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## The use of English as corporate language in global knowledge work over a 15-year business career

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Tiina Räisänen\*

Research Unit for Languages and Literature,  
University of Oulu,  
PL 8000, Oulu, Finland  
Email: tiina.raisanen@oulu.fi  
\*Corresponding author

Anne Kankaanranta

Department of Management Studies,  
Aalto University School of Business,  
PO Box 21210, Espoo, Finland  
Email: anne.kankaanranta@aalto.fi

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the use of English as corporate language in the everyday global knowledge work of a business practitioner over his 15-year career. The data, collected over the practitioner's career, include both authentic data such as recordings of work practices and email communication, as well as interviews and ethnographic field notes. Applying content and genre analysis, we investigate how the practitioner's use of different genres of English as corporate language changes over time and how his experiences follow suit, enabling agency, participation and engagement in the global knowledge economy. While at the beginning of his career the trainee practitioner produces backstage genres only, as a manager he needs to navigate between official, frontstage genres and the mixed genres falling in-between the two extremes. Over his 15-year career the novice practitioner becomes a global knowledge worker who is empowered by his competence in English as corporate language.

**Keywords:** corporate language; English; lingua franca; MNC; knowledge work; genre; language-sensitive management research; ethnography; authentic text data.

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**Biographical notes:** Tiina Räisänen is a University Lecturer in English in the Research Unit for Languages and Literature at the University of Oulu, Finland. She received her PhD degree in 2013 at the Department of Language and Communication Studies from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, where she worked on her Postdoctoral Project 'Professional Communicative Repertoires' funded by the Academy of Finland (2016–2019). She has published in, for example, *IEEE Transactions of Professional Communication*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* and *Journal of Business Communication*.

Anne Kankaanranta is a Senior University Lecturer at the Department of Management Studies of Aalto University, School of Business, Finland. Her

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research focuses on the role and use of English in multilingual and multicultural business contexts. In particular, she is interested in the notion of English as (a) corporate language in MNCs. She has published in, for example, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, *Public Relations Review*, and *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*.

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## **1 Introduction**

In recent years, along with accelerating globalisation, language-intensive knowledge work crossing geographic and linguistic boundaries has become the norm. Although language use has attracted increasing attention in international management research (e.g. Brannen et al., 2014; Lecomte et al., 2018), the field has understood language in different ways – often without unpacking the notion at all – which has unavoidably affected the methodology, findings and conclusions drawn about individuals and corporations operating internationally (Karhunen et al., 2018). Angouri and Piekkari (2018) argued that national language varieties spoken by native speakers (e.g. English, Finnish, Chinese) have been prioritised in research designs, which suggests an instrumental view of language (language-as-tool), whereas in sociolinguistically informed studies the interest is in the situated *use* of language and its context (language-as-practice; see e.g. Lønsmann, 2015).

Because a shared language, a lingua franca, has been conceived as a necessary tool to manage international business operations across linguistic borders, corporate language in general and English as corporate language in particular have attracted a lot of scholarly attention (e.g. Feely and Harzing, 2003; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Hinds et al., 2014; Luo and Shenkar, 2006; Neeley and Dumas, 2016; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2014). Unsurprisingly, English in this case means English as a National Language (ENL), but when, how, where and by whom this language comes into being in practice has not really been discussed. Only a few studies applying the sociolinguistic conceptualisation of 'language-as-practice' have acknowledged the hybridity of English as Corporate Language (ECL), which is used in everyday situations by people from diverse linguistic backgrounds aiming to get their job done (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2010; Lønsmann, 2015). Such studies view English as a shared resource (e.g. Blommaert and Backus, 2013; Heller, 2010) that is available for individuals to use in relevant ways to make meaning – and thus to complete their work. Its various manifestations depend on specific contextual factors.

Although the existence of these two different conceptualisations of ECL – language-as-tool and language-as-practice – and what they might entail for corporate reality have been acknowledged (Kankaanranta et al., 2018), no empirical research has yet shown how ECL manifests in an individual business practitioner's situated everyday work in different texts and interactions. Nor have any studies adopted a longitudinal approach and followed the trajectory from novice business practitioner to successful manager over time. Finally, no longitudinal studies exist on how the practitioner experiences, and reflects upon, the use of English, and agentially negotiates the role of English in his/her professional life.

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Inspired by the conceptually oriented research on the hybridity of English as CL (Kankaanranta et al., 2018) and on the notion of English as a (business) lingua franca (Komori-Glatz, 2018; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), and responding to the call by Lecomte et al. (2018) for further development of the field of language-sensitive management research, we take a step forward with an ethnographic study of a business practitioner's knowledge work in the corporate context with multiple data collected over a period of 15 years. This type of research approach, combining various methods, has been called for together with the more versatile conceptualisation of language as social practice. For example, especially sociolinguistically oriented scholars of international management have discussed the opportunities offered by authentic interactional data from the workplace, and an approach combining the analysis of such interactions with ethnographic interviews and observation (e.g. Angouri and Piekkari, 2018; Gaibrois, 2018; Janssens and Stayert, 2014; Karhunen et al., 2018).

Our purpose is to investigate how ECL comes into being as different genres – authentic types of texts and interactions with specific substance and form (e.g. Miller, 1984; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992) – in the everyday knowledge work of an individual practitioner. We investigate how the genres are used, how the practitioner navigates between them during his 15-year career, and how he experiences English language use over time. To do this we apply a longitudinal and ethnographic approach, a relatively underused methodology in international management research (but see Neeley, 2017), and draw on recent conceptualisations of ECL (Kankaanranta et al., 2018). The data collected at various points during the practitioner's career include both authentic data such as audio- and video-recordings of work practices and email communication, and interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes. We focus on the practitioner's role as a manager in a Multi-National Company (MNC) for two reasons: first, the MNC as a research context has traditionally been studied in language-sensitive international management research and, second, managerial practices in the MNC provide rich data for investigating the various manifestations of ECL in different genres.

Focusing on an individual knowledge worker managing his tasks in English, and providing a rich, situated example of his experience over time, we address knowledge work as a manifestation of 'globalisation from below' (Appadurai, 1996) in the context of ECL and thus contribute to the discussion of the use of English in global knowledge work.

## **2 English as the language of knowledge work in globalised business**

Boosted by globalisation, English has shifted from being one foreign language among others to an international language that is shared and used for work and leisure (e.g. Graddol, 1999). As Boussebaa and Brown (2017) argue, such Englishisation dominates especially in the corporate world and higher education, and it is taking up room previously occupied by other languages used in non-Anglophone settings. Finland is a case in point: English proficiency is high and business managers, for example, have mobile lifestyles and handle their work in English (Leppänen et al., 2011), interacting with colleagues and clients, writing emails and commenting on texts (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). As Louhiala-Salminen (2002) argues, following globalisation and the radical advances in communication technologies, secretaries with foreign language skills handling format-bound business correspondence have given way to a new generation of employees assuming ownership of their own message exchange with

international partners, and English has become their work language. This development of English into a global language has placed it at the centre of linguistic forms of work and labour processes (Duchêne and Heller, 2012, p.328). English has become the language of mobile, global knowledge work.

In international management and business research, English is the default language in corporations' language diversity (Tietze, 2008), meaning that internationally operating personnel conduct their (knowledge) work in English. Interestingly, however, the hegemonic role of English (Phillipson, 1992; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999; Pennycook, 2000) was not automatic, because MNCs as workplaces are inherently multilingual and diverse (e.g. Luo and Shenkar, 2006). The various languages have typically been viewed as separated by a language barrier (e.g. Feely and Harzing, 2003) and thus existing side by side in parallel monolingualism (Heller, 2006). Despite this seeming parallelism, languages are not equal, as some employees, due to their language proficiency, may hold gatekeeping roles and gain status and power (e.g. Angouri, 2013; Logeman and Piekkari, 2015; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). In MNCs, the diversity of languages has led to language management, involving the implementation of an official language policy and the adoption of a common 'corporate language' – typically English – as a managerial tool to manage the diversity (e.g. Feely and Harzing, 2003; Fredriksson et al., 2006; Nekvopil and Sherman, 2009; Nekvopil and Nekula, 2006).

Often English is selected as the corporate language by the management and it is implemented either through official regulations or more informally, with recommendations (e.g. Harzing and Feely, 2008; Kangasharju et al., 2010; Luo and Shenkar, 2006; Neeley, 2011, 2013; Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018). In either case, the corporate language takes top place in the corporate language hierarchy and may thereby increase status inequalities and rivalry between those with language competence and those without (e.g. Hinds et al., 2014; Lønsmann, 2015; Neeley, 2013; Tange and Luring, 2009). As language policies can have different effects, depending on the users' proficiency, position and attitude (Nekvopil and Nekula, 2006), white-collar managers' knowledge work (e.g. Fredriksson et al., 2006; Piekkari et al., 2014) has been clearly prioritised in research designs over blue-collar work (e.g. Lønsmann, 2019; Nekvopil and Nekula, 2006). For instance, while Angouri and Miglbauer (2014) show employees drawing on various linguistic resources for transactional and relational purposes at work, Lønsmann (2019) demonstrates how blue-collar workers interact with people from diverse linguistic backgrounds without a shared language but with a shared context, where drawings, numbers, and measures suffice.

### 3 Dynamics of English as (a) corporate language

Although research on English as (a) corporate language is accumulating, hardly any empirical studies have acknowledged the dynamism involved in the notion itself. Following Karhunen et al. (2018), we argue that English as (a) corporate language can be conceptualised in two ways: as *a language*, a bounded entity ('language-as-tool) and as *language*, a social practice ('language-as-practice), manifesting in different genres at work when investigated from an individual's perspective over time.

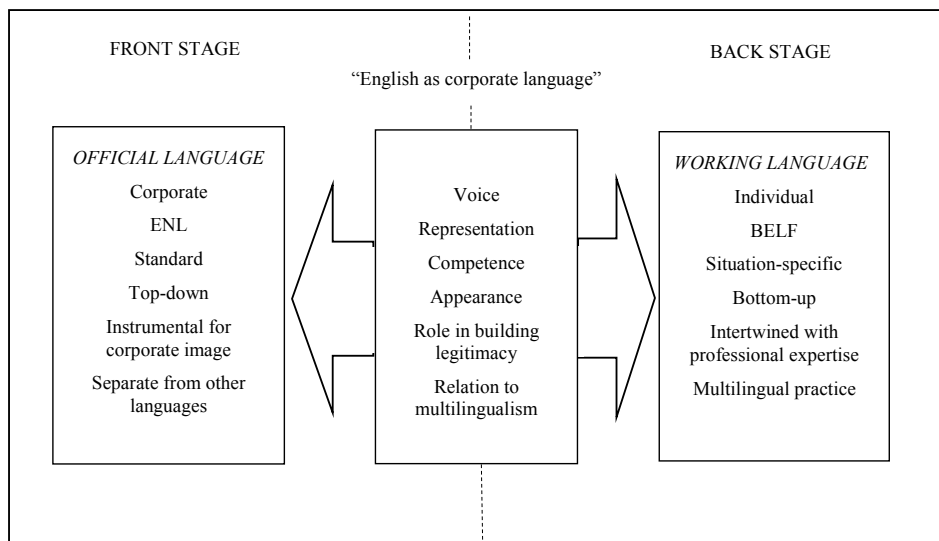
Sociolinguistically informed international management studies that challenge the traditionally employed notion of language as a bounded entity view language as an emergent, contextualised social practice (e.g. Gaibrois, 2018; Janssens and Steyaert,

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2014; Kassis Henderson, 2005). In this view, language only emerges in social action, is embedded in various layers of context, and competence in a particular linguistic system does not necessarily reveal anything about a person’s ability to communicate in a specific situation. Sociolinguistic studies of language at work focus on the same phenomenon but from a different, language-in-use, perspective: *how* language emerges and manifests itself in interactions between practitioners, *what* the repertoires of language users consist of, *how* multilingualism plays a role in work practices, and *how* business practitioners conceive the communicative reality at work (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).

Combining the two conceptualisations of ECL – the language-as-tool and language-as-practice – Kankaanranta et al. (2018), inspired by Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of social life, developed a dynamic notion of ECL (see Figure 1). Their framework distinguishes the frontstage official English used in corporate communication (see Cornelissen, 2017) and the backstage ‘working language’, conceptualised as English as a Business Lingua Franca (in short, BELF, see Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), used in everyday interactions between business practitioners. This sociolinguistic BELF resource only emerges in interaction as a dynamic hybrid among speakers of different mother tongues and does not exist *a priori* with a certain structure that can be identified and described in grammar books and dictionaries, like the English of its native speakers, typically used as the yardstick when non-native speakers learn English.<sup>1</sup> Hence, BELF neither has any native speakers nor does it exist as *a* language. Indeed, because of the speakers’ multiple mother tongues, the resource can be conceptualised as inherently multilingual (e.g. Janssens and Steyaert, 2014; Jenkins, 2015). As its manifestations are dependent on the business context and situation, its users’ knowledge and skills about working in business (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2018) are an essential prerequisite. The BELF resource is fundamentally different from the lingua franca concept in international management research, where it is typically conceptualised as a shared tool for organisational use (see Komori-Glatz, 2018).

**Figure 1** English as corporate language (Kankaanranta et al., 2018, p.342)



Kankaanranta et al. (2018) posited how different approaches to corporate language may show on the ECL continuum between its two extremes of frontstage official English and backstage working language BELF. The frontstage English is used in one-way communication reflecting corporate image and voice (see e.g. Hatch and Schultz, 1997) and would manifest as English as a Native Language (ENL), typically found in genres such as annual reports and press releases. Backstage BELF, however, arises in everyday, inherently multilingual, interactions between professionals in specific work situations such as meetings and email, which have been widely investigated in the (B)ELF paradigm of sociolinguistics (e.g. Räisänen, 2016; Cogo, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Pullin, 2013). In other words, the two ECLs would manifest in different genres, i.e. in different types of texts and activities (Angouri and Marra, 2010).

Which genres business practitioners engage in and how naturally depends on the requirements of the situation and on their competences, organisational roles, and the field of business (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). Although certain conventions exist, and genres have labels like ‘press releases’ or ‘meetings’, they are inherently dynamic and change along with circumstances and the individuals and communities engaging with them (Miller, 1984; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Our paper enriches the ECL framework by investigating how the ECL comes into being as different genres in the everyday knowledge work of an individual practitioner over years. While doing that it also reflects the daily linguistic reality of the MNC, where employees engage with genres in their knowledge work at various points on the ECL continuum depending on their position, seniority and job tasks.

## **4 Methodology**

### *4.1 Longitudinal ethnographic study*

The present paper presents a longitudinal ethnographic study, a method that is well suited for investigating language practices at work over time as it allows a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon. This study involves the ethnographer’s overt and covert participation in people’s daily lives, observing what happens, listening to people and asking them questions, hence collecting multiple types of data to shed light on the issues under focus (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Our study incorporates a multi-site ethnographic approach (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995) with data on both reported practices (i.e. the individual’s talk about his work in audio-recorded interviews and informal discussions recorded with notes) and actual practices (i.e. recordings and fieldnotes of the individual’s work activities in the office and in meetings with the researcher present) collected at various times and at different fieldwork sites.

Our data focus on one of three Finnish professionals followed for over 15 years, 2003–2018, from their student days through their career advancement towards leadership positions in Small and medium-sized (SMEs) and multinational companies (MNCs). Due to their unique career paths and our space restrictions, we focus on one practitioner. As is typical in ethnographic studies, the research questions have evolved during the process and have arisen from the researcher observing actual practices (Blommaert and Dong, 2010). As the practitioner himself has been active in collecting and providing the researcher with data, for example, self-recordings, he is here referred to as a ‘participant’. Table 1 presents our participant’s professional background.

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**Table 1** Participant's professional background

<i>Job title</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Company</i>	<i>Language policy</i>	<i>Languages at work CEFR level for English, German, Chinese</i>
Trainee	2003	Paper MNC, Germany Industrial production Headquarters Finland Parent company stock-listed	Official corporate language: English German subsidiary: German	Finnish (L1), English (B2–C1), German (A2)
Project engineer	2005	Manufacturer MNC, Finland Headquarters Finland Stock-listed	Official corporate language: English	Finnish (L1), English (C1)
Project manager	2005–2011	Tech MNC, Finland Headquarters Finland Technology solutions provider	Official corporate language: English	Finnish (L1), English (C1–C2), Chinese (basics, receptive skills)
Operations manager	2011–2014	Tech MNC, China Headquarters Finland Technology solutions provider	Official corporate language: English	Finnish (L1), English (C2), Chinese (A1 receptive skills in speech)
Operations manager	2014–2018	Service MNC, China Headquarters Finland Technology, services and solutions provider Stock-listed	Official corporate language: English	Finnish, English (C2), Chinese (A1 receptive + productive skills in speech)

Notes: L1 = First language, CEFR = Common European Framework.

The participant's (pseudonym Oskari) career has advanced from Trainee to Operations Manager in some ten years. The 4-month internship in 2003 at a German factory (here called 'Paper MNC') was the first time he used English for work purposes. After graduating in 2008 in the field of mechanical engineering, his career has advanced toward management positions and he has been based both in Finland, in 'Manufacturer MNC', and, recently, in China, in 'Service MNC'. He also completed an English-language MBA program as part of his job. Throughout his career, Oskari has used Finnish, his mother tongue. He studied English as a foreign language for over ten years, progressing towards advanced proficiency level, but took only one German course in upper secondary school. Although he has heard, seen and learned some Chinese for many years, he has never studied it (see Table 1 for details).<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.2 Data collection

The data were collected during 2003–2018. All contacts with the participant have been in Finnish, his mother tongue and that of the first author, later translated into English by the first author. Oskari was interviewed twice in 2003, 2016 and 2018 and once in 2008,

2009 and 2010. At various checkpoints (2003, 2008–2009 and 2016–2018) his work practices were collected and recorded by both the first author, who has been present in various face-to-face interactions and observed his work practices at the office, and the participant himself, who made self-recordings. He has submitted research material in textual form (e.g. emails, messenger chat, survey for distributors, technical documentation, presentation slides). However, to avoid influencing his behaviour, the participant was not informed about the exact research question before the data collection. Instead, during and after data collection, he functioned as the insider expert of the industry, company and activities. Aiming for triangulation, he answered the researcher's clarifying questions, checked and verified interpretations and provided necessary background information (Duff, 2006, p.81; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.230). The entire data comprise fieldwork with approximately 340 hours of observations.<sup>3</sup> Table 2 presents the details and summarises the use of English as classified according to the participant's job title and the persons with whom he has interacted.

**Table 2** Summary of data

<i>Job title</i>	<i>Data on the use of 'English'</i>	<i>Amount of data</i>	<i>Interactions with whom</i>
Trainee	interviews	2 hrs	colleagues, superiors
	observation of face-to-face interactions	in total 4 months (consist of shorter periods)	
	fieldnotes	40 pages	
	photos	30 photos	
Project Engineer	discussions of face-to-face interactions, meetings, email, technical presentations		colleagues, superiors, clients
Project Manager	interviews	2 hrs	colleagues, superiors, clients
	observation, fieldnotes and recordings of face-to-face discussions (by the first author and self-recordings), meetings, email, messenger chat, technical presentations	4 days observation 2.5 hrs recordings 10 pages 83 photos	
Operations Manager	discussions of face-to-face interactions, meetings, email, messenger chat, business presentations		colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients
Operations Manager	interviews	3 hrs	colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients
	observation and recordings of face-to-face interactions, meetings, emails, messenger chat, business presentations, surveys, non-disclosure documents	13 days observation 15.5 hrs recordings 137 pages 341 photos	

While the analysis draws on the longitudinal data, the main emphasis and examples in this paper come from Oskari's job as Operations Manager in Service MNC, because the number of different genres is the highest there and also include the genres manifested in

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the earlier stages. Service MNC employs almost 4000 people and provides clients with services and solutions. Its headquarters are in Finland and it has offices in nearly a dozen countries on three continents.

#### *4.3 Analysis of data*

The data analysis process for this paper has involved three overlapping parts. First, the entire longitudinal ethnographic data were reviewed to trace the participant's work practices and experiences using English in different positions and over time. Second, using qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2011), the data were analysed and grouped into themes to identify emerging genres, Oskari's use of the genres, and the stages of their use (backstage, frontstage, and in-between; the last category was added as the use of some genres did not fit well at either of the two ends of the ECL continuum) (Figure 1). Third, selected instances of genres were analysed applying tools from genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993) to identify the situational context of genre use, their features and function in the participant's work, and the differences between the genres. Although the second author actively participated only in the last two stages of the process, the entire data had been thoroughly discussed earlier because of other shared research projects. The codes for genres that emerged from the themes were frontstage, backstage, and mixed genres, and the codes for Oskari's work with the genres were production, consumption and commenting. For example, if Oskari described his job as mainly consisting of solving technical problems in meetings and emails with his Chinese colleagues, using English, the genre would be classified as non-public and backstage, the corporate language would be BELF, and Oskari's role 'production'.

## **5 Findings: practitioner's changing genre use over time**

Our findings demonstrate that the practitioner moves over time along the ECL continuum from backstage to frontstage language use, and as a manager in the company navigates between the extremes of public and non-public genres. While doing that Oskari's feelings towards these changes in the use of English have been pragmatic: he has embraced learning new skills on the way. Indeed, his career advancement as a global knowledge worker would not have been possible otherwise. The practitioner's engagement with the genres falls into three different categories: 1) production (writing and speaking), 2) consumption (reading, sharing, interpreting and applying), and 3) commenting (accepting, confirming and contributing by brainstorming in meetings, editing and participating in drafting). Our findings in fact suggest that Oskari engages with three main ECL genres: not only in official English and working language BELF (Kankaanranta et al., 2018), but also some genres in in-between language that represents neither the official language nor colleagues' shared working language. Rather, it comes into being in mixed genres, which we will illustrate in the following sections. Figure 2 illustrates the ECL continuum as engaged in by Oskari.

At the beginning of his career as a Trainee in Paper MNC in Germany, Oskari was involved in producing spoken non-public genres only, interacting with colleagues and superiors. Oskari said in an interview that he did not feel that he spoke fluently and he felt pressured, especially if he had to explain something. The major problem at work was

his lack of German skills as most of his co-workers did not speak English. However, during his four-month stay he learned some German and was able to have simple conversations with colleagues.

**Figure 2** Use of genres on the corporate language continuum

NON-PUBLIC GENRES/ BACKSTAGE	MIXED GENRES/ IN-BETWEEN STAGE	PUBLIC GENRES/ FRONTSTAGE
Produce (speak, write)	Produce (speak, write)	Produce (write)
Consume (share, read)	Consume (read, apply)	Consume (read, share, apply)
Comment (accept)	Comment (edit, confirm)	Comment (confirm, accept, edit, participate in drafting)

Next, in his job as a Project Engineer in Manufacturer MNC in Finland, Oskari's use of English mostly consisted of producing and consuming written genres, such as writing and reading emails and technical documentation, with colleagues but also with clients. Because of such external encounters, he had to learn a new genre, which we call 'mixed', where the language is somewhere between official English and working language BELF. This genre was needed especially in the early stages of a business relationship; with more established clients the non-public genres dominated. For this reason, 'mixed' genres had a minor role in his job.

Oskari's use of more varied genres began when he became Project Manager in Tech MNC, responsible for projects in China. His production of non-public genres of speaking and writing increased together with his greater responsibility and wider networks; his work centred on technical issues and solving technical problems in client projects in English. Over the six years in the job, Oskari mostly interacted face-to-face with Chinese colleagues and clients using non-public and mixed genres during his frequent trips to China and via email and chat while in Finland. He also began to contribute to public genre production with Finnish and Chinese marketing and administrative personnel. For example, he participated in meetings on company brochure production and commented on both the language and the visuals used in that public genre. In Oskari's own view, presenting and discussing technical issues became easier by the day and, indeed, became his strength because of the experience and knowledge he was accumulating. For instance he learned to present and discuss Tech MNC's product qualities and solutions to technical problems and to anticipate the client's questions or requests for clarifications. Although this type of professional communication became easier, small talk remained difficult because of his lacking experience and education in this respect (Räisänen, 2016). Most of Oskari's interactions with Chinese professionals included a Chinese interpreter. It was challenging to understand Chinese people's accents, but conversing with a native speaker of English was even more difficult because of their rapid, idiomatic speech and accent. Hitherto he had communicated in English mostly backstage, but increasingly now also between back and frontstage, navigating between genres needed in early and later stages of business relationships. He no longer felt anxious or worried about speaking English.

When he became Operations Manager first in Tech MNC and then in Service MNC in China with a number of subordinates, he began to use public genres. Although he produced, consumed and commented in all three types of genres, and encountering new

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genres, such as non-disclosure agreements, felt challenging and time-consuming, using English with colleagues did not require any extra effort. English had become a natural, indispensable part of his daily work.

During his most recent job as Operations Manager, Oskari managed the daily operations of the China office and used different genres on the ECL continuum. His superordinate was the head of the China section, stationed in another city. The first superordinate was a Finnish L1 speaker and the second a Chinese L1 speaker. Oskari's subordinates, most of them Chinese with a few Finnish ones, were stationed in the same office he was leading, comprising of mid-level managers and technical experts. He was in constant contact with the Chinese department managers and team leaders (face-to-face, email and chat). In frequent contact he was with his superordinates (email and phone), clients in China (mostly email, also face-to-face) and colleagues and clients in Finland (mostly via Skype). Table 3 illustrates Oskari's use of genres on the ECL continuum, including information about the stage (backstage, frontstage, in-between), the genre (non-public, mixed, public), some examples of genres, ECL (BELF, ENL), the original producer of the genre and the participant's role in the genre (production, consumption, commenting).

**Table 3** Operations manager's use of genres on the ECL continuum

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Examples of genres</i>	<i>ECL</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Participant's role</i>
Back	Meetings, discussions	BELF	Oskari	Produce: speak
	Skype chat	BELF	Oskari	Produce: write
	Skype call	BELF	Oskari	Produce: speak
	Email	BELF	Oskari	Produce: write
	Company bonus plan	ENL	Oskari	Produce: write
	Personnel survey	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: share
	Client project plan, forecast, report	N/A	China teams	Consume: read; Comment: accept
	Employee stories (company template) + boards (office corridor)	BELF	China HR	Consume: read
In-between	Meetings, discussions with clients	BELF		Produce: speak
	Email to client	BELF	Oskari	Produce: write
	Customer feedback survey	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: read Comment: edit **
	Client report by technical documentation team	N/A	China teams/ Oskari	Consume: read Comment: edit
	Non-disclosure agreement, frame agreement, general terms and conditions	ENL	HO/CD/ Oskari	Consume: read, apply Comment: edit, confirm
	Company presentation power point template	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: apply Comment: edit Produce: write
	Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn posts (weekly)	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: read, share (posts)

**Table 3** Operations manager’s use of genres on the ECL continuum (continued)

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Examples of genres</i>	<i>ECL</i>	<i>Producer</i>	<i>Participant’s role</i>
Front	Reference videos Youtube	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: apply
	Governmental documents (agreements, reports, offer letters/invitation letters)	Chinese/ ENL	HO/ China CD	Comment: confirm, accept
	Brochures (printed)	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: read
	Company magazine (printed)	ENL	HO/CD	Consume: read
	Recruitment advertisements	N/A	China HR	Consume:/read; Comment: accept
	Name of the subsidiary	ENL	Oskari	Produce: write
	Company website: China version	ENL	HO/CD/CH	Comment: participate in drafting, accept
	Company website: Global/Group version	ENL	HO/CD	Comment: participate in drafting
	Company releases: Annual Report	ENL	HO/CD	Comment: participate in drafting; Consume: read

Notes: ECL = ‘English’ as corporate language, ENL = English as a Native Language, BELF = English as a Business Lingua Franca, HO/CD = Head office, communications department; HR = Human Resources.

As Operations Manager at Service MNC, Oskari uses genres backstage, in-between and frontstage in different ways, including production, consumption and commenting. In the following three sections, we illustrate with examples the different genres in Table 3.

### 5.1 Non-public genres

In the category of non-public genres, we have identified situations that occur among company employees using English as a shared business lingua franca. They are labelled ‘BELF’. Non-public genres and BELF reflect work situations in which employees use different kinds of communicative strategies to achieve their business goals and ensure mutual understanding. Below we present two such situations.

Example 1 is from a face-to-face meeting in China between Oskari and two Chinese colleagues. Oskari is discussing a technical design detail with a Chinese Project Manager (labelled CMan in the example). The Chinese Manager translates some parts from English into Chinese for a Chinese engineer (CEng) who is also present. This is a typical example of a BELF encounter, where the participants seek mutual understanding using the available resources, including multilingual resources. Oskari first introduces an issue in the design and tells the CEng (present) to discuss it with Timo, a Finnish engineer working in Finland (absent) (see Appendix 1 for Transcription Key).

**Example 1:** Meeting (2008)

196 Oskari second issue is this (.) aa: Timo knows about this  
197 so CEng can [discuss] further (.) with Timo about this  
but the  
198 CMan [mm?]  
199 Oskari pri- öö [basic prin]ciple is that  
200 CMan [Timo]  
201 Oskari (0.7) .hhh because we have this (.) ladder  
202 ((*sound of a pen drawing*))  
203 CMan mm?  
204 (0.5)  
205 Oskari this is ladder (.)  
206 CMan mm  
207 ((*sound of a pen drawing*))  
208 (*talking in Chinese to CEng, translated into English:*  
xx is ladder)  
209 Oskari going up to the  
210 CMan platform yeah  
211 Oskari the platform yeah  
212 CMan (*talking in Chinese to CEng, translated into English:*  
ladder for going up)  
213 CEng mm

While Oskari is talking to the Chinese Manager he visualises the technical issue with pen and paper and then refers to it with language (*this ladder*, lines 201–202) which he repeats in line 205. In line 209 Oskari seems to be searching for the right expression and then CMan helps by providing the word *platform* (line 210). The repetition in line 211 (*the platform yeah*) shows that this is what Oskari was looking for. This example illustrates the cooperative nature of BELF.

Example 2 is a short, technologically mediated exchange between Oskari and a Department Manager, Kate. Oskari is sitting behind his desk and working on his computer. He sends Kate a Skype chat message asking *do you have a minute?* Kate responds immediately with *yes*, which indicates that she is working on her computer too. Very soon she enters Oskari's office.

**Example 2:** Skype chat (2016)

Oskari: do you have a minute?  
Kate: yes  
(and a minute or two later Kate walks in)

This is a typical exchange between colleagues who work together and know each other well. It reveals a shared practice and norms for communication: Oskari's *do you have a minute* is not only asking Kate if she has time, but also asking her to come to Oskari's office for a face-to-face discussion. Kate's arrival shows that she has indeed interpreted the question as a request to go to his office and that she and Oskari share these norms of behaviour and hence a joint communicative repertoire. This is a typical example of how

BELF manifests as an informal working language as a result of interaction between colleagues from different linguistic backgrounds. This genre is a non-public, digital genre and resembles face-to-face language use.

## 5.2 Mixed genres

In the category of mixed genres, we have identified situations where the participant uses English as a working language as in Sub-section 5.1., but it is evident that no joint repertoire, or a relationship or common goals have yet been established in the same way as in the non-public genres. Shared norms are ‘in the making’. The data show that differences exist between using the BELF resource with colleagues and with clients; with the latter it is more formal and polite, less direct. The participants also use more meta-language: they explain themselves and their motives more because they lack consensus. Oskari’s email message to a new client below is a case in point (adapted from Räisänen, 2018).

### Example 3: Email (2016)

Dear Mr. Italian,

Thank you for the discussions on Friday. I went through your NDA, and have one change request, hopefully it is doable. The clause in question is 9. Remedies. Although NDA is mutual, (our company) can’t accept automatic sanctions or penalties in the breach of contract. Is it possible to be removed or modified for example so that actual damages are compensated?

Best regards,

Oskari Suomalainen

Oskari addresses the client formally (Dear Mr. and surname), begins by expressing gratitude (*thank you for the discussions*), politely asks for a change in the mutual non-disclosure agreement that they need to compile before they can begin cooperation (*one change request, hopefully it is doable, is it possible to be removed or modified*), and signs off politely, using his full name.

Compared to the chat message (Example 2) and other instances of technologically mediated communication between Oskari and his colleagues and subordinates, BELF between Oskari and a client clearly emerges here as different. In addition to exemplifying communication in a business-to-business context, the email also serves as an example of another genre used by Oskari: non-disclosure agreements, which he has begun to consume and comment on only since becoming Operations Manager. For Oskari, NDAs are “really time-consuming and tricky”, which suggests that encountering new genres – both their substance and their form – and their contexts of use are challenging for practitioners. An added difficulty with NDAs is the legalese they contain and their effects on business transactions.

Another example of a mixed genre is a feedback survey targeted to clients globally. It was compiled by the Head Office Communications Department in a word format and sent to all clients with a request to complete it. When Oskari reviewed the responses to the survey with the Quality Manager who compiled them, they noticed that one question involved the term ‘offshoring’. Oskari found the term problematic because it was not applicable in China, since both Oskari’s company and most of their clients were actually located in China. He therefore suggested that ‘outsourcing’ or ‘on-site services’ would be

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better. He then commissioned the Quality Manager to ask the Group's Communications Department to change the term so that the survey would be better tailored for the China context. In this way, Oskari was contributing to editing the document, i.e. commenting, thus showing mixed genre features.

Our final example in this genre comes from a sales meeting between Oskari, his subordinate (Team Leader, Chinese) and a client representative (Chinese) at the client's place of business. The following exchange occurs towards the end of the meeting, after a one-hour discussion. Oskari has introduced the company and their services and they have discussed possible cooperation. The example illustrates our earlier point about this BELF resource emerging as different from the BELF resource used among close colleagues. Example 4 shows that in the early stages of a prospective relationship the participants and companies need to learn about each other before they can start their collaboration.

**Example 4:** Sales meeting (2016)

1073	Oskari	of course now we need to learn each other
1074	Client	yeah
1075	Oskari	we need to learn (our company) our people need to get aa: aa: familiar with your product
1076	Client	yeah yeah
1077	Oskari	and it doesn't happen overnight
1078	Client	yeah [yeah]
1079	Oskari	[but] this is the direction this is a very I would say the the the (.) one of the main strate- strategic [points what we] have
1080	Client	[yea yeah yeah]
1081		yeah from our side it is this is the same
1082	Oskari	mm
1083	Client	we take big a really big decisions around that as well

Oskari explicitly says that *we need to learn each other, get familiar with your product* and that this requires time (*it doesn't happen overnight*). Interestingly, line 1079 shows that such learning is essential in order to reach the company's strategic goals. This example also illustrates a common feature of BELF: the participants need not follow the grammatical rules of standard English since the main point is to get the message across. In the example, we can see from his use of backchannelling (*yeah yeah*) that the client is following Oskari. These were typical interactions for the Operations Manager when Oskari represented the company in the first negotiations with the client. Although he was in charge of client projects as a Project Manager in Tech MNC, he did not then have this kind of corporate voice in the early negotiations where he needed to choose suitable expressions and politely building the relationship.

### 5.3 Public genres

Oskari explained that company communication policy in Service MNC defined who was responsible for handling external communications and speaking to the media: only the

CEO or the Communications Department were entitled to make comments to the media, unless otherwise agreed. Communications was in charge of producing official texts and documentation such as press releases and annual reports for stakeholders and the general public. They also produced company templates for various kinds of documentation purposes, as illustrated by Oskari below.

**Example 5:** Company power point presentation (interview 2018)

Oskari: We have company guidelines for communications, which defines templates, and even fonts that we should use

The templates produced by the Communications Department were then applied by employees in their individual presentations. Oskari used the official template with basic information about the company in all the client meetings observed; however, what information he included on the slides was up to him. Below (Example 6) is yet another example of Oskari's engagement in contributing to the production of a public genre, an Annual Report, for which he was asked to provide a reference case from China. Oskari thus sent information to Communications on a client case and thereby participated in drafting the report.

**Example 6:** Annual report (interview 2016)

Oskari: Communications department wanted to have a reference case from China, so we have helped them with that

Perhaps Oskari's most public genre engagement could be seen in his initiative to change a word in the official name of the subsidiary company he managed. He changed a British spelling to an American English spelling because, he said, the British spelling confused their stakeholders and the American way was more straightforward and easier to remember. This was an empowering experience for Oskari, who could make a difference as a company leader. On a more general level, it illustrates how career advancement is intertwined with increasing competence to engage in the genres at the public end of the ECL continuum, and how agency emerges in a particular career phase.

#### *5.4 Experiencing English over time*

Throughout this longitudinal study, Oskari has reflected on his feelings towards using, and particularly speaking, English. His feelings have changed from worry about speaking correctly (novice) to a sense of empowerment (experienced), especially after gaining experience of other people's sometimes deficient language skills and particularly of Finns' good skills (Räisänen, 2016).

Oskari explained that changes in work tasks contributed to the need to acquire new competences and genre knowledge, for instance related to customer relations. Indeed, it would have been impossible to take on such new tasks and responsibilities without consciously aiming to do one's utmost to succeed. For instance, although he has experienced challenges communicating with the Chinese, who may not admit failing to understand, Oskari has embraced his career development and learning to negotiate deals in the Chinese business context (Räisänen, 2018). Importantly, his experiences of successful interactions and the knowledge he has acquired about genre conventions have

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contributed to the feeling of empowerment. In the end, however, the constructive and supportive feedback that Oskari has received from his superiors has enabled and encouraged him in career advancement.

Oskari has also embraced the learning of additional languages, notably German and Chinese, which enabled him to converse a little with colleagues in Germany and to follow conversations in Chinese. Oskari's successful career path has been a natural development for him, with the effect of English becoming his daily working language and additional languages becoming valuable resources in specific settings. In other words, English has enabled his global knowledge work and has become a natural part of his global professional life.

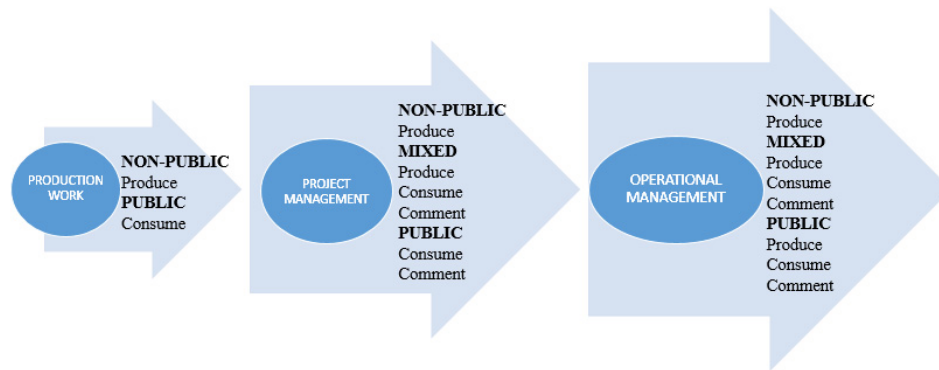
## **6 Discussion**

This longitudinal ethnographic research focused on one individual business practitioner as a knowledge worker and user of genres in the ECL context. The findings show how ECL emerges as genres and enables knowledge work *in situ* and *over time* in the era of globalisation. Our social practice point of view of language provides a window to individuals' possibilities in the globalised new economy, shedding light on how new types of participation formats are linked with new ways of using language (Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002).

From the perspective of the individual, a novice user of English becomes a global knowledge worker, a member of a mobile global elite (e.g. Duchêne and Heller, 2012; Leppänen et al., 2011; Pennycook, 2000). The role of English changes from foreign language to everyday work language which, as the practitioner's engagement in the entire ECL continuum increases, intensifies and enables different forms of knowledge work in the knowledge economy. At the beginning of his career, the practitioner uses English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF) with colleagues, and he is more concerned with following the native speaker norms in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that he was taught at school and university. Later, however, such orientations fade as getting the job done gains precedence over grammatically correct language use (see Angouri and Miglbauer, 2014; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Räisänen, 2016). In other words, we could argue that learning and understanding the requirements of the job and of business – business knowledge – refines his language use, in which the 'B' of BELF dominates over concern about how close to the native English (ENL) yardstick he finds himself (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). Interestingly, Oskari's changed attitude corresponds to Eraut's (2000) arguments about informal or on-the-job learning: whereas learning in school is explicit, with learning as primary (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation following ENL norms), learning on the job is mostly implicit, as work is primary (i.e. getting the job done following business norms). Figure 3 shows how ECL emerges as genres in the practitioner's career in the three stages: backstage, in-between and frontstage.

**Figure 3** Corporate language as emerging in the practitioner’s career

CORPORATE LANGUAGE			
STAGE	BACK	IN-BETWEEN	FRONT
LANGUAGE	INFORMALBELF	FORMALBELF	ENL
GENRE	NON-PUBLIC	MIXED	PUBLIC
PRACTITIONER’S ROLE	PRODUCE: speak, write	PRODUCE: speak, write CONSUME: read, share, interpret, apply, edit COMMENT: accept, confirm	CONSUME: read, share, interpret, apply, edit COMMENT: accept, confirm, contribute



Backstage, non-public genres (e.g. face-to-face meetings and instant messages) with colleagues reflect the informal BELF resource as flexible and dynamic, allowing for the deployment of multilingual, multimodal resources such as bits of Chinese and Finnish, or visualisations. Throughout his career, the practitioner in this study has been involved in actively speaking and writing backstage, where BELF interactions with colleagues are characterised by individual voice and presenting oneself as a leader and manager.

Over his career advancement, the practitioner begins to meet more clients and represent his company in business-to-business contexts; he uses English frontstage. Genres become what we identified as mixed, containing language that is more formal than the backstage BELF, but not quite as standard as the frontstage ENL. In this in-between stage, the practitioner both produces, consumes and comments using various mixed genres, in which both corporate and individual voice are present. Frontstage, then, manifested most notably in company websites and other official forums, language is produced by the Communications Department, but the practitioner contributes to public genre production, including participating in drafting, accepting and confirming official documents. When engaged in such public genres, the practitioner assumes the voice of the corporate.

A manager’s everyday knowledge work thus requires navigation between different genres and, over his/her career, movement along the ECL continuum from BELF interactions towards the official English end. The practitioner experiences this change pragmatically: while responsibility increases, so do the types of communicative situations in which English is needed. In general, new situations represent themselves as opportunities to develop one’s competences and to learn on the job. This type of on-the-job learning tends to occur as needed, serendipitously, but it typically leads to permanent

changes in knowledge, attitudes and skills (e.g. Manuti et al., 2015; Berings et al., 2008). Working and learning are thus inextricably linked, integrated in one's daily routines but calling for reflection and interaction with others (Farrugia, 2013; Manuti et al., 2015).

## **7 Conclusions**

In addressing English as corporate language from the perspective of an individual practitioner, longitudinally, our findings give insights into how the global knowledge worker operating in English emerges in the context of globalisation. As Steyaert et al. (2011) argue, the use of English anchors professionals in a transnational cultural flow that unites its users in an international community, not territorially bound, in the field of work (e.g. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2018).

Our paper is a conceptual contribution to considering knowledge work from an English-as-corporate-language perspective in the 21st century. Different manifestations of ECL in the individual's work practices and genre use 'tease out the tension' between standardisation (official ENL) and variability (informal BELF), thus showing the hierarchical and valorised communicative practices at work (e.g. Duchêne and Heller, 2012) and the ECL continuum along which practitioners need to navigate. We have shown that in the global new economy, workers with multi-competences in languages and genres acquire new forms of symbolic capital (e.g. Duchêne and Heller, 2012). We hope our contribution will lead to greater recognition of the multiple skills required by international managers as global knowledge workers (e.g. Manuti et al., 2015; Eraut, 2000).

The implications of our findings are manifold, but with a common denominator: communication skills are more important for global knowledge workers than language proficiency (e.g. Karhunen et al., 2018; Räisänen, 2018). For individuals, this means a willingness to learn throughout one's career; educating students into ready-made knowledge workers would be practically impossible (e.g. Eraut, 2000). For companies using English as corporate language, it means acknowledging the dynamics of the concept and discussing the implications for such corporate functions as communications, recruitment, promotion, and HR practices. Finally, external audiences as recipients of public genres at the ENL extreme would probably appreciate companies' efforts to adhere to the principles of the Plain English movement (see e.g. Petelin, 2010), to make public genres easily accessible to speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Kankaanranta et al., 2018).

The longitudinal aspect of the study is a methodological contribution to international management research. Data spanning some 15 years have shown the implications of career advancement to individuals' language practices (see e.g. Angouri and Piekkari, 2018; Sliwa and Johansson, 2014) and demonstrated how situated practices are connected to organisational and institutional orders (see also Angouri and Piekkari, 2018). Longitudinal studies reveal the entire context of ECL, with its different manifestations in professionals' careers. We urge the need for management research to consider language as embedded in its various spatial and temporal layers. Furthermore, a bottom-up perspective (Sanden and Lønsmann, 2018) forces us to consider ECL in everyday business practice, where standard English is only one part of corporate

language. We have been able to increase the clarity of the concept of English as corporate language, as called for by, for instance, Brannen et al. (2014) and Suddaby (2010). This is essential for advancing theoretical discussion about language in general and English as corporate language in particular in the field of international management.

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## **Notes**

- 1 Although heretoforth we use BELF as if it was an entity or an object, we do it for ease of reference only. Ontologically it does not exist as such but only emerges in interaction.
- 2 The participant's language skills are described on the basis of his self-evaluation, the first author's observation based on her English teaching competence, and the levels in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
- 3 In total 19 hours of recordings, 450 photographs and 187 A5 pages of fieldnotes, 7 hours of interviews.

## **Appendix 1: Transcription key**

- [ the point of overlap onset
- ] the point of overlap termination
- (.) micro pause
- (2.0) silence marked in seconds
- (xxx) unclear speech, transcriber's interpretation
- ((gaze)) embodied action

## AMENDMENT SHEET

Page No.	Section	Paragraph	Line No.	Delete	Add/amend
1	1 <sup>st</sup> author info				change: 'Research Unit for' → 'Research Unit of'
1	biographical notes		2		change: 'Research Unit for' → 'Research Unit of'
3	1	2	12		change: 'Multi-National Company' → 'multinational company'
4	2	2	1	delete: research	
6	4.1	2	3		change: 'Small' → 'small'
7	Table 1				change: 'Paper MNC' → 'Industry MNC'
7	Table 1				move 'industrial production' below 'Parent company stock-listed'
7	Table 1				change: 'A2' → 'A1-A2'
7	4.1	1	3		change: 'Paper MNC' → 'Industry MNC'
8	Table 2				add 'A5' after '40' → '40 A5 pages'
8	Table 2				change: 'messenger chat' → 'instant messaging' next to Project Manager
8	Table 2				add: 'A5' after '10' → '10 A5 pages'
8	Table 2				change: 'messenger chat' → 'instant messaging' next to Operations Manager
8	Table 2				add: 'A5' after '137' → '137 A5 pages'
9	5	2	1		change: 'Paper MNC' → 'Industry MNC'
11	5	2	7	delete: 'Chinese'	
11	Table 3				add: 'and phone' after 'Skype' → 'Skype and phone call'
11	Table 3				add: 'Oskari' between 'BELF' and 'Produce: speak'
11	Table 3			delete: '(weekly)'	
11	Table 3			delete: '(posts)'	
12	Table 3				change: 'Reference videos Youtube' → 'Youtube reference videos'
12	Table 3				move 'Consume: read' (at the bottom of the table) below 'in drafting'
12	5.1	2	1		add: 'an audio-recorded' before 'face-to-face meeting' → 'an audio-recorded face-to-face meeting'
12	5.1	2	3		add: 'Project' before 'Manager' → 'Chinese Project Manager'
13	5.1	2	2		add: 'Chinese' before 'Department'

