

**Exploring Concepts in the English as a Second Language
Classroom**

*Challenges and Potential Related to the Exploration of Concepts from an English as a
Second Language Perspective*

Maren Eliassen

NTNU, Programme for Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the didactical challenges and potential related to the exploration of concepts from an English as a second language (ESL) perspective. To investigate this, I have followed a concept learning project called Concept Learning for Empowerment through Analysis and Reflection (CLEAR). My goal is to examine how a concept learning project such as this can be useful in a second language learning setting. Ten students from Germany and Norway participated in the CLEAR project examined by this study. The students all had English as a second language which is relevant when concept learning is to be explored within an ESL perspective.

The CLEAR project involves various stages, including individual work involving exploring concepts at the students' respective universities and on an online platform, and cooperative work during a workshop at which the students discussed the different meanings of concepts. Each stage has been followed in this study. My role during the CLEAR project was to be an outside observer. Once the CLEAR project had been completed, interviews with the students were conducted to acquire a deeper understanding of the way in which a concept learning project may be organised. Exploring the different stages of a concept learning project has provided insight into the challenges and potential related to working with concepts. The material consists of information about CLEAR which was provided to the participants, written entries, observation of the workshop and interviews with participants.

I found that there are several challenges to consider when implementing a concept learning project in a second language learning context, such as language issues (a lack of language proficiency and language confidence in English) and interculturality (a reluctance to contribute to discussions and the fear of saying something wrong or offensive). My data also show potential related to exploring concepts; for instance, the opportunity to exchange ideas can provide a better understanding of how concepts can be understood differently.

SAMMENDRAG

Hensikten med denne masteroppgaven har vært å undersøke didaktiske utfordringer og muligheter knyttet til utforskning av begreper, fra et engelsk som andrespråks-perspektiv (ESL). For å undersøke dette, har jeg fulgt et begrepslæringsprosjekt kalt Concept Learning for Empowerment through Analysis and Reflection (CLEAR). Nærmere bestemt ønsker jeg å undersøke hvordan et begrepslæringsprosjekt som CLEAR kan være nyttig i engelsk som andrespråksundervisning. Ti studenter fra Tyskland og Norge deltok i CLEAR prosjektet som denne masterstudien har fulgt. Studentene hadde engelsk som andrespråk, noe som er relevant når begrepslæring sees på i et ESL-perspektiv.

CLEAR består av ulike faser, som inkluderer individuelt arbeid med å utforske ulike begrep på studentenes respektive universitet og på CLEAR's internettplattform, samt et møte mellom studentene der de diskuterte ulike betydninger av noen utvalgte begrep. Hver fase har blitt fulgt i denne studien. Min rolle under CLEAR prosjektet var å være en ikke-deltagende observatør. I etterkant av CLEAR prosjektet gjennomførte jeg intervjuer med studentene for å få en dypere forståelse for hvordan et begrepslæringsprosjekt kan organiseres i andrespråksundervisning. Materialet består av informasjon om CLEAR som ble gitt til studentene, skriftlige innlegg på CLEAR's internettplattform, observasjon av møtet mellom studentene og intervjuer med studentene.

Gjennom denne studien fant jeg at det er flere utfordringer knyttet til bruken av et begrepslæringsprosjekt i en andrespråklærings-sammenheng, blant annet utfordringer knyttet til språk (manglende språkkunnskaper) og interkulturalitet (en motvilje mot å bidra til diskusjoner av frykt for å si noe galt eller støtende). Funnene viser også potensial knyttet til utforskning av begreper, for eksempel kan utveksling av ulik begrepsforståelse gi en bedre innsikt i hvordan begreper kan forstås ulikt.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	I
SAMMENDRAG	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
INDEX OF FIGURES, SAMPLES & TABLES.....	X
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Why CLEAR?	1
1.2 How was this study conducted?	3
1.3 Research question.....	3
1.4 English education in Norway and Germany	4
1.5 Definitions of terms.....	4
1.6 Overview of theoretical framework	5
2. THEORY.....	7
2.1 The cultural dimension in the ESL classroom	7
2.2 Concepts and concept learning.....	7
Translations in concept learning	9
2.3 The cultural dimension of second language learning	10
2.4 The intercultural speaker	11
2.5 Summary	13
3. METHODS AND MATERIALS.....	15
3.1 The different stages of the CLEAR project.....	15
The preparatory stages	16
The written communication stage	18
The oral communication stage	20
3.2 Method of data collection.....	20
In-depth interviews and written interviews	21

3.3 The participants	23
3.4 The concepts.....	25
3.5 Interview guide.....	25
3.6 Material	27
3.7 Method of data analysis.....	28
3.8 Data processing	28
3.9 Coding and categorisation	29
Coding	30
Categorisation.....	33
3.10 Summary	36
4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.....	37
Challenges	38
4.1 Organisation of CLEAR.....	38
Time	38
The role of the facilitator.....	39
Groups and cooperation	40
Assumptions about other students.....	43
4.2 Information and task descriptions	45
Choice of concepts	47
4.3 Language issues.....	49
Lack of awareness about the non-native speaker	49
First language as support.....	50
Translations from first language to second language.....	52
Potential.....	54
4.4 Learning potential	54
4.5 Summary	57
5. DISCUSSION	59

5.1 Key findings	59
5.2 Language issues.....	60
5.3 Cultural aspects	64
5.4 Interculturality and cultural aspects	65
5.4 Conditions of effective concept learning	70
5.5 Ethical considerations	75
5.6 Credibility.....	76
5.7 Quality of research material	77
5.8 Summary	78
6. CONCLUSION.....	79
6.1 Research questions revisited	79
6.2 Concept learning projects used in the ESL classroom?	81
6.3 Further research.....	82
REFERENCES	83
Appendix 1: Letter from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services with permission to collect data for the study.....	86
Appendix 2: Letter of information and consent	87
Appendix 3: Interview guide	89

INDEX OF FIGURES, SAMPLES & TABLES

Figure	Page
Figure 3-1: The CLEAR project's online platform	19
Figure 3-2: Concepts defined by the Norwegian and German participants	19
Figure 3-3: Overlapping codes between the categories	35

Sample	Page
Sample 3-1: Written entry of the concept of collaboration	20

Table	Page
Table 3-1: An excerpt of the interview guide	26
Table 3-2: An overview of the first categories	34
Table 3-3: Description of main categories	36
Table 4-1: Description of main categories	37

1. INTRODUCTION

How can one work successfully with concept learning in a second language teaching setting? What are the challenges and potential related to working with the exploration of concepts seen from an English as a second language (ESL) perspective? Concept learning is considered essential for language development (Bracken & Panter, 2011; Clark, 2004). A link between concept learning and language teaching can be found in the core curriculum where it is emphasised that language education should involve “training in thinking” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006, p. 13). This study has investigated a concept learning project called Concept Learning for Empowerment through Analysis and Reflection (CLEAR). CLEAR consists of participants from higher education institutions, schools, education authorities and NGOs in a number of countries, such as Morocco, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway and the United States (CLEAR Project, 2015c). The CLEAR project is supposed to encourage participants from different language and cultural backgrounds to reflect on and discuss the meaning of various key concepts and how these may be interpreted differently. Although CLEAR serves as a basis for this study, the intention is to view CLEAR from the outside and use it as an example of how suitable a project model such as CLEAR actually is from an ESL perspective.

The specific CLEAR project that this study has investigated is run as a collaborative project between staff at one Norwegian and one German university. Ten students in total participated in this particular round of the CLEAR project (five Norwegians and five Germans). All the students had English as their second language but their level of proficiency was not necessarily the same. Five concepts chosen by the project’s facilitators were explored.

1.1 Why CLEAR?

An interest in exploring how people may interpret concepts differently led to this study and a desire to investigate how concept learning can be used in an ESL setting. One of the main aims of the English subject is to help students’ develop an awareness of their own and others’ cultural values (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013a). The emphasis of the English curriculum on intercultural awareness inspired me to explore the didactical potential and challenges related to working with concepts. CLEAR was selected because it could provide a context for

investigating the exploration of concepts in an intercultural setting. Although CLEAR serves as a basis, the intention of this study is to investigate various aspects of the project to examine how suitable a project model such as this is from an ESL perspective. ESL is applied here as a language teaching approach for students whose first language is one other than English (Carrasquillo, 1994). The term ESL encompasses both English as second language and English as a foreign language (EFL). From now on I will refer only to the ESL perspective.

The letters in the acronym CLEAR stand for important aspects of the aims of the project:

- *Concept Learning* refers to a methodology concerned with exploring various concepts and discussing how they can be understood differently. According to Malt et al. (2011) “[...] languages vary dramatically in how they carve up the world by name” (p.519). This illustrates the importance of exploring and reflecting on the way in which concepts may be understood differently in various languages. This contributes to making concept learning relevant from an ESL perspective.
- *Empowerment* in this context involves the development of “[...] attitudes, skills and knowledge in learners that allow them to actively take part in social and political affairs” (CLEAR Project, 2015b). This corresponds with the aim of the ESL classroom, i.e. preparing students for interaction through a second language.
- *Analysis* implies a “careful study of something to learn about its parts, what they do and how they are related to each other” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). With regards to concept learning, this means exploring and analysing concepts and comparing the students’ understandings of them.
- *Reflection* entails “[...] a process of exploring and examining ourselves, our perspectives, attributes, experiences and actions/interactions” (University of Edinburgh). Within the setting of a concept learning project, this involves critical thinking about and reflection on concepts and the way in which people may understand these differently. Reflection is an important principle in foreign language learning and can function as a strategy to improve language learning (Kunitake, 2006).

CLEAR represents the type of second language context that might be relevant from an ESL perspective in that the students do not share a first language. One relevant context is classrooms where students have different first languages and different cultural backgrounds. Working with concept learning in a multicultural classroom can be useful because the students’ different language and cultural backgrounds may result in different understandings of the concepts. Another aspect to consider is the way in which the English classroom presents an ESL context where the students can practise English during both written and oral

activities. This offers an authentic teaching situation where they can practise their second language.

1.2 How was this study conducted?

My role during the CLEAR project was to be an outside observer. I followed the whole project process, starting from the initial online communication to the actual meeting between the students. The CLEAR project consists of various stages, involving both individual and cooperative work. The students first offered their understandings of the concepts on an online platform. I started this study by looking at their written entries; this gave me the opportunity to observe the written interaction between the students (or lack thereof) and the way in which concepts were explored in writing. After this, the students met face-to-face at a workshop at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) where they were supposed to discuss concepts in more detail. I observed the workshop, the discussions and the interaction between the students; this allowed me to see how an actual meeting between students could provide a context where reflection on personal perspectives and cultural influences on concepts can be explored in an intercultural setting. After CLEAR was completed, I wished to interview the students to gain a better understanding of how one can work successfully with concept learning.

1.3 Research question

My main focus for this study is to investigate the didactical challenges and potential related to the exploration of concepts from an ESL perspective. I will seek to examine how a concept learning project such as CLEAR can offer useful perspectives within an ESL teaching setting.

I have developed one main research question and two sub-questions. This has given me the opportunity to explore the different stages of the project: the preparatory stage, communication on the online platform and communication at the workshop. The questions are as follows:

How can (aspects of) the CLEAR project illustrate didactical challenges and potential when working with the exploration of concepts from an ESL perspective?

- *What are the didactical challenges and potential of the preparatory stages?*
- *What are the didactical challenges and potential of the two different communicative stages?*

The first sub-question is concerned with the preparatory stage, i.e. what occurred before the communication between the Norwegian and German participants started. This research question focuses on the kinds of instructions the participants were given and what they thought they were expected to do. The second sub-question aims to study the communicative stages of the project on the online platform and at the workshop. Through this research question, I will explore aspects touching on the communicative setting, language issues and the exploration of concepts.

1.4 English education in Norway and Germany

As this study will explore the communication between Norwegian and German students with English as their second language, it seems apt to outline the English education usually offered in these two countries. Norwegian students start primary school at the age of six (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013b). German students also start at this age, with English from their first year (Ministry of Education and Training of North Rhine-Westphalia department Soest, 2008). Norwegian and German students have compulsory education up to year 10 which means that their English language background is largely comparable.

1.5 Definitions of terms

Above, I introduced the terms “language background” and “cultural background”. The former in this context signifies a person’s first language, as well as any second languages spoken. I adopt the definitions used by Lightbown and Spada (2006). First language represents the first language learned and the language that a person speaks and understands best (ibid., p.199). Second language refers to “any language other than the first language learned” (ibid., p.204).

Cultural background is understood here to mean the culture to which people belong; this involves all aspects that may influence one's identity and personality. Culture is a complex term and it is difficult to provide a suitable definition. Despite this, the definition that I have used is taken from Tylor (1924) who has described culture as “[...] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p.1). In other words, culture is shared by people with similar experiences and worldviews. Culture may help us make sense of our surroundings and informs us about how we should behave. Byram (2008) emphasises that “the relationship between language and the shared values, beliefs and behaviours in a social group is complex and much debated, but it is undoubtedly close [...]” (p.68). As this quote suggests, there is a complex but close connection between language and culture. This interconnectedness is essential for the exploration of concepts and interaction between the participants in CLEAR.

The term “concept” is “[...] a general idea, understanding, or thought embodying a set of things that have one or more properties in common” (The Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5). A concept can be expressed in a single word, such as *democracy* or *justice*. It differs from the term *word*, however, in that words are used to represent concepts. We may say that a concept is an abstract way of presenting meaning, whereas a word is a symbol expressing concepts (Martinsen, 1991, p. 19, my translation).

1.6 Overview of theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this research has been inspired by scholars from the field of intercultural communication. The main theoreticians that I have drawn on are Michael Byram and Claire Kramsch; they are both key figures within the field of second language acquisition and intercultural dialogue. Kramsch's writings are relevant because they deal with matters such as the relationship between language and culture, second language learning and intercultural communication; Byram is significant because of his work within the field of foreign language learning and for developing the terms “intercultural competence” and “intercultural speaker” in the 1990s. Byram and Kramsch both suggest how one can work with intercultural competence in a second language teaching context. They are also concerned with how language and culture can be seen as a “place of struggle” between the learner's and

the native speaker's meaning (Kramersch, 1993, p. 24). These terms are useful to explore in relation to this study because they illustrate some important principles that must be considered within an ESL context.

Theory about concepts and conceptual understanding will also be presented in the next chapter, as well as translation theory. Arnd Witte and Marcel Danesi are important scholars in this field. Witte has an interest in intercultural aspects of foreign language teaching and learning and mentions the challenges related to translations. This is an important issue in this context because the students participating in the concept learning project have different language and cultural backgrounds. Danesi's interest is in the field of language, communication and semiotics. He has explored the importance of conceptual fluency in second language learning.

2. THEORY

The emphasis in this chapter is on the theoretical perspectives that will serve as a background for the analysis and discussions. The chapter starts by introducing the cultural dimension in the ESL classroom, as a starting point indicating how cultural differences may result in differences in understandings when concepts are explored. The next section is about the general principles of concepts and concept learning which are the main perspectives in CLEAR. The chapter then looks at translation theory and intercultural perspectives which is specifically related to second language contexts.

2.1 The cultural dimension in the ESL classroom

Kramsch (1993) argues that there are different ways of viewing the cultural dimension in relation to language teaching. The first aspect is that language is used as a means to convey facts and information about a culture. The second aspect is more concerned with viewing culture as part of language and as a social practice. Kramsch (1993) points out that if language is viewed as a social practice, “[...] culture becomes the very core of language teaching” (p.8). This argument illustrates the interconnectedness of language and culture. Language as a social practice is here understood to mean what we do with and how we use language in communicative situations. This means that language is a part of society and culture, rather than seeing them as separate entities. Culture as the “core” of language teaching is understood as culture serving as the foundation for the ESL classroom. This means that students should learn about and become aware of cultural contexts to become proficient second language users. Kramsch (2006) highlights that “culture is seen as the indispensable key to understanding speakers’ verbal behaviours and worldviews [...]” (p.20). What she seems to be suggesting here is that culture provides a way of interpreting what other people say. Through cultural exchange, we may learn about other people’s verbal behaviour.

2.2 Concepts and concept learning

Smith (1989) has stated that a concept is “a mental representation of a class or individual and deals with *what* is being represented and *how* that information is typically used during the categorization” (p.502). In essence, this means having a mental image about an idea or a term which is used to communicate one’s opinion. Some concepts are concrete, whereas others are more abstract. “Concrete concepts are generally easier to grasp and can be used to help

students understand more abstract ones” (The Ministry of Education, 2009). This means that when one teaches abstract concepts to students, one should help them build understanding based on concrete concepts. Kvande and Lenz (2013) point out that concepts reflect the way in which a society “makes sense” of reality (p.115). Concepts help one organise one’s world and communicate with others. At the same time, one needs to be aware of how others may understand a concept or word in a different way. This seems to point to the importance of teaching pupils critical reflection and helping them explore how a concept may involve different understandings. “Key concepts are important to public debate, and mastering them is part of becoming an active citizen” (Kvande & Lenz, 2013, p. 114, my translation). Thus, concept learning is an important part of education. Teachers are expected to teach pupils to assess critically and reflect upon the definition of a concept, rather than providing them with a “closed” definition. This is a general requirement for all teachers of all subjects, as concepts are present in all subjects. The focus should therefore be on developing both imagination and scepticism, for instance by allowing the students to use their creative and critical skills in various settings so they can ask new questions and examine sources (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006, p. 14).

Concept learning can enhance students’ learning if “[...] teaching and learning is [sic] structured around multiple and timely approaches to significant concepts” (The Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). It is therefore important to give students time to explore a concept and provide opportunities to approach it through multiple perspectives. Focusing on concepts can help students categorise and organise new information. “Pupils are faced with the enormous task of making meaning out of a sea of seemingly unrelated facts. They need mechanisms for categorising and organising information, connecting ideas and identifying or constructing patterns” (Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003, p. 58). This indicates the importance of working explicitly with concept learning in an educational context. Meyer and Land (2003, p. 4) introduced the term “threshold concepts” which can be described as core concepts that can transform “[...] the perception of a subject, or part thereof”. A threshold concept may prove itself to be troublesome if it stems from a perspective that conflicts with one’s own. Perkins (1999) calls such troublesome concepts “alien” or “foreign” knowledge. In relation to such perspectives, Perkins (1999, p. 10) suggests that “we can engage learners in recognizing that there *are* alternative perspectives by asking them to identify and elaborate on them”. According to Meyer and Land (2003, p. 11), “[...] threshold concepts are more readily

identifiable in some disciplines (such as Physics) than in others (such as History)". Threshold concepts and "foreign" knowledge seem to become especially complex within the field of foreign language learning where language is also the content. "Students get very disconcerted when they come across ways of expressing familiar concepts in a different way" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 9).¹ It is therefore important to keep in mind that the issue of language may be troublesome when exploring concepts in a second language.

Translations in concept learning

When language learners use a second language to communicate and explore concepts, translation becomes relevant. Witte (2011) says that the ability to translate "[...] presumes a level of knowledge and competence not only on linguistic, but also on pragmatic, historical, social and cultural planes" (p.81). He also points out that the process of translation takes place at the very first encounter with a foreign language being learned. A person's first language is the cognitive basis for all translating and will always have some sort of influence on the foreign language. However, there are other factors that also contribute to the process of translating.

When learning a foreign language, the learner develops a specific individual language that is characterised by elements of his/her knowledge of the native language, his/her knowledge of the target language, knowledge of the communicative functions of the language, knowledge about language in general, and sociocultural knowledge (Witte, 2011, p. 88).

Witte highlights a number of aspects that affect the process of translating. He further argues that "[...] translating seems to be the most efficient path into understanding aspects of the foreign language and culture" (Witte, 2011, p. 89). However, there may be great variety in the way in which a concept is understood by different languages and cultures and this must be taken into consideration when using translations. "Contextually sensitive translation [...]" requires more than linguistic knowledge, namely pragmatic social knowledge and intercultural sensitivity" (Witte, 2011, p. 90). Language learners should thus be aware of the pitfalls of translating concepts and they should reflect upon the social knowledge and intercultural sensitivity that may influence their exploration of concepts in a second language.. Risager (1996) has emphasised the importance of considering the cultural connotations that may complicate translations. She has said that students may use a foreign language without an awareness of the cultural aspect, especially in the initial stages of language learning. The

¹ Quote taken from Meyer and Land (2003) in personal communication with N. Reimann, University of Durham.

target language is then used as an “amputated” language with semantics and pragmatics transferred from the students’ first language (Risager, 1996, p. 19). In relation to the exploration of concepts in a second language, this may involve certain challenges for the language learner; a cultural connotation that exists in the first language does not necessarily exist in the second language.

2.3 The cultural dimension of second language learning

In language learning, the main aim has long been to imitate the native speaker in terms of linguistic competence and learning about cultural traits in a given country (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). Linguistic competence implies having the skills to use the language according to native speakers’ use of it and understanding utterances that are made (van Ek, 1996, p. 8). Contemporary second language teaching has a stronger focus on the intercultural dimension so as to develop “learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities [...]” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 9). The aim of the ESL classroom is therefore to prepare language learners for interaction with speakers of other languages and help them acquire the linguistic competence necessary for communication between people from different cultural and language backgrounds.

These intercultural perspectives are also represented in the current Norwegian curriculum, LK06. In the main area of *culture, society and literature*, the focus is on cultural understanding and knowledge about the English-speaking world. The aim is to introduce students to “key topics connected to social issues, literature and other cultural expressions” (LK06). However, it is important that students are offered more than mere cultural facts. Culture is context-based and language learners should be aware that cultural features may vary within nation states and within a social group. Otherwise, there is the possibility that stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes will be maintained. Witte, Harden, and Harden (2011, p. 2) point out that cultures are not monolithic, fixed entities; rather, they undergo continuous change and must be taught accordingly. LK06 mentions that the English subject can “contribute insight into the way we live and how others live, and their views on life, values and cultures” (LK06, p.1). This means that students should develop an understanding of how their own lives may be seen in relation to people from other cultures.

2.4 The intercultural speaker

The “intercultural speaker” is a term that emerged in the 1990s in the field of intercultural communication. The term is closely linked to foreign language education and was introduced by Michael Byram. The intercultural speaker is defined as “[...] someone who has an ability to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations of difference” (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001, p. 5). This definition suggests that the language learner must have an ability to act interculturally, as Byram (2008) puts it; this means meeting a foreign culture with sensitivity and being able to relate the different perspectives that emerge to one’s own perspective. Byram et.al (2001) point out that in order to be an intercultural speaker, it is essential to possess intercultural competence. Intercultural competence involves five elements, or “savoirs”, as Byram et al. (2002) term them. These are outlined below:

- The term “intercultural attitudes” indicates the ability to “relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider’s perspective who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12). What Byram seems to be describing here is the ability to see one’s own opinions and beliefs from the outside and relate them to how others might perceive them. Also, this relates to the ability to acknowledge that one’s own perceptions are not the only way of viewing things.
- Knowledge “of how social groups and identities function and what is involved in intercultural interaction” (ibid, 2002, p.12). This involves socio-cultural knowledge that can support communication, for instance knowledge about how people interact.
- The skills of interpreting and comparing involve an understanding of how someone might misunderstand something that is uttered by someone with a different social identity (ibid, 2002, p.13).
- Skills of discovery and interaction imply “[...] finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have” (ibid, 2002, p.13). This means having the ability to use one’s knowledge in a concrete interactional setting.
- Lastly, critical cultural awareness refers to “[...] the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and

products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (ibid, 2002, p.13). This implies an awareness of how one's own values may influence communication with others.

Byram et al. (2002, p. 11) point out that being a "[...] successful intercultural speaker and mediator does not require complete and perfect competence" because one will never be able to anticipate all the knowledge needed to interact with people from other cultures. Also, since cultures undergo constant change, it is not possible to keep up to date with the changes in many different cultures. Instead, one needs to be able "[...] to adjust, to accept and to understand other people" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 11). This means having the ability to adjust to the different situations one may encounter and show empathy towards and an understanding of diversity.

Kramersch is concerned with the interaction between people from different cultures, arguing that an intercultural speaker must be able to interact successfully in different situations. She sees the intercultural speaker as a competent language user who is able to "select those forms of accuracy and those forms of appropriateness that are called for in a given social context of use" (Kramersch, 1998). This relates to different cultures and different contexts, meaning that the intercultural speaker must be able to communicate with people from different cultures and within different contexts.

Kramersch (1993) also mentions that culture can be seen as "a place of struggle between the learners' meanings and those of native speakers" (p.24). This quote relates to the process of making meaning out of unfamiliar situations. It also touches upon the non-native speaker's "struggles" to understand the cultural codes of the native speakers' world; however, what Kramersch mentions here may also involve communication between non-native speakers. To overcome such "struggles", it is important to reflect upon them. Kramersch (1993) argues that "[it] is through the opportunities for dialogue and reflection upon dialogic experiences that cross-cultural exchanges have their value" (p.26). This means that, in an intercultural setting, time must be provided for examining and reflecting upon the different meanings a situation may involve. Kramersch (1993) calls the language classroom a site of cross-cultural fieldwork where "[...] the students are both participants and observers of a cross-cultural dialogue" (p.29). Students should be introduced to a second language teaching setting where they can

practise the language and become acquainted with the way in which the target language is used in various settings. To facilitate this, Byram et al. (2002, p. 34) emphasise that language teachers need “[...] skills in promoting an atmosphere in the classroom which allows learners to take risks in their thinking and feeling”.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has introduced some theoretical perspectives that are relevant to this study, such as theory about concept learning and translation theory. Translation theory was relevant from an ESL perspective as it has highlighted elements that are important to consider when teaching a second language, for instance that cultural connotations may influence the translation of concepts. Intercultural perspectives were also presented, for instance the intercultural speaker, the “place of struggle”, intercultural competence and the interconnectedness of language and culture. Theory about the intercultural speaker seems relevant because it offers significant perspectives pertaining to didactical potential and challenges related to the exploration of concepts by participants with different language and cultural backgrounds. Kramsch’s notion of “the place of struggle” was also mentioned. It will be relevant to consider this aspect in relation to CLEAR and examine whether this “place of struggle” was facilitated for throughout the project.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This chapter focuses on the research methods employed to collect and analyse data. Relevant information about the study, such as about the participants and interview guide, will be presented. The chapter also introduces the method of data processing and the development of codes and categories.

This study uses a qualitative research methodology to find connections between the different parts of the material; this material consists of: information given to the students before the project, written material from CLEAR's online platform, observations from the workshop and interviews with the participants themselves. Qualitative research is often considered a suitable method for a study such as this because it can provide an in-depth understanding of the material. Postholm (2011, p. 17) has pointed out that qualitative research involves gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' perspective.

3.1 The different stages of the CLEAR project

The CLEAR project has taken place a number of times at different universities with different facilitators and students. However, this study has observed only one of these projects (2013). The participants in this investigation consist of students from one Norwegian and one German university. The CLEAR project is part of the students' study programme at their respective universities and they were selected as participants in this study because of this. There are three stages in the CLEAR project: an offline preparatory stage at the two universities; an online session on the internet platform; and, a face-to-face meeting between the participants. The preparatory stages took place at the participants' universities: the University of Hamburg and NTNU. The two groups of students did not spend the same amount of time preparing for the online process and workshop, according to information provided by them. The students from NTNU were informed about the project and the concepts but spent most of their time exploring the concepts on their own without discussing them with their peers. The students from the University of Hamburg, however, spent a longer period of time analysing and discussing the concepts, because the Norwegian students' school semester started at a later date than the Germans'. This information was mentioned by the participants in the interviews.

The CLEAR project involves both written and oral communication. To gain a fuller understanding of the challenges and potential related to a concept learning project such as this, I decided to observe the whole project. I was able to follow the project by accessing the internet platform on which the participants defined the concepts and by observing the participants during the workshop. After CLEAR was completed, I interviewed the participants to learn about their views of participating in a concept learning project and to gain insight into various factors that must be considered when conducting such a project. These interviews form part of the material employed in this study, as well as written documentation from the online platform and observations from the workshop.

The preparatory stages

This section describes the information and introduction the students were given to the CLEAR project. I was not present at any of the preparatory meetings and what I describe here is thus based on information garnered from the facilitators and students. The students were given their initial introduction to the CLEAR project at their universities. This introduction was provided orally by the facilitators. The two facilitators met with the students separately but coordinated the information the students should be given. This brings in an interesting question: did the two groups of students receive the same information? This question will be touched on in the discussion.

The German students received their information only in oral form whereas the Norwegian students were provided with an information sheet after the first meeting at the university had taken place. The information sheet offered the same information as that which had been given orally to the students at the preparatory meeting. The content of the information sheet may therefore be useful as it offers a precise description of the kind of information the participants were given during the preparatory stage of the project. The validity of the document as a source is a relevant question here because the German participants were not given this document. Nonetheless, the information provided here corresponds to the German students' descriptions in the interviews. I would therefore deem it as a reliable source to employ in presenting the project.

The document starts by presenting what the CLEAR project is and its aims and content.

CLEAR

[...]aims to develop and test a learning/educational tool and methodology related to the investigation, negotiation and reflection of concepts in the fields of Education for Democratic Citizenship, Human Rights Education and Intercultural Education (Information sheet, NTNU).

The information sheet presents three elements in the project:

- Development of an online glossary of terms
- Development, testing and documentation of learning methods related to the glossary
- Realization of learning activities that will lead to the generation of glossary content (face-to-face and peer to peer/online) (Information sheet, NTNU).

The first element involves creating an online glossary of terms. This includes the five concepts selected for this year's students, as well as concepts from previous years. The second element involves developing, testing and documenting learning activities that may be useful in working on the online glossary. CLEAR is linked to teacher training and this element is relevant to the participants' classroom practice. The idea is that these learning activities should be transferable to a classroom where students work on concept learning. The third element entails realising these learning activities within various settings.

The facilitators chose five concepts to explore. The aim was to look at the concepts in-depth and a limited number of concepts were therefore selected. The students each chose one concept to explore. The focus during the preparatory stage was on their personal approach to the concept. The information sheet instructs the participants to

“[e]xplore what comes to your mind when thinking about your chosen concept/topic. At this point, there is no need to confirm your perspectives with references (written texts and explanations). Rather, the first step is to carry out what kinds of associations and thoughts come to your mind as an *immediate response* to the chosen concept.”
(Information sheet, NTNU).

This stage involved presenting the participant's personal perspective about the concept. We can see this taking place in the written entries, where most of the concepts on the online platform included a section on personal approach.

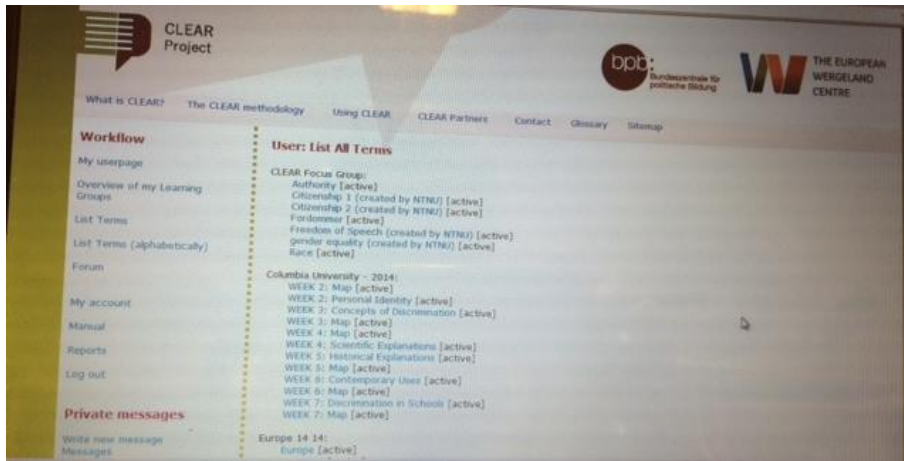
The oral information was provided in the participants' native language. Although the discussions at the participants' respective universities took place in their native language, the students were expected to write to and communicate with one another in English.

The written communication stage

Written material from the online platform has also been selected as part of the research material. This will provide me with information about the students' written communication and how concepts were explored in writing. The written communication took place on the online platform. After the initial session at which the students were introduced to CLEAR and each chose a concept, each student offered his or her understanding of the concept on the online platform. The idea was that one concept would be explored by one Norwegian and one German student, so that one pair looked at only one concept. The German students were the first to write on the platform as they started the project before the Norwegians. The information sheet explained that the students were "supposed to choose one of the concepts and work on the entries at [sic] the CLEAR platform which fellow students at the University of Hamburg have started" (Information sheet, NTNU). This initiated written communication between the two groups as the Norwegian participants were supposed to work on the entries that the German participants had started.

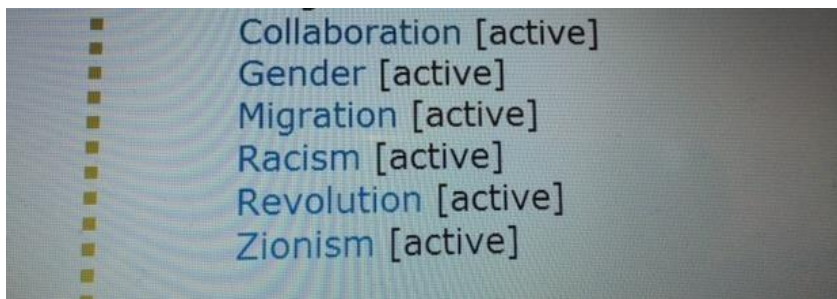
The figure below shows the online platform that the participants saw when logging on. To access the online platform, the participants needed a username and password. Only students that participated in a project could gain access. The figure shows how the list of terms was presented to the users of CLEAR. The online platform consists of all rounds of the CLEAR project that had taken place. These previous projects had been conducted separately, with different concepts in each project.

Figure 3-1 The CLEAR project's online platform



The concepts that the students were asked to explore in this round were listed together, as shown in the figure below. There are six concepts: *collaboration*, *gender*, *migration*, *racism*, *revolution* and *Zionism*. The concept of *migration* was omitted from the workshop discussions because each concept was supposed to be explored and discussed by two students. However, there were only nine students present at the workshop. Therefore, only five of the concepts were explored during the workshop.

Figure 3-2 Concepts defined by the Norwegian and German participants



The first stage in relation to exploring the concept was for the participants to explore the associations and thoughts that came to mind when encountering it. The next stage was to explore the concept's historical and contemporary contexts. An example of the way in which concepts were posted on the online platform is presented below. It illustrates how the concept of *collaboration* was defined. The paragraphs are highlighted in two colours, yellow and blue. This was done by the participants themselves to make it clear that the text had been written by different participants. The online platform allowed for two-way communication as the participants could see what had been written about each concept and follow up what the first person had written.

Sample 3-1 Written entry of the concept of collaboration

Collaboration

Collaboration (Kollaboration)

Personal approach to collaboration:

The focus of my historical work primarily lies on Eastern Europe. For me, it was important to understand, how the holocaust in Ukraine and Belarus was possible, considering the vast territories and the lack of German personnel and local knowledge. In this regard I became interested in this complex and complicated topic and its peculiarities.

Personal approach to collaboration: My first association is Norways partnership in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). A partnership that developed after Second World War II. Norway`s membership in NATO started in 1949 when the treaty organization was established. I grew up during the last part of the Cold War and remember very well how Norwegian media focused on the Sovjetunion and a possible military treaty form "the sleeping bear".

The oral communication stage

Initial communication between the Norwegian and German participants took place on the online platform. The next stage was an actual meeting between them at a one-day workshop at NTNU. The workshop consisted of two parts; first, the participants discussed the concepts; second, learning methods that may be related to the concepts defined on the online platform were explored.

The workshop started with a short introduction of the participants and facilitators and of an outline of the course of the day. There was no other opportunity for the participants to become better acquainted. After the preparatory round, the participants were divided into pairs to discuss the concept they had defined on the online platform. The aim of this task was to explore their personal understandings of the concept they had worked on and link this to their different or shared views. The participants were encouraged to discuss the concepts' cultural, socio-political and historical references so that they could be linked to both a historical and contemporary situation. After this session, each concept was presented to the whole group; this was followed with a group discussion of each concept.

3.2 Method of data collection

The written material from the online platform has been selected as part of the research material for this study. This material will provide information about the written interaction between the students and is important to gain an understanding of how concepts can be explored in written form. I was given access to the written material by the CLEAR project's

facilitator; this allowed me to observe the way in which the students had worked on the online platform.

Observation was chosen as a research method because I wanted to observe the interaction and discussions between the participants. During the workshop, my role was to observe the discussions that took place. I took on the role as “the observer as participant”, meaning that I had minimal involvement in the social setting (Postholm, 2011, p. 64). By listening to the participants and writing down what they said, I was able to observe the authentic discussions between the participants without interfering with their interaction. However, if I was approached by them in any way, I would respond and interact with them. I therefore had some connection to the social setting. I made note of any hesitation or reluctance or if anyone seemed to be struggling to participate. These notes have been helpful because they show whether anyone found it challenging to explore and discuss concepts. Postholm (2011, p. 57) has argued that one of the limitations of observation as a research method consists of the difficulties involved in providing a precise description of a situation; this is because observations are likely to be influenced by the researcher’s preconceptions. A situation can be interpreted in different ways by different people and it was therefore necessary to contrast and compare my observations with the remainder of the material.

In-depth interviews and written interviews

The CLEAR project ended after the workshop in Norway. However, to gain a fuller understanding of the way in which a concept learning project can be conducted, I deemed it necessary to investigate the participants’ experiences of the CLEAR project. I therefore decided to follow up their participation with in-depth interviews. “Combined with observation, interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that people hold for their everyday activities” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 110). What Marshall and Rossman seem to be suggesting here is that interviews can provide the researcher with a better understanding of the perceptions and opinions that participants may possess.

I regard interviews as a fruitful method because they have allowed me closer contact with the participants. Through a qualitative interview, I hoped to gain more nuanced descriptions of

the participants' understanding of the project and the concepts. I interviewed seven of the nine participants, five Norwegians and two Germans. The reason only two German participants were interviewed was due to difficulties in coming into contact with the German students after the workshop. I contacted the participants by email but at first only one German responded (perhaps they were busy with exams). I therefore contacted them once more and one more German student responded. All of the Norwegian participants from the workshop agreed to take part and I conducted the interviews with them relatively soon after the workshop had taken place.

The Norwegian participants were interviewed in person at NTNU. It felt most natural to conduct the interviews in Norwegian because I believed the participants would share more information and speak more freely if they could communicate in their first language. I have translated the findings into English. I am aware of the risk of interviewing the participants in their first language and then translating their responses into English. The meanings behind their answers may have been lost in translation and this may have affected my conclusions. To ensure the meanings were not lost in translation, I tried to rephrase the answers if a direct translation was not possible, while still trying to hold on to what the participant was expressing.

Meeting and interviewing the German participants face-to-face was slightly more difficult as we lived in different countries. My initial plan was to interview the participants by Skype. However, one participant said that he felt uncomfortable about being interviewed by Skype; we therefore agreed to conduct a written interview instead that was sent by email. This was done with both German participants. There are certain risks involved in carrying out a written interview. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have pointed out that the quality criteria for an interview consist of "the degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers" (p. 164). Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to do this with the German participants as they were responding to a written interview. I therefore had to rely on their answering my questions as thoroughly and informatively as possible. Another problematic aspect about written answers is that it is difficult to know how long it has taken the participants to answer the questions and how they have approached the questions; this is because a written interview allows the participants to

rewrite an answer until they are satisfied with it. The German participants were interviewed in English because I do not speak German. The impact of interviewing them in their second language must therefore be considered, as this brings in the possibility that translation from German to English may have influenced their answers. “Misinterpretation of meaning is a potential problem in any research, but the risk grows tremendously when language is a barrier” (Esposito, 2001, p. 570). With the need for translation, the participant’s actual meaning may have been lost in translation. One “solution” could perhaps have been for a German to interview them in German, but the interviews would still need translating nonetheless. As Esposito (2001) has argued, “[...] the potential for miscommunication increases when researchers move out of their native language and culture” (p. 578). There is the risk of arriving at an inaccurate portrayal of the participants’ beliefs and experiences.

I chose to conduct a semi-structured interview as this often provides more leeway for both the interviewee and the researcher. A semi-structured interview is, according to Johannessen et.al (2010), the most prevalent method for qualitative interviews because it allows the researcher to be freer in his or her approach to the topic and towards the participants. This means that the researcher can deviate from the subject if it feels natural and can be led by what is mentioned or broached in each individual interview. “Semi-structured interviews can provide a good balance between standardisation and flexibility” (Johannessen, Tufte, & Christoffersen, 2010, p. 139, my translation). I wanted to allow for such flexibility as it could lead to unexpected findings. However, it is important to have a main theme and I therefore prepared an interview guide as a point of departure. An interview guide is a list of topics and general questions that the interviewer is supposed to cover during the interview and helps one adhere to the topic. An outline of the interview guide will be provided below.

3.3 The participants

The Norwegian and German students were selected as participants in this study because CLEAR was part of their study programme. Consequently, I myself did not “choose” these participants. There were ten students, five Norwegians and five Germans, taking part in the first stage of the project when they defined concepts on the online platform. Of these ten students, nine took part in the workshop at NTNU. I conducted interviews with a number of

the students after the online communication and workshop session. Only seven of the ten students wanted to participate in the interviews; accordingly, there are ten participants from the online platform entry stage, nine participants from the workshop and seven participants from the interviews.

The participants all had backgrounds from social studies, with a majority of them specialising in education studies. The participants' field of study is therefore relevant as they were dealing with standard concepts in their respective disciplines. They may have encountered the concepts previously in their social studies education and this may have influenced the way they understood and discussed the concepts. Their shared educational background may have influenced their written and oral participation in the CLEAR project as they may have possessed similar knowledge about the various concepts.

The CLEAR project aims to spark off discussion between students from various cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, students taking part in the CLEAR project have different language and culture backgrounds. The participants had Norwegian and German as their first languages and all of them had English as a second language. The fact that they all had English as their second language is an important aspect from a language didactic perspective as all the participants had to communicate and explore concepts in English. This is an interesting point as it may have influenced their conceptual understanding and the communication that took place between the participants.

I will refer to each of the participants and the facilitators using the pronoun "he" even though the group consisted of both men and women. I do so to protect the identity of the participants as there only nine students at the workshop; of these, only seven took part in the interviews. In the interviews, I have given the informants male names to keep them anonymous. The Norwegian participants are called Eskil, Jakob, Emil, Isak and Alexander. The names of the German participants are Dominik and Benjamin. I do not reveal any sensitive information about any of the participants. Still, as the number of participants was so low, I decided to

report the study to NSD.² The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2006, p. 18) emphasises that the participants must be informed about what their role in the study is and they must participate on their own terms without being pressured. The participants were given a consent form to sign for participation.

3.4 The concepts

Discussing and defining concepts form the essence of the CLEAR project and this was done both orally and in writing. The participants discussed and defined five concepts; *collaboration, racism, gender, revolution* and *Zionism*. The facilitators in charge of each round of the CLEAR project chose concepts that were central ones within the participants' disciplines. The concepts were related to the participants' field of study, the social studies, and were therefore deemed suitable for the Norwegian and German students.

3.5 Interview guide

The interview questions were planned with both an oral and written interview in mind because I would interview the Norwegian students in person and the German students by email. I used the same interview guide for the two groups because I wanted to compare their answers. This is not always possible as “qualitative data are dependent on the situation in which they are collected [...]” (Johannessen et al., 2010, p. 138, my translation). I wanted to prepare an interview guide that to some extent would allow for comparison so that I could explore the participants' similar or contradictory experiences of the CLEAR project. With the Norwegian participants, I knew that I would be able to ask follow-up questions face-to-face interviews would be conducted. With the German participants, however, I had to make sure that the questions I formulated were clear and concise since a written interview does not allow for follow-up questions in the same way as a face-to-face interview does. Because of this, I tried to avoid “yes/no” questions and phrase the questions as openly as possible. A different reason to avoid “yes/no” questions was that I wanted to encourage the participants to share their experiences and opinions as much as possible. I prepared questions related to the

² The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) requires that a research project must be reported if the research involves personal data that can be linked to a person indirectly through a combination of background information (Norwegian Social Science Data Service, 2012, p. 14).

research topic and divided the interview guide into four main themes: introduction, the online platform, the workshop and the understanding of concepts. The first theme, *introduction*, pertains to the way in which the participants viewed the CLEAR project and what information they were given during the preparatory stage. The theme *online process* comprises questions related to the way in which the students first approached the concept and the way in which the written communication took place on the online platform. The theme *the workshop* focuses on the oral communication and discussions during the workshop and questions related to language differences. The last theme, *the understanding of concepts*, consists of questions that relate to the way in which the project has influenced the students' conceptual understandings and whether they believed that they had gained a greater understanding of the concepts after participating in the various stages of CLEAR. I also included a few introductory questions so that I could find out which information the students had received and how they had experienced their participation in CLEAR.

Table 3-1 An excerpt of the interview guide

Theme	Question
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you like participating in the project? • What sort of information did you receive about the project before you started participating?
The online process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you go about writing about the concept you were working on? • Was your understanding changed in any way when you used English, compared to how you understand it in German? In what way?
The workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you experience the communication between the Norwegian and German students? In terms of language, the composition of group members, culture differences, etc. • Do you think your own or the others' cultural background influenced the understanding of the different concepts? In what way?

The understanding of concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you have any thoughts about the other students' understanding of the concepts ahead of the meeting at NTNU? Did they match with what actually happened at NTNU? • Have you gained a greater understanding of the concepts? In what way?
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The original interview guide was in Norwegian because I conducted the interviews with the Norwegian students in Norwegian. It was then translated into English for the German students. As the examples provided in the chart show, I followed up some questions by asking “in what way” to encourage the participants to elaborate as much as possible. Based on the answers they provided, the German students did largely seem to understand the questions even though they were in English. However, a few questions seemed rather similar to them so they decided to merge some of the questions under one answer. With the Norwegian participants, however, I was able to move away from the interview guide if necessary and ask follow-up questions if I needed them to specify any points. This means that the questions that the Norwegian participants were asked varied, depending on the direction the conversation took.

3.6 Material

The material generated by this study and used in the analysis consists of:

- Information material from the preparatory stage, including an information sheet
- 10 written entries from the written communication stage: the participants' written entries describing the concepts
- 1 observation from the oral communication stage: my own observations from the workshop
- 7 qualitative interviews: 5 face-to-face interviews, 2 written interviews

The interviews provide data about the participants' reflections on participating in the CLEAR project and their exploration of the concepts. The written entries and observations from the

workshop provide a different angle on the material, allowing me to investigate how the participants engaged with the concepts and their communication, both on paper and face-to-face. Findings from the written entries and observations also serve to support the material from the interviews since they offer an opportunity to relate the participants' reflections to the data from the written entries and observations.

3.7 Method of data analysis

I have used perspectives from Glaser and Strauss' *constant comparative method*. This method is concerned with "[...] *explicit coding and analytic procedures*" (Glaser & Strauss, 2012, p. 102). The constant comparative method is derived from grounded theory which is an approach to methodology that pertains to "generating a theory from data [...]" (Glaser & Strauss, 2012, p. 6). However, this study will not develop a new theory, as *grounded theory* proposes. The method instead serves as inspiration for the analytical approach and only certain elements of the *constant comparative method* have been used.

3.8 Data processing

According to Postholm (2011), "qualitative analysis starts with the first interview, the first observation and the researcher's first glance at documents" (p.86). My initial contact with the material from the CLEAR project consisted of the written entries where the concepts had been defined by the participants. I familiarised myself with this material so I could be prepared for the meeting with the students and the discussions during the workshop. The written entries have been kept in their original form, including spelling mistakes and other errors. This decision has been made because I did not want to interfere with the participants' written work as this would damage the authenticity of the entries. Information from the preparatory stages was given to me by the facilitator and students at a later stage and was therefore not part of my first encounter with the material.

The observations I made during the workshop were written down throughout it. To acquire as much information as possible, I wrote only bullet points from the discussions I observed. Since the communication was in English, I wrote down my observations in English too. I did

so because I wanted to present as accurate an illustration as possible of the discussions that emerged. I organised the material from the observations by classifying them into different themes, for instance by grouping observations about one concept together. This made it easier to relate my observations to findings from the written entries and interviews. Postholm (2011) argues that the researcher's prior understanding, influenced by theory and assumptions, may affect the observations that the researcher makes. As I organised the observations, I tried to reflect upon how the observations might have been influenced by my encounter with the written entries and tried to ensure that the observations were as neutral as possible.

The interviews conducted were transcribed and later coded. I labelled the interviewer as number 1 and the interviewee as number 2 to make it easier to distinguish between the interviewer and participant. I decided to write down exactly what the participants said. I focused on the words they used and how they expressed themselves. I tried to keep the interviews as authentic as possible by illustrating exactly what the participants said. Some quotes that illustrate hesitation or agreement, such as “ehm” or “mm”, have been included to highlight whether a participant struggled to answer a question. When the participants mentioned other participants by name, I hid this by adding [...]. The transcribed Norwegian interviews and the written German interviews have been treated similarly in the analysis.

3.9 Coding and categorisation

There are three phases involved in the constant comparative method of analyses. These are *open coding*, *axial coding* and *selective coding* (Postholm, 2011, p. 88). During the first stage of analysis, “the analyst starts by coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible [...]” (Glaser & Strauss, 2012, p. 105); this is to closely examine and compare them for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). In the axial coding phase, the existing categories and subcategories are rearranged in a process where they can be modified, elaborated or rejected from the research (Boeije, 2010, p. 87). The last phase involves selective coding which is concerned with the establishment of a core category that represents the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). This method has served only as inspiration; each phase has not been strictly followed. Instead, the method has been used as support in establishing codes and categories; this has guided me in breaking down the data into small parts and providing a code for such. A vital part of the constant comparative

method is connecting the existing categories to new data. This method is therefore considered to be a useful strategy for this study, as there are different types of material that need to be related to each other. This study has not established a core category, as the constant comparative method suggests, but will instead use a number of categories to present the findings from the material. The reason for this is that the research questions include different elements and it would therefore be very restrictive for the analysis to develop only one main category.

According to Nilssen (2012) “coding and categorisation of data are the core activities in the qualitative analysis process” (p.78, my translation). I believe it may be useful here to clarify how I understand the terms “code” and “category”. Code is understood here to mean the labels I apply to segments in the material that I am analysing. According to Saldaña (2009), “[a] code is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). The code captures the essence and content of the data which is useful when it comes to making sense of what the material and the participants communicate. By coding the data, I am able to look at common features in the material and investigate how they relate to each other. After the codes were developed, they were arranged into different groups. These groups of codes are called *categories*. “Coding is thus a method that enables you to organize a group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristics – the beginning of a pattern [...]” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). Generating categories is a beneficial approach to exploring whether any of the codes have something in common. The categories are used as a basis for the presentation of findings. After the categories are produced, the codes will not be relevant to the analysis. I have made this decision because I cannot see their importance in the presentation of findings. Rather, the categories will function as an “umbrella” in the management and demonstration of findings. The next chapter will therefore only present the developed categories.

Coding

The initial analysis started with the first encounter I had with the written entries. At this stage, the analysis was mostly focused on acquiring an understanding of what the participants had written in their written entries. The purpose of this was to prepare for the workshop and the

discussion that would take place there. The actual coding, however, started after the workshop was completed, when all the material had been gathered. I decided to do all the coding after all the material had been collected so that I could interrelate the material. The written entries were coded first as this was the first material I had gathered. The observations and transcribed interviews were coded afterwards. Material from the preparatory stage, such as the information sheet, was not coded as this was used to support the findings from the written entries, observations and interviews.

There are different ways to code research material. Some code big chunks, others code every single word or fragment. I started the coding process by closely examining the material and provided a *descriptive code* that captured the essence of the quote. The term *descriptive code* is taken from Saldaña (2009) who explains that a descriptive code “[...] summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt” (p.3). I will introduce this term because it conveys how I have engaged with the material and how I primarily gave codes that summarised the data. Since this study is written within the field of English and foreign language didactics, I viewed it as most beneficial to code the material in English, even though parts of the material are in Norwegian, such as the interviews with the Norwegian participants. As I was analysing the written entries and transcribed interviews, I provided codes where suitable. This means that each time I found valuable information in the material, I labelled it with a code. By valuable information I mean information that is relevant to the research questions. I will here include quotes from both an written entry and an interview to illustrate how the coding work was done. Afterwards, I will present the corresponding codes and explain why I consider these codes to be suitable.

This first example is a quote from the online platform, presenting the concept of *racism*. The participants marked their written entry with a colour so that it would be possible to distinguish between the different writers.

Thus, much debate, especially online, has revolved around what constitutes racism. In Norway, we've seen this in relation to muslim immigration, because many claim that being opposed to muslims or islam does not constitute racism – it's simply scepticism towards religion, commonly stated "islam is not a race". (Written entry, racism, 2013).

The following codes emerged from this statement:

1. Thus, much debate, especially online, has revolved around what constitutes racism.

Codes: significance /representation/debate of concept

2. In norway, we've seen this in relation to muslim immigration

Codes: relation to own culture/country

I have provided codes that seem to capture the essence of what I interpret from the reading, meaning that I created the codes based on what the participant has communicated through his writings. I chose *significance/representation/debate of concept* as a code in example 1 because it relates to how the participant broaches what the concept actually represents. In the second example, the participant connects the concept to his own culture/country and I therefore saw *relation to own culture/country* as a suitable code. Example 3 introduces the participant's own perspective and *personal understanding* therefore seems like a suitable code. This code also relates to the particular context of the discussions in the CLEAR project, as the participants were encouraged to explore their personal perspectives about the concept.

The next example is a quote from the interview with the Norwegian participant, Eskil. The conversation is based on the notion that the group appeared to be homogenous.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about the participants? Do you consider it to be positive or negative that both groups were seemingly homogenous?

Eskil: In my experience, there were not that many discussions. It might have been more useful if the differences within the group had been greater, so that we could have an effective discussion and then come to a shared understanding (Eskil, p.3, my translation).

Codes emerging from this excerpt:

Eskil: In my experience, there were not that many discussions. It might have been more useful if the differences within the group had been greater, so that we could have an effective discussion and then come to a shared understanding.

Codes: few discussions, group combination

I decided to code only what the participants said, not my own questions or comments during the interview as I was interested only in the participants' contributions. The codes are meant to capture the essence of what the participant shared and I have therefore attempted to provide codes that convey this. This means that the codes are related to what the participant expressed. I have tried to generate codes that present an overall view of the material to capture the essence of the material. There are, of course, other codes that could have been used instead of

the ones I have chosen, but I have developed codes based on my interpretation of what is communicated through the material. Providing codes for the material is a way of familiarising myself with and gaining a better understanding of the material.

There are certain similarities between the codes for the written entries and transcribed interviews. Since the initial process of coding started with the written entries, it is likely that the codes generated here have inspired me in the process of coding the observations and transcribed interviews. There appear to be similarities between the codes generated by the various materials. This can be explained by the fact that there are parallels between the activities in the preparatory stage, on the online platform and at the workshop, as the students have worked with and talked about concept learning during the various stages of the CLEAR project. These issues were also discussed in the interviews. This will most likely result in comparable data which explains why there are some resemblances between the codes. Although there might be similarities between the codes, I do not consider this to be problematic as they are part of the same material for this study. As the codes have been generated across the interviews and written entries, some of the codes are repeated. This shows that the material is interrelated and that there are recurring incidents in the data.

Categorisation

After coding the material, the next step was to arrange the codes to generate categories that can be used to present the findings. The categories helped me organise and display the findings so that I can make sense of the material. As I was analysing the material, I went back and forth between its various parts, with the aim of relating the different parts to each other. The aim of this process was to explore if there were any similarities or differences between the different parts of material. This could help me illustrate challenges and potential related to the various stages of a concept learning project.

These categories are useful as they allow information to emerge from the data and serve as a resource that allows me to explore if there are any patterns in the data. In the first attempt, five categories have been created, *challenges*, *language*, *issues*, *information*, *approach to concept* and *potential*. The aim of the categories is to explore if the codes share some

characteristics and the ones that have features in common are placed into the same category. I used the research question as a resource when the codes were being generated into categories, and the categories are therefore closely linked to the research question. After the first categories were generated, they were organised into a chart. The chart below shows the relationship between the codes and categories.

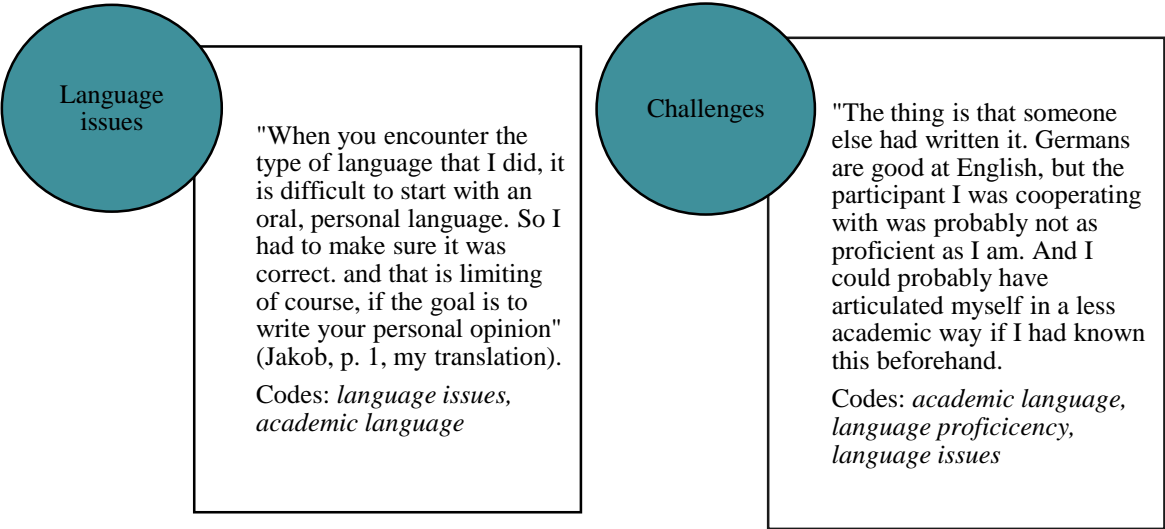
Table 3-2 An overview of the first categories

Category	Codes belonging to each category
Challenges	Lack of collaboration, lack of time, struggles, politeness, technical issues, hesitations, hindrance, silent disagreements, lack of discussions, group combination, stereotypes, cultural sensitivity, collaboration, background, language issues, previous knowledge, collaboration
Language issues	Translations, influence from mother tongue, language issues, language of communication, use of mother tongue
Aspects of the CLEAR project	Introduction, tasks, background work, information
Approach to concept	Personal approach, sources, personal interest, previous knowledge
Potential	Academic benefits, outcome, collaboration, group combination

In accordance with the constant comparative method, the first phase consists of coding and categorising the material freely, followed by a phase of reorganising the categories. After the first categories were created, the next step was to search for connections between them. This was done with the purpose of looking for similarities and differences in the data. This process is also a way of reducing the number of categories as I believe a small number of categories will make it easier to present the results clearly and understandably. To reduce the number of categories, I decided to look at the existing categories to see which elements were predominant. This correlates to what Boeije (2010) has explained about axial coding: that the researcher should reorganise the data set and find the best representative codes for the research. I see the necessity in doing this to ensure that the categories are relevant to the research topic and so the material can be presented in an accurate way, meaning that there is a

correlation between the categories and the material. Throughout the analysis process, I have tried to relate the various materials to each other. In doing so, I noticed that some of the codes appear in more than one of the categories. An example of overlapping codes is shown in the figure below. In the figure, the circles show the titles of the categories. The rectangular boxes show an excerpt from the transcribed interviews where the same codes have been given so that it will be clear how the codes emerged.

Figure 3-3 Overlapping codes between the categories



The figure above has been included here so that it will be clearer why I have decided to eliminate some of the categories.

After reviewing the overlapping codes, I tried to eliminate some of the categories so that the number of categories would be more distinct and well defined. To present the results, I believe it is beneficial to have a short number of categories so it is easier to illustrate the research questions. A limited number of categories provide the opportunity to explore the relationship between the various parts of the material more precisely as this reduces the possibility of repeating the findings. To limit the categories, I explored how each category could provide a complete representation of the material. After this process, I settled on two main categories, *challenges* and *potential*, with existing sub-categories that make the categories more precise. These two categories emerged from the process of analysis and represent the types of challenges and potential that were identified across the material. They are presented and described in the table below.

Table 3-3 Description of main categories

Challenges	<p>Examines the challenges in the various stages of the CLEAR project. The challenges that emerged from the material are:</p> <p>Organisation of CLEAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time - The role of the facilitator - Groups and cooperation - Possible influences on the interaction <p>Information and task descriptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Choice of concepts <p>Language issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of awareness about the non-native speaker - First language as support - Translations from first language to second language - Cultural awareness and assumptions about other students
Potential	<p>Investigates the potential that may arise from exploring different understandings of concepts.</p> <p>Learning potential</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What can be achieved when working with exploration of concepts

3.10 Summary

In this chapter I have presented my methodological approach to this study. The first part of the chapter introduced the participants, the different stages of the project, the method of data collection and the material for this study. It was then established that the material consists of information given to the students, written material from an online platform, observations of a workshop and interviews. The last part of this chapter illustrated the method of analysis. The constant comparative method was then presented, as well as an overview of the coding and categorisation process.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This chapter will present findings from the material. The material includes information given to the students in the preparatory stage, written entries from the online platform, observations and coded interviews. Before the findings are introduced, an explanation of the categories will be given to familiarise the reader with each category.

The table below presents and describes the categories generated from the material. It is the same as presented in chapter 3 on page 35. The categories are developed and applied here to show the material in a structured way and will be used as titles to make the presentation of findings clearer and more orderly. The last category, *learning potential*, focuses on the potential of implementing a concept learning project in an ESL classroom and will include various aspects related to this. This category places more emphasis on the potential related to a concept learning project, compared to the other categories.

Table 4-1 Description of main categories

Challenges	<p>Examines the challenges in the various stages of the CLEAR project. The challenges that emerged from the material are related to the following:</p> <p>Organisation of CLEAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time - The role of the facilitator - Groups and cooperation - Possible influences on the interaction <p>Information and task descriptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Choice of concepts <p>Language issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of awareness of the non-native speaker - First language as support - Translations from first language to second language - Cultural awareness and assumptions about other students
Potential	<p>Investigates the potential that can arise from exploring different understandings of concepts.</p>

Learning potential

- What can be achieved when working with exploration of concepts

Challenges

4.1 Organisation of CLEAR

Time

The Norwegian and German students did not have the same amount of time to work on the project. The Norwegian students only had one lecture where everyone met. The German students, on the other hand, worked on the project for a relatively long period before the online session. As Benjamin pointed out, the German students “met about six or seven times at university and also once as a whole group in private with our teacher. Most of the work was done individually and in private, the seminar was used for exchanges and discussion” (Benjamin, p.2). This seems to show that the Germans had more time to spend on the project with their fellow students compared to the Norwegians.

Some of the participants mentioned time, or rather lack thereof, as an issue with regard to the workshop. Benjamin (p.5) explained that “[a] lot of things came up that would need further elaboration”. He seems to be saying that there was too little time to go into the concepts in-depth and that more time was needed to explore them further. Eskil seems to agree that one day was not enough:

I wish we could have had more time to get to know each other. I think that would have been beneficial. Throughout the day, more people started participating in the joint discussions, but it was pretty quiet at the beginning. (Eskil, p.1).

Eskil emphasises that it would have been useful if the participants had become acquainted at an early stage during the workshop. This illustrates a challenge that may emerge if the students do not get to know each other well enough.

The facilitators may have chosen to spend a short time on introductions since the workshop lasted for only one day. Dominik, however, does not seem to regard the limited time spent on

getting acquainted as a problem for the communication: “[i]n my opinion I think we had great communication in the workshop. Having such a short time to get to know each other, we spent most of the time working on our concept and the programme” (Dominik, p. 3). However, if the purpose of the project is to explore how people understand concepts differently, it is important to feel comfortable with the people with whom one interacts. This was pointed out by Isak: “[i]t was sort of a weird setting, it was very short and when they entered the room there was a very short introduction, with no informal chat first, [...]. It would probably have been easier if I had talked to the person first ” (Isak p.4). These examples illustrate a challenge related to a lack of time, i.e. that just a short introduction can make the communication setting uncomfortable. Isak suggests that more time spent on getting acquainted could have been positive. This challenge is important to consider in relation to the exploration of concepts and, more generally, to working with language development, as it illustrates the significance of creating a safe environment if the participants want to exchange their understandings of concepts.

The role of the facilitator

One important aspect is the role of the facilitator. CLEAR’s webpage has a checklist that includes various elements that must be taken into consideration when conducting a CLEAR project. One of the points is to “[m]ake sure that learners are followed up by a trainer/teacher during online cooperation” (CLEAR Project, 2015a). However, there appeared to be little involvement by the facilitators on the online platform. The students were instructed to include certain elements in their entry but the facilitators did not intervene in what they had written on the platform. This may represent a challenge as the students were not offered any support or guidance on the online platform.

During the workshop, on the other hand, the facilitator was more involved. The lecturer from NTNU functioned as the main facilitator and led the meeting, while the German lecturer participated in the discussions and acted as a participant similar to the students. I observed that the facilitator mostly walked around and listened to the discussions during the one-on-one discussions. In the joint discussion, however, the facilitator led the discussion and was involved in it. The facilitator did not so much include his own opinions as facilitate the

students in their exchanges. Although the facilitator was present during the project, exploring the concepts was left up to the students. This suggests that the students could be provided with assistance if they needed it in their investigation of and reflection on the concepts; however, the main idea was that they should explore the concepts individually and in interaction with other students. This illustrates the importance of the facilitator in challenging and encouraging the participants.

Groups and cooperation

If the purpose of a concept learning project is to explore how concepts can be understood differently, it is important to provide a space where the concepts can be studied and discussed. The keywords *investigation*, *negotiation* and *reflection* are mentioned on CLEAR's webpage. Eskil pointed out that investigating a concept can be important in clarifying its meaning so as to avoid misunderstandings: "It is very important to focus on the meaning of concepts as confusion may occur when you talk to people from other countries, as they might have a different understanding of the concept" (Eskil, p.1). Eskil seems positive about having the chance to investigate concepts. Benjamin, on the other hand, seemed less positive. He related this to a lack of time, saying that things "would need further elaboration" (Benjamin, p.4). This illustrates that although the students did get to investigate the concepts to some extent, they would most likely need more time to investigate the concepts more closely.

In the previous chapter, I presented a quote from an written entry describing the concept of *collaboration*. This written entry illustrated that the two students made individual contributions. The entry also showed that there was little correlation between the two written entries; this was the case with the majority of the written entries. The Norwegian students were asked to "[...]work on the entries on the CLEAR platform which fellow students at the [German university] have started" (Information sheet, NTNU). In my understanding, this implied that the Norwegian students were supposed to respond in some way to what the German students had written in their entry, but the fact that there seems to be a lack of negotiation and communication here might indicate that the students did not understand this task. There was one exception, however, with one of the written entries for the concept of *revolution*. The student concerned started his entry by writing "It is also interesting to look at

how the term “Revolution” is defined in encyclopedias [...]” (Written entry, revolution). This seems to be a response to what the first person had written. However, as the majority of the written entries were individually written and did not respond to one another, this seems to indicate that the intended cooperation and interaction on the online platform might not have functioned as planned.

The students were not given any instructions regarding how long the entries should be and there is therefore variation in the length of the entries. One example is one of the written entries about *gender*, which consisted of only one sentence. Eskil stated that such a short entry limited the interaction on the online platform. He had expected greater cooperation between the two students but he says that this did not happen as he had anticipated.

I had chosen the concept gender and first I just wrote about how I understand it. And then I tried to find its historical background and research. I just started off this way and attempted to write down something sensible about it. But in comparison to the others, there was not that much to respond to. It is supposed to be cooperation but when I started, there were only three lines (Eskil, p.1).

Eskil explains that he approached the concept by presenting his personal understanding of the concept. He points out that the work on the online platform was supposed to be cooperative but he found it difficult to respond to what the other student had written on the platform as he had provided only a short entry.

During the workshop, there seemed to be more room for negotiation and discussion. As one of the students pointed out: “in my opinion I think we had great communication at the workshop” (Dominik, p.3). From what I observed, it appeared as though the participants were eager to participate in the one-on-one discussions. Emil supports this to some extent but says that in his experience the one-on-one discussions did not lead to much discussion. When the whole group participated in the discussion, however, he believed that this resulted in a productive debate.

The meeting was very positive. When it came to the concept of racism there might not have been a lot of discussion between me and [...], but when the discussion took place with the whole group, there was a fruitful discussion (Emil, p.2).

Emil points out that the one-on-one discussions involved little discussion between him and the other student but he does not offer a reason why. The shared discussion, on the other hand,

was perceived as successful by Emil, perhaps because it included more people, meaning that more viewpoints were expressed. These examples suggest that discussions taking place face-to-face are perceived as better than the online interaction.

The examples above indicate that there were valuable discussions taking place in the one-on-one discussions and to some extent in the joint discussion. Eskil would have liked more discussion of the concepts as his experience was that the students mostly agreed with each other.

In my experience there were not that many discussions. It might have been a bit more useful with greater differences within the group, so that we could have a good discussion within the group and then come to a shared understanding (Eskil, p.3).

Eskil suggests that greater diversity within the group might have resulted in an enhanced discussion. The quote seems to say something about the role of the group members and how group diversity may influence the exploration of concepts. It is interesting that Eskil suggests that the aim of the discussion was to ‘come to a shared understanding’, as this may indicate something about his assumptions about exploring concepts. Nonetheless, “negotiation” does not exclusively imply a discussion of differing opinions but may also denote the discussion in itself (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2015a). Eskil’s example suggests that there are challenges related to group diversity and that the combination of group members may affect one’s involvement in discussions.

Although the discussions taking place at the workshop appeared to be relatively successful, it was evident that some students were reluctant to contribute. There may be various reasons why some students were reluctant to voice their opinions. Isak relates this to the composition of the group and to the influence of dominant students.

[...] the more dominant members set the boundaries of what it is allowed to say and then you think that ‘no, I do not fully agree, but I do not want to say so’. Because one can experience this and then you have to defend yourself and be good at arguing (Isak, p.5).

Isak seems to feel that it was difficult to express contrary views because dominant students steered the discussion and set the limits for what could be said; that might make the others afraid to express their views.

The keyword *reflection* involves “serious and careful thought” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2015b). In relation to the exploration of concepts, reflection refers to the careful consideration of the concepts. This took place during various stages of the project, in the discussions at the universities, on the online platform and during the workshop. The written entries exhibit varying levels of reflection. It is possible that exploring the concepts on the online platform has encouraged reflection, but the students have not expressed this clearly through their written entries. One place where reflection can be found is in the written entry for *revolution*, where one student has written a number of questions that could be broached for discussion.

What is the difference between “revolt” and “revolution”?
What are the characteristics of a revolution (referring to the theory)?
Is the arab spring a revolution? (Written entry, revolution).

These questions illustrate a certain degree of reflection about the concepts, especially the last question: “Is the arab spring a revolution?”. To me, this question encourages reflection because it seems to ask for more than a yes/no answer. It also brings in the contemporary issue of the Arab spring which relates to the students’ knowledge of present-day topics. This is relevant from a didactical perspective as it is beneficial to encourage students to make use of their pre-existing knowledge.

In view of the findings presented so far, it seems that CLEAR struggled to encourage investigation, negotiation and reflection, especially on the online platform. One example of this consists of the challenges related to cooperating and responding to each other’s written entries on the online platform. These challenges might have hindered successful discussions between the students on the online platform.

Assumptions about other students

Some of the students seemed reluctant to contribute the discussion. This may have been due to assumptions about what one can and cannot say in such a communication setting where the

participants have different language and cultural backgrounds. One situation that illustrates this is a discussion between two of the students about the concept of *revolution*. During the workshop, it appeared as though the two students agreed on the understanding of the concept. Both mentioned “political revolution” as the first thing they thought of and mentioned the Arab spring³ as an example of how revolution is understood and used in a contemporary setting. However, it emerged during the interview that they may not have agreed fully after all. In an interview, a Norwegian student pointed out that the German students had used the concept about incidents that the Norwegian students did not fully agree with. Jakob asserted that a sense of politeness or sensitivity may have been exercised in this situation.

Interviewer: related to your work with the concept, were there times when you disagreed? Did any situations arise where you either truly agreed or truly disagreed?

Jakob: Ehm. We agreed for the most part, at least we did not disagree. But there, when we meet for the first time, it is difficult to disagree, a sort of a politeness thing, you do not sit and say no [...] (Jakob, p.3).

Although Jakob seems to be expressing here that there were not any major disagreements, he does suggest that he did not fully agree with the German participant. He explains that he did not express this disagreement because of politeness and because he did not know the other student. The example demonstrates Jakob’s assumptions about what one can or cannot say to people one has just met. This brings in the aspect of whether the CLEAR project facilitated or hindered the participants’ exchange of opinions. This may also indicate that the students may not have been well enough prepared for the encounter with the other students.

Isak had certain assumptions about how other students might react to the concept Zionism: “considering that they are German, I don’t know, the Jewish history might have had an impact on how they would interpret *Zionism*. But it did not seem that way when we were discussing it” (Isak, p. 2). As Isak points out, the fact that they were German could influence how they understood the concept. Assumptions about how other people might react to a concept were also mentioned by Emil and Jakob. Emil seemed to express certain assumptions about how Africans would react to the concept of *racism*: “I think it would have been positive for the discussions if both Africans and people from various organisations had been present” (Emil, p.4). Jakob expresses a similar view, saying that it “[...] would have been extremely

³ The Arab spring is a term for the revolutionary wave of protests and demonstrations throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Eide 2011: 687, my translation.

interesting to hear it from a dark person's point of view" (Jakob, p.3). Emil and Jakob's assumptions about how African people or a "dark person" would react to the concept of *racism* might be related to stereotypes, as they seem to think that the colour of someone's skin might decide or influence how a concept is understood.

4.2 Information and task descriptions

I presented the information they received in the previous chapter and I will now look at this in relation to what the students actually did and what they thought they were expected to do. The students' first step in the preparatory stage of the project was to explore their personal approaches to the concepts. The students were not expected to use references as a source during this part, but were instead encouraged to write about their associations and thoughts that emerged "[...] as an immediate response to the chosen concept" (Information sheet, NTNU). An example of how this has been done is the concept of Zionism.

Personal perspectives: I first heard the concept when I had the topic "Middle East political history" in Social science at my university college. We learned the concept Zionism by reading about Theodor Herzl and his book "Der Judenstaat" (1896) and his fight to establish a Jewish state. My first thoughts will therefore be colored by that I recently learned the concept and recently have read professional articles on the subject" (Written entry, Zionism).

We can see from the above that the student included his personal response to the concept. He appeared to have followed the instructions from the facilitator as he reflected upon the various sources that have influenced his understanding of the concept. Looking at the online platform, most of the students have completed the part about personal perspectives. The German participant, Dominik, confirmed that the first stage of exploring the concepts was about investigating the students' personal understandings. As he explained it: "[e]veryone started working on their concept with their personal approach so it was really interesting to get to know how they understood that concept" (Dominik, p.1). However, it seems some of the written entries did not include a personal approach and these concepts appear to have been defined in a more theoretical way. One such example is the written entry below for *revolution*.

Working definition:

The term revolution is a very complex term which semantic meaning was established during the French revolution. Revolution means a fundamental change of power or structures in a relatively short period of time (Written entry, revolution).

This student has thus avoided a personal angle and has written a theoretical definition. The second entry for the same concept, however, seems more personal.

It is also interesting to look at how the term “Revolution” is defined in encyclopedias: In the online version of “Store Norske Leksikon” which is a Norwegian encyclopedia, one can read that a “revolution is a process of change that happens in a *very* short period of time”. As a teacher student, I hardly believe that a 14 year old pupil would think that ten years of revolution, such as the French is a *very* short period of time (Written entry, revolution).

It seems quite clear that the student has used an encyclopaedia despite instructions not to do so during the first stage of the CLEAR project. The intention of this instruction may have been because the facilitators wanted the students to explore their knowledge of the concept instead of being influenced by external references.

The next step was to study the concepts’ historical development, contemporary uses and theoretical/scientific definitions. This part appears to have been taken more seriously by some of the German students than the Norwegians. This is what one German student said:

The general outline was to define one’s personal approach i.e. a working definition first. The more theoretical part was to formulate a contemporary definition of the concept plus historical definitions. This seemed to me the most vital part of the work and required a good deal of literature research (Benjamin, p.2).

Benjamin understood the project’s focus on the students’ personal approach to the concepts. Nonetheless, he says above that he considered the historical development and contemporary uses to be the most important part of the written entries. It is therefore possible that this was the main focus during the discussions in the German group and that there was agreement that the personal response was not that important. This might be why some of the participants have excluded their personal perspectives from the written entry. On the other hand, it might be that Benjamin’s quote is his personal opinion and not that of the whole group. Still, the findings from the written entries do suggest that there are challenges related to the instructions in the preparatory stage, or at least related to how the students have followed these instructions.

It seems that the students who wrote their written entry for the concept of revolution did not provide their immediate response to the concept and that they also used an encyclopaedia. This lack of a personal approach and the use of an encyclopaedia may imply that these

students did not understand the assignment and what was expected of them, or perhaps for some reason they did not want to provide a personal response, perhaps due to a fear of looking stupid. Although some students avoided writing about their personal response, there were others who did include this. The online tasks provided the opportunity to raise awareness of one's own perceptions but this does not seem to have been fully exploited by the participants.

Choice of concepts

This section looks at the choice of concepts and whether exploring them was useful in this context. Some concepts were investigated in more detail than others. The concepts were chosen by the facilitators based on the topics that the students had in their disciplines. It is therefore likely that they had encountered some of the concepts before. *Collaboration* appears to have been a useful concept to explore because it brought up different ways of understanding it.

Personal approach to collaboration:

The focus of my historical work primarily lies on Eastern Europe. For me, it was important to understand, how the holocaust in Ukraine and Belarus was possible, considering the vast territories and the lack of German personnel and local knowledge. In this regard I became interested in this complex and complicated topic and its peculiarities.

Personal approach to collaboration: My first association is Norway's partnership in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). A partnership that developed after Second World War II. Norway's membership in NATO started in 1949 when the treaty organization was established. I grew up during the last part of the Cold War and remember very well how Norwegian media focused on the Soviet Union and a possible military treaty form "the sleeping bear". I went on an interrail and stopped for a few days in Berlin just some months after the opening of the border between East -and West Berlin. The ruins after the Berlin Wall stood as a strong symbol for the end of the Cold War. After the Cold War collaboration between European countries changed in many ways. (Written entry, collaboration).

The two participants who defined and presented their understandings of *collaboration* appear to have had rather different understandings of the concept. The first participant writes about Eastern Europe and the Holocaust, while the second participant writes about NATO and the Norwegian media's attention on the Soviet Union. An interesting point, however, is that they both relate their personal understanding of *collaboration* to the Second World War in some way. It appears as though cultural references have influenced the students' personal

understandings of the concept and this was also brought up during the workshop. The concept encouraged a useful discussion during the workshop that introduced different ways of understanding a concept; it therefore seems to be a useful concept to employ in this context.

From the written entries and discussions, it seems as though racism was also a useful concept to explore. Emil says that the exchange of understandings about this concept resulted in disagreement about how the concept should be interpreted. As he put it: “[...] there were also some disagreements, for instance whether you are a racist towards a culture, or if it is just about race” (Emil, p.2). It is not very clear what the two interpretations of racism imply, but if I relate this to what I observed in the discussions during the workshop, I believe the two views refer to connotations of race and biology and to a country’s culture, for instance the Norwegian culture. As the discussion introduced different views of the concept, this may imply that it was a useful concept to explore. Another example that demonstrates that the concept of *racism* appears to have been useful is provided by the German student, Dominik. He reflected upon how his Jewish family background was likely to have affected his understanding of the concept of *racism*: “I am sure that my definition was influenced by my background having Jews in my family during the Second World War and also my culture. Having that history of Germany we are often working with this topic” (Dominik, p. 2-3). Although he does not provide an specific example of how his understanding of *racism* was influenced, Dominik has certain assumptions about how his understanding of the concept was influenced by the fact that he is a German citizen with Jews in his family. There is no way of knowing for sure that his understanding of the concept has been influenced by these factors, but the concept seems to have worked because it made the student think and reflect. There were also challenges associated with this concept. Jakob said that racism was a contested concept that was difficult to discuss without making a mistake or overstepping certain boundaries: “[...] Because I believe that *racism* is such a charged concept that we are terrified of screwing up” (Jakob, p.3). Jakob thus mentioned the fear of uttering something that could be perceived as inappropriate or hurtful. This illustrates the challenges of exploring and discussing contested concepts, as people may refrain from voicing their views if they are afraid of insulting anyone.

4.3 Language issues

Lack of awareness about the non-native speaker

As the students had different first languages, they had to communicate through their second language, English. On CLEAR's webpage it is stated that "CLEAR participants may not be native speakers of English. In this case, learners may be encouraged to define complex words or acronyms that they use" (CLEAR Project, 2015d). This confirms that the language of communication in the CLEAR project is English. However, any issues that may arise with the use of a second language are not commented on. It appears as though English has not been an issue that has been up for discussion, at least not with the participants. This is an important aspect to explore because the language of communication may influence the exploration of concepts and the communication that takes place between the students. Several students mentioned the facilitators' seeming lack of reflection on the use of a second language. Jakob mentioned that it seemed to be taken for granted that everyone would be comfortable about speaking English. "It makes me wonder why it was not brought up if anyone did not want to speak English, or feel comfortable about speaking English in front of a larger group. [...] I would think that cooperation is the most important part, not whether we speak English satisfactorily" (Jakob, p. 2). In this last comment, Jakob seems to signalise that the emphasis in a concept learning project should be on cooperation and support when trying to understand someone else's point of view, rather than on one's level of proficiency in English. Eskil also mentions how using English was taken for granted: "I talked to another person in class about it, that it is somehow taken for granted that English would be ok. [...] Because none of us has English as our first language" (Eskil, p. 4). Eskil introduces an essential aspect here: that none of the participants had English as their first language. It may appear as though this has not been taken into account, or at least not discussed openly with the students.

Eskil pointed out that some students appeared to be reluctant about speaking in English when the whole group were together, but that they seemed more comfortable about it in the one-on-one discussions. As he put it: "there were great differences related to who spoke in the joint discussion. [...] As I understand from the others, it worked very well when we were just one-on-one, but there were less people who expressed themselves in the joint discussion" (Eskil, p. 4). It is possible that the students were reluctant to contribute to the joint discussion because of shyness or a lack of confidence in English. Jakob explained that being in a large

group of people could make it more difficult to communicate in English and that it was easier to communicate when in a small group. “Something happens when everyone around the table is quiet and you are about to say something. I think everyone experienced this and you have to think about it and I got extremely self-conscious, like “how is this” and then it gets complicated” (Jakob, p.3). Jakob thus mentions self-consciousness as a reason why some people might find it challenging to contribute to the joint discussion. Inger Langseth has addressed this feeling and has emphasised the importance of creating an atmosphere where students dare to use the target language and take risks (Langseth, 2007, p. 40). This is relevant to consider in relation to concept learning between people with different language backgrounds since they will have to communicate in a second language.

Although some of the participants saw it as a challenge to communicate in English, there appeared to be a relaxed atmosphere where language difficulties and mistakes were accepted. My observations were supported by Eskil who explained that it helped that all the participants had English as a second language. “I am aware that my English proficiency is far from perfect. But when you are in this setting, you know that, OK, no one in this group has English as their first language and that helps. It was allowed to make mistakes” (Eskil, p. 4). This quote implies that even though they were all non-native speakers and had to communicate in their second language, they were surrounded by a safe, relaxed environment. This suggests that the issue of language might not pose such a huge challenge if a positive and safe environment is created.

The language issues that have been broached so far illustrate certain challenges related to the exploration of concepts, for instance how language struggles can influence cooperation and the exchange of understanding. Still, there appeared to a relaxed and supportive atmosphere, as Eskil pointed out above.

First language as support

It appears as though the students’ first languages sometimes functioned as support during the exchange of understandings. Jakob explained that the students sometimes used their first

language and needed help from others to translate it: “I noticed that several people did it, that they had to say it in Norwegian and then someone else had to provide a translation, help out a bit” (Jakob, p.3-4). As the participants could use their first language and help each other translating, there appeared to be a supportive atmosphere at the workshop. Eskil explained that he understood what the other participants were trying to communicate even if certain words were said in German.

Interviewer: Did you ever have to use your first language as help?

Eskil: There was one concept, it was just gone, a very common word, I cannot recall what it was. I know that the person I was discussing with was very proficient in English, but there were a few words he explained by using the German word and I understood what he was saying and then we used that as a platform for discussion. And it functioned well. But if that did not work, we used Google Translate (Eskil, p.4).

Eskil thus says that the first language could be used as a resource if they could not find the right words in English. He also explains that Google Translate could be used as a dictionary to come to a mutual understanding of what the other person was trying to communicate.

Emil points out that to carry out an intercultural project, it is necessary to have a common language in which to communicate with each other: “[i]f the goal is an intercultural exchange of ideas, you need a shared language and that is English. If some of us had been very proficient in German then we could have spoken in German, but it was not like that” (Emil, p.5). Emil thus says that it is obvious that a common language is needed. Isak also mentions that a common language is needed when people have different language backgrounds. However, he argues that English could be a challenge and that it would sometimes be easier to keep quiet instead of voicing one’s opinion.

Interviewer: What did you think about everything being conducted in English?

Isak: In a setting like this it has to be like that. But it is a very fair practice, you have to if you are supposed to cooperate across national borders. [...] But it is easy to be misinterpreted and then it is sometimes easier to just keep quiet (Isak, p.6).

This quote shows the limitations of communicating in a second language. It also broaches whether or not the CLEAR project managed to facilitate a successful platform for the exploration of concepts and assumptions. Isak acknowledges that English is a required language in order for the communication to take place, although he thinks that the possibility of being misinterpreted might hinder people from voicing their opinions. This indicates the

challenges related to the exploration of concepts, as the communication may be affected and limit the exchange of ideas.

Although some of the participants felt that cooperating in English was somewhat limiting on the communication, it seems that they made things work with the help of their first language and dictionaries. This indicates that although communicating in a second language can be challenging, it is possible to make it work if the students are motivated and put efforts into understanding the other person.

Translations from first language to second language

To discuss and understand a concept in a second language, there is a requirement for a certain level of language proficiency. Although they were instructed not to do so, some of the participants deemed it necessary to use a dictionary for their written entry to present their understanding of the concept in English. This may indicate that they have used dictionaries due to their lack of proficiency in English. Isak reflected upon whether his understanding of the concept was changed with the use of translation. "I do not think there was a change in the understanding, but it is possible that I chose other words, as I have a poorer vocabulary in English, so it might have changed in some way. I had to look up words when I wrote it" (Isak, p. 2). Isak thus explains that he had to search for words as he wrote his written entry and was therefore dependent on a dictionary. As he points out, this may have changed his written entry in some way. The issue of translation was also mentioned by the German participant, Dominik, who says that he first wrote his entry in German and then translated everything he wrote. He explains that the use of translation from his first language to his second language most likely influenced the accuracy of the concept: "the definition didn't change but I could imagine that it sounds still really German" (Dominik, p.2). It emerges from this that Dominik considers his understanding of the concept to be the same in both languages, but that he believes his first language influenced his ability to express himself. The examples here illustrate the importance of considering how a second language may influence one's understanding. It might challenge the exploration of concepts if students are not able to express their opinions in their second language. However, Isak and Dominik do not believe that the use of English had an apparent effect on their understanding of the concepts.

The preparatory stage of the project took place at the students' respective universities where they discussed the concepts between themselves before choosing one each. This stage was conducted in the students' first language. The instructions did not say anything about translating their written entry. However, it is possible that translation has been used as a strategy since the concepts were initially explored in the students' first language. Benjamin explained that not everything can be translated into a second language: "with regard to our first language it was sometimes obvious that concepts cannot be so easily translated, the question of our competence as speakers of English put aside" (Benjamin, p.3). Benjamin thus pinpoints that one's level of competence is not always the issue, but rather that some concepts are impossible to translate. In communication settings where a second language is used, there is always the risk of not being able to communicate one's meaning accurately. The challenge of providing a correct translation for a concept seemed to occur with the concept of *collaboration*. Many participants appeared to treat this concept as a synonym for the English word *cooperation* which may indicate that the participants' understanding of the concept was influenced by how they interpreted the concept of *cooperation*. Jakob mentions the challenges of translating words and concepts that might not exist in one's first language: "I do not think we have it in Norwegian, *kollaborasjon* (collaboration, my translation) does not exist in Norway, [...] probably thought that it exists, but it is not used. If someone used collaboration, it sounds as if someone is trying to say *samarbeid* (cooperation, my translation) in a very nice way, I think" (Jakob, p.3). Jakob thus suggests that *collaboration* is not used in Norwegian. The concept can be found in Norwegian dictionaries, but the student does not seem to be aware of this. This may indicate that the participant was not familiar with the concept. The example illustrates one of the challenges of working with the understanding of concepts in a second language. If students do not understand or are not familiar with the concepts, it can be challenging to explore them.

A different concept that appeared to be challenging was *gender*. It seems that several of the students only referred to the physical distinction between being a male or a female, without considering the more complex aspects of the concept. During the interview, the Norwegian student, Eskil, related the concept to the Norwegian word *kjønn*.

Interviewer: when you were supposed to write in English, did you experience that the concept you wrote about was different when you used English, compared to if you had written in Norwegian?

Eskil: no, not directly. I mean, gender, if we think about that and *kjønn* (gender), it is sort of the same thing. But gender might not be so, no I don't know, I don't think I reflected upon it that much (Eskil, p. 1).

Eskil seems to think of “gender” and “sex” as synonyms. This quote implies that the student did not understand the complexity of the English term “gender” or that he was unable to explain what it means. He explains that he did not reflect upon it which may indicate that he did not see a difference between “gender” and “sex” and therefore automatically translated the Norwegian word *kjønn* into the English word “sex”, rather than relating it to the complex term “gender”. This shows that the concept of *gender* can be problematic if the students are unaware of the many aspects of a concept.

The action of translating a concept from one language to another poses certain challenges, such as difficulties in expressing one's genuine thoughts. This brings in the “struggle” involved in being able to express oneself accurately in a second language, as well as being able to capture the intercultural sensitivity of the concept. However, using a dictionary when translating may have some potential, such as the opportunity to explore the target language in more detail.

Potential

4.4 Learning potential

Many of the ideas and perspectives above need further elaboration; Benjamin pointed out that it was thus difficult to say what they had achieved in exploring the concepts. Still, one of the learning potentials of working with the exploration of concepts is that it provides an opportunity to explore how one understands a concept and relate this to how other people understand the same concept. Isak appears to agree with this: “I have learnt that there are many ways to view the same concept and that you can't necessarily use it without considering that others might view it in a completely different way. An awakening, I guess you can call it” (Isak, p. 5). From the exchange of views, he explains that he has gained a better understanding of how a concept can be understood differently. Isak's comment is interesting because he seems to have reflected upon how people might understand things differently and that this

must be taken into consideration when interacting with others. Although these examples do not guarantee that the students have increased their understanding of concepts, it seems that they have had positive experiences after exploring the concepts.

CLEAR's webpage states that "[a] key benefit of CLEAR is the sharing of different perspectives across learners" (CLEAR Project, 2015d). This is supported by the German participant, Dominik. As he points out, "[i]t was interesting to find out how other cultures understand the concepts. This always creates another point of your understanding and makes you able to get other ideas for the same concept" (Dominik, p.4). Dominik makes the point that exploring concepts with someone from a different language and cultural background can open one's mind to new perspectives. On CLEAR's webpage, it is said that participation in the project can foster cultural awareness by "enabling learners to understand that meaning of concepts is influenced by cultural factors, such as language, religion and personal beliefs" (CLEAR Project, 2015b). According to this, working with concepts offers the opportunity to explore cultural differences. Dominik suggested above that his cultural background, both as a German citizen and with Jews in his family, most likely influenced his understanding of the concept. Considering Dominik's reflection, it is possible that cultural background can influence the way in which concepts are understood.

The language issues that have been brought up in the previous section illustrate certain challenges related to the exploration of concepts, for instance how language "struggles" can influence cooperation and the exchange of understanding. However, it was also mentioned that the workshop had a safe, supportive atmosphere. Being in a multicultural setting such as this one, where all the participants were non-native speakers of English, may therefore offer potential when it comes to exploring concepts in an ESL setting, as an arena can be created where students get to practise the target language. Being in a group where everyone had English as their second language helped create a supportive setting. Eskil pointed out that "[i]t was allowed to make mistakes and they were very open about the fact that you can make mistakes or formulate yourself in an imprecise way (p. 4). Eskil's comment illustrates that the focus was not on whether or not the students could express themselves like a native speaker of English and that mistakes and language "struggles" were accepted. This indicates that although communicating in a second language may feel like a difficult task, knowing that one

is in a setting with non-native speakers might provide a context where it feels all right to make mistakes.

A different challenge is the fear of making an inappropriate remark. This was brought up by a student in relation to the concept of *racism*. This example shows how a concept worked quite successfully, indicating the potential in terms of gaining an immediate response from the students and making them explore concepts at a more advanced level. Being able to take the discussion about concepts to a more advanced level is considered an important matter in all subjects, not only ESL.

It seems from the above that CLEAR struggled to encourage investigation, negotiation and reflection, especially on the online platform. One example consists of the challenges related to cooperation and the responses to one another's written entries on the online platform. These challenges might have hindered fruitful discussion between the students on the online platform. However, there also seems to be potential related to this. For instance, it appears as though the exploration of concepts did initiate reflection to some extent. It was also pointed out by a student that an in-depth investigation of the concepts could encourage a deeper understanding of the concept. This may signify that working with the exploration of concepts does have potential.

This section has illustrated certain aspects that may influence the exploration of concepts and how the concepts are understood. The group may appear homogeneous in terms of educational background, but shared education does not necessarily mean that the students understand the concepts similarly. Therefore, there can still be great differences in how the concepts are understood, even if concepts are explored within a group of the same educational background. The findings presented here illustrate the potential of implementing a concept learning project in an ESL classroom.

4.5 Summary

A presentation of the findings from the collected data has been provided in this chapter. The material, consisting of information from the preparatory stage, ten written entries, my own observations and seven transcribed interviews, have been placed in relation to the categories developed. These categories have presented findings related to the challenges and potential associated with the exploration of concepts.

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter will deal with the key findings from the previous chapter and link them to a theoretical discussion. With findings from the CLEAR project material as my basis, I will discuss the challenges and potential of working with concept learning.

5.1 Key findings

Below are the key findings from this study:

- Language issues can pose a challenge when it comes to exploring concepts. A lack of language proficiency and language confidence in English seems to have influenced the exploration of concepts and the interaction between the students.
- Some students have not followed the instruction in their written entries, for instance by omitting a personal approach to the concept. This key finding pertains to the organisation of CLEAR and the clarification of tasks.
- The third key finding relates to interculturality and cultural aspects. There are different factors that have influenced the exchange of understandings of concepts, such as reluctance to contribute to the joint discussion or a fear of saying something wrong or insulting.
- Some students emphasised that the exploration of concepts and exchange of ideas can result in an understanding of how concepts can be understood differently. It was also pointed out by one student that working with concepts encouraged him to investigate concepts more closely.

Different aspects of the key findings will be discussed below. The second point, regarding the instructions and organisation of CLEAR, is considered a key finding in this study but will be discussed in less detail than the other key findings, as I am more interested in the challenges and potential related to language issues and interculturality.

5.2 Language issues

For people with different language backgrounds to communicate, a common language is needed. Considering that both the Norwegian and German students had compulsory English training from year one up till year ten (Ministry of Education and Training of North Rhine-Westphalia department Soest, 2008; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013b), English seemed a suitable choice. Although a common language is needed, a number of students mentioned that they felt that it was taken for granted that English would be the language of communication. This may indicate a certain lack of reflection on the influence of language by the facilitators. On the other hand, it is possible that the facilitators did consider the challenges related to communicating in English, but that this was not discussed explicitly with the students. One of the students, Eskil, said that there seemed to be little reflection on the problems that can arise with the use of a second language. This is an important point, as the use of English as a second language can become a challenge and might also require a relatively advanced proficiency level when working with concepts.

Although the students had English as a common language, this did not necessarily mean that their language proficiency was the same, as the language training may be different in the two countries and their possibilities to practise the language may differ. English as a second language may therefore pose a challenge if the students did not feel comfortable or competent enough to discuss and interact in English. It emerged from my observations during the workshop and from interviews that not everyone felt comfortable speaking English in public. The findings indicate that the students were comfortable about communicating in the one-on-one discussion, but that some found it challenging to speak English in front of the whole group. As Jakob pointed out: “something happens when everyone around the table is quiet and you are about to say something. [...] I get extremely self-conscious, like “how is this” and then it gets complicated” (Jakob, p.3). This illustrates the challenges related to communicating in a second language. It is possible that some students have refrained from participating in the discussion of concepts because of issues related to language and this is important to keep in mind when conducting a concept learning project between students with different language backgrounds.

The paragraph above indicates a seeming lack of reflection about the implications of communicating in a second language. It is possible that the facilitators have taken this for granted because English is the only language that both groups of students spoke. This argument is highlighted by Emil who says that “if the goal is an intercultural exchange of ideas, you need a shared language and that is English” (Emil, p.5). Some of the students said that the context of CLEAR did manage to create a setting where mistakes and language struggles were welcome. As Eskil pointed out: “it was allowed to make mistakes” (p.4). This illustrates that the focus should be on the communication between students rather than on being able to act like a “perfect” speaker of English. Byram et al. (2002) state that there is no “ideal speaker” of English, meaning that the students should not aim to imitate anyone else, but rather keep their own identity and cultural viewpoint. Embedded in this is the importance of creating a safe environment where the students are allowed to be themselves and where they do not need to act like native speakers of English. From an ESL perspective, it is important that the teacher and the group of students manage to create a setting where the students feel comfortable about contributing, even if they do not have a high level of proficiency in English. Otherwise, there may be students who are reluctant to contribute their opinions.

I mentioned in the analysis that the students used their first language as support and that they helped each other translate when communicating in English. As Eskil said: “there were a few words he explained by using the German word and I understood what he was saying and then we used that as a platform for discussion” (Eskil, p.4). The fact that the students made an attempt to understand each other even when using their first language shows that they put effort into understanding each other’s point of view. Arguably, participating in such discussions can have positive outcomes on second language learning, for instance an expanded vocabulary and increased language proficiency when more abstract and theoretical concepts are discussed in English (Cruz, 2004). This relates to the Norwegian curriculum, too, where it is pointed out that the English subject should provide students with “the opportunity to acquire information and specialised knowledge through the English language” (LK06, 2010). Considering that there is no “ideal speaker” of English, the students must be able to adjust, accept and understand other people (Byram et al., 2002, p. 11). This illustrates a potential related to working with concept learning; if students put effort into understanding each other’s view, they may gain a better understanding of how others can have ideas that are

different from their own. The students were supportive in helping each other find the right words and would sometimes contribute with the right word if anyone needed help. This illustrates that although the students to some extent struggled with the language, they were still able to interact and get their opinions across with help from others.

The use of translation is an important aspect to investigate because it says something about how concepts can be explored from an ESL perspective. Since the participants all had English as a second language, this means that translation is a necessary step in exchanging their understandings of the concepts. According to Witte (2011), the process of translating starts with the very first encounter with the foreign language. However, this is not a straightforward process, as an “exact one-to-one translation of words uttered and received is hardly ever possible” (Witte, 2011, p. 83). The process of translating is therefore rather complex. Some of the students explained that they explored the concepts in their first language in the preparatory stage and then translated their written entry into English. They did not think that the process of translation influenced their understanding of the concept, but they do point out that the written entry may have been influenced by their first language. As Dominik pointed out: “the definition didn’t change but I could imagine that it sounds still really German” (Dominik, p.2). What Dominik seems to be explaining is that the student’s presentation of a concept in his second language has elements from his first language and the first language’s conceptual system. This relates to the argument of Danesi (1992, p. 490) who claims that “[...] students 'speak' with the formal structures of the target language, but they 'think' in terms of their native conceptual system”. This must be accounted for when exploring concepts in an intercultural setting where people have different language and cultural background. The students might not be aware of the influence their first language can have on the way they present their understanding of a concept. This can be a challenge, as the students might use their native conceptual systems, Norwegian and German, as a basis in their exploration of conceptual understanding, even if they use English to explain it.

A different challenge related to translation is whether a concept can actually be translated. The German student, Benjamin, pointed out that it was sometimes difficult to translate the concepts from their first language into English. He says that this did not necessarily have to do with the students’ language proficiency, but rather that the concepts were impossible to

translate. This might not be entirely correct, as findings show that the concepts explored in this round of the CLEAR project could be translated. Still, when one translates a concept from one language into another, one must consider all aspects that can influence this process. Witte (2011, p. 90) states that the use of translation “[...] requires more than linguistic knowledge, namely pragmatic social knowledge and intercultural sensitivity”. For instance, there is the significant possibility that the meaning of a concept in one language is different in another. This posed an issue during the CLEAR project with the concept of *collaboration*. One student argued that this concept did not exist in Norwegian, or as he put it, it is not used often. What he is referring to is the direct translation between the Norwegian word *kollaborasjon* and the English word *collaboration*. *Collaboration* does exist in Norwegian which may imply that the students did not understand the true meaning of this concept. One reason why the Norwegian student did not recognise the use of the word in Norwegian might be that he was not familiar with the historical context of the word, or that the word did not belong to his own vocabulary, meaning that he did not use it himself and therefore did not know that it exists in Norwegian. It is also possible that the concept is not used between people of his own age and, as a result, he did not recognise the concept. This illustrates one of the challenges related to exploring concepts, namely that the students’ prior understanding may limit the interpretation of a concept.

None of the other Norwegian students, however, appeared to have reflected upon the use of this word in their first language. This might mean that they were familiar with the concept in their first language, or that they actually did not see any difference between this concept and its synonyms. The students appeared to associate *collaboration* with *cooperation*, without seemingly reflecting upon whether there might be a difference between these English synonyms. This became visible because they linked *collaboration* to NATO and trading between European countries. As Risager (1996, p. 19) points out, students often use the foreign language without an awareness of the cultural aspect, where semantics and pragmatics are transferred from the students’ first language. If one does not possess knowledge about the cultural influence when translating a concept, this can make it challenging to present an accurate translation. Exploring concepts in a second language can become a challenge if the students are not aware of any linguistic differences between a concept in the two languages. This might influence which concepts are useful for exploration in a concept learning project.

5.3 Cultural aspects

The exploration of concepts took place in an intercultural setting, where the aim was to exchange different understandings of concepts. Although the students all had English as their second language, there were still certain cultural codes stipulating how to behave, such as treating others with respect and being interested in what others contributed to the discussion. The students therefore had to strive to understand the cultural codes in the group. This relates to the struggle between a non-native speaker and the target culture. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture can be seen as “a place of struggle between the learners’ meanings and those of native speakers” (p.24). In the meeting between the students, there was no authoritative view of which cultural codes are correct. This means that the Norwegian and German students did not necessarily need to possess knowledge about each other’s culture, but they had to be able to know how to interact with someone from a different culture. As Byram et al. (2002) point out, cultures are in constant change and it will not be possible to be prepared for all the different cultural changes that take place. It is therefore not required to have complete and perfect competence when acting as an intercultural speaker, but rather be able to adjust to the people one interacts with.

An interesting aspect is whether CLEAR can create “a place of struggle”, where the students can investigate their own and other’s meanings. The setting of a concept learning project like the one that has been investigated here introduces a potential in exploring how one’s own understanding of concepts can be understood from other perspectives. As was pointed out in the theory chapter, teachers should encourage students to use their creative and critical skills in various settings (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006, p. 14). This involves the ability to participate in a more academic discussion where concepts are critically assessed. Being able to contribute to an academic conversation about how concepts can be understood differently is relevant in all subjects and not only from an ESL perspective. With regard to exploring how concepts can be understood differently, Isak said that: “I have learnt that there are many ways to view the same concept and that you can’t necessarily use it without considering that others might view it in a completely different way” (p. 5). Isak’s comment illustrates that there is a “place of struggle” when exploring and reflecting upon various concepts. This demonstrates the potentials of exploring concepts, namely that it can raise an awareness of how concepts can be understood differently. It is, however, important to take into consideration the struggles between the speakers of English as a second language and facilitate for this to

exploit the potential of a concept project. As it has been discussed above, it seems that CLEAR did not put enough emphasis on the challenges related to exploring concepts in a second language. This must be given greater reflection if the aim is to provide a context where the students investigate their own and other's meanings.

From an ESL perspective, it is essential to reflect upon how one's cultural background may influence our understanding of concepts. Through a concept learning project such as CLEAR, students can gain to meet people with different cultural backgrounds. One of the potentials related to this is that a concept learning project can provide an opportunity to become aware of how our cultural background can be a possible influence on the way we see and interpret concepts. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture is a "key to understanding speakers' verbal behaviours and worldviews [...]" (p.20). This suggests that culture can provide a foundation for interpreting what others say and understanding their worldviews. The influence of culture is commented on by the German student Dominik, who believes that his understanding of the concept *racism* must have been influenced by his cultural background. "As I was working in the concept 'racism' I am sure that my definition was influenced by my background having Jews in my family during Second World War and also my culture" (Dominik, p. 2-3). Dominik brings up his family background as an element that can influence his understanding of a concept. This illustrates how CLEAR has provided an opportunity to explore how cultural background might possibly influence the students' understanding of concepts. Even if a concept learning project is carried out between students of the same age and educational background, there will always be the likelihood that they have different cultural backgrounds that results in various understandings of the concepts.

5.4 Interculturality and cultural aspects

A concept learning project can function as a useful context to prepare the students for interaction with students from a different language and cultural background. A successful dialogue presupposes that the students take each other's world views and languages into consideration. However, as presented in the analysis, some students appeared to be reluctant to participate in the shared discussion during the workshop. This illustrates a challenge related to working with concepts, as it is essential that all students participate in the concept learning project. One participant expressed a fear of being misinterpreted which may have restricted the student's participation in the discussion. As he put it: "[..] it is easy to be misinterpreted

and then it is sometimes easier to just keep quiet” (Isak, p.6). The fact that some students apparently felt that they could not express their ideas indicates that there are some challenges related to the setting of CLEAR. If the goal is to explore various understandings and ideas of concepts, it is important that everyone contributes and expresses their view. This necessitates Byram’s idea of “decentering” which involves the ability to “relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours [...] and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider’s perspective who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours” (2002, p.12). If facilitators and participants are not aware of the risks of misunderstandings, this can be a challenge when exploring concepts.

A different reason why some students seemed to be reluctant to participate is the influence of dominant members on the interaction within the group. As Isak pointed out: “[...] the more dominant members set the boundaries of what it is allowed to say and then you think that ‘no, I do not fully agree, but I do not want to say so’” (Isak, p.5). This implies that there were some assumptions about what the students could discuss and that these were limited by the dominant members of the group. Byram et al. (2002, p. 9) point out that people’s social identities are an unavoidable part of the social interaction. He explains that this can influence “what they say, how they say it, what response they expect and how they interpret the response” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 9). Isak’s statement about dominant members illustrates one of the limitations of working with the understanding of concepts, i.e. that a small number of students contributing to the exploration of concepts may offer only a limited number of perspectives. This highlights the need to develop the skills of interpreting and comparing, one of the components of intercultural competence. Such skills involve the ability to see how misunderstandings can occur (Byram et al., 2002) which may be useful when trying to figure out why someone may have misunderstood something that has been said, written or done when exploring the concepts. The examples here illustrate some challenges related to the exploration of concepts, since some ideas may not have been presented if some students have been reluctant to express their views. Also, if only a small number of the students contribute to the discussion, it is difficult to organise a successful debate.

Participating in a concept learning project in an intercultural setting will require that the students have what Byram et al. (2002) call “savoirs”, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes. However, as some students appear to have refrained from participating in the exploration of

concepts during the shared discussion, this may illustrate that the setting of CLEAR has not prepared the students in terms of how to act as intercultural speakers. Arguably, an awareness of the intercultural speaker is to some extent lacking in the CLEAR project. I make this comment based on the way in which there seems to be a lack of reflection on how the intercultural setting could influence the exploration of concepts. Being able to act as an intercultural speaker is essential in a concept learning project, as the students must be able to accept that others may have different perspectives and understandings of the concepts. The intercultural speaker is “[...] someone who has an ability to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations of difference” (Byram et al., 2001, p. 5). This involves the ability to acknowledge that someone may have other perspectives than one’s own. The paragraphs above discussed the students’ apparent reluctance to express their opinions and understandings of the concepts. This begs the question whether the CLEAR project had sufficiently prepared the students for the challenges related to exploring concepts in an intercultural setting. A lack of awareness about the importance of the intercultural speaker illustrates one of the challenges related to the exploration of concepts, as the students’ intercultural competence may influence the interaction between them and, consequently, how concepts are explored.

As reflection on the intercultural speaker is lacking to some extent, this may indicate that the students have not been well enough prepared for the encounter with someone from a different language and cultural background. In the analysis chapter I presented a situation, in relation to the concept of *revolution*, that demonstrated possible disagreement between the students. Although one student did not fully agree with the definition of the concept provided by a German student, he did not express this to the German student. The student’s explanation for this was that “[...] when we meet for the first time, it is difficult to disagree, sort of a politeness thing, you do not sit and say no [...]” (Jakob, p.3). Jakob thus relates this situation to politeness and that it is difficult to disagree with someone one has just met. The example might illustrate possible assumptions about what can be said in a communicative setting where the participants do not know each other. This indicates certain challenges related to working with concepts, such as the “struggle” to communicate one’s own meanings if one feels one does not know or is not prepared to communicate successfully with one another. Only a short time was spent on introductions before the students started exploring the

concepts so perhaps the student did not feel that he knew the other student well enough to express his disagreement. Although Jakob not expressing his disagreement may pose a challenge, it also appears that Jakob has been conscious of his response to the other student. This example may thus demonstrate critical cultural awareness which involves being “conscious in any evaluative response to others” (Byram, 2002, p.13). Jakob’s reluctance to express disagreement might suggest that he was practising critical cultural awareness during the discussion.

When conducting a concept learning project, it is important that everyone is provided with the same information, as this will hopefully ensure that the students understand the aims of the project. The purpose of the project was to explore how a concept can be understood differently, without necessarily reaching a conclusion on one understanding that they all agreed on. Based on comments from the students, however, it seems that some of the students thought that they were expected to come to a shared understanding of the concepts, rather than exploring how people understand the concepts differently. This may be related to the keyword of *negotiation* that was highlighted as one of CLEAR’s goals. Negotiation is “the process of discussing something with someone to reach an agreement with them, or the discussions themselves” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2015a). This means that the discussion does not necessarily have to result in agreement between the students, but that negotiation can simply refer to the discussion itself. It is possible that this had not been communicated explicitly which illustrates the importance of ensuring that everyone receives the same information. Byram et al. (2002, p. 26) highlight that an intercultural dimension in the foreign language classroom involves letting the students share their knowledge with each other and discuss their opinions. A concept learning project must therefore encourage the students in their discussion and allow everyone to contribute their opinions. If it is not clear to the students that they do not need to come to a joint conclusion, but instead explore all ideas that a concept can bring up, this may pose a challenge for the concept learning project, as the students may struggle to understand what is expected of them.

The comments by the students about the interaction mainly concerned the communication that took place in the workshop. However, the online platform was also a space for written cooperation and communication. From an ESL perspective, written communication involves

“adapting the language to purposeful objectives and to the recipient” (LK06, 2010). Having the ability to make oneself understood and present one’s meaning through text is seen as a valuable aspect of second language learning and is one of the main topic areas in the English subject. When we look at the written entries, however, it is obvious that there has not been a lot of negotiation or interaction between the students on the platform. This was illustrated by the excerpt from the written entry for *collaboration*. We can see in the excerpt that both participants have written separate entries that do not respond to each other. One exception, however, is the concept of *revolution*. The Norwegian student’s entry starts with “[i]t is also interesting to look at how the term “Revolution” is defined in encyclopedies” (Written entry, *revolution*). Since the student has started the entry with “it is also”, he seems to be trying to respond to the first student’s entry. This illustrates potential related to the exploration of concepts, as the student made an attempt to associate his understanding with that of the first writer. This can be related to one of Byram et al. (2002)’s “savoirs” in intercultural competence, namely skills of discovery and interaction. This skill involves “[...] finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have” (ibid, 2002, p.13), meaning that the students must be able to use their knowledge, attitudes and skills in an actual act of communication. Still, each student has written only one entry, meaning that the communication ceased after the second entry had been written. This means that the project has been able only to a small degree to facilitate or encourage interaction on the online platform. The example of the written entry for *revolution* demonstrates some success, but it is possible that the facilitators should have been more specific in terms of how the students were supposed to interact with each other on the online platform. One idea that could perhaps be carried out to engage the students in online interaction could be to encourage them to continue writing on the platform even after they had posted their first entry. This could possibly encourage the students to respond more actively to what the other person has written. After the meeting between the students was over, they were told that they could end their written entry with a concluding remark showing whether their personal perceptions had changed in any way. However, this was not done by any of the students, possibly illustrating that this should have been an obligatory part of the project.

In the paragraphs above, I mentioned *negotiation* as one of the aims of CLEAR. *Reflection* is also an aim in relation to exploring concepts. There are findings that suggest that the students were encouraged to reflect upon the concepts. One student, for instance, demonstrated

reflection on the online platform; his personal perspectives on Zionism may have been influenced by what he had read in professional articles about this concept. This illustrates the potential in becoming aware of what may influence our own understandings of concepts. A number of the participants expressed that they experienced a positive outcome from reflecting upon concepts and how people understand concepts differently. As one participant pointed out, “one can do a lot by reading and observing, but an actual exchange of ideas adds another quality, of course [...]” (Benjamin, p.7). This indicates the potential in discussing and reflecting upon concepts with others. Kramsch (1993, p. 26) emphasises that “[i]t is through the opportunities for dialogue and reflection upon dialogic experiences that cross-cultural exchanges have their value”. By establishing a context where the students can explore concepts in a cross-cultural exchange, the students may discover how others interpret and understand such concepts. Also, one may gain a better understanding of the concepts when exploring them in detail with someone else. However, as Benjamin pointed out: “[a] lot of things came up that would need further elaboration” (Benjamin, p.5). By “things”, I believe he means perspectives and ideas related to the concepts. This may imply that although the students were encouraged to reflect upon the concepts, the various stages of CLEAR did not leave enough space to reflect upon the understanding of the concepts. A lack of time was also mentioned by other students as one of the challenges associated with CLEAR. This indicates that to encourage reflection, one needs to provide enough time to explore the concepts thoroughly.

5.4 Conditions of effective concept learning

The choice of concepts is an important element in a concept learning project. The concepts chosen for this round of the CLEAR project were all taken from the field of social science, the students’ field of study. Some of the concepts explored were useful in such a setting, whereas others appeared less suitable. The concept of *racism* seemed like a suitable concept to explore as one student seemed to reflect upon how his cultural background might have influenced his understanding. On the other hand, this concept also appeared to be challenging, because it is contested and can lead to views that can be experienced as hurtful. When exploring concepts, one must be aware of the fact that some people may have different understandings and that some views may emerge as inappropriate, even though this may not have been the intention. This emphasises the need to be able to “decentre”, where one is able to see how something might be seen from an outsider’s perspective, as explained by Byram et al. (2002) above.

Although it is difficult to say for certain, as it was not pointed out explicitly by any of the students, it seems that the students managed to respect each other's perspectives of the concept of *racism*. Even though some of the concepts were useful to explore for students at university level, these concepts may be too advanced to explore for language learners undergoing lower or upper secondary education in Norway. If a concept learning project is to be conducted within the field of ESL teaching, one must consider the aspects of age and the level of second language competence when finding the concepts to explore.

The concept of *gender* appeared to be challenging to explore. The concept was defined differently by both students, with one student linking it to men and women's social construction, while the other refers to gender as a synonym for one's biological sex and gender. As illustrated in the previous chapter, it seems that various dimensions of meaning are lacking from the discussion of this concept, both on the online platform and in the workshop discussions. This may suggest that the students did not understand the profundity of this concept. The purpose of exploring concepts is for the students to explore their personal understandings, as well as the concept's wider definition, such as its historical background and contemporary uses. However, if the students are not acquainted with the concept or do not understand the concept's meaning, part of the project's intention may be lost. Danesi (1992) argues that when students practise a foreign language, they often use target language words to express their native conceptual system (p.490); students may thus use the formal structures of English to communicate, but their understanding comes from their own native conceptual system which is Norwegian and German. This is an example of a concept that is challenging to explore, as it may make it difficult to explore the concept if the students are not aware of the full, deep meaning of the concept.

In a concept learning project it is important to have clear instructions for the students to follow. If students from different schools are to cooperate, clear, shared instructions are increasingly important so that both parties know what is expected of them. CLEAR instructed the students to start by exploring their "immediate response" to the concept and write about their personal perspective of it, without referring to dictionaries or encyclopaedias. The second approach was to search for definitions among different sources. The two different approaches have different aims; whereas the first asks the students to explore their prior

understandings and presumptions of the concept, without being influenced by other references, the second approach requires a “professional” explanation of the concept. The purpose of having two different approaches may be that they introduce different angles on the concepts. By first reflecting upon one’s “immediate response” to the concept, one may explore one’s own thoughts and views of a concept. In the second approach, one may find existing definitions allowing the comparison of existing definitions with one’s own understanding. The two approaches can be related to the core principle of language teaching, namely bringing authentic language use into the classroom by using the target language. As Kramsch (1993) points out, the second language classroom should prepare students for native-speaker environments (p.185). This is exactly what the students do get to do when they explore the concepts in English in an English-speaking setting.

The first approach is relevant in relation to intercultural awareness and Byram et al. (2002)’s idea that there is no native model to imitate. The aim of this approach is to focus on one’s own perspectives and identity, rather than “[...] imitate or attempt to acquire the social identity of a native speaker” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 11). As Kramsch (1993) points out, “it is through dialogue with others, native and non-native speakers, that learners discover which ways of talking and thinking they share with others and which are unique to them” (p.27). This means that by approaching a concept with one’s immediate response and then going through the other students’ responses, one can learn more about which ideas belong to oneself and which ideas are shared with others. This approach is also useful because it can raise awareness of how people understand the concepts differently, instead of learning how different scholars define the concept. Concept learning can therefore be a valuable way of working with intercultural awareness, as it offers the students a context to explore concepts in more detail. The second approach can also be used to work with intercultural awareness, as the students will use different resources to write about historical developments, contemporary uses and theoretical definitions. These different resources may offer students an idea of how a concept has developed and how it is defined in a culture different from their own. Dominik explains that learning how other cultures see and understand concepts can introduce one to new perspectives on a concept. He points out that “it was interesting to find out how other cultures understand the concepts. This always creates another point of your understanding and makes you able to get other ideas for the same concept” (Dominik, p.4). This illustrates how

working with concepts in an intercultural setting can offer the possibility of expanding one's own understanding of a concept.

Students were asked not to use dictionaries or any other resources in the first stage of the CLEAR project and this is a fruitful way to approach concepts if the aim is to explore our own ideas rather than other scholars' definitions. However, it was clear that some students had used dictionaries and encyclopaedias on the online platform in providing their personal perspective of the concept. This may indicate that some of the concepts were too challenging to explore without seeking help from other resources. Stoll et al. (2003, p. 58) emphasise that students need "mechanisms for categorising and organising information, connecting ideas and identifying or constructing patterns". If students lack these mechanisms, it will be challenging to explore concepts and approach them through their immediate response. Teachers must help students develop such mechanisms and it is therefore important to work with concepts in an educational setting. It is not clear why some of the students in the CLEAR project used dictionaries when they wrote about their personal perspective of the concept, but this may imply that the students found it difficult to pinpoint their immediate response to the concept or that they did not fully understand it. A different reason might be language issues, for instance that they did not know the concept's meaning in English or that they did not know how to present their personal understanding of the concept in English. It is therefore important to keep in mind that language issues can make some concepts troublesome to the students.

The fact that some students have used dictionaries and encyclopaedias, when they were asked not to, illustrates the importance of choosing concepts that are understandable to and within the intellectual reach of all the students. This can be challenging as it will be difficult to know for certain whether the students have encountered the concepts before. Still, if the aim is to explore concepts, one must attempt to find concepts that everyone can relate to in some way without the need to use dictionaries or encyclopaedias. Meyer and Land (2003) point out that it is easier to identify threshold concepts in some disciplines. When selecting concepts from a foreign language teaching perspective, the focus must be on finding concepts that can be explored by people with different cultural and national backgrounds. By choosing concepts that are cognates, "[...] words that are similar in the student's native language and in English" (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013, p. 29), it would perhaps be easier for the

students to approach the concept without using a dictionary. Such concepts could for instance be “identity” or “respect”. In an ESL context, we must remember that there may be varying levels of English proficiency. This means that that a student may not know the meaning of a given concept. However, if we choose to explore concepts that are cognates, there is the possibility that the student will be able to present a personal and immediate response to the concept. One important factor to consider here is that one would have to make sure that the words are familiar to both groups, considering that they have different language backgrounds.

The role of the facilitator is important to consider as he or she may influence how the concepts are explored. The facilitator’s role during the workshop was mainly to consult and help the students in their exploration of the concepts and assist them in their discussions if needed. One participant, however, argued that he could have wanted more assistance from the facilitator when it came to language “struggles”. Byram et al. (2002, p. 34) emphasise that language teachers need “[...] skills in promoting an atmosphere in the classroom which allows learners to take risks in their thinking and feeling”. It is therefore important that the facilitator of a concept learning project focuses on creating an environment where the students feel that they can contribute their understandings of the concepts. As mentioned, there were issues related to reluctance to participate in the shared discussion. This implies that the facilitator must be aware of all the challenges that are involved in an intercultural setting and try to assist students in overcoming these challenges. In the analysis, I pointed out that there appeared to be little involvement by the facilitators on the online platform, even though the importance of support on the platform is pointed out on CLEAR’s webpage. It is possible that the lack of presence by the facilitator influenced the work done on the online platform and that if the facilitators had assisted them in their work, they might have followed the instructions more closely. A lack of involvement by the facilitator can pose a challenge, as the students might be left to their own devices without any support for what they are doing. This presupposes that the students are informed about what they should be doing, if they are supposed to write entries and interact on the online platform on their own.

The context of CLEAR can be compared to that of an ESL classroom since it revolves around students with different language and cultural backgrounds who have English as their second language. The German and Norwegian students who participated in this CLEAR project had

not met before and therefore had to get to know each other during the workshop. The workshop started with a short introduction of the students, before starting their one-on-one discussions of the concepts. A short time spent on becoming acquainted was mentioned as a challenge by some of the participants. As Eskil pointed out: “There is something about overcoming the obstacle of speaking English with people we do not know, from a different country and perhaps with a different understanding than ours” (p.1). This illustrates that it might have been beneficial for the students to get to know each other a little bit better before they started exploring and discussing the concepts. He also pointed to the issue of communicating in a second language which illustrates that getting to know each other might be even more important in an intercultural setting where different language and cultural backgrounds are involved. The second language classroom’s aim is to prepare students for interaction with speakers of other languages and, as Byram et al. (2002, p. 9) put it, help develop “learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities [...]”. To be able to interact with “multiple identities”, the facilitators should arrange for the students to get to know each other, as this can create a secure environment that is useful for exploring concepts. If a concept learning project such as CLEAR is going to be used in ESL teaching, it is therefore important to consider the time aspect and perhaps consider having a longer preparatory stage where the students are prepared for intercultural communication.

5.5 Ethical considerations

There are several ethical considerations that have been reflected upon in performing this research. The national research ethical committee for social sciences, law and humanities (NESH) is a Norwegian committee that has developed a set of guidelines that concerns ethics in research. NESH mentions the requirement for confidentiality and that research material should be kept anonymous (The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, 2006, p. 18). The group of participants was relatively small and it is therefore important to consider how well their anonymity has been preserved. I took several steps to ensure anonymity, e.g. through the use of male names of all the participants. A second step was to conceal the names of the participants that were mentioned during the interviews, by including [...]. Further, I do not reveal the actual university the students

belonged to. I therefore believe I have taken the necessary steps to keep the participants anonymous.

Postholm (2011, p. 148) argues that a close relationship between the researcher and participant can lead to friendship between them which may influence the participant to share information that he might not have given otherwise. As I am acquainted with some of the participants, I had to be aware of my interaction with them, both during the workshop and interviews. I have earlier explained my role as “the observer as participant” at the workshop. By taking on this role, I was able to focus on the authentic discussions between the participants and yet still be able to interact with them if necessary. One thing that helped me act in an ethical manner was the interview guide I had prepared for the interviews. By following the guide, I made sure that I did not trail off into personal conversations. Although I kept a professional role during the interviews, I think that my acquaintanceship with some of the participants led to an instant relationship of trust that might not have been there otherwise. It is possible that this had an effect on the interaction between the participant and researcher and on the answers that were given.

5.6 Credibility

Nilssen (2012, p. 141) emphasises that the qualitative researcher needs to reassure the reader that the presentation of research is in no way incorrect or a distortion of the actual situation. This means that as a researcher, I must make sure that the research is a correct representation of the field. I call this aspect *credibility*, a term adopted by Vivi Nilssen. Nilssen (2012) states that “the researcher needs to prove to the reader that the findings are credible” (p.141, my translation). An aspect relevant in relation to this is the importance of having a correlation between the material and what this research project wants to investigate. The methods chosen for this research project include analysis of written material, observations of the workshop and conducted interviews. I consider these methods to be credible because they follow the whole process of the CLEAR project. To find out how the participants worked on the concepts, it was relevant to observe how they participated and interacted both on the online platform and at the workshop. It was also useful to gain the participants’ perspective on how

they experienced participating in a concept learning project, as this would enable me to gain a more detailed picture of CLEAR.

5.7 Quality of research material

Reliability and objectivity are crucial components in the performance of research as this reveals the consistency of a study. Boeije (2010, p. 168) has introduced the term *quality of research* as a substitute for “objectivity” which is a term that I deem apt to use here as it implies an evaluation of the research conducted and an assessment of whether the research project has investigated what it set out to explore. One requirement that is relevant to the research project is transparency. Through the collection of data and the presentation of findings, I have attempted to present the material in an objective way so that the research could be repeated with similar results. However, it would be difficult to reproduce the exact same situations and acquire the same findings, as the participants would most likely not be able to repeat everything they had said or experienced the first time. This occurred with one participant during an interview, where he was asked to elaborate on whether anything surprising had come up in relation to the concepts. The participant pointed out during the interview that he could not remember everything fully which illustrates the difficulties in providing an accurate presentation of what occurred in the workshop. This illustrated the challenges of measuring reliability in qualitative research because one cannot reproduce an interview since it is doubtful that the interviewee would be able to repeat everything that was said in the first interview. (Postholm, 2011, p. 169).

The methods I have chosen for the collection of data provide a demonstration of the whole process of the CLEAR project which made it possible to investigate challenges and potential related to the different stages of a concept learning project. Knowing about all the stages of the project will make it possible for other researchers to conduct a similar investigation. Conducting interviews was a useful way to relate the participants’ reflections from the interviews to my own observations. This was beneficial because it makes my own observations more reliable in that I have comments by the participants that relate to my own perspectives. One example is the seeming lack of reflection by the facilitators on the influence of language when exploring concepts; this was noticed by the researcher and later commented

on by the students during interviews. This example shows quality in the research as the findings from observations interrelated with comments from students. A different reason why this research is reliable is that I have included the perspectives of both the Norwegian and German participants. For the sake of accuracy, both parties must be able to argue their points of view.

Another aspect that must also be considered is how the theoretical framework shapes all research findings (Boeije, 2010). As this research project mainly leans on Byram and Kramsch and their theory of interculturality and the interconnectedness of language and culture, it is likely that my approach to the participants and the “lenses” that have been used to analyse the material have been influenced by the theoretical framework. In my meeting with the students, both at the workshop and in the interviews, I endeavoured to meet them in a neutral and unbiased way as I wanted to have authentic answers without my influence. Still, it is possible that I have been affected by the theoretical framework when observing the students’ exploration of concepts and during the conducting of interviews. A crucial thing that may influence the findings is the risk of being affected by expectations. If the researcher enters the field with a set of expectations, instead of being open-minded to what he or she might find, the chance that the researcher will steer the conversation in that direction is present. I therefore conducted a semi-structured interview, as this would let the participants elaborate as much as possible without me interrupting them too much.

5.8 Summary

Throughout this discussion, the focus was on linking the findings to relevant theory that was presented in chapter 2. I have also attempted to contribute my own thoughts where fitting.

6. CONCLUSION

This research project set out to explore the didactical potential and challenges related to working with the understanding of concepts from an ESL perspective. My interest was in challenges and potential related to both the preparatory stages and the communicative contexts of a concept learning project; it was therefore useful to explore the whole process of the CLEAR project. It was also of interest to investigate how the students experienced CLEAR and the exploration of concepts and the interviews with the students have contributed valuable information about conducting a concept learning project. Further, I reflected upon the social benefits of this study and the way in which the topic could be further researched.

6.1 Research questions revisited

The research question included two sub-questions to make the investigation more specific and precise. The first research question was “**what are the didactical challenges and potential of the preparatory stages?**” Here, I wanted to explore the tasks and instructions the participants had been given and how they worked on the concepts before the communication between the German and Norwegian students started. The students seem to have gone through the same procedures in choosing a concept. The German and Norwegian students chose their own concept and many of them said they chose their concept because of a personal interest in it. It also seems that the Norwegian and German students received the same instructions. This is evident from the students’ comments during the interviews. Although they appear to have received the same information, this does not necessarily mean that they all followed the instructions. Looking at the written entries, it is obvious that some of the students have not included all of the parts in the entry, despite being instructed to do so. I also found that there appeared to be some miscommunication about the interaction on the online platform. CLEAR’s aim was for the online platform to encourage interaction between the students, but it is obvious that the majority of the written entries did not relate to each other and that there was little communication between the students. This finding also relates to the subsequent research question as it illustrates some of the challenges related to the communicative contexts.

The second research question was **“what are the didactical challenges and potential of the two different communicative stages?”** This question focused on the setting where the students interacted, on the online platform and at the workshop. A common language was needed since the students had different language and cultural backgrounds. English was therefore chosen as the language of communication. There are certain challenges related to the use of a second language and several students mentioned the facilitators’ seeming lack of reflection on the use of a second language. Communicating in a second language was challenging to some of the students both because of a lack of language proficiency and a lack of confidence. A different challenge related to the use of English as a second language was the issue of translating a concept accurately. As Benjamin pointed out: “with regard to our mother tongue it is sometimes obvious that concepts cannot be easily translated” (Benjamin, p.3). The findings regarding English as a second language illustrate the importance of reflecting upon and preparing the students for communication with someone who has a different language background.

Another aspect that emerged from the analysis is that there appeared to be little reflection on the importance of the intercultural speaker in a concept learning project between students from different language and cultural backgrounds. This argument is based on the way that some students seemed to be afraid to offer their thoughts and reflections; this was because of language issues and because of dominant members in the communicative setting. It was pointed out that it was sometimes easier to keep quiet rather than having to defend one’s opinions; this may imply that some students kept their opinions to themselves rather than sharing them with the group. This illustrates a challenge related to working with concepts, as the aim was to explore the concepts from different points of view. To this end, it is important that everyone contributes to the project. Although there may have been challenges related to the communicative stages, several participants pointed out that there was a relaxed atmosphere where language difficulties and mistakes were accepted. This corresponded with my own observations from the workshop. This shows that the communicative stages have potential if the facilitator can create a safe environment where the students want to participate.

Another potential that emerged from working with different understandings of concepts is a greater understanding of the concepts themselves. Discussions and exploring the concepts can

contribute different points of view. As Isak said: “I have learnt that there are many ways to view the same concept and that you can’t necessarily use it without considering that others might view it in a completely different way” (Isak, p.5). In contrast, a different finding suggested that the exchange of understandings did not lead to an increased conceptual awareness. It was pointed out that what was broached in the workshop was similar to what had been discussed in advance; accordingly, few surprises emerged from the discussion. One challenge related to the exploration of concepts is a lack of time. As emphasised by Benjamin, “I think one would need more time and invest more work to tell individual and truly cultural differences apart” (p.4). This comment highlights that the short amount of time working on the project was inadequate for going into depth in terms of the students’ understandings of the concepts. It can therefore be concluded that although there is potential related to the exploration of concepts, such as learning new perspectives, students need time to explore them thoroughly.

6.2 Concept learning projects used in the ESL classroom?

Here, I will briefly offer a few reflections on whether a concept learning project can be used in the ESL classroom. As the findings and the first part of this chapter have demonstrated, there appears to be potential and challenges related to working with concepts. The findings can be used to show how concept learning should be used in second language education. Knowledge about how language and culture can influence how students interpret a word is essential for teachers in the ESL classroom, as different understandings of concepts can influence the communication in the classroom. Further, in developing the intercultural speaker in the classroom, it is essential to encourage students to explore how people can understand concepts differently so that they are aware of this when meeting other people. This awareness can also help students overcome difficulties in interacting with other people if language teachers encourage them to reflect upon how such differences can be dealt with. Although there are challenges related to language issues and what seems to be little reflection on the intercultural speaker, it is my opinion that a concept learning project such as CLEAR can be used to work with intercultural awareness in the ESL classroom.

6.3 Further research

The length of this round of the CLEAR project restricted the results that emerged to some extent. The project ran over just one semester and only a short amount of time was spent on the written entries and the one day workshop; accordingly, there was not much time to explore the concepts thoroughly, as pointed out by some students. An interesting idea would be to run the project for a longer period and perhaps revisit the concepts after the workshop to see if there were any changes in understandings after exploring different understandings of the concepts. The combination of participants is also worth considering in future research. As was pointed out by one participant, German and Norwegian participants are able to understand each other quite well. An interesting point of departure might be to include participants with greater differences in language and cultural backgrounds. This might offer greater differences in perspectives.

Another aspect that could be further investigated is how the CLEAR project and exploring concepts can be used in the ESL classroom. So far, the project has only been used in relation to the fields of social science and intercultural education. I can see the relevance of incorporating a project that focuses on exploring conceptual understandings in the field of language education, as concept learning offers the students a context where English as a second language is used and where they must be able to interact as intercultural speakers. It would therefore be interesting to investigate whether a concept learning project would work in an ESL classroom.

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Appendix 1: Letter from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services with permission to collect data for the study

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



Harald Hårfagres gate 29
N-5007 Bergen
Norway
Tel: +47-55 58 21 17
Fax: +47-55 58 96 50
nsd@nsd.uib.no
www.nsd.uib.no
Org.nr. 985 321 884

Anja Synnøve Bakken
Program for læring og praktisk pedagogikk Universitetet i Tromsø

9037 TROMSØ

Vår dato: 28.10.2013

Vår ref: 35981 / 2 / MSS

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 11.10.2013. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

35881	<i>Can CLEAR contribute to the development of intercultural competence.</i>
<i>Behandlingsansvarlig</i>	<i>NTNU, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
<i>Daglig ansvarlig</i>	<i>Anja Synnøve Bakken</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>Maren Eliassen</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i melde skjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 25.05.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Vigdis Namtvedt Kvalheim

Marie Strand Schildmann

Kontaktperson: Marie Strand Schildmann tlf: 55 58 31 52

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Kopi: Maren Eliassen Klostergata 29 leilighet 130 7030 TRONDHEIM

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Avdelingskontorer / District Offices:

OSLO: NSD, Universitetet i Oslo, Postboks 1055 Blindern, 0316 Oslo. Tel: +47-22 85 52 11. nsd@uio.no

TRONDHEIM: NSD, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 7491 Trondheim. Tel: +47-73 59 19 07. kyrre.svarva@svt.ntnu.no

TROMSØ: NSD, SVF, Universitetet i Tromsø, 9037 Tromsø. Tel: +47-77 64 43 36. nsdmaa@sv.uit.no

Appendix 2: Letter of information and consent

Request for participation in a research project

Background and purpose

This master thesis will study how CLEAR (Concept Learning for Empowerment through Analysis and Reflection) can contribute to the development of intercultural competence. I will look at how the participants use their language to define various concepts, and how their participation in the project can help develop intercultural competence.

The participants have been asked to participate in this empirical study because of their work with the project CLEAR.

What does participation in this study involve?

I will observe how the participants contribute to the CLEAR-platform online, as well as observing the interaction between the Norwegian and German students. I will also be doing a few interviews after the workshop is over, to get feedback on the project. I will mainly observe the use of language, as well focus on how the understanding of concepts lead to a development in intercultural competence. The data will be registered through notes and sound recording.

What happens to the information that is collected about you?

All personal information will be dealt with confidentially. Personal information will only be accessed by myself, and the supervisor for this thesis. All information will be stored in a personal computer. The thesis will not mention the participants by name or include sensitive information.

The project will be finished by May 25th. All personal information and sound recording will then be deleted.

Voluntary participation

It is voluntary to participate in the study, and you can withdraw at any time, without stating a reason. If you choose to withdraw, all information about you will be anonymous.

The study has been reported to Personvernombudet for forskning (The Data Protection Official for Research), Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS

Consent to participate in the study

I have received information about the study, and agree to participate.

(Signed by participant, and date)

Appendix 3: Interview guide

Interview regarding the CLEAR-project

Below I have 18 questions I would like you to answer, in the best way possible. I will remind you of the written notification-form you signed at the workshop. This form states that you agree to participate in my study, but that you can withdraw from the study at any point. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of the information you have given me.

The study focuses on how concept learning and the CLEAR-project can contribute to the development of intercultural competence and how language plays a factor in this, as the participants have English as a second language. The questions below will focus on your participation in the project, as well as your meeting with the other students. Please try to answer as thoroughly as you can.

Introduction

Q1. How did you like to participate in the project?

Q2. What sort of information did you receive about the project before you started working with it? For instance, what where you expected to do, how much would you be expected to participate etc.

The online process

Q3. How did you go about to answer the concept you were working on?

Q4. Which approach did you use to answer the concept? E.g. a personal approach, a theoretical approach, or something else?

Q5. Do you think the definition you gave was influenced by or related to your mother tongue? In what way?

Q6. Was your definition changed in any way when you used English, compared to the definition you gave in German? In what way?

Q7. Did you have to translate your answer or did you think in English from the beginning? Did this have an influence on you answer?

Q8. Do you think your definition of the concept was influenced by your background or culture? In what way?

The workshop

Q9. What did you think about the communication between the Norwegian and German students? In terms of language, the combination of group members, culture differences etc.

Q10. How did you feel about the discussion? Was it a fruitful discussion? In what way?

Q11. Did the language differences cause problems, or was your first language of any help?

Q12. Do you think your or the others' culture had something to say for the understanding of the different concepts? In what way?

Q13. Were there any surprises related to different understandings of the various concepts?

Q14. Were there any problems or situations that arose regarding the concepts? Were they related to language differences? Or related to culture?

The understanding of concepts

Q15. Were some concepts solely negatively or positively loaded?

Q16. Did you have any thoughts about the others' understanding of the concepts ahead of the meeting at the workshop? Did it match with what actually happened at workshop?

Q17. Have the other participants' understanding of the concepts changed your view or understanding of them? In what way?

Q18. Have you gained a greater understanding of the concepts? In what way?

If you have any comments to add, please do so.

Thank you for answering the interview and helping me out with my study.

Regards,
Maren Eliassen

