Language-safer space? Navigating multilingualism in a Finnish university language centre

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Abstract

As the demographic and linguistic diversity within Finnish higher education grows, institutions face increasing demands to address linguistic inclusivity and equity in multilingual contexts. University language centres are sites where these demands are negotiated in everyday professional practice, alongside their role in offering language and communication courses, as well as translation and language consultation services. This study examines how staff describe and make sense of the linguistic spaces they navigate in their everyday work.

The research question is: How do language centre staff report and reflect on their experiences of navigating linguistic spaces within a Finnish language centre? The data consist of workshop discussions in which staff shared language-related experiences.

Using thematic content analysis and a narrative-based approach, the study highlights two themes: situations marked by ambiguity and unease when expectations and linguistic resources do not align, and reflexive reorientation in which participants adjust or reimagine language practices. These themes are read through the spatial theories of Doreen Massey and Suresh Canagarajah, which conceptualize space as a dynamic field where power relations are negotiated. The results are brought into dialogue with discussions of the safer space concept, which offers a frame for considering how equity and inclusion can be supported.

The study foregrounds the need for reflexivity not only among students but also among educators and other actors in positions of authority, whose language practices shape the communicative conditions of academia. The paper offers language-safer space as a tentative exploratory concept for future theoretical and practical development.

Keywords: *multilingualism, safer spaces, higher education, professional community*

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1 Introduction

The demographic and linguistic landscape of higher education is evolving, driven by global mobility, digitalization, and an increasing emphasis on continuous learning (e.g., Altbach & Knight 2007; Haberland & Mortensen, 2012; Onikki-Rantajääskö 2024, pp. 93–134; Toom et al., 2023;). In Finland, the 2023 government program aims to raise the proportion of young adults with a university degree, while also focusing on closing the sustainability gap by attracting highly educated immigrants (Finnish Government, 2023). This trend, evident in higher education worldwide, underscores the need for educational systems to adapt to increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural realities (Huusko et al., 2023; Slowey et al., 2020). This study focuses on Finnish university language centres as sites where these dynamics converge, examining how staff navigate multilingual practices in professional interactions.

Language centres are distinctive professional communities within higher education, responsible for language education and services such as translation and text revision. In Finland, all universities have a language centre or an equivalent unit, and due to national language requirements nearly all students interact with these centres during their studies (Hildén & Taalas, 2017). As such, language centres are key actors in implementing practical language policy and shaping linguistic experiences within universities. Yet the internal language practices of these communities—and of language professionals more broadly—have received little scholarly attention. How these experts understand and enact multilingualism shapes not only their own practices but also the forms of multilingualism that universities promote.

Despite ongoing efforts to promote equity, Finnish higher education still grapples with challenges such as the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in leadership positions, opaque recruitment processes, and a generally non-inclusive academic culture (Jousilahti et al., 2022). These issues are further complicated by linguistic dynamics, as the system often privileges white, middle-class individuals who speak one of the national languages—Finnish or Swedish—as their first language (Nori et al., 2020; Souto & Lappalainen, 2025). Meanwhile, English has become both essential and contested, as universities navigate national language policies and global competitiveness (Saarinen & Taalas, 2017). Yet, internationalization framed as linguistic openness often obscures power asymmetries, including colonial legacies embedded in English as a lingua franca (Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, 2023). Finnish higher education policies also contain gatekeeping mechanisms that reinforce structural inequalities by overlooking how language proficiency, academic literacy, and disciplinary networks shape Riitaoja et al., 2022). Addressing these issues requires fostering environments where prevailing norms are critically examined— principles that are also key to the safer space approach explored in this study.

The research question guiding this study is: How do language centre staff report and reflect on their experiences of navigating linguistic spaces within a Finnish language centre? Inspired by the empirical inquiry, I explore points of convergence between safer space principles and the critical reflection and development of multilingual language practices in academia. My initial interest in the safer space framework emerged in work on language and communication learning and teaching (Kosonen et al., 2024). This prompted me to consider how the framework might also illuminate multilingual workplace communication. As a tentative opening, I propose *language-safer space* as an exploratory concept for further theoretical and practical work. My analysis is informed by relational and socially constructed understandings of space (Canagarajah, 2018; Massey, 1994, 2005; Canagarajah, 2018).

The data for this study draws on focus group workshop discussions conducted as part of a nationwide project combining developmental aims with empirical inquiry into academic language professionals' practices (Kosonen, 2025; Kosonen & Suuriniemi, 2026, in press). An earlier mixed-methods survey within the same project (Kosonen, 2025)

showed positive correlations between clear language policies, visible multilingualism, freedom of language choice, and overall staff satisfaction. The survey also identified justifications behind language choices, such as accessibility and inclusion, time-benefit ratio, concerns about national languages, and the role of lingua franca. While offering an overview, the survey lacked depth on how these dynamics are experienced in everyday interaction. The current study addresses this gap by analyzing discussions from focus group workshops with language centre staff through the small stories framework (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006;) and thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This article is structured as follows: Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 reviews the safer space phenomenon: its broader significance, its role in Finnish higher education, and ways in which it has already been connected to language research. Chapter 4 outlines the data and methods, and Chapter 5 offers analysis. Chapter 6 presents the discussion: It first summarizes the main findings and then extends the theoretical discussion by introducing the notion of a language-safer space. The article thus has a twofold aim: to provide an empirical analysis and to explore whether the notion of safer space might support more inclusive language practices in academia.

2 Multilingualism and Space

In this article, I examine how multilingual spaces are co-constructed through encounters and language practices, extending beyond physical locations to social and digital environments. Multilingualism, in this context, involves not only the ability to communicate in multiple languages but also the strategic use of the linguistic resources across various social settings, which involves a fluid negotiation of meaning, identity, and power through linguistic diversity (see e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García, 2011; Wei, 2011).

Building on diverse theoretical perspectives, I highlight the socially constructed and evolving nature of space as central to this research. Doreen Massey (1994, 2005), a human geographer, conceptualizes space as an evolving intersection of social relations, challenging the traditional view of space as a static physical entity. Massey contends that space is shaped through interactions imbued with power dynamics and influenced by historical, cultural, and economic contexts. In Massey's framework, language assumes a pivotal role, as discourse not only reflects but actively shapes and alters social relations, embodying broader social processes and power hierarchies. Similarly, Suresh Canagarajah (2018), from a sociolinguistic and postcolonial perspective, perceives linguistic practices as fluid and continually negotiated within these spaces, shaped by globalization, migration, and transnationalism. Canagarajah conceptualizes space as a social construct where multilingual practices are performed, contested, and redefined to navigate meaning, identity, and power.

Drawing on Canagarajah's (2018) spatial thinking, Lehtonen et al. (2023) demonstrate that even a single educational institution contains several linguistic spaces in which language choices are negotiated. Their analysis also shows that multilingual agency is not evenly distributed across these spaces: possibilities for using languages, and the emotions tied to those possibilities, depend on how each space organizes participation. Although their empirical focus is on school settings, the spatial insight travels well to other institutional contexts.

In universities too, diversifying linguistic environments generate tensions. These tensions surface at multiple institutional levels. Solin and Pienimäki (2024) demonstrate how linguistic regulation is dispersed across curricula, governance documents and unit-level practices, producing a fragmented regulatory landscape in which different parts of the institution pull in partly divergent directions. Salö et al. (2020) demonstrate that even when national language requirements are backgrounded in policy documents, they still

influence who is perceived as a legitimate academic and whose career paths remain open. Kuteeva (2023) highlights how global pressures toward English intersect with the relevance of national languages, creating heteroglossic spaces in which linguistic ideologies and expectations coexist and at times collide.

What has been less visible in this discussion is how university language professionals themselves reflect on these issues in their daily work. Lehtonen et al. (2023) highlight the role of teachers in enabling or constraining multilingual spaces, an insight that also frames my approach: educators need opportunities to reflect on the linguistic spaces they themselves participate in, allowing them to model and enable more equitable practices in their role as language experts. In the workshops of this study, participants engaged in such reflection. The concept of safer spaces similarly involves negotiations around inclusivity, and in what follows, I explore it as one way of approaching how communities negotiate linguistic spaces.

3   Safer spaces in higher education and multilingual context

This section provides a background for the later conceptual development of *language-safer space*. Safer space is a practice-oriented, and partly politicized concept that is difficult to define precisely (see e.g., Barrett, 2010; Iversen, 2019;). Therefore, I begin by providing an overview of the phenomenon and related academic discussions, followed by a selection of studies that specifically connect safe(r) space(s) to multilingual research.

The concept of *safer spaces* originated within marginalized communities as a way of creating environments that foster safety, inclusivity, and respect (Harless, 2018; Roth, 2019). Although initially developed to protect these communities from discrimination, harassment, and violence, these principles have gradually permeated academic and institutional contexts as part of a wider effort promote equity and build inclusive environments that recognize and respect diversity (see e.g., University of Tampere, 2021; Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023; University of the Arts Helsinki, n.d.). *Equity* in educational and academic workplace contexts means acknowledging unequal starting points and structuring institutional conditions to support fair participation (OECD, n.d.; OECD, 2020; Sturm, 2006). *Inclusion* refers to removing structural and social barriers so that all members can contribute meaningfully and feel respected (UNESCO, n.d.; Mor Barak, 2015).

In Finnish universities, the introduction of safer space principles has generally followed a bottom-up approach, reflecting their origins in marginalized communities (Kosonen et al. 2024). At the University of Helsinki, for instance, these principles were initially adopted by student organizations (e.g., The Student Union of the University of Helsinki, 2021; The Finnish Student Sports Federation, 2022) and later expanded to institutional settings like the Guidance Corner—a low-threshold space for university employees, partners, and students to engage in events related to studies and well-being (University of Helsinki, n.d.-a). Over time, these principles have become part of broader university guidelines, such as general student instructions (University of Helsinki, 2024) and specific policies such as those of the student library (Ristikartano, 2023).

The incorporation of safer space principles into Finnish higher education takes place against a backdrop of wider discussions about Nordic exceptionalism: the belief that Nordic countries, including Finland, have uniquely successful and equitable social models. While this perception highlights the region's achievements, critics argue it often overlooks the challenges faced by linguistic and cultural minorities (Keskinen 2019; Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012). According to Rastas (2012), Finnish exceptionalism operates as a national narrative that downplays racism and makes existing inequalities harder to confront.

This perception of societal harmony, central to the narrative of Nordic exceptionalism, can also shape dynamics within higher education. In the context examined in this study, such idealized framings may obscure the structural challenges and exclusions

experienced by staff and students. Alemanji (2016) notes that the educational system often overlooks the experiences and challenges faced by racial and ethnic minorities. Souto and Lappalainen (2025) explain how normative whiteness operates as an unspoken standard in Finnish universities, impacting both students and staff by reinforcing exclusionary practices and limiting genuine inclusion. Additionally, Nori et al. (2020) point out that, despite efforts to broaden access to higher education, minority students still face barriers, including explicit and implicit biases that impact their academic achievements and career progression (see also Sahlström & Silliman 2024).

While linguistic minorities globally face structural discrimination and even physical violence, the academic debate around safer spaces tend to focus on the balance between free speech and discourse practices within secure environments (see also Kosonen et al. 2024). Critics have expressed concern that the way safer spaces are interpreted and enacted may restrict free expression or limit the intellectual rigor seen as integral to academic inquiry (e.g., Barrett, 2010; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). This critique highlights concerns about the potential consequences of creating overly controlled spaces where robust debate may be stifled. However, Harless (2018) challenges the notion that intellectual challenge and safety are incompatible, arguing that safety can enable contributions from those who might otherwise remain silent. Spaces that engage diverse voices can, in turn, enrich perspectives and deepen critical reflection. Similarly, Ylönen and Hietalahti (2024) dispute the assumed incompatibility between safer spaces and intellectually challenging content, contending that even sharp humor and safety can co-exist when guided by reflexivity, relational sensitivity, and self-critical awareness.

Moreover, the concept of a safe space itself has been questioned for setting unrealistic expectations that safety can be fully guaranteed in all situations (Iversen, 2019). Partly in response to this critique, the term *safer space* has emerged emphasizing that safety is not a binary concept but rather a continuum that involves ongoing negotiation and adaptation. This idea of moving away from binary distinctions is explored further in section 5. The shift from *safe* to *safer* space acknowledges that no environment can be entirely safe for everyone, and that safety is a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed state.

The intersection of safe(r) spaces and multilingualism is not a novel concept, and scholars have already begun to explore how these ideas intertwine. Puigdevall, Pujolar, and Colombo (2022) describe *linguistic safe spaces* as "stepping stones" or "bridge places" where learners can explore new forms of expression without fear of judgment. These low-pressure environments prioritize exploration and personal growth over adherence to linguistic norms.

Translanguaging pedagogy also aligns with the idea of safer spaces in its commitment to challenging normative assumptions and foregrounding learner diversity. Translanguaging pedagogy refers to a teaching approach that encourages learners to use all their linguistic resources across language boundaries to support learning and participation, while also challenging monolingual norms (García & Li, 2014).[1] For example, Capstick and Ateek (2021) suggest that translanguaging spaces can serve as "safe spaces", supporting both language learning and psycho-social well-being in refugee education. Similarly, Dryden, Tankosić, and Dovchin (2021) highlight translanguaging as an "emotional safe space" for migrant English language learners, helping reduce anxiety and foster a supportive learning environment.

To further explore the concepts of multilingual space and safer space, I now turn to empirical data from one specific context: a university language centre. This material offers an illustrative example of how multilingual spaces are negotiated in everyday professional interaction, and how participants describe and interpret the phenomena in

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1. Interestingly, Li (2018, pp. 23–24) also introduces a notion of a *translanguaging space*, using the word *space* to describe how multilingual practices can be used to negotiate and reshape social norms in language use.

question.

4   Data, methods and positionality

The data for this study consist of recordings from three workshops conducted in 2024 as part of a community development project at a Finnish university language centre that employs over 100 staff members and offers instruction in more than a dozen languages. The workshops were designed to complement a previous survey study (Kosonen, 2025) that participants had completed earlier. Open invitations were sent through the community mailing list, and targeted invitations were extended to ensure a representative sample across various professional roles that included language teachers, translators, interns, and expert supporting teaching and learning. Participants chose from three 1.5-hour sessions—two on Zoom and one in person—with a total of 21 participants and three facilitators (myself included). The workshops followed a structured format, focusing on small group discussions. Since smaller groups were formed within each workshop, the total recorded data was approximately 7.5 hours.

The dataset described above was generated within a broader participatory action research project (see Kosonen & Suuriniemi, 2026, in press), which included participant observation, field notes, and reflective dialogue. Although these additional materials are not analyzed here, the wider project context informed my understanding of the community and its practices.

Participants were informed about the study during registration to the workshops and provided consent. Participants were asked to complete a pre-task, recalling a work-related language incident, and optionally sharing it during the workshop. Participants were asked to complete a pre-task by recalling a work-related language incident and, optionally, sharing it during the workshop. Participants themselves referred to these as *incidents*, *stories*, or *situations* (in Finnish *tilanne*, *tarina*, *kertomus*), and I use these terms interchangeably to refer to participants' narrated experiences. This exercise, loosely based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique, helped structure the workshops, which followed a set format:

1. Discussing language practices and forming small groups
2. Sharing and discussing incidents in small groups
3. Brainstorming ideas
4. Group debriefing.

The analysis in this study focuses on Phase 2. To identify and delineate the incidents, I drew on the small stories approach (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006;). Small stories refer to narratives about ongoing, hypothetical, or recently experienced events that do not conform to the traditional structure of "big stories", which often focus on significant life events. Instead, small stories are contextually situated, co-constructed in interaction, and reflect the dynamic negotiation of identities and social practices (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2015; Georgakopoulou, 2006). These narratives may initially seem trivial but offer insights into how individuals navigate social dynamics and position themselves within their environments. As seen in one participant's comment, *This isn't really a story, but just a small situation I've noticed happening repeatedly*, these moments reveal how storytelling and observation often intertwine (Georgakopoulou 2015). Some participants said they did not remember the pre-task, and many instead shared their experiences spontaneously, with one story often prompting another. Consequently, it was not always possible to distinguish between pre-prepared and spontaneously generated stories. I therefore examined storytelling

and subsequent discussions that emerged during Phase 2 as part of the same meaning-making process.

To analyze these small stories, I employed thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in two phases:

Phase 1: Deductive coding. Based on earlier survey research (Kosonen, 2025), I identified two themes for closer examination: communication confidence and emotions, and accessibility and inclusion. These themes guided the initial coding and shaped the overall analytical focus.

Phase 2: Inductive analysis. Within these two themes, I conducted six iterative rounds of close reading, coding, and comparison in ATLAS.ti software, examining both semantic and latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step-by-step process allowed me to refine the coding, group recurring features, and trace how the themes unfolded in practice. Through these iterations, the analysis developed into two overarching categories: metapragmatic practices and the grey area. While small stories provided the framework for focusing on the data, thematic content analysis was used as the primary method to systematically interpret the narratives. This approach helped reveal how participants conceptualized linguistic spaces within Finnish university language centres.

The data excerpts are presented in their original languages with English translations where necessary. Anonymity is prioritized by including only context-specific details relevant for analysis, rather than applying uniform descriptors. Participants were given the option to select their pseudonyms and pronouns, addressing ethical concerns related to representation (Wang et al., 2024). The small stories emerged as parts of broader discussions and presenting them with essential interactional and contextual elements posed challenges for the overall length of the text. I have therefore selected a few longer representative excerpts to do justice to the narrative form and highlight the participants' voices while ensuring contextual richness. To focus on meaning-making, the excerpts are transcribed verbatim, with micro-level phenomena left for future research.

My dual role as a Finnish L1 writing instructor and language centre teacher provided valuable insight but also shaped how participants interacted with me and how I interpreted their stories. As a white, middle-class academic with a linguistically privileged repertoire in the Finnish university context (Souto & Lappalainen, 2025; Nori et al., 2020), I occupied a privileged position that required sustained reflexive work. The participatory action research framework of the broader project supported this ongoing reflexivity (see Kosonen et al., 2026 for further discussion).

5   Linguistic Spaces in Flux

This section presents an empirical analysis of how language centre staff report and reflect on their experiences of navigating linguistic spaces. In the data, I identified recurring patterns that I grouped and named under two interrelated thematic categories: 1) the grey area, which captures situations marked by ambiguity and unease when expectations and communicative resources do not align, and 2) reflexive reorientation, which focuses on instances where participants adjust or reimagine communicative practices. Together, these themes trace a movement from uncertainty toward attempts at renegotiation, a dynamic that I later connected to discussions of safer and braver spaces.

5.1 Grey area

In their small stories, participants repeatedly described moments when language use felt uncertain or difficult to interpret. These stories sketched a space that was unsettled and in-between, where norms and personal experiences did not neatly align. In the analysis, I use the metaphor **grey area** as a descriptive label for this recurring pattern.

One example of the grey area emerges in Pete's story (Excerptample 1), where he

describes the discomfort that arises when interaction feels simultaneously familiar and unsettling:

> Excerpt 1. *Se on just se all in -ongelma mun mielestä, että joko sitä joko sitä osataan tai sitten sitä ei osata, että siihen väliin siihen semmoiseen. Tiiättekse sen outolaakson. […] et jos joku ihminen näkee toisen ihmisen niinku tosi kauniina ja sit jos on oikeesti niinku sellanen joku kissarobotti ni se on vaa niinku söpö esine mut @sitku se on sellanen niinku ihmisrobotti, joka on melkeen muttei ihan ni sitä kok… et se muuttuu niinku creepyks.@ [...] Se on niinku se outolaakso. Niinku täs kielitaidossaki on tää uncanny valley niinku sä et oo niinku ihan osaamaton, mutta sä et pysty niinku engage fully niin se tekee niinku kanssaihmisten olon niinku suomi toisena kielenä opiskelijan kanssa, että miten sen kanssa niinku puhutaan. Niin tämä vaihe niinku ihmisen kielitaidossa että sä niinku tavallaan osaat mutta mutta niin niin niinku se on se missä niinku kiinnostus pitäis olla mutta se ei ole koska sä joko osaat tai et osaa.*
>
> *That's exactly the all-in problem in my opinion, that either you know it or you don't know it, and there's no in-between. You know that uncanny valley, right? […] Like, if someone sees another person as really beautiful, and then if it's really like some kind of cat robot, it's just a cute object, but @when it's like a human robot that's almost but not quite right, it becomes... creepy.@ […] That's the uncanny valley. And it's the same with language skills this uncanny valley, you're not completely incompetent, but you can't like engage fully, and that makes others feel uneasy. Like with students learning Finnish as a second language, how do you talk to them? This stage in someone's language skills, where you kind of know it but, but, you know, that's where the interest should be, but it isn't, because either you know it or you don't.*
> (Pete)

In Excerpt 1, Pete describes that he disrupts the binary notion of knowing or not knowing a language, raising questions about how to navigate moments that don't fit neatly into categories. Pete refers to this as *outolaakso*, *an uncanny valley*, a concept originally introduced by Mori (1970) to describe the discomfort people feel when robots appear almost, but not quite, human (Mori, MacDorman, & Kageki, 2012). Similarly, in multilingual settings, an interactional uncanny valley emerges when deviations from expected language use cause an unsettling gap between perception and reality. These moments reveal a tension in encountering otherness, highlighting the discomfort of navigating an ambiguous space between established social categories. The @-symbol in Excerpt 1 marks a tonal shift, and the use of the word *creepy* resonates with a sense of alienation and unfamiliarity, evoking the concept of the uncanny valley.

In Pete's narrative, the uncertainty was examined from the perspective of the more proficient language user. The following Excerpt 2 sheds light on the phenomenon from the perspective of a language learner, capturing Carrie's experience in a Finnish-language discussion, where she fears being asked a question:

> Excerpt 2. And then I remember just getting, like super anxious and being like, oh God, what if they're like "what do you have to say about that?" and then *I'm like, "I have no idea what anyone just said for the past five minutes"* and I'm like my face turning red almost and like getting all anxious. (Carrie)

Carrie's story exemplifies the tension between visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion. Her description of blushing and anxiety shows how language use is emotional and physical, tied to spatial awareness. Such experiences point to the relational dynamics of being seen, evaluated, and positioned within a shared space (Kosonen & Intke-Hernández, 2024). As Canagarajah (2018) notes, multilingual spaces are rarely neutral: they are sites of ongoing negotiation over meaning, legitimacy, and belonging.

The metaphor grey area can be read through Massey's (2005) concept of *throwntogetherness*, which highlights the contingency of situations where heterogeneous

trajectories come together without coordination. Massey (2005) uses the term to describe how social, material, and institutional processes are brought into temporary and often uneasy coexistence.

Marko's story in Excerpt 3 highlights another dimension of the grey area, focusing on asymmetrical interaction in which participants bring different linguistic resources into play, and showing how a shift in language context can alter the interpretation of social cues.

> Excerpt 3. *I was usually in a situation with this person where there was another teacher who didn't understand Finnish, so the conversation was usually always in English. And then this person often came across as incredibly blunt to the point where me and this other teacher were discussing whether we can even continue working with this person. [...] Then I had more encounters with this person where they spoke Finnish to me, my experience [...] started to change quite a lot. [...] It was an eye-opening experience in that I think the language that was used really limited their expression to the point where we were considering whether we could even work with them. But when I had more encounters with them where I spoke Finnish with them, I had a much more pleasant experience of them. [...] The language that is used [...] can really affect how somebody comes across.* (Marko)

Marko's story (Excerpt 3) revolves around his changing understanding, which he describes as *eye-opening*. Initially, when the conversation was in English, the other person's behavior was perceived as *blunt*. Later, when Marko spoke Finnish with this person, he reported having to reassess his earlier impressions. This highlights how assumptions and social expectations can alter as the language context shifts. The grey area here lies in the ambiguity of social cues. As Marko continued to interact with the same person in Finnish, his perceptions began to shift, prompting him to reconsider the assumptions that had guided his earlier interpretation. Marko's *eye-opening* moment marks an initial step toward the reflexive reorientation, the second theme that I examine next.

5.2 Reflexive reorientation

Whereas the theme of grey area focused on the conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity, the next theme, **reflexive reorientation**, describes a shift in stance: participants begin to treat unsettling situations as something they can examine or act upon whether by reassessing assumptions, working to reshape language practices, or considering alternative ways of proceeding. Because the workshops consist of language users commenting on language, the data are inherently reflexive. What is analytically central here, however, is that reflexivity was already embedded in the situations the stories described: participants chose to recount moments in which language was explicitly commented on, or alternative ways of acting were considered in the very moment.

Michael Silverstein (1993) conceptualizes reflexivity as part of language's semiotic organization: linguistic signs carry, alongside their referential work, an orientation to the conditions of their own use. Asif Agha (2007, p. 16, pp. 27–32) develops this insight by showing how such orientations feed into the ongoing formation of social norms, roles, and expectations, and how speakers contribute to these processes when they comment on, perform, or otherwise frame language in interaction implicitly in stance-taking or explicitly in metapragmatic commentary (Agha 2007 pp. 150–153).

In the present dataset, the explicit form stands out. Participants recount moments when language practices came under adjustment. Seen through a spatial lens, such moments show how linguistic space is actively reshaped: when participants label, assess, or reinterpret language use, they participate in reproducing and reshaping the hierarchies and expectations that structure the space (Canagarajah 2018; Massey 1994; 2005).

One prominent example was a Zoom event involving staff, students, and external

stakeholders. Nearly half of the participants narrated or said they recognized this incident, providing stories from both the participant and organizer perspective. According to the participants, the event began in English, and after someone switched to speaking Finnish, another attendee insisted that *in the name of inclusion* English should be the only language used. The participants reported that the comment came so unexpectedly that nobody challenged it, and the event continued in English. The person who had spoken Finnish described feeling *embarrassed* and some of the organizers said that they felt *unsure* as this incident disrupted the planned multilingual approach of the event. Both inside the stories and in the subsequent discussions, the participants reflected on why nobody questioned the interruption and why they felt compelled to follow the directive without discussion.

The explicit intervention functioned as a metacommentary on acceptable language use, while participants later reflected on having recognized the need to question the directive in the moment but feeling unable to act on it. This highlights a need for practices that would better support such negotiations.

In the workshop discussions, individual reflections often moved toward broader considerations of policy and practice. The story about the Zoom meeting exemplifies this shift: in the workshop, it was followed by a collective discussion on the absence of an established language policy, as the centre's own guidelines had not yet been introduced when the incident occurred. Some participants noted that the situation might be different now, given that guidelines have since been introduced. The problem, as participants later pointed out, was not speaking English per se, but the sudden imposition of an unnegotiated rule and the lack of shared tools for addressing the situation in the moment.

Although discussing language choices was considered important among the participants, it was not seen as an easy task. In the following Excerpt 4a, Carrie describes her concern that expressing a language preference during a Zoom breakout room might lead to being categorized into a group with which she did not wish to identify:

> Excerpt 4. *This might just be like my own kind of paranoia, but I feel like, you know, there are people [...] both in the language center and outside of the language center who are really resistant or even kind of like don't want to ever use Finnish. And so [a] I kind of like don't want to put myself in that group like I don't want to integrate and be like "let's use English because I don't want to work on Finnish or I gave up on that like a decade ago or something". So I think that yeah, it's [b] it's a lot to explain when it's just like a 10 minute small group breakout room and like yes, I want to practice, but honestly I can't really practice unless the other people are'nt going to simplify their Finnish for me.*
>
> *And I think also just like kind of the way that Finnish society is like [c] people will not really like check in necessarily and be like, hey, so Carrie, are you understanding things like is this OK or should we switch to English? Nobody would ever do that. So it would just be like [d] whatever decision was made in the beginning that's what we're going with and [d] I just have to accept it and go along for the ride.*
> (Carrie)

Excerpt 4 highlights a recurring theme: Zoom breakout rooms were experienced as challenging spaces where participants were suddenly placed with others—*thrown together*, as Massey (2005) would put it—without knowing their language preferences (b). While language practices are situated and negotiated in interaction (Canagarajah, 2018; Massey, 2005), such negotiations are not always feasible in every situation due to time constraints (see also Kosonen, 2025). This underlines the need for more fundamental, community-wide discussions on language practices. Carrie also notes that *people will not really check in* to see if others are following or comfortable, adding that *nobody would ever do that* (c). Similar patterns have been documented elsewhere: Lehtimaja and Kotilainen (2019), in their conversation-analytic study of a multilingual workplace, note that limited

linguistic resources are often handled delicately with face-saving strategies. However, they also suggest that, in some situations, it may be useful to make interactional goals or understanding problems explicitly visible.

Carrie's remark in Exerpt 4 (d) underscores the feeling of being locked into an unspoken norm once the initial choice has been made. The passive acceptance to *go along for the ride* can be interpreted as reflecting a limited sense of agency in shaping the interaction. This aligns with Massey's (1994, 2005) view of space as relational yet sometimes closed when dominant norms go unquestioned. Similarly, Canagarajah (2018) highlights how communicative spaces are co-constructed but not equally accessible, as individuals' ability to shape interaction depends on their positioning and perceived legitimacy. This sense of asymmetry and limited possibilities for influence also resonates with a recent report on parallel language use in faculty councils (Solin et al., 2024), which noted that those speaking their first language were most often the ones speaking.

Carrie's story (Excerpt 4) illustrates how personal feelings, assumptions about others' language ideologies, and perceived social norms intersect in her reflexive reasoning. Her account moves across levels: self-reflection, imagined audience reactions, and wider societal interactional expectations. By naming the assumptions that constrained her in the moment, she gestures toward the possibility of approaching similar situations differently in the future. Across the dataset, similar reflections point to a desire to discuss and organize language use more collectively rather than rely on taken-for-granted assumptions, aligning with the dynamics of safer spaces outlined in Chapter 3.

In next Excerpt 5, Aino shares a story that illustrates a reflexive reorientation in which awareness gives rise to new practice. In her story, she first described teaching Finnish in an English-speaking country for several years, where she was encouraged to ask for pronouns. Upon returning to Finland, she said she was *startled* (in Finnish *hätkähti*) to realize that this practice wasn't part of the basic routines in the language centre, even in contexts where languages mark gender distinctions. Since Finnish lacks grammatical gender, the third-person singular pronoun *hän* does not function as a marker of gender. In the following excerpt, she explains how she adapted this practice in Finland by combining her language preferences with her pronouns:

> Excerpt 5. *Meillähän tätä, tai siis, ööh, tätä ei välttämättä silleen ole tarpeellista selvittää, koska se on se hän-pronomini, mutta. Halusin jotenkin, niinku, tuoda ilmi, että […] näitä asioita mietin ja pidän niitä tärkeitä, niin sitten lisäsin omaan, niinku, sähköpostiallekirjoitukseen niinku pronominini ja samalla halusin niiden kautta. Että se palvelee niinku kahta funktiota, et vaikka mä kommunikoin suurimmaksi osaksi suomeksi töissäni, sekä opiskelijoiden että kollegoiden kanssa, niin että myös välittyis se, et millä kielillä mun kanssa voi kommunikoida, ni mul on se hän, hon ja she niinku siellä mun nimen perässä. Niin se on ollut musta kiva pieni viesti niistä kielistä ja sukupuolesta, että ehkä mun kanssa näistä asioista voi turvallisessa ympäristössä keskustella.*
>
> *So, like, we don't really have this, or, um, it's not really necessary to clarify, since there's just the hän pronoun, but… I just wanted to, like, make it clear that […] that I've thought about these things and find them important, so I added my pronouns to my email signature, you know. So it kind of serves two purposes: like, even though I mostly communicate in Finnish at work, with both students and colleagues, I also wanted to show what languages you can use with me, so I have hän, hon, and she after my name. I think it's a nice little message about the languages I use and also about the gender –that maybe you can talk to me about these topics in a safe environment.*
> (Aino)

Aino's practice in Excerpt 5 illustrates how language-specific pronouns act as indices (Silverstein, 1976), together generating several overlapping social meanings. First, they index her gender identity, drawing on the presupposed convention (Silverstein, 1976; Moore, 2020) of using preferred pronouns—a practice she adopted abroad. Second, she innovatively signals her linguistic preferences: *hän* for Finnish, *hon* for Swedish, and

she for English. This introduces a reconfiguration of norms (Silverstein, 1976; Moore, 2020), establishing how she presents herself as a trilingual individual. Since *hän* is gender-neutral, its inclusion in the pronoun list seems to function primarily to make Finnish visible as a language choice. Lastly, her use of these pronouns can also be read as a pedagogical and professional gesture aimed at fostering inclusivity, signaling that discussions on language and identity are welcome.

In a workshop discussion, participants developed this story further by suggesting that the multilingual pronouns could also be used next to names during Zoom sessions, serving as a signal of both language and identity preferences, reinforcing inclusivity in digital spaces. This analysis leads to a broader consideration of how textual elements can function as material symbols of communication expectations and preferences, helping to pre-empt uncomfortable situations and foster inclusion within institutional contexts[2].

Language negotiations may take the form of written principles, where practices materialize in artifacts and, in turn, shape space (see also Canagarajah, 2018). Such agreements formalize communication expectations at different levels, from national laws to unit-specific policies. In this sense, they resemble safer space guidelines as textual articulations of shared values and preferred ways of interacting. As with safer space principles, however, the challenge lies in their enactment.

In the workplace under study, both unit-level and university-wide guidelines were in place, yet workshop discussions revealed that, although participants acknowledged their importance, only a few had read them (see Kosonen & Suuriniemi, 2026, in press). This highlights a familiar tension between policy and practice (see also Solin & Pienimäki, 2024; Solin et al., 2024): written commitments depend on everyday interactional work to become meaningful. The workshop itself functioned as one such medium, where participants revisited and reinterpreted everyday experiences through shared reflection. While the previous examples examined reflexive reorientation within participants' stories and the discussions that followed them, the next Excerpt 6 points to an institutional layer of reflexivity:

> Excerpt 6. *And I think here at Language Centre, we are responsible for, for our students, that we, we take care of them and even this what we're doing here right now is exactly that. We are instructing our staff to be more inclusive.* (Lea)

Lea's reflection (Excerpt 6) also resonates with Aino's earlier reflections on the use of pronouns (Excerpt 5). Both can be seen as reflexive acts that articulate a professional stance and gesture toward the institution's broader commitments to inclusion. Yet Lea's remark shifts attention from the narrated incident to the workshop situation itself. Her observation functions as a metacommentary on the ongoing process, acknowledging that the group is not only discussing inclusion but enacting it as part of the collaborative work. In this sense, the reflexive act is directed at the research setting and the collaborative work unfolding within it. This aligns with the methodological orientation of the project. Conducted as part of a broader initiative informed by Participatory Action Research (Kosonen & Suuriniemi, 2026, in press; Lewin, 1946), the study treats inquiry and action as mutually constitutive. The workshop therefore operates both as an analytical site and as an intervention: it models the dialogic and transformative practices it seeks to understand.

5.3 Towards Safer and Braver Spaces

Across the data, two interrelated themes recur and together point to a movement from uncertainty (Section 5.1) toward reflexive reorientation (Section 5.2). This movement

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2. Aino's reflexive reorientation also appeared to prompt a small shift in community practices, as several colleagues later began to adopt similar forms of self-introduction. However, this observation derives from participatory observation and is not part of the analysed dataset.

resonates with discussions of safer spaces, where difference and tension are approached as starting points for renegotiation.

In the grey area situations described in the data, ambiguity often pulled interaction toward binary interpretations, such as competence versus incompetence or inclusion versus exclusion. Discussions of safer spaces are similarly marked by tensions around ambiguity and binary framing. In debates on safer spaces, positions tend to harden and discussions become polarized, with critics arguing that safer spaces may produce overly controlled environments in which safety is treated as an absolute and difficult speech is curtailed (see Section 3). Against this backdrop, the Roestone Collective (2014) proposes that safer spaces should not be understood as fixed binaries of safe and unsafe but as dynamic, relational constructs shaped by continuous negotiation. In this light, the phenomenon I call the grey area is not simply a sign of something going wrong; it marks a moment when taken-for-granted assumptions loosen, and alternative ways of organizing participation become thinkable.

When the binaries begin to lose their grip, participants often pivot to examining the assumptions that shaped their initial interpretations, as Marko did in Excerpt 3, when he described an *eye-opening* experience. In these moments, the interpretive ground shifts: what first appeared as a problem "out there" becomes something to be reconsidered in one's own reasoning. Similar reflexive work underlies the idea of safer spaces, where inclusion is framed as an ongoing process of confronting and reflecting the assumptions that shape communication. At the same time, many safer space principles include the injunction "we don't assume", which carries an inherent paradox: social interaction necessarily depends on assumptions to make meaning possible. However, frames are not fixed; they are adaptable and can shift in response to context and negotiation (Goffman, 1981). The key issue, then, is not whether we assume, but how we recognize those assumptions and, when necessary, reorient ourselves and act differently.

In this light, Arao and Clemens' (2013) idea of *brave spaces* complements the concept of safer spaces by adding another dimension to emotional safety: the courage to engage in difficult and sometimes uncomfortable conversations. While safer spaces aim to provide emotional security, brave spaces extend this by encouraging individuals to confront challenging dialogues and the discomfort that arises. The following sequence (Excerpt 7) illustrates how moments of bringing difficult matters into speech surfaced in the data. Before the excerpt quoted below, Lea had shared a story describing how she realized she had judged a student's language ability based on appearance and said that she had felt deeply embarrassed when she realized this. Maria, who said she had experienced something similar, shared her own emotional response, and Venni acknowledged the courage needed to recognize and apologize for such mistakes:

> Excerpt 7. *Maria: It was so bad and so embarrassing that I still remember it [covers her face with both hands].*
> *Venni: But yes, also in that situation, it takes some bravery to say it out loud and say I'm sorry.*
> (Maria; Venni)

After Venni's recognition of the bravery required to acknowledge mistakes (Excerpt 7), Jim (practicing Finnish) reflects on his personal struggle with showing vulnerability in Excerpt 8. He describes how difficult it is to balance the need to project confidence while internally grappling with emotional strain. This mismatch mirrors Carrie's narrative in Excerpt 4, where she discusses the challenge of meeting social expectations as a language learner:

> Excerpt 8. *Jim: I wish I was able to show my vulnerability because I remember just one day I was just so exhausted and I was still trying to speak Finnish and I was like, I put on this really brave face, You know.*

Lea: Yes, I know. [nodding]
Jim: Like outside I was doing really great [waves his open hand in front of his face], but inside like my eyes were burning and I was like I wanted to cry, I probably could. That's just kind of that, that vulnerability. It's really important to be able to experience, to let free in those situations, let the crack show because those expressions of vulnerability are sometimes the only thing that can really help, to help us all to transform.
Lea: Yeah, that's so true.
Venni: Yeah. [nodding]
Lea: And that's humane. That's normal. That's how people are.
(Jim, Lea, Venni)

As Jim opens up in Excerpt 8, both Lea and Venni respond with validation. This exchange highlights how the group fosters a space where difficult emotions are treated as something that can be shared and accepted. Applied to multilingual communication, Arao and Clemens' (2013) concept of brave spaces[3] invites both language learners and proficient speakers to embrace linguistic uncertainty. By working through discomfort together, participants can navigate challenging moments in interaction in ways that support mutual learning. This mirrors broader debates on safer spaces, where the question is not only how to protect emotional security but how to sustain space for critical or challenging speech at the same time (see Section 3). In this sense, the grey area is not a space to avoid but one where deeper understanding can emerge. Stepping into such shared uncertainty can transform what initially feels like an awkward moment into a more open, multi-voiced interaction, where differences are explored rather than hidden (see also Kuteeva 2023).

6   Discussion

This study asked how the staff of a language centre reflect on and negotiate linguistic spaces in their everyday work. The analysis brought into view two themes: stories of interaction marked by uncertainty, ambiguity or friction, and moments in which participants reported reflexive reorienting by reconsidering language practices. These themes frequently appear side by side: descriptions of unsettled interactional space and accounts of rethinking or acting otherwise.

Participants expressed a wish to address interaction and language as they unfolded, but they also reported lacking courage or workable means for doing so. Many wondered how similar encounters could be approached differently in the future. References to institutional policies remained abstract: participants were aware of the guidelines, but few had read them, revealing a gap between institutional frameworks and everyday practices.

It is at this intersection between awareness and action, between the wish to engage, and the fear of overstepping, that the safer-space framework might become relevant. It seeks to make the conditions of participation explicit and to articulate the emotional and ethical conditions that enable dialogue. The principles might offer a vocabulary for practices already described in the workshops, such as checking in, naming uncertainty, or acknowledging discomfort. In this sense, the principles of safer space can be understood as institutionalized forms of the reflexive work already visible in participants' discussions[4].

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3. However, *brave space* has been criticized for shifting the burden of education onto marginalized groups, trivializing their experiences, and increasing their emotional labor (Zheng, 2016). In my research, I use the term *safer space* (and subsequently *language-safer space*), acknowledging these critiques but primarily because the concept is already familiar and, as such, more readily applicable in the context of institutional development work.

4. During a subsequent brainstorm phase of the workshop, safer space was explicitly mentioned as a further suggestion by several participants. For instance, one written suggestion read: *Goal setting & expectations to follow safer space guidelines.* This material falls outside the empirical scope of the article, which focuses on the small story. Still, these suggestions illustrate that the idea of safer spaces did not emerge

The findings suggest that the uncertainties described in the analysis, together with participants' wish to revisit or rework such moments, point to a need for tools that can hold both affect and reflection. Safer space principles offer one such tool, complementing language awareness (e.g., Lilja et al., 2017; Suuriniemi, 2023). Whereas *language awareness* (in Finnish *kielitietoisuus*) emphasizes cognitive recognition of linguistic diversity and power dynamics, safer space principles draw attention to felt experiences and provide a more practice-oriented framework for fostering inclusion. This emotional dimension is urgent for example in the current context of declining student well-being in Finland (Salmela-Aro et al., 2023), underscoring the need for spaces that support both academic engagement and emotional safety.

I now turn from empirical analysis to a more theoretical discussion. I first propose the notion of a *language-safer space*[5] as a heuristic for extending safer space thinking to multilingual dynamics. Table 1 summarizes how general safer space principles intersect with their potential application in multilingual settings, with examples drawn from Chapter 5.

Table 1. Safer space principles in multilingual contexts: a heuristic overview.

	Safer Spaces (general)	Language-safer space (multilingual interaction)	Link to the data examples
Core focus	Provides a reflexive framework for organising inclusive and equitable participation.	Draws attention to how language resources shape who can participate and how.	Participants' wish to address interaction and language as they unfolded, combined with a sense of lacking courage or workable practices for doing so. Language-safer space might offer one such tool.
Negotiating norms	Encourages making interactional norms explicit and, at times, formulating written principles to guide conduct.	Invites explicit talk about language practices and, when useful, written guidelines.	The Zoom episode, where a sudden, unnegotiated switch to English went unchallenged, made the absence of shared norms visible only in later reflection. Carrie (ex 2, 4) described hesitating to interrupt, ask for clarification, or suggest a language shift, indicating that participation norms remained unspoken. Maria and Venni (ex 7) questioned the norm that mistakes should not be spoken about openly. Jim (ex 8) reported presenting a confident exterior while describing internal strain, drawing attention to expectations around how vulnerability may be expressed.
Power and hierarchies	Aims to surface and address structural inequalities.	Challenges linguistic hierarchies and promotes equitable language use	Marko's story (ex 3), where a person was interpreted as *blunt* when using English but differently when speaking Finnish, illustrating how linguistic resources shape social legibility and interpersonal evaluations; Carrie's and Jim's stories of feeling visible yet unable to fully participate (ex 2 and 8); Carrie's concerns about being categorized as someone who does not want to integrate if she opts for English (ex 4).
Embodiment and emotion	Recognizes bodily diversity, personal boundaries, and emotional safety in shared spaces. Considers accessibility and physical safety in spatial design.	Highlights the embodied and emotional aspects of language use.	Carrie's description of blushing and anxiety in Finnish-medium meetings (ex 2); Jim's story of putting on *a brave face* while feeling close to tears (ex 8); the *creepy* register in Pete's "uncanny valley" metaphor (ex 1); workshop dialogues where vulnerability and apology are acknowledged as part of working through tension rather than avoiding it (ex 7 and 8).

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only from the analytic framing but was also recognised by participants as a relevant direction for future development.

5. I chose to use the phrase *language-safer spaces* in this study instead of *safer language spaces* because it aligns with the widely used concept of *safer space*, emphasizing the ongoing negotiation of safety rather than implying a fixed *language space*, whatever that may entail. This phrasing highlights how multilingual safety is co-constructed within physical, social, and material environments and also intentionally mirrors the Finnish *kieliturvallinen tila*. While the term may not be grammatically conventional, I view grammar as an evolving system shaped by practical needs (see, e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

	Safer Spaces (general)	Language-safer space (multilingual interaction)	Link to the data examples
Polyphony and diversity	Promotes coexistence of multiple voices and perspectives in all forms of interaction.	Supports the inclusion of diverse linguistic identities and practices.	Aino's multilingual pronoun signature as a sign that others may use different languages with her and raise identity-related questions in a safe way (ex 5).

As the table shows, the concept of language-safer space reorients the safer space principles toward the role of language as a site of inclusion. While both frameworks emphasize openness, reflexivity, and equity, the language-safer space makes visible the role of language in fostering them.

Taking seriously a poststructuralist view of language as dynamic, embodied, and entangled with material, historical, and social conditions (Canagarajah, 2018; Massey, 2005), it may seem paradoxical to introduce a concept like language-safer space. If language is not a discrete code, but an emergent, spatial and relational process, why distinguish language-safety from other forms of safety?

Yet this very paradox is what gives the concept its critical potential. Precisely because language is embedded in broader dynamics of power and belonging, naming it explicitly opens space for reflection. Anchored in the familiar discourse of safer spaces, the concept also unsettles and expands what we think language *is* and *does*. Asking what constitutes a language-safer space pushes us to consider language not just as a communicative tool, but as a site of affect, legitimacy, and power.

Rantanen (2024) cautions that pedagogical approaches to multilingualism can remain at the level of celebratory diversity if they do not also make visible the structural inequalities that shape participation. From this perspective, the purpose of a language-safer space is not to promote multilingualism for its own sake, but to invite a critical examination of linguistic rights, access, and recognition in interaction.

Interestingly, the idea of a language-safer space is not only conceptual but already present in institutional policy. The University of Helsinki has published *The Linguistically Aware Safer Space Principles* as part of its Guidelines for Language Awareness, available under the *Sustainability and Responsibility* section of the university's website (University of Helsinki, n.d.-b). Although this research project is not connected to the creation of these principles, the document serves as an empirical example of how the notion of safer space thinking is being extended to include linguistic dimensions in higher education.

Beyond its theoretical relevance, the study also offers practical insights into the development of professional reflexivity and institutional responsibility. In Finnish universities, safer space principles have grown out of student-led initiatives (see Section 2). However, this study offers a different perspective: language professionals in positions of pedagogical responsibility engaged in reflexive dialogue about their own language practices. This suggests that expertise entails not only knowledge but also a readiness to question and reflect on one's own ways of acting, to be able to model them for others. In this way, the study also calls top-down actors to take part in the dialogue.

This study has several limitations. The dataset is small and context-bound, restricting generalizability. Its focus on small stories foregrounds experiential meaning-making, while longitudinal and developmental aspects are addressed in the broader project (Kosonen & Suuriniemi, 2026, in press). Moreover, the notion of language-safer space could only be introduced here as a preliminary opening, leaving theoretical elaboration and exploration with other datasets to future research.

While the study is grounded in a poststructuralist view of language (Canagarajah, 2018), much of the workshop discussion still revolved around named languages. This is not only a methodological limitation but also an empirical finding, illustrating how institutional discourse continues to reify linguistic boundaries, even among language professionals. At the same time, the excerpts also demonstrate participants' willingness to challenge dominant assumptions and to imagine more inclusive and diverse practices.

The data thus reflect both the persistence of established frameworks and emerging efforts to move beyond them.

A further limitation concerns the identity-political charge of the safer space concept, which may evoke resistance, as inequality is easily dismissed as divisive identity politics. This tension must be understood in Nordic contexts, where institutional discourses shaped by Nordic exceptionalism (Keskinen, 2019; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012; Rastas, 2012) tend to emphasize egalitarianism and consensus, making it more difficult to recognize systemic inequality. In such environments, there is also a risk that concepts originating in marginalized groups' struggles and activist efforts are absorbed into institutional reassurance and self-congratulatory moral discourse that polishes the institutional image rather than challenges it. Precisely this risk highlights why language-safer space principles should not be seen as feel-good guidelines, but as critical questions about equity that may even feel unsettling for those who occupy normative positions.

The study also suggests that while language-safer space principles hold potential for fostering belonging, their central contribution relies on ongoing negotiation and community engagement rather than static guidelines. Discussions around these principles can strengthen participants' awareness of how communication is organized, reframe discomfort and uncertainty as essential aspects of growth (Arao & Clemens, 2013), and view tensions as productive spaces for dialogue and reflection (see also Kuteeva, 2023).

The methodological approach of this research itself contributed to the reconfiguration of space: by engaging participants in reflective workshops, the research both generated knowledge and opened space for renegotiation. In this sense, the workshops modelled the reflexivity that language-aware higher education demands, offering a concrete example of research-based impact in institutional settings.

Acknowledgements

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