communication is not as clear and understandable in English as in their native language. This author proceeds to point out that this is not related to experience because members of MCTs with vast experience might also engage in inefficient communication related to non-native proficiency, which can result in misunderstandings (Heinz, 2014). This is an insight that was not corroborated by the sample of this research since there were participants that claimed that having an established corporate language, like English, inhibits the eventual facilitating role to conflicts and experience acts as an inhibitor of cultural values also playing a facilitating role. Therefore, according to the results obtained in this study, experience in MCT has an impact on communication, usually making it more effective.

Another topic that aligned with the theoretical framework established for this study was the occurrence of side conversations between members of multicultural teams that speak the same language and disregarding those who do not share the same mother tongue. Heinz (2014) concluded that these side conversations could potentially deteriorate work relationships. Just as Gumperz and Gumperz (1996) pointed out, there is a tendency to interact within cultures that share the same language since, in this case, fewer linguistic-

related challenges have the potential to increase the likelihood of conflict. This was also evident during the analysis of results since even the interviewees that pointed out the occurrence of side conversations within their team recognized the likelihood of themselves doing the same since it is easier to communicate in their native language with other native speakers more clearly and understandably.

Participant 8's experience working in a country with the same native language, although different dialects, provided an important remark regarding language standardization in an MCT, as defended by Buckley et al. (2005). Another relevant insight brought by Buckley et al. (2005) is the fact that common vocabulary, grammar, and syntax do not necessarily involve smooth communication. In fact, linguistic and paralinguistic cues can differ even when a common language is used (Bret et al., 2006), which requires to engage in a process of an individual adapting to the norms and practices of their group (Pires & Macedo, 2006) to attain effective communication even if the language is similar, communication patterns may differ due to different cultural contexts (Zander, 2005), just as experienced by P8. Also, P3 and P6 corroborated this point. The latter defends that the fact that teams communicate in another language can help alleviate conflicts due to the fact that interlocutors tend to pay no heed to eventual mistakes in their English speech, either in an oral or written register that otherwise could result in misunderstandings or conflict (Méndez García & Pérez Cañado, 2005).

According to Henderson (2005), MCT members often overlook cultural differences because they assume that a shared language also means a shared cultural context and fail to recognize that their cultural backgrounds may differ and affect their perspectives.

Culture reflects the shared values and beliefs among members of a group. These values and beliefs are communicated through various symbols, such as stories, myths, rituals, and specialized language (Pires & Macedo, 2006).

It was almost unanimous during the conduction of interviews and focus groups that the primary factor of conflict is the difference in communication styles within a multicultural team because misunderstandings arise due to how individuals interact and interpret each other's remarks (Heinz, 2014). Multiculturalism and cultural values were the most mentioned

aspect that influences communication styles, so it is vital to be aware of the cultural context when communicating since the backgrounds might differ a lot, and there can be any type of incompatibility of how a specific communication style is perceived by other culture. Also, language proficiency was pointed out to influence communication styles because, as Ochieng and Price (2010) established, effective communication is paramount to managing expectations, misconceptions, and misunderstandings that may occur in MCTs. Employing good communication strategies is vital for establishing, nurturing, and sustaining strong working relationships (Ochieng & Price, 2010) is extremely hard when having team members with limited proficiency in a language since this impacts the ability of being able to communicate effectively and comprehend others effectively (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), as well as experiencing misunderstandings in international and intercultural contexts.

Furthermore, participants recognized that cultural values are present in communication styles through language. Additionally, some interviewees pointed out that personality and personal values are the most prone to conflict and established a connection between culture, personality, and communication styles. This is a contrasting insight with the one presented by Zein (2012) since this author emphasizes the difference between culture and personal traits since the first is a collective phenomenon and the latter reflects the individual's personality.

According to Méndez García and Pérez Cañado (2005), language is often perceived as a tool for controlling and coordinating activities and as a means to establish personal relationships within the MCT. Therefore, when language barriers occur, it is necessary to adopt strategies to overcome them if the strategies adopted to avoid them beforehand do not work. Conflicts deriving from language barriers happen when a person intends to deliver a message that might not be the same as the other individuals receiving it.

This language proficiency is one of the distinguishing factors between those who hold a privilege within the team and those who do not. The majority of the participants of the present study recognized that native English speakers or locals, sometimes both, have privileged positions in debates and discussions. The reasons presented during the interviews were language proficiency, the familiarity of the locals with the country, more experience, and a certain sense of superiority. According to the theoretical framework established, language

also works as a tool for networking and the possibility for training courses (Méndez García & Pérez Cañado, 2005). Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) approach language as a source of power since competent speakers of the corporate language have a competitive advantage in expressing their ideas in meetings and discussions, access to more information, and therefore have more power within the team or organization.

The strategies engaged by the non-privileged group are essential to socialize with the privileged and self-improvement approaches such as learning the local language.

Regarding non-verbal communication, the participants emphasized the loss of that complement to verbal communication since working remotely but recognized that this gave more importance to clear written communication.

Regarding the third research question, about the role of language in conflict resolution, it is crucial to recognize that members of MCTs may hold distinct views on conflict resolution methods (Hofstede, 2001), so it is important to adopt culturally appropriate strategies within a team in order to prioritize conflict avoidance and enhance cooperation (Zein, 2012).

During the interviews, there was a notable emphasis on remote work as less prone to conflicts compared to an in-person working context. However, the fact that the participants are left with their own interpretation of the written communication can evolve into misunderstandings. When in person, most participants defend dialogue as the conflict-solving approach as the most effective.

However, it was pointed out by some participants that, even though their company has some sort of training focused on conflict avoidance, there is still a gap touching the actual resolution of conflict since companies are merely focused on avoiding conflict and not providing the tools to solve it when it happens.

The fourth and fifth sub-question aimed to assess how members of MCTs prioritize cultural intelligence in communication while they are influenced by their own cultural values. To evaluate that, participants were confronted with the duality of accuracy and precision *versus* the need for cultural sensitivity. This was the approach chosen to see if there was a need to adapt the speech in order to accommodate a particular cultural sensitivity and

the language skills of the other interlocutor to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings. Lau and Murninghan (1998) developed the concept of faultlines to characterize the members of a group that fall into demarcated subgroups based on demographic characteristics, and Chatman and Flynn (2001) complemented this line of thinking claiming that more demographically diverse individuals will result in more heterogeneity within a group that will be less likely to establish and adopt cooperative norms compared to more homogenous ones, which therefore might lead to conflicts. Considering the diverse sample of this study and the diversity of the multicultural teams they integrate, it was expected to have some divergencies in their answers. However, besides P3, every participant pointed out the relevance of adapting the speech to make it more understandable and to ensure that they do not say something culturally rude or insensitive to the other interlocutor. Although the reasons and the strategies employed to ensure this cultural sensitivity and to match the language proficiency presented are different, it was unanimous that in order to be culturally sensitive, there is the need for one to be clear in their communication by providing examples, more details or even apply what it was learned in training. This goes with the theoretical framework developed by Matveev and Nelson (2004), who suggest that team members should possess solid cross-cultural communication competence, such as developed interpersonal and team effectiveness skills, the ability to manage cultural uncertainty and cultural empathy. In an MCT context, both linguistic and paralinguistic cues are likely to be misinterpreted, resulting in face-threatening acts that can be managed through politeness strategies (Morand, 2003).

Lastly, the fifth sub-question assessed how participants recognize the importance of intercultural competence, communication and collaboration, and conflict resolution while fostering workplace diversity. For that, participants were asked about their recruitment preferences to assess their language, soft skills, or cultural intelligence preferences. The overall generalized ranking of these aspects obtained from the participants was soft skills followed by cultural values/ cultural intelligence, and the latter was language proficiency. There were small divergencies from this by a few participants but, especially during the focus groups, they were able to understand why other interviewees had different opinions and somewhat agreed with them.

Once again, language was indicated by most of the participants as solely a tool to be used in communication; what has a significant impact on communication are the different communication styles that reflect different cultural values, and language is just the way the exchange of information between individuals flows but when applied incorrectly might also result in conflict.

It is not new that organizations seek to hire employees who possess cultural competence, as Harvey and Novicevic (2001) noted, because cross-cultural skills have become more critical in a global society. As of this, employees must be able to navigate their new cultural surroundings, which requires the ability to interpret and understand the concept of culture – a skill referred to as cultural intelligence (Shafi, 2018). Additionally, this explains why companies are focused on training to raise awareness for cultural differences and how to deal with them, giving them priority over training directed to conflict solving, which was pointed out as a gap.

Implications

The results of this thesis, as discussed in this section, have several implications for organizations operating in multicultural contexts. Regarding the emphasis on language proficiency, the findings support the claim that non-native proficiency in the corporate language can lead to misunderstandings within MCTs. Therefore, managers should acknowledge the significance of this proficiency in their teams and provide opportunities for language training that can enhance communication clarity and reduce misunderstandings. Additionally, cultural values emerged as a significant factor influencing communication styles and conflict in these teams since participants recognized that cultural differences and individual personality traits could lead to conflicts and misunderstandings as much or more than language proficiency does. The study emphasized the importance of considering cultural context when communicating, as different backgrounds and values may lead to incompatible communication styles. Managers should actively foster cultural sensitivity and awareness among team members by encouraging them to understand and respect diverse cultural backgrounds, communication styles, and perspectives. By doing this, they can help prevent conflicts and promote collaboration since implementing cultural sensitivity training

programs can aid the development of cross-cultural communication competence and empathy.

Furthermore, language proficiency was proven to be a distinguishing factor between privileged and non-privileged group members within multicultural teams due to native English speakers and locals being perceived as having privileged positions in debates or meetings. From a managerial perspective, managers play a crucial role in creating an environment that supports effective communication by establishing clear communication channels, fostering open dialogues, and providing opportunities for team members to express their thoughts and ideas. Managers must be attentive to potential power dynamics within their multicultural teams, particularly those related to language proficiency, and address these barriers by cultivating an inclusive and equitable environment where all employees have equal opportunities.

The study also explored the role of language in conflict resolution. It was found that members of MCTs may hold different views on conflict resolution methods based on their cultural backgrounds. While remote work was perceived as less prone to conflicts, written communication introduced the risk of misunderstandings due to individual interpretations. In-person dialogue was generally seen as the most effective approach to conflict resolution. Managers and companies should prioritize providing conflict resolution training and resources to team members because, while creating an environment that minimizes conflict is essential, it is equally important to equip employees with the skills to resolve conflicts when they arise effectively.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the perceptions of individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds regarding conflicts arising from language barriers.

The focus was on understanding how people from different cultures interpret and experience conflicts resulting from communication difficulties due to language differences. Particularly, this research attempted to fill the gap in the existing literature regarding the language factor and its impact on international teamwork.

The findings illustrated that language is not pointed out to be the main conflict facilitator concerning communication in multicultural teams. In fact, the primary conflict facilitator brought up by the participants of this study was the differences in communication styles, which reflect cultural diversity and different values. With this, differences in communication styles are the main reason conflict emerges. However, it was almost consensual among the participants that language barriers from a lack of language proficiency result in minor misunderstandings that can be easily solved.

The current findings emphasized the need for companies to implement more training extended to every employee to create cultural awareness and promote cultural sensitivity for an effective and fruitful conversation between employees. Furthermore, companies should consider implementing stricter policies regarding conversations in native languages different than the corporate ones. This would help to create a standardization of communications and to promote more inclusion and cooperation between team members with different backgrounds and, hence, ideas and insights.

Nonetheless, organizations must also ensure that individuals have opportunities to address issues regarding language barriers since this can affect their ability to communicate effectively due to a certain communication apprehension regarding their proficiency level.

Overall, the insights provided by the participants were essential during the conduction of the methodology of this paper, and the fact that so many different ideas and opinions were brought up is really enriching for the findings and conclusions of the research.

Limitations and future research

It is of utmost importance to recognize that the present study had some limitations that should be considered. The first one to be pointed out is related to the sample. The majority of the

participants, except two, were working in The Netherlands at the time of the interviews and the focus groups, which might imply that the results may not be transferable to other countries. In order to mitigate this limitation, during the contact and recruitment of participants, it was given preference to participants also working in a remote environment. Regarding the two participants not included in this, P8 referred to a past experience, and P6 works fully remotely for an Estonian company. Moreover, a larger pool of participants would have yielded a significantly broader look at the topic for more generalized conclusions applicable to the whole target population, especially since a critical cultural cluster was not represented in this study which regards native English speakers. This could have resulted in a broader analysis.

Overall, due to time and logistical limitations, conducting multiple analyses to thoroughly explore and deepen the influence of various cultural backgrounds in communication within MCTs was not entirely feasible. However, a significant effort was made to differentiate between experience levels and nationalities through cultural clusters. The inability to thoroughly examine the results in terms of intersectionality has led to a lack of specificity in the details. Consequently, the conclusions drawn may have been somewhat generalized. Thus, it is recommended that future research place greater emphasis on a comprehensive analysis of respondents' cultural backgrounds and consider them more extensively. Moreover, the author of this thesis also recommends one to conduct research to analyze how workplace changes in dynamics during the pandemic of COVID-19 affected multicultural team members' perception of conflicts. It is also relevant to assess the role of leaders and how they cope with cultural divergencies within their teams.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Objective	Question
To contextualize the position of the participant and their experience in multicultural teams	How long have you been working in a multicultural team?
	May you briefly characterize the MCTs you have been involved in? • What cultures were represented in the team? • How long were the teams working together?
To identify the communication strategies in the MCT	How do you communicate and coordinate your group?
To identify and understand the implication of different factor in a MCT's efficiency	In case of having worked in more than one MCT: Which aspect distinguished the more efficient team you worked in and why?
To identify situations in which conflict emerges and the role of language in them	If a conflict was to arise, what do you think the main reasons could be, according to your experience? • Do you think that different languages work as a conflict facilitator? And different culture values?
To identify and understand the role of language in conflict resolution	How do you believe language impacts conflict resolution in a multicultural team? • Can you share a time when language barriers affected conflict resolution within your MCT?
To understand, based on the participant's personal experience in coping with conflict how solving conflicts deriving from language barriers is a priority in MCTs	What strategies do you recommend for addressing language barriers in a multicultural team during conflict resolution? • Do you think that talk is always a good approach to solve conflicts or to minimize their impact?

To assess the interviewee's ability to effectively communicate in the context of their MCT while influenced by their cultural values	How do you balance the need for accuracy and precision in language with the need for cultural sensitivity during conflict resolution in a multicultural team?
To identify strategies used to approach a conflict	Can you provide an example of a successful conflict resolution outcome in a multicultural team that was facilitated by effective language use and communication strategies?
To establish a relation between the role of language in communication efficiency and power positions	In your experience, do native or native-level speakers of the language used for communication in the MCT have a privileged position in debates or discussions? • How could non-native speakers help solve these problems?
To comprehend the importance given to cultural intelligence in a work setting	How do you approach communication with team members who have varying levels of language proficiency in a multicultural team?
	If you had the chance to choose the participants in your MCT, what qualities or features would you prioritize in selecting them?
	How can language be used as a tool for understanding cultural differences and promoting conflict resolution within a multicultural team? • In your opinion, how can language proficiency and cultural awareness be integrated into conflict resolution training for multicultural teams?
To identify and understand the importance participants give to nonverbal communication	Can you discuss the impact of nonverbal communication and cultural differences on conflict resolution in a multicultural team?

Appendix 2: Summarized outputs of individual interviews (NVIVO)

Name	References
Accuracy & Precision vs. Cultural Sensitivity	0
Balance both	3
More detailed conversations and more focus on accuracy	2
More focus on cultural sensitivity	4
No need to adapt the speech	1
Something to learn more	2
Yes, there is the need to adapt the speech	1
Company policy	4
Conflict resolution	
<u>Easier in remote work</u>	
No	1
Yes	1
<u>Focus on other communication styles</u>	
Give more examples, details	2
People need to get used to other communication styles	2
<u>Success of using a talk was a resolution strategy</u>	
Depends	1
Effective	3
Ineffective	1
Easier to communicate within the same language, culture	
No	2
Yes	5

Name	References
Example of conflict	3
Influence of non-verbal communication	
Equally important	2
Importance of written official communication	2
Less important than verbal	1
Language as a tool	
Build relationships	2
Communication	3
Conflict resolution training	6
Language training programs	9
Understand cultural differences	7
Language barrier	0
Job task	3
Relationships	2
Language proficiency strategies	
Ask, offer help	6
Match the speech to the level of proficiency of the other	8
More careful speech	6
Patience	7
Questions to guide	1
Seek to improve and learn it	2
Privileged position in debates	

Name	References
No	1
Yes, both English native-level speakers and locals have a privileged position	1
Yes, English native-level speakers have a privileged position	3
Yes, locals have a privileged position	3
Recruitment preferences	0
Cultural values more than language	2
Language preference	1
Soft skills more than language and cultural values	5
Role of language in the emergence of conflict	
Cultural values do not play a role	2
Language does not play a facilitating role	3
Neither language or cultural values play a role	1
Sometimes language plays a role	2
Yes, but cultural values play a bigger role than language	4
Yes, but language plays a bigger role than cultural values	2
Yes, language and cultural values play an equal role	3
Side conversation	3
Strategies that non-native speakers can adopt to fight this privilege	
Do not overreact	1
Self-improvement	3
Socialize with the privileged	2

Appendix 3: Focus Group A – question guide

1. When asked how the work is coordinated in your team/company, both of you mentioned the English language. However, P7 pointed out that many side conversations are happening in Dutch. Also touching on this point, P1 pointed out that when some question pops up, or you need some type of help, it is easier to ask someone with the same language skills. Can you discuss a bit about this? Like, P7, from your perspective, would you also say that it would be easier to do the same with someone who speaks Mandarin? You have around 5 minutes to discuss this

2. When asked about the role of language in the emergence of conflict, neither of you pointed out language proficiency as a factor for conflict. However, P1 said that how people express themselves in English, with communication styles similar to their native language, can result in conflict. P7, do you agree with P1, or would you still say that language has no role in this situation?

3. Once again, regarding the emergence of conflict, P1 emphasized the role of communication styles, in this case, those that reflect cultural values. At the same time, P7 says that cultural values do not play a role. P1, what is your perspective on this? P7 also pointed out that people are more careful when talking to her due to the fact that she is an Asian woman. P1, do you think this is part of cultural sensitivity regarding, for instance, how Dutch people know others perceive them?

4. You had similar opinions regarding the balance between accuracy and precision and cultural sensitivity. P7 said there is no need to have that balance, and P1 said it's something you need to figure out proactively in the moment and situation you are in. P7, what do you think about this perspective?

5. When questioned about the possibility of native English speakers or Dutch speakers having a certain type of privilege in debates or discussions, you pointed out experience as the reason for that privilege. P7, as an intern and almost master's graduate, how do you think you could fight, let's say, this privilege?

6. During your interviews, you pointed out the existence of language and cultural awareness training in your companies, whether it's for everybody or just for managers. How do you think this topic should be approached in a way that also focuses on conflict resolution and not only avoiding conflict?

7. P1, you work essentially remotely. How would you say that non-verbal communication is approached in that situation since you don't have the component of body language, etc? Just written communication

1.   P7, in one of your answers, you claimed it had an impact. If you were working remotely like P1, how would you balance it out?

8. You were asked to put yourself in a scenario where you were responsible for picking your team members and, in that case, if you would prioritize language skills over other soft skills. Here there was a point of divergence of opinions. P1 said that he would treat language as a priority, while P7 claimed that a basic level of the language, depending on the position, would be enough at a standard line. I would like to listen to both of you elaborating on this.

Appendix 4: Focus Group B – question guide

1. When asked if you felt native English speakers have a privileged position in debates and discussions, both of you said yes. P2 gave an example of a British colleague and P6, the americans that work in the company. My question now is how can non-native speakers fight this privilege and put themselves at the same level?

2. When questioned about the role of language in the emergence of conflict, P6 said it was not so much about the language but more about the communication styles. On the other hand, P2 said that language associated with multiculturalism is a main factor for conflict. P6 added that different native languages help to alleviate conflicts. P2, I would like to listen to your opinion about this. How do you think it could help alleviate conflict? P6, I would also like your input on this question.

3. Still, regarding the last question, P6, what do you think influences the different communication styles that can result in conflict more? Language or multiculturalism? Or even another factor?

4. During his interview, P2 gave an example of a conflict deriving from miscommunication. A colleague asked him something that assumed he was being clear towards P2 when he truly wasn't. Since you work remotely, P6, and you said this is an advantage when a conflict emerges, I would like to listen to strategies that people in this situation could use to approach this type of conflict. P2, do you think working remotely would work as a facilitator for conflict or a tool to avoid or solve them more effectively?

5. Another interesting input from both of your interviews was the divergence of opinions if you could pick the member of your team. P6 claimed that English proficiency was not an impediment, but if, at a cultural level, a person is not a good fit, then that would be a problem. In contrast to this, P2 gave preference to language skills, and I quote, "because you can get the other skills easily in a shorter time period ." P2, would you say that language proficiency weighs more, like this, than certain cultural skills, for instance?

Appendix 5: Summarized findings from Focus Groups round

Name	References
Accuracy & Precision vs. Cultural Sensitivity	
It depends, you figure that out in the moment	2
Company policy	
Cultural sensitivity and not conflict resolution	3
Side conversations	2
Training	1
Conflict resolution	
Easier in remote work	4
Success of using talk as a resolution strategy	1
Easier to communicate within the same culture, language	2
Influence of non-verbal communication	2
Recruitment preferences	
Conflict resolution skills	1
Cultural values more than language	1
Language at a basic level is enough	1
Language preferences	1
Soft skills more than language	1
Role of language in the emergence of conflict	
Communication styles	4
No, it's about personality and personal values	2
Strategies that non-native speakers can adopt to fight privilege	
Do not overreact	1
Self-improvement	1
Simpler and more effective coomunication	1
What influences more the different communication styles	
Multiculturalism	2