Article

Contextual Communicative Competence in Multinational Infrastructure Projects

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Abstract: Communication is dynamic, social, challenging, and a key quality factor for construction projects. This is especially the case in multinational and inter-organizational infrastructure projects where factors like culture and language differ among the involved actors. As infrastructure projects usually extend over longer periods of time, collaborative relationships need to be established in which the actors can develop, for example, mutual understanding, learning, and efficient working routines. By building on empirical data from contemporary infrastructure projects, we explore how international contractors and a large public client communicate in multinational infrastructure projects (i.e., what the challenges are and what competences are needed). The analysis is based on the linguistic framework of communicative competence, and we contribute to the development of collaborative models in construction project management by suggesting the concept of contextual communicative competence.

Keywords: inter-organizational communication; infrastructure; collaborative model; project management; communicative competence

1. Introduction

The importance of well-functioning communication for efficient collaboration in construction projects has been established in earlier studies [1,2]. Communication is found to be a key quality factor for construction projects, as it builds relationships and trust [3], bridges distances [4], and enables boundary spanning and learning [5,6]. The construction industry is known for its conservatism and poor collaboration [7,8] as well as for having major challenges related to inter- and intra-organizational communication [9]. Communication in construction takes place in a multifaceted context, a context described as unique, complex, and discontinued [3]. When communication is studied in a construction project context, it is often defined and discussed in order to improve performance and therefore seen as a rather stable element [5]. In these studies, communication is just a "*randomly black box among a plethora of other activity black boxes*" [5] (p. 164). It is often ignored that communication is dynamic and social; it includes informal, everyday oral communication, as well as formal, written information stipulated in the contract [8]. Therefore, communication and learning in projects needs to be understood as something that is multifaceted and complex; it encompasses the individual, group, and organizational levels, and it does not only involve the transfer of information [8].

One way to facilitate inter-organizational communication, learning, commitment, and trust in projects involves the development and implementation of collaborative approaches such as partnering [10–13]. There is no widely accepted definition of partnering [14], but it can be understood as a formal collaborative model often initiated by the client to avoid conflicts and disputes between the client and contractor, and it includes, for example,

workshops, open books, and a facilitator. Partnering has been viewed as an effective tool for improved project performance and has, therefore, been implemented in many countries including, for example, the UK [15], Sweden [12], Norway, and Finland [10]. However, earlier empirical studies [16] have found that clients identify three types of barriers to cooperation: cultural (conservative industry culture, adversarial attitudes, short-termism, focus on projects instead of processes, and a lack of supplier involvement), organizational (new competence requirements and traditional construction process and procurement procedures), and industrial (laws and regulations, as well as rules and standard contracts). In particular, clients consider the cultural and organizational barriers to be the most critical in order to achieve increased cooperation [16].

The Swedish Transport Administration (henceforth the STA) is the largest construction client in the infrastructure sector in Sweden. The STA has developed its procurement strategy [17] to include, among other things, collaborative requirements and a formal collaborative model, which poses inter-organizational communicative challenges for the client and contractors. This stresses the need to acknowledge contracts as relational and that different contract types have different depths of relationship [18]. MacNeil's [18] theory of relational contracting asserts that a contract does not simply include the regulatory obligations set out on paper (the contract's substance) but also the "*relations in which exchange occurs*" [18] (p. 878, original emphasis).

The management of infrastructure projects at the STA is further layered by the fact that the STA recently moved toward an international approach, actively encouraging more foreign contractors to submit tenders. This shift from mainly working with the (same) national contractors to also working with new, international contracting partners raises questions related to language and how the intercultural relationships are managed. As Chevrier [19] notes, it is important to understand contextual cross-cultural practices and the ways in which project participants handle issues of cultural diversity, which may be complex and require nuanced interpretation.

Communicative competence [20] is a linguistic concept that can be used to understand how to learn and use a foreign language. It includes three aspects; the knowledge of a language (competence), the ability to create meaning in a language (capacity), and the actual use of a language in practical situations (performance) [21]. Although there are recent studies regarding multidisciplinary teams in construction (e.g., [22]), communication in construction (e.g., [23]), and new roles in construction (e.g., [24,25]), there seems to be a need for more studies on inter-organizational communication challenges and competence needs in a multinational project context, like that of the STA and its international contractors. Given the call from Koch et al. [26] and Volker [27] for more interdisciplinary research in construction management, and by exploring empirical data from contemporary construction projects through theories on relational contracting, language use, and culture, we contribute to bridging a gap in the construction management literature.

The purpose, therefore, is to explore inter-organizational communication in multinational infrastructure projects and to contribute to the development of collaborative models in construction project management. We aim to fulfill this purpose by answering the following questions:

- What are the challenges of inter-organizational communication in multinational infrastructure projects?
- What competencies are needed to handle these challenges?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Inter-Organizational Communication

Inter-organizational communication is an umbrella term defined as "*the structures, forms, and processes created by the exchange of messages and the co-creation of meaning among organizations*" [28] (p. 1). The messages could be the classic transmission of information, exchanging, or sharing data among the actors (ibid.). Shumate et al. [28] observed that shared meaning in texts between organizations (semantic inter-organizational communi-

cation) could improve inter-organizational relationships, but they note that research in this area is lacking. Koschmann [29] has studied textual production through observations and interviews of an authoritative text in the process of creating a collective identity in an inter-organizational group. Although the use of shared text could provide common communicative ground, semantics relates primarily to word- and sentence-level meaning.

Therefore, understanding communication and behavior within a project context, particularly an intercultural and inter-organizational project context, needs to go beyond text (for example, a common lexicon, such as universally accepted terms used in the construction sector) and mutually agreed upon documents. Shumate et al. [28] concluded that organizational representatives in an inter-organizational relationship need to bridge semantic distances, often by creating a specialized language. Applying a relational contract approach implies a more complex, nuanced, and dynamic understanding of contextual factors. Consequently, in a relational context, a more pertinent approach is to consider inter-organizational communication. Inter-organizational communication accounts for dynamic "*structures of communicative situations, featuring such categories as time, place, participants and their roles and mutual relations, ongoing actions, as well as the intentions or knowledge of the participants, among others*" [30] (p. 6, original emphasis). Here, the emphasis is on the way the actors negotiate meaning in order to reach mutual understanding and agreement in the new context.

Language use in international settings has become a topic of interest, particularly with the emergence of English as a lingua franca, or common language of communication, in the global corporate environment. Vaara et al. [31] found in their study of a cross-national corporate merger that English was seen as a usefully neutral medium of communication. However, others have argued that the use of a lingua franca such as English can, in fact, be problematic [32–35]. Piekkari and Zander [36], therefore, proposed that mandating an official language of communication such as English does raise issues of asymmetrical power relationships between participants based on language competence if some of the participants have English as their native language. As Jenkins et al. [37] (p. 298) noted, English used in international business contexts is more "*content-oriented (rather than focusing on form)*" and "*expertise and correctness . . . are secondary to accommodation practices*". Moreover, as Cordeiro [38] (p. 781) pointed out, "*perceived 'bad English' could help facilitate communication across cultures in a cross-cultural working context*".

2.2. Inter-Cultural Performance

Language is deeply intertwined with culture, and cultural diversity as it relates to language differences and language competence in international business contexts has been seen as posing particular challenges for management [39–42]. A definition of culture is the "*clusters of common concepts, emotions, and practices that arise when people interact regularly*" [43] (p. 1). The cultural aspects that different international actors bring to a new project is something that they have created beforehand and apply in the new context, a context that, in turn, has its own culture. A complicating factor is that a project context "*involves a number of experts from various fields, backgrounds and professions*" [44] (p. 1163) and thus can be understood as a mix of different subcultures. The cultural differences of the different subcultures can be seen either as a potential for creativity or as a problem that leads to difficulties and miscommunication [45]. Moreover, inter-organizational communication is harder when the cultural distance between the actors is large [46]. The influences of cultural aspects related to the actors warrant consideration, particularly because in multinational inter-organizational projects, it may be the case that these "*international partners often lack a shared frame of reference*" [46] (p. 27).

In a comparative study of intra-organizational European project groups, Chevrier [19] observed that there are three aspects involved in intercultural relationships. First, in the absence of specific measures to deal with conflicts from cultural mismatches of practices and performance, there is a need for tolerance and self-control among the individuals involved. Second, there is an inevitable process of "trial and error" within the day-to-day

interactions that help each actor to learn about the other's practices and thereby develop relationships together with "*effective routines even though the contexts of interpretation of others remain obscure*" [20] (p. 146). Finally, Chevrier [19] noted the opportunities afforded by taking advantage of the different business cultures involved. Chevrier [19] concluded that "*[a]ppropriate patterns of collective action can only be identified through interactions and depend on the context*" (p. 149). This, therefore, highlights the context in which the project is executed. In order to understand the implications and practicalities of the relational aspects of an international, inter-organizational context, language and culture can be understood as intertwined within the negotiation of meaning in inter-organizational communication. Friedrich [47] (p. 295) referred to the "*nexus of language and culture as linguaculture*". Agar [48] (p. 5) used the term languaculture rather than linguaculture, but noted that "culture is *relational*" (original emphasis), involving a cross-fertilization rather than an adversarial stance, implying that the cultural relationship is also a matter of negotiation and awareness raising.

2.3. Communicative Competence

Hymes [20] defined communicative competence as the grammatical competence of a language and as the ability to use a language in a variety of communicative situations (performance). It is the combination of language use and social setting that form the basis for communicative competence in a bilingual setting [49]. In [21], Savignon distinguished competence as an underlying ability, in contrast to performance, which is the open manifestation of competence.

In [50], Widdowson explained that communicative competence needs to be understood at three levels. The systemic level, or linguistic competence, is the first level. This level focuses on the knowledge of a language (i.e., the structure of a language in combination with grammatical knowledge) [20]. The schematic level, or communicative capacity, is the second level, which includes how to combine the frames of a scenario with how to communicate. The third level, the procedural level, or the actual performance, is what allows a speaker to communicate in a specific situation. Performance is when a reader or speaker negotiates or co-constructs meaning in a new context. These three levels could be summarized as follows:

- Competence, or the systemic level, which includes linguistic competence and grammatical knowledge.
- Capacity, or the schematic level, including the ability to use language and create meaning.
- Performance, or the procedural level, which includes practical performance and the capacity to perform a language in a new context.

3. Method

3.1. Research Approach

The approach was qualitative, inductive, and explorative, and it sought to better understand inter-organizational communication, challenges, and competence needs in multinational infrastructure projects. An inductive approach [51] enables a focus on phenomena in the data rather than starting from a predefined theory or hypothesis. This study was based on a single case study of multinational projects at the STA.

A case study is recommended when the aim is to understand complex issues, because it develops context-dependent knowledge [52]. The data included 17 interviews with contractor and client representatives from four multinational infrastructure projects initiated by the STA (see Table 1). The respondents were selected based on the following factors: (1) they had a managerial role, (2) they worked in multi-national projects initiated by the STA, (3) the contractors were non-domestic and new to the STA and the Swedish infrastructure context, and (4) the project was based on a DB contract. All non-domestic respondents were European (e.g., Italian, Danish, Austrian, or Swiss). The selection of the STA and its multinational projects as a single case study was based on its potential usefulness to contribute theoretically and, as Eisenhardt [53] stated, to help fill conceptual

categories. Importantly, here, all contractor representatives were working in multilingual and multinational projects initiated by the STA and did not have the same native language or home country as the client representatives. The interview questions covered issues related to procurement strategy, innovation, collaboration, and project organization, as the data collection was also a part of a larger study on DB contracts procured by the STA. All interviews took place during the execution phase of the projects, illuminating the inter-organizational communicative processes between actors.

Table 1. Information on the interviews and respondents.

Respondent	Role	Actor	Duration (min)
1	Project manager	Client	49
2	Procurement officer	Client	65
3	CEO/project director	Contractor	36
4	Project manager	Contractor	27
5	Project engineer	Contractor	46
6	Project manager	Client	139
7	Project director	Client	70
8	Procurement officer	Client	41
9	Project manager	Client	113
10	Project director	Client	73
11	Procurement officer	Client	40
12	Project director	Contractor	64
13	Project manager	Contractor	40
14	Project manager	Client	120
15	Project director	Client	58
16	Procurement officer	Client	74
17	Project manager	Contractor	90

The four multinational projects that the respondents belonged to are briefly presented here. Project A entailed roads and a bridge crossing the river in a small town in southern Sweden. This relatively small infrastructure project lasted 1 year and was finished in 2015. The contractor was still on site to handle inspection remarks when the interviews took place. General conclusions on this project's technical and collaborative outcomes were that there were many conflicts, no one was wholly satisfied with the project's completion, and there was no agreement on the final inspection remarks when the interviews took place. Project B was a tunnel project also including temporary construction, such as a harbor. The tunnel project was a sub-project within a mega project and had a duration of 6.5 years. Significantly, the client terminated the contract with the contractor. Project C was a railway project entailing a tunnel in Stockholm. It was a sub-project within a mega project and had a duration of almost 10 years before it was finalized in 2017. General conclusions on this project's outcomes were that both client and contractor were satisfied. Finally, project D entailed the reconstruction of an existing road junction, including a new bridge and a new roundabout, and could be considered a conventional road project. The duration of the project was 3 years. General conclusions on this project's outcomes were that some irreconcilable differences affected the project overall.

3.2. Data Collection

Interviews with four to five respondents from each project were conducted by the first author to gain a broad perspective on the perceived aspects of, in particular, inter-organizational communication, language, and project management. The interviews were semi-structured, and the respondents were free to express opinions beyond the questions during the interviews in order to expand the dataset and capture interpretations and reflections. The questions to the contractors were similar to those asked to the client respondents but were adapted to the contractual relationship. The respondents were chosen due to their key managerial role in the projects and thus their ability to have both

an overview of the projects as well as detailed information. Due to the long durations of some of the projects, there were changes in staffing, meaning that some respondents had not been involved in the project from the beginning. Interviews were conducted in both Swedish and English, depending on the language preferred by the respondent. All client representatives were interviewed in Swedish. The interviewers were proficient in both Swedish and English. The quotes selected from the interviews conducted in Swedish were translated to English by the authors: two of them native in Swedish, and one native in English. Table 1 summarizes the data collection.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were structured from a relational contract perspective using the communicative communication concept [20,49,50]. The categories used were competence, capacity, and performance. This structure helped to structure and interpret the data and better describe and understand the inter-organizational communication in terms of expressing communicative competence. The concept of communicative competence refers to an individual learning a new language [54]. The analysis was, however, on the project level, and the focus was the inter-organizational relationship between the client and the contractor. It was, therefore, not a focus on if individuals had learned a new language, but rather if the involved actors had expressed competence, capacity, and performance when interacting with each other. This was in accordance with Hymes's [49] view that communicative competence needs to be performed to be able to be an actual competence.

The analysis began with transcribing interviews verbatim. The transcriptions were then uploaded in the software Nvivo in order to further analyze and structure the data. The analysis followed the three communicative capacity dimensions: (1) how the contractor representatives expressed knowledge of the language or how the client representatives supported or hindered the contractors to learn the language (competence), (2) how the contractors and client representatives expressed capacity to create meaning and what challenges they met (capacity), and (3) how the contractor representatives used language in practical situations and how the client representatives supported or hindered the contractors to use the language (performance).

4. Empirical Findings

Based on the three theoretical themes noted above, the empirical findings are presented below. The findings thus present the ongoing processes involved when developing (or not developing) the capacity and performance to communicate in multinational infrastructure projects.

4.1. Competence

The contractor representatives' descriptions of their competence regarding the Swedish language were related to their access to employees that were native in Swedish. This was explained by a contractor representative: " . . . *we have colleagues who are here only a year or two and they don't understand [the Swedish language, authors note]. So, we have one or two, three people in the organization who we always have to go to and discuss with. For example, in this phase, can you please check what is required at execution?*" (Respondent 17).

Since contractor employees from abroad usually do not stay long enough to learn the local language, the organization's communicative competence was greatly dependent on the hired local staff. Despite this challenge, there seemed to have been a lack of planning for how to communicate daily within the projects among the international contractors. At project initiation, there are many language issues to take into consideration. Aside from all the written official forms (e.g., contracts and regulations), there are also site meetings of major importance to establish a good team spirit and working procedures. However, the social interactions at project initiation often seemed unstructured, and it became apparent that it was up to the client's and the contractors' project managers to set the stage, form the team, and make necessary decisions. This resulted in heavy language burdens on the

project managers at project initiation. For example, a project director from STA described the difficulties for a foreign contractor regarding the vast amount of text included in an infrastructure project contract: "*It is an extensive contract that needs to be translated. This is a bit difficult for them to do. There is a lot of text. So, it is hard for a foreign contractor to grasp and understand all our texts*" (Respondent 7).

Another challenge that was pinpointed in terms of language was the fact that all additional documents and drawings of importance for the contractor to plan and organize the project were in Swedish and needed to be translated before execution. This lack of language competence among the contractors was something that the managers at STA acknowledged early on. Translating a document from one language to another or partaking in discussions in a language that one did not master would add insecurity to the collaboration: "*If all speak Swedish, then you can be sure that there are no misunderstandings regarding language at least / . . . / there could be misunderstandings still, but there is an extra risk that someone does not really understand what has been said*" (Respondent 14).

Aside from issues of translation and misunderstanding, there was also a challenge when client representatives did not speak English. A construction manager explained this: " . . . *you need to see to it that the client has people speaking English in the organization: construction and judicial English*" (Respondent 6).

Both client and contractor respondents thus conveyed hesitation in using a foreign language when working in an infrastructure project. One of the client's project directors argued that it is of value having a common point of linguistic understanding; that is, using an alternative language (here, English) that is not the native language of either actor: "*We speak much English, in the design meetings for example. We have not yet had any project director discussions, but according to my view, we are limited when we don't use our own language. We cannot express ourselves as easily*" (Respondent 15).

While there was a contractual demand for speaking Swedish, client representatives shifted from Swedish to English in one of the projects. A client representative explained: "*It is an outspoken demand that we speak Swedish, but when the project director for the contractor arrives at a meeting and does not speak Swedish we either insist on the contractual language or we are accommodating and show that it is ok to speak English. So, in this project, we began to speak English at all meetings*" (Respondent 14).

Shifting from Swedish to English was perceived as an example of openness, flexibility, and interest in making the collaboration work. It also provided advantages, especially for the new contractors that were new to the Swedish context: " . . . *the client is open for international companies, and also open to speaking English. Most of the foreigners are not speaking Swedish when they come [here]*" (Respondent 17).

There are challenges and entry barriers when initiating a project in a new context. Examples of entry barriers for international contractors are language, cultural differences, and recruiting Swedish staff. One of the client's project directors stated: "*This contractor has had a slow start, and there are cultural explanations for that. Also, they are new to the labor market. There is a lot for a new contractor to grasp*" (Respondent 7).

Aside from language, there was perceived ambiguity regarding both formal and informal aspects, such as the different norms and regulations. The international contractors were not familiar with local norms and regulations. Therefore, without awareness, some contractors perceived the behaviors of the STA representatives in relation to norms and regulations to be both (too) ambiguous and unpredictable. A project manager representing one of the contractors shared this frustration: "*I am allowed to make the construction documents together with my designers for the road. Why I am not allowed to do the same for the bridge? Why is it different? And where is that written?*" (Respondent 17).

Extensive and context-specific regulations, norms, and standards were difficult to grasp and understand by the international contractors. This problem was twofold; first, the sheer volume of documents that the STA referred to in the tendering documents was massive, and secondly, they were country-specific and thus different from similar standards and codes used in other parts of Europe. Furthermore, since Sweden does not always

adapt its standards to the EU, this challenge did arise not only during construction but also during the design process. In fact, it was perceived as a more challenging issue to have an international designer than an international contractor, since the designers had to adapt their design to Swedish norms and standards that they did not normally work with. A project director from a contractor pinpointed this as a language issue in the following way: "*Technical consultants from abroad perform design as they normally do in their home countries, but these standards do not really work in Sweden. It does not work, the drawings may look a little different than usual and the translation will not always be correct, often because they use English words and translate directly, leading to meaningless words that you do not use in Swedish*" (Respondent 12).

This indicates that it was not enough to have basic knowledge in a language when working in collaborative infrastructure projects. One has to understand context-specific terminology to understand others and to be understood by others in complex project contexts.

4.2. Capacity

There were respondents from both the client and contractors who pinpointed that the language challenges were most notable in the interaction between people in their daily work. Even though the contractual language was Swedish and the appointed management might have been sufficiently adept at handling conversations in English, this might not have been the case for all involved that interacted daily with each other. This was expressed by a client's project manager: "*Not everyone is as good at English; hence, there is always a lack of communication. Communication is a major aspect of a project with an international contractor; it is a challenge to be able to communicate properly*" (Respondent 1).

Aside from a language variation, there was also a variety of language abilities among people working on the same project. This added complexity to the communication challenge, as expressed by a project director at one of the contractors: "*Overall, it all works well. We have quite a few Germans and they are talking German with each other, but almost all meetings are entirely in English, and there are no worries. We have nationalities where only a few speak English, then you often have to have an interpreter*" (Respondent 12).

Everyday communication thus becomes a challenge when there is uncertainty about how well people working in the project know English and at what level.

In construction projects, there are expectations regarding different forms of communication, often at the basic level as well as a higher, formal level. Here is an example of formal written and informal oral communication as stated by a project director: "*you need to be formal and informal at the same time but you cannot forget the paperwork / . . . / when I started working in this project we had about 40 formal documents. When we finished, we had 3000*" (Respondent 10). This quote illustrates the need for informal communication while, at the same time, keeping written formal documentation ongoing. The same respondent continued: "*the thing we got wrong was that we thought that the informal collaborative setting we had established was enough and that we did not need to create a lot of formal documents*" (Respondent 10).

Aside from formal documents and informal discussions, there were questions related to other written communication related to the contract. Since STA decided that all documents must be in Swedish, all foreign contractors have to translate everything to be able to decide if they should submit a tender or not: "*It could be problems with the tender documents for foreign contractors. They have to translate the documents from Swedish to English, or any other language, but what gets lost in the translation?*" (Respondent 15).

Since the translated documents are later used as the basis for the contractor when executing the projects, any mistake with the translation can result in problems when delivering the projects.

A way to improve communication between the client and the contractor that was mentioned by the respondents was that everyone should be a bit more flexible. This required not only translating the documents, but also using an interpreter, as one of the client's project managers observed: " . . . *no one is forced to talk English if they don't. [A client*

representative] could talk Swedish and the contractor has arranged for an employee for translation." (Respondent 14).

During the course of a project, both the client and contractor representatives learn and improve their language: " . . . *the client improved their English skills"* (Respondent 17).

The respondents indicated that what was said and what was done were two different things. The international contractors referred to Swedish standards in their documents, but they did not apply them in their daily work. This caused frustration among both the STA and the contractors because the STA monitored them so closely, which added extra emphasis on formality and bureaucracy. A project manager at the client commented this: *"You need to be extra awake when you have a contractor who may not be used to the [Swedish] practice and regulations"* (Respondent 6).

There were also differences in how the contractors and the client handled risk aversion, documentation, and planning: *"The view on risk, on planning, and the way to handle documentation, those you could be regarded as cultural differences / . . . / and I think that we in Sweden keep much documentation in general. We, the client, have a good structure for which documents we need and which certificates we demand and which tests that are needed/ . . . / we also expect a lot of planning and structure"* (Respondent 6).

Aside from following rules and regulations, roles and responsibility were other issues that the respondents mentioned. When roles were given different meanings, it created confusion. A respondent noted: *"we see to it that the role descriptions are clear. This means that we see to that the right roles are handling the issues they should"* (Respondent 6).

4.3. Performance

In addition to language competence and capacity, performance is connected to how the language is performed in a new context. Thus, while competence has to do with, for example, words and phrases, and capacity has to do with everyday conversations, performance also includes the cultural aspect of the context. However, understanding and practicing within a new culture is challenging. A respondent at the client explained: *"Much of our business culture and the understanding on how to get access to subcontractors and authorities, is better done if it is done in the local language / . . . / and with local culture"* (Respondent 7).

Thus, to be familiar with and included in the local culture is argued to be very important to get things done in the Swedish context. Because the contractors were not familiar with the local context, it caused misunderstandings, such as in relation to how to collaborate. A client's project manager developed this further: *"the contractor felt that we interfered / . . . / it took a long time before they understood that it was support we gave them"* (Respondent 9).

The shift that the STA has made, from focusing on domestic contractors to proactively trying to attract international contractors, raised the awareness of issues such as language, culture, and what it means to collaborate. A contractor representative said: " . . . *in 2012 we did not know how it is to work in this country, although we had a lot of Swedish consultants around us. It is one thing that somebody explains to you about something, and it is another thing how it is in reality"* (Respondent 17).

Aside from the differences in how the contractors and client viewed the rules, regulations, and roles, some respondents also mentioned very particular differences in their life balance. A project manager at a contractor said: *"The life balance of people is quite different; I mean balance between work, family, and private. Middle Europeans are used to working ten to twelve hours per day / . . . / You can never find a Swedish person working from six in the morning to six in the evening, as we are normally working on site. If you try that, the person is already gone. So, it is totally different"* (Respondent 17).

This shows some of the perceived challenges of mixing staff between Swedish and other nationalities. The same project manager elaborated a bit further: *"We are used to it and we can handle it, yes. But how do you then mix Swedish staff with foreign staff / . . . / It makes everything difficult. It is not easy to work in a foreign country"* (Respondent 17).

Furthermore, there were cultural differences connected to interpersonal contact, as a project director at one of the contractors (respondent 3) explained: "*[Project X] was the first project I got involved with in Sweden and then I didn't know the Swedish mentality and Swedish culture. I attended some meetings / . . . / and I think the assumption was that I was very aggressive / . . . / I was acting in the same way as I usually act / . . . / I am quite straight forward but I don't think that was much appreciated in the beginning. / . . . / the client said 'Yeah, we will have a look at that', just to close the discussion. And then [the client representatives, author note] goes back to look at it and writes an email*" (Respondent 3).

The ways of communicating, such as how avoidance strategies were used during meetings, affected how communication was taking place, and interpersonal communication was replaced by emails and other documents.

When signing a contract and initiating a construction project, both the client and contractor(s) meet the new actor in a new context, which is affected by various cultural differences. For example, the following comment was made by a project director at a contractor: "*. . . there are also differences in mentality. We are neighbors but quite different. We have the experience that Swedish people are consensus seeking / . . . / they don't want to disagree, even if they disagree, they don't want to disagree. This makes them not stating their disagreements when we are sitting together in a meeting. Instead, they go home and write an email. If we say we disagree, it takes a lot of time and extra time isn't good for the project*" (Respondent 3).

The fact that cultural differences are important when delivering infrastructure projects in Sweden, and that it is important for contractors to learn the local language and culture and adapt to the client's ways of working is further highlighted by this quote from a client's project manager (Respondent 9): "*You need to know the rules of the game*".

5. Discussion

5.1. Communicative Competence

Based on relational contract theory [18], the performance rather than the substance of contracts should be acknowledged, as well as related behaviors. In relation to the STA and their shift from working with domestic contractors to proactively attracting international contractors, this increased the need to acknowledge and develop a better understanding of both inter-organizational, interlingual, and intercultural factors that may influence project practices. An important factor related to relational behavior is language regulations. Although the STA contracts stipulate that Swedish must be used as the project language, the requirements for Swedish being the sole language of inter-organizational communication is not necessarily enforced in practice. A more flexible view of language allows the contractors to translate whenever appropriate and to adapt and learn over time.

The three communicative competence categories of competence, capacity, and performance [20,49,50], when applied to the empirics from the projects, show that in relation to competence, contractors do not speak or understand Swedish, which is why they translate documents and use interpreters at meetings in order to understand what it is that the client is requesting. Thus, on a systemic level, the contractors handle a lack of language competence by rational means. This results, however, in a situation where misunderstandings and direct errors sometimes occur because the language used in formal documents and meetings is contextual. This brings us to the second dimension, capacity, or the schematic level of communication, which acknowledges the actual use of a language in practical situations. The capacity is supported by client representatives shifting to English when necessary. Thus, in practice, the most common way to handle interlingual challenges seems to be to use a common language not native to any of the actors. This way, they mutually work on understanding each other and focus more on progress than on the actual language used.

Finally, there is the third dimension, performance, which is on the procedural level. The findings indicate that project work and project progress is not only dependent on understanding each other and avoiding misunderstandings by translating documents, interpreting during meetings, or by shifting to English to better understand each other, but

to actually learn another business culture and be able to take that into consideration when acting in the new context. "*To know the rules of the game*" is how one client representative described the communicative competence needed. Understanding the business culture includes, however, both language and culture, and both formal and informal structures and practices.

5.2. Intralingual Competence and Intercultural Business Competence

As Corderio [38] and Jenkins et al. [37] pointed out, "bad" English is of less importance in multi-cultural settings, as the focus is more on content than form. This also is in accordance with [30] in that actors strive for reaching mutual understanding by negotiating meaning instead of enforcing specific writing in a contract. The empirical findings suggest that most important to the respondents was not which language they used (Swedish or English) or their level of proficiency in either language, but rather their possibilities to collaborate and communicate.

The movement to speaking both Swedish and English and also to translate between languages, which was pinpointed in the findings, suggests an emphasis on the communication aspect (performance) rather than linguistic competence and contractual obligations (substance). This also suggests that a mutual and contingent working language (but not a definitive lingua franca) can be achieved if both the client and contractor are more flexible. Although language flexibility might be difficult during project initiation, actors do not have to follow the contractual language requirements. It is noteworthy that in none of the projects studied was there a specific moment brought up by the respondents of negotiation and confirmation for which common working language to use. Instead, the choice of language seemed to emerge contextually and contingently from among the various options available as a trial-and-error phase, as suggested by Chevrier [19]. If the client would have imposed Swedish as the official language throughout the projects, there could have been an asymmetrical power balance [36] toward the client's side. As Shumate et al. [28] suggested, organizations could create a specialized language to bridge semantic differences. Thus, the use of English here was not a lingua franca but part of a communicative intralanguage that was developed by and specific to the participants within both organizations for a common purpose within a specific inter-organizational communicative context.

As with intralanguage, intercultural business competence could be fluid and contingent, and it does not require the achievement of an unobtainable (and not necessarily required) level of proficiency. Instead, it is a developmental process that, like intralanguage, need not be a linear progression toward arbitrary standards. As with the imperfect intralanguage, low intercultural business competence may contribute to fuzzy interactions between the actors when the actors are not familiar with "*local language . . . and with local culture*" as described by one of the respondents. However, intercultural business competence can be overcome by trial and error, linguacultural awareness, high levels of tolerance, and flexibility, as indicated by Chevrier [19].

Developing communicative competence through interlanguage creation and intercultural business competence seems to be difficult when a project is executed only according to documents, norms, and standards (substance), especially when these are extensive and new to the contractor and where legally and technically there are no options for flexibility in terms of the praxis of daily communication during the projects.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Contextual Communicative Competence

The purpose here was to explore inter-organizational communication in multinational infrastructure projects and to contribute to the development of collaborative models in construction project management. By applying a linguistic perspective on collaboration and communication in multi-cultural and multi-lingual construction project settings, we answered the call from Koch et al. [27] and Volker [28] for more interdisciplinary research in construction management. We found that having language competence and the capacity

to communicate is not enough to communicate and collaborate in construction projects. The cultural context affects performance and is therefore important to highlight. Therefore, the term contextual communicative competence is suggested in order to capture a more holistic understanding of the concept of communicative competence.

There are, however, insights that warrant attention regarding the contextual communicative competence in inter-organizational and multinational projects. It seemed that project progress depended on the development of contextual communicative competence that involved both intra-lingual competence and intercultural business competence among both the client and contractor representatives. However, intralanguage skills are not easily developed because they depend on the specific context. Similarly, the development of intercultural business competence needs to be considered by both the client and contractor. A client can preempt problems by recognizing that contractors may be unfamiliar with domestic operational practices and help them assimilate. Contractors need to understand at initiation that the client could have different requirements to those they might operate with normally. As mutual understanding among actors in inter-organizational projects is established by negotiating meaning, learning and the sharing of understanding (of the specific content of the project) can be difficult. However, developing contextual communicative competence may support learning in and between projects and should therefore be acknowledged in collaboration models within construction project management.

6.2. Contributions

The findings contribute a linguistic approach to the development of construction project management and in particular to the discussion on collaborative approaches and project partnering (e.g., [11,12]). We accomplished this by acknowledging the need for contextual communicative competence in collaborative construction projects, and we suggest that the development of collaborative models for inter-organizational and multinational projects include support for intralingual competence and intracultural business competence. Based on our empirical study, we have also contributed to a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of the culture and organizational barriers and challenges that have been identified in previous research (e.g., [16]).

6.3. Future Research and Limitations

Actors taking part or planning to engage in multi-lingual, multinational, and multi-project contexts need to acknowledge the challenges and competencies needed for well-functioning communication and collaboration. Factors that need to be explored further are the total project length, time for upstart and planning, and joint activities as well as language and culture support and training. Nevertheless, additional work needs to be carried out in international projects where a lingua franca such as English is not stipulated in the contract and where links need to be developed between language use, cultural praxis, and ideas about how knowledge transfer, behavioral relations, and construction project management in international contexts can be developed. Clearly, there is a need for further explorative rather than confirmative studies due to the limited previous construction project research from a linguistic perspective. However, this could be a starting point toward a significant step to better understand the practice of contextual communicative competence between foreign contractors and a client, where the focus is on the substance of the communication rather than the form and grammar.

Although the limitation to the Swedish market settings and the qualitative research method constrained the statistical generalizations, analytical generalizations based on this research are possible and encouraged.

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