

Is English the Lingua Franca of Heaven?

Exploring the Language of Faith for International Christian Students

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BA Thesis, European Languages & Cultures

Language and Society Profile: English

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9313 words

29 May, 2020

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Introduction

Is English becoming the language of personal faith for international Christian students? As an European Languages and Cultures student, who is actively involved with an international church, I have developed an interest towards the languages international Christian students use in their private religious practices. Interestingly, many seem to be turning more and more towards reading the Bible and praying in English instead of their first language. Consequently, I wanted to further explore if this is a legitimate phenomenon, and if so, to investigate the reasons behind it.

In this ever globalising world, English usage has increased, especially in higher education (Coleman, 2006). As a communicative and educative language used by students and professors from different linguistic backgrounds, namely, as a Lingua Franca, English influences the daily lives of those who use it in university settings. To what extent has this influence reached to more private and personal realms, such as religion?

In my thesis, I will explore this question in the framework of Christian religion. My focus will be specifically on the language choices made in personal faith practices, such as Bible reading, prayer, and worship, of international Christian students pursuing higher education in Europe.

This thesis is structured as follows. In the literature review I will expand on English as a Lingua Franca in general and in university education. Further, I will explore the history of language in religion, and employ the observations to more detailed research question and hypotheses related to the language of religious practices for international students. The methodology section will explain the questionnaire I used for the research followed by data analysis in the results section. The discussion section will pick up the hypotheses and discuss them in the light of the current data as well as the previous studies. The thesis will end with a conclusion presenting a summary of the findings and suggestions for further research.

Literature Review

English as a Lingua Franca

English has been gaining more ground in the world as a Lingua Franca since the late 16th century, widely due to the British colonialization and imperialism (Jenkins, 2017). This terminology implies that the English language has been used as the means of communication between non-native English speakers throughout the past centuries. Since the British Empire reached several parts of Africa and Asia, English quickly became the language of importance, for example, for trade (Jenkins et al., 2011). Additionally, English language teaching in non-English speaking countries increased through colonialization and missionary activities, further confirming the status of English as a rising global language with one to five ratio between native speakers and non-native speakers using English (Coleman, 2006; Etherington, 2005; Pennycook, 1998).

The more recent phenomenon of globalization has further advanced the spread of English and the subsequent language shift especially in certain spheres of life (Coleman, 2006). Globalization as a notion reflects the modern world of easy travelling, multinational companies, world-wide brands, the internet and not the least, “Global English”, which is often used as the mode of communication in all the aforementioned reflections (Crystal, 2006; Pennycook, 2011). Through globalization, not only in the former colonies but also in Europe, the importance of English is recognized. Proficiency in English is increasingly required for good employment and other personal benefits in most EU countries (Busse, 2017; Coleman, 2006; Gnutzmann et al., 2014). Especially young adults recognize the importance and high communicative value of English in their private lives (Busse, 2017; Erling, 2007; Gnutzmann et al., 2014). This can be observed in the music they listen to, consumed media entertainment and desires and expectations for travelling (Erling, 2007). For example, according to a study by Gnutzmann et al. (2014), on average 73,5% of German

young adults in their test group use English during their leisure time and most feel relatively competent in their English language skills. Perhaps all this is because English is the most taught foreign language in nearly all countries in Europe (Coleman, 2006).

Academia is one of the major domains where English stands on a high pedestal as a global Lingua Franca (Mauranen, 2017). Once upon a time this pedestal was held by Latin as the language of university and education, but since the increased importance of vernacular languages through nationalism, the rule of Latin started to shift (Bloemendal, 2015; Mauranen, 2017). In the recent decades there has been another shift in the higher education from the national languages again towards a more unified language of education, namely English (Coleman, 2006). Especially since the 1999 Bologna Process and the European Union's desire for internationalisation in higher education, English as the medium of instruction in teaching became the standard way to reach a more internationalised community in European universities (Coleman, 2006; Phillipson, 2006). Not only is attracting international students the aim of the English speaking countries but also in nearly all non-English speaking European countries, English-medium programmes are being implemented to increase internationalisation in higher education (Mauranen, 2017). For example, in Nordic countries alone, nearly 2000 Masters programmes are offered in English (Dimova et al., 2015).

This internationalisation has been met with a variety of opinions and perceptions. When some students embrace the internationalisation in higher education, others face it with fear and scepticism (Margić & Žeželić, 2015). On one hand, it is claimed that in the light of the increase of English in education and economy, world is actually becoming polarized in its language use; people have their native language for local and cultural communication representing their identity and English for wider and more formal communication, especially in written form (Coleman, 2006). On the other hand, English is widely used in private lives

through the internet, media, and consumption (Busse, 2017; Pennycook, 2011). This illustrates that despite the government policies and EU agreements, it is the individuals who are acting as initiators and executors of language choice (Jenkins, 2017). There is no denying that English is claiming ground especially as the formal language of higher education and to some extent in the private sphere of consumption. However, could it be possible that English is advancing also in a more personal and cultural identity context?

Identities are shaped by interaction, and if English as a Lingua Franca is the basis for more and more interactions, it is likely to influence the identity construction (Gnutzmann et al., 2014). In Gnutzmann et al. (2014), above 50% of students who studied English language studies in Germany agreed that the English language determines their identity considerably or to a large extent (p. 451). Although some are afraid of losing their cultural identity because of the increased use of English, there is a general shift towards a more favourable attitude towards English identity within the younger generation (Busse, 2017). As a matter of fact, English helps students to integrate their national identity with more European and global aspects (Erling, 2017). High school students of this day have more developed “ideal English selves” and they aspire to identify themselves as part of the imagined global community of fluent and educated English speakers (Busse, 2017, p. 570). Moreover, the cultural identification and aspirations for group membership in the globalising world open the door to a more internationalised identity (Erling, 2007). This can be seen especially in realms where English is used as a Lingua Franca in sociocultural contexts, such as international churches. Perhaps there can be a relationship between English use and personal faith in the context of religion.

The History of Language and Religion

Although the historical phenomenon of one religion being connected to one language is being increasingly challenged through diverse languages in religious practices, language

still holds an important place in religion. The language choice can attract more people to the religion, enforce ideologies, and uphold traditions.

Before the widespread translation of Scriptures to vernacular languages after the medieval times, one language was traditionally attributed to one religion (Pandharipande, 2006). For instance, the language of Islam was Arabic, the language of Hinduism Sanskrit, and the language of Christianity Latin (Pandharipande, 2006). Although technically Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic were the original languages of the Bible, this tradition of one language per religion rooted from the ideological thinking that the original language of Scripture was the only appropriate way to express the religion (Pandharipande, 2006; Teagle, 2019).

However, as the translation of Scriptures proceeded, so did the change in ideology, thus leading to changes in the language choice of religious practices (Pandharipande, 2006). In South Asia, the use of English started increasing in Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism, in order to make religion more popular and allow communication with a larger group with several mutually unintelligible native tongues (Chew, 2006; Pandharipande, 2006). In Europe, eventually even the Catholic Church had to give up their Latin imperialism and incorporate national and vernacular languages in their services (Souza, 2016b).

Although the diversity of languages in religion became more accepted, certain ideological restrictions lingered on. English was not commonly used for Islam, nor was Sanskrit for Christianity in the South Asian context (Pandharipande, 2006). To some extent, there appeared a level of separation in the usage of vernacular and more prestige languages; English was used by the elite whereas the new South Asian languages were used by the lower classes (Pandharipande, 2006). In the African context, those who were more active participants in church had more foothold to choose which language was used in the church services (Kouega, 2008).

Another type of separation appears nowadays when different languages are commonly used for different religious functions (Pandharipande, 2006). Minor languages are used for singing and epistle reading, while the national lingua francas or the majority languages are used for the preaching and liturgy (Kouega, 2008). In the Ghanaian and Brazilian immigrant churches in London, prayers and songs are often in the migrant languages (Twi and Portuguese) whereas English is used in many other parts of the service (Souza et al., 2012). A lot of material for Bible study, kids' ministry, and other interactive endeavours are easily found in English, which might be the reason why English is gaining more ground in these religious activities (Kouega, 2008; Souza et al., 2012).

On the other hand, in the more traditional churches, such as the Catholic Church, the language choice is often used to reflect the ethnic identity, close ties of the community and tradition (Dzialtuvaite, 2006; Souza et al., 2012). Lithuanian immigrants in Scotland held into their Lithuanian language in their Catholic Church services to keep the community close and uphold the inheritance and tradition (Dzialtuvaite, 2006). Polish migrants in London take pride in their language and reinforce their ethnic identity in their religious activities through linguistic choices (Souza et al., 2012). The social context and social group identity speak volumes to the language choice in religion (Pandharipande, 2006).

Language of Faith for a Christian

The language choice in religion and the previous section reflects many times the top-down policies of church leaders, spiritual authorities, and influencers. This is also commonly studied in the academic realm. However, the aim of this thesis is to focus on the individual's personal and private language choices in their religious practices.

For the individual, many a scholar emphasises the importance of the heart language, the native tongue (Brown, 2009). Because understanding is a vital key to faith and a relationship with God should be maintained in a personal manner, it is suggested that the

native language is the best way to practice faith-related activities, such as Bible reading and prayer (Dye, 2009). Moreover, the maintaining of one's native language can reflect deeper devotedness to one's religion (Fernandez & Clyne, 2007). Those people who read the Bible only in their second language may experience God as distant and the relationship between them and God may feel superficial (Dye, 2009). This attitude is well reflected in the vast and commendable efforts of Bible translation to minority languages in rural villages all over the world.

However, this attitude indeed is reflected mainly in the context of mission and Bible translation. It fails to notice the increasing spread of English, especially in more wealthy and educated contexts. For example, in Singapore, "Christianity is English speaking, higher educated, higher income and highly literate" (Chew, 2006, p.222). Due to English as the language of education in Singapore, English has become the major language spoken in homes of more than half of the population (Phillipson, 2012). Education has a huge impact not only on the language choice for the individual, but in many countries also on the religious choice (Chew, 2006). English education offers Western values that have the power to replace religio-cultural frameworks of native languages (Chew, 2006). Chew (2006) maintains that Christianity as one of those Western values offers an option of a more "rational" appearing faith for those who come from a superstitious and animalistic religious background (p. 223).

Lastly, for those who are devout and yearn to grow deeper in their Christian faith, the English language offers nearly unlimited options for further study of the Bible due to the large amount of material available in English. Dye (2009) notes that in the Welser Scale which evaluates the "condition for facilitating Scripture engagement" (p. 91), English would score 10 out of 10, because of the vast variety of English Bibles, devotionals and study tools. Thus devotedness could be reflected also in the increasing use of English rather than the

maintenance of the native language, especially in the context of Christians studying abroad in higher education.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The overarching questions of this thesis are the following. To what extent and in which circumstances is the English language used by international Christian university students in their personal faith-related activities? How can this be connected to the larger phenomenon of English as a Lingua Franca in higher education? These questions address how English in the public sphere influences language choice in the private, personal realm of individual religious practices.

Hypothesis 1: *The longer a person has studied abroad, and the more active they are in religious activities, the more they will use English in their personal faith practices.* The motivation for this hypothesis is that there are more resources available in English and the longer someone studies in English, the more comfortable they will become using the language in personal activities as well.

Hypothesis 2: *The use of English in personal faith-related activities is more likely when the individual goes regularly to an English speaking church and especially if they have learned about faith first in English.* This could help the students to further integrate into the international Christian community in the church and help them with the communication in the group they have chosen to identify with.

Hypothesis 3: *The religious background of the home country of the student will have an effect, namely, that if Christianity is not the main religion in the home country, it is more likely that the student prefers to practice religion in English.* The reason for this hypothesis is the possibility of perceived ideological restrictions in the native language, which might make it easier and more comfortable for the student to use English while practicing a religion that is not the majority religion in the student's home country.

Hypothesis 4: *It is more likely that international Christian students use their native language in prayer and English in other faith activities.* This can be assumed because prayer is the most intimate and informal form of religious practices and oftentimes different languages are used for different functions in religion.

Hypothesis 5: *The use of English in personal faith-related activities has a positive impact on other use of English and on the confidence of speaking English.* Using English in other private realms, such as media consumption, has a positive influence on language confidence, which is why it can be assumed that increased use of English in faith practices would have the same effect.

When it comes to the preference of language in individual practices other than prayer, such as Bible reading and worship, I defer from making hypotheses before conducting the research. I will additionally research what the correlations with the use of English are relating to age, gender, language competence and the amount of years the student has been a professing Christian.

Methodology

Participants

The research participants chosen for this study were international Christian university students. In order to classify as such, they had to meet the following criteria. English was not to be their native language, they were to be studying in a post-secondary program where the language of their instruction was mainly English, the university they were studying at should not be located in their own home country and they should consider themselves as Christians.

In total, I received 89 responses from 11 different countries and 27 different university cities from individuals with various linguistic backgrounds. Although the participants had 38 different native languages, the most common native language was German with 19 respondents. All informants were studying in a university in Europe with the

exception of four students from the city of Jerusalem in Israel. Out of the 27 different university cities the respondents were studying in, by far most responses came from Groningen (31 in total), whereas the second largest number of responses came from Leiden, with only 6 responses.

In order to make my analysis more homogenous, I wanted to focus on young adults between the ages 18-32. Thus, the responses from students above the age 32 or under the age 18 were excluded from the analysis levelling down the total number of responses used for the analysis to 82. Out of these 82 respondents, 57 and 25 were female and male, respectively.

Questionnaire

To research the language choice in personal faith practices, a questionnaire with mostly quantitative questions was used. However, some qualitative questions to deepen the analysis further were also included. The questionnaire consisted of four short sections: Background Information, Personal Faith-Life, Language of Faith and English (see Appendix).

In the Background Information, section the research participants were asked questions relating to their personal data, namely, age, gender, native language, English proficiency, location and length of study abroad, and language for daily communication.

In the Personal Faith-Life section, the participants were asked to estimate their frequency of commitment to several Christian practices, such as Bible reading and prayer. Moreover, the participants were asked to state how long they have been Christians, in which language they first learned about Christianity and whether Christianity was the main religion in their home country.

In the Language of Faith section, the questions about faith practices were targeted to evaluate the language use in those practices. The participants were to estimate whether they practice different activities in their faith-life more in English or in their native language. This

section was also topped up with two optional qualitative questions if the participants wanted to clarify in what manner in their own opinion language plays a role in their personal faith practices, and whether they practiced their faith in some other language than English or their native language.

In the last section, titled “English”, there were some additional questions with Likert scale about how practicing religion in English has influenced their use of English in other spheres of life and their confidence in speaking English. The participants were also able to respond to this theme with their own words in an optional question about how their language choice in faith may have influenced their relationship with English.

Procedure

The questionnaire was constructed in Google Forms and sent out to different platforms for international students to find it. Via email, I contacted multiple international Christian ministry leaders focused on Christian student ministry in universities all over Europe. Many of them responded by forwarding the questionnaire to the international students who are participating in the activities organized by them. I also wrote a Facebook post with the link to the questionnaire and posted it on several Christian union Facebook pages where international university students in Europe could find it. Moreover, I forwarded the questionnaire to the international students from Vineyard Church Groningen, because there is a large group of international Christian students attending this particular church.

The research participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire and submit the answers anonymously. They did this with their own device and without supervision. If the participants had any questions asking for clarification, my email was attached to the introduction of the questionnaire for any contact needs.

Results

Descriptive data

Overall data from 82 respondents were used for the data analysis. Most of the participants were aged either between 18-22 years or 23-27 years (Table 1). The mode average of how long the participants had been studying abroad in English was 2-3 years, although 28% of the participants had been studying abroad only 0-1 years and 17,1% more than 5 years (Table 2).

Table 1.

What is your age?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-22 years	35	42.7	42.7	42.7
23-27 years	38	46.3	46.3	89.0
28-32 years	9	11.0	11.0	100.0
Missing	0	0.0		
Total	82	100.0		

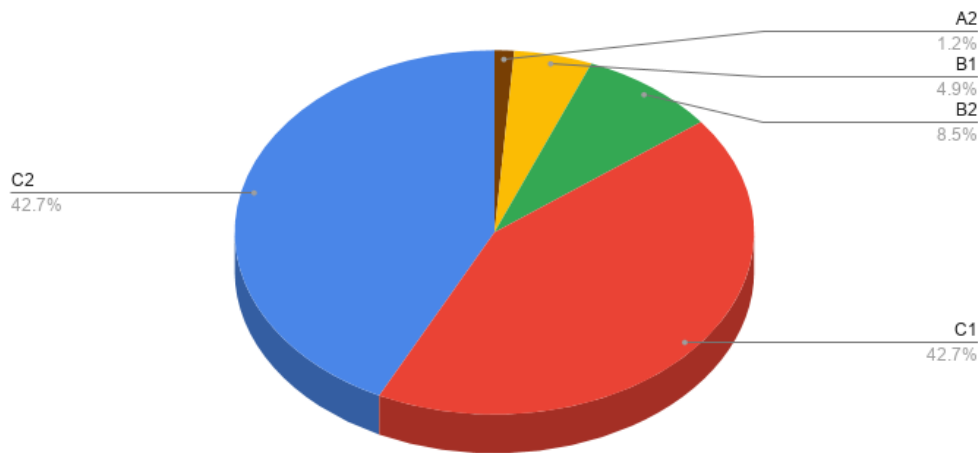
Table 2.

How long have you studied abroad (mainly) in English?	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-1 years	23	28.0	28.0	28.0
2-3 years	34	41.5	41.5	69.5
4-5 years	11	13.4	13.4	82.9
More than 5 years	14	17.1	17.1	100.0
Missing	0	0.0		
Total	82	100.0		

The English proficiency of the participants was overall high by their own estimation. The majority of the participants (85,4%) estimated their English proficiency to be either C1 or C2 level (Figure 1). Only one participant estimated her English level to be less than B1. When it comes to daily communication, 74,4% of the participants responded that their daily communication with activities such as shopping and talking with friends happens in English. There was an equal amount, namely, 12,2% of those who said they communicate both in English and other languages, and those who indicated that their daily communication does not happen at all in English.

Figure 1.

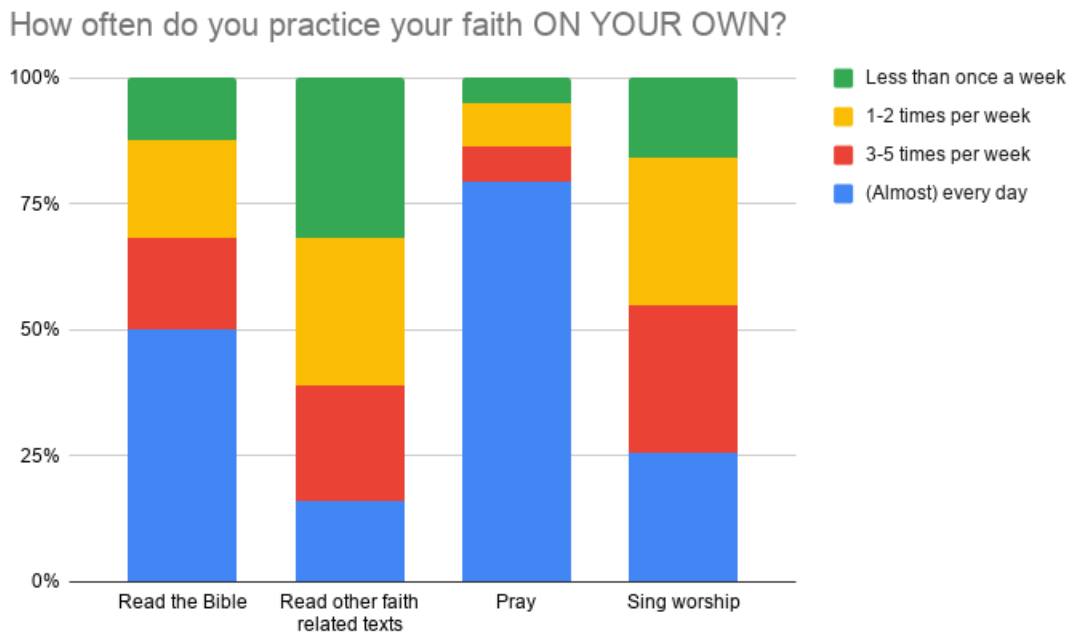
What is your estimated English proficiency level?



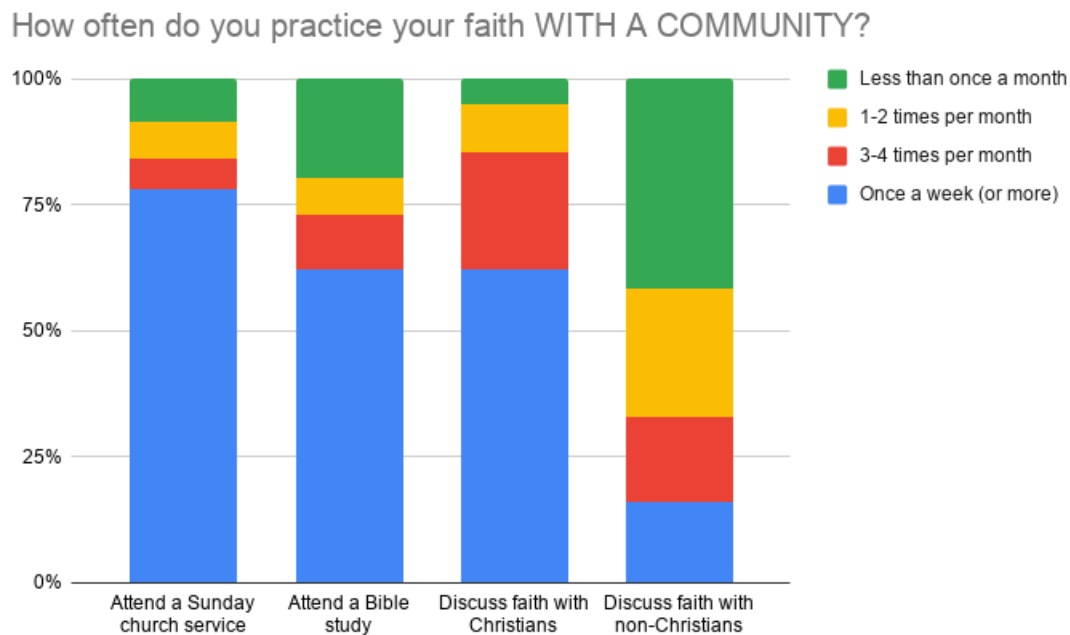
Christianity was the main religion of the native country of 57 respondents which leaves 30,5% of the participants with a different main religion in their country. However, 78% of the participants learned about Christianity in their native language, and only 15,9% in English. What is more, most of the participants had been professing Christians for a long time; 52,4% became believers more than 10 years ago, and only 7,3% less than a year ago.

When the participants were asked about the frequency of their personal faith-related activities, the following results were received. Half of the participants read the Bible (almost) every day, although only 15,9% read other faith-related texts, such as devotionals and Christian books, as frequently (Figure 2). However, nearly 80% of the participants expressed that they pray daily and only 4,9% pray less than once a week (Figure 2). Singing worship was quite equally divided between the responses “1-2 times per week” (29,3%), “3-5 times per week” (29,3%), and “(almost) every day” (25,6%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2.



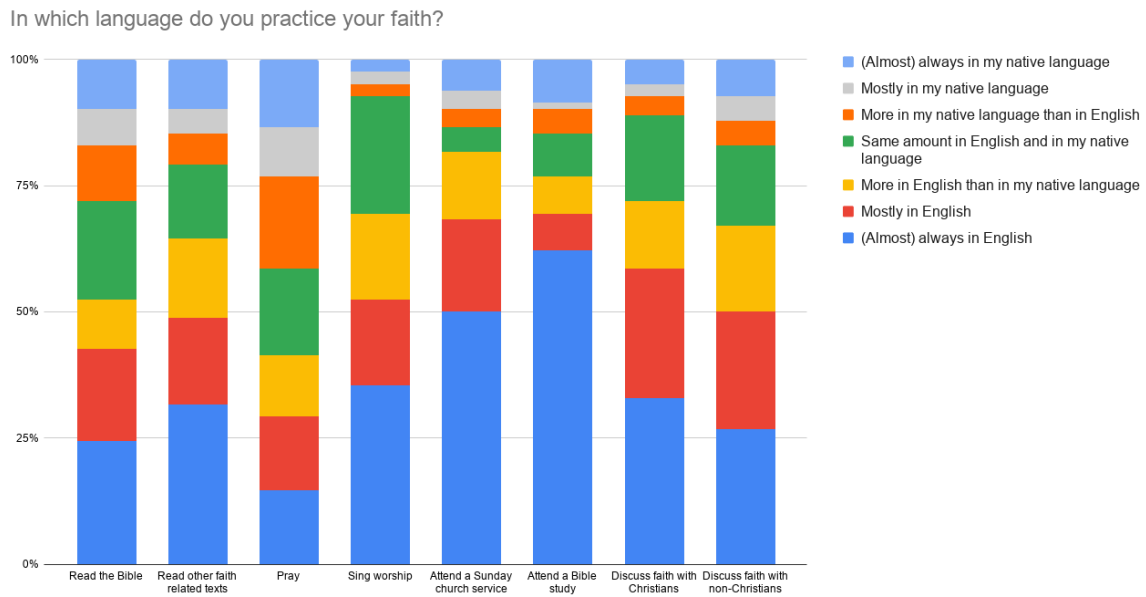
In regards to practicing faith with a community, 78% of the participants go to a Sunday service in church every week (Figure 3). For attending a Bible study and discussing faith with Christians there was the same percentage, namely, 62,2%, albeit there were still 19,5% who go to a Bible study less than once a month (Figure 3). The least popular of the communal faith –practices was discussing faith with non-Christians; only 15,9% of the participants expressed that they discuss faith with non-Christians once a week or more (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

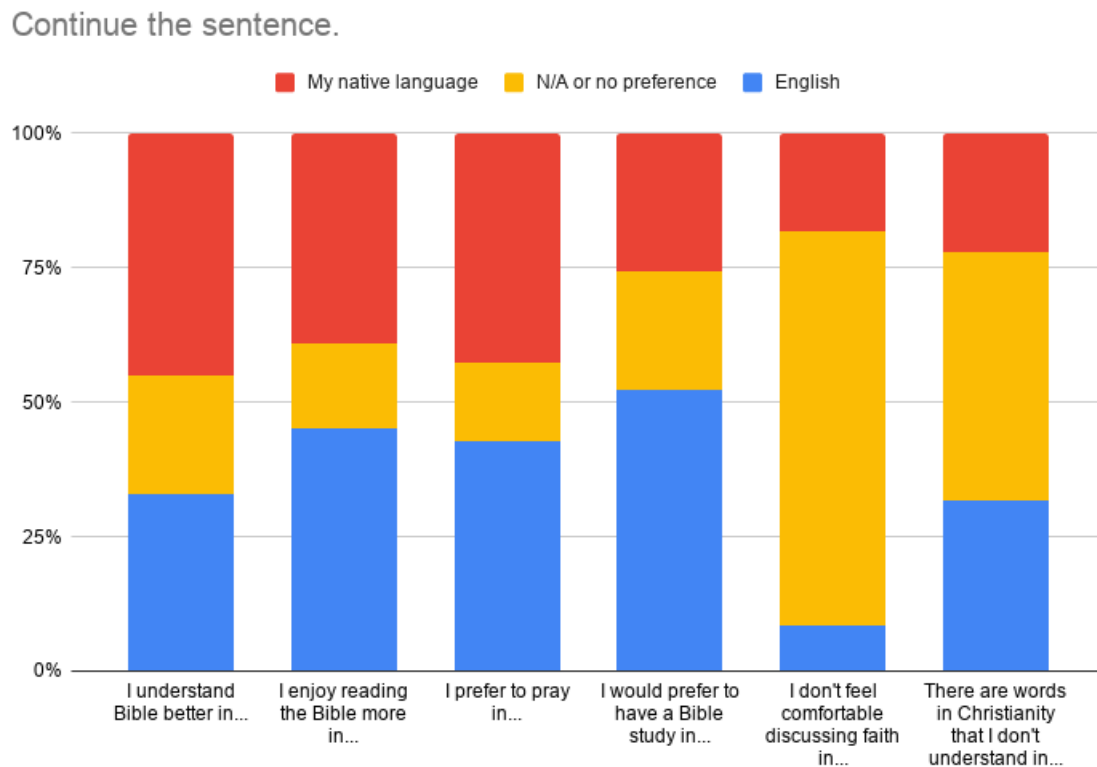
When it comes to the languages in which the faith is practiced individually, English is more commonly used in every activity besides prayer (Figure 4). Almost two fifths (39,1%) of the participants read the Bible always or mostly in English whereas only 20,7% of the participants read the Bible always or mostly in their native language (Figure 4). Reading other faith-related texts is done mostly in English by nearly 50% of the participants and singing worship is done mostly in English by slightly more than 50% of the participants; only 7,2% worship more in their native language (Figure 4). Prayer, however, is more equally divided between English and the native language because 41,5% indicate that they pray more in their native language than in English, but almost the same amount (41,4%) indicate that they pray more in English than in their native language (Figure 4).

The communal faith activities are practiced even more commonly in English. Most of the participants (80,5%) go more to church Sunday services that are held in English and 62,2% attend Bible studies always in English (Figure 4). Only 11% discuss faith with Christians more in their native language and 50% of the participants discuss faith with non-Christians always or mostly in English (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

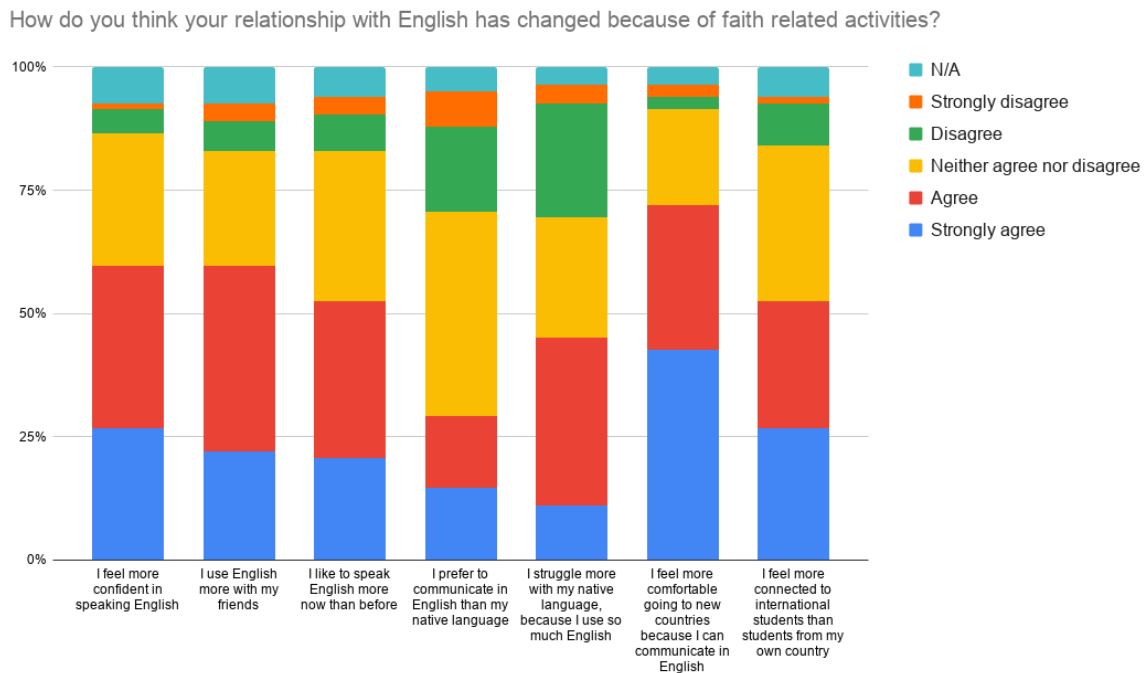


When the participants were asked to continue sentences relating to their language preferences and understanding, the results for English and the native language were quite similar in most cases. Although 45,1% state that they understand Bible better in their native language and only 32,9% in English, more than half of the participants prefer to have a Bible study in English (Figure 5). Quite a similar amount says they enjoy reading the Bible more in their native language (39%) than in English (45,1%), but still quite a few admit that there are words they do not understand in Christianity in English (31,7%) or in their native language (22%) (Figure 5). The same amount (42,7%) prefers to pray in English as in their native language (Figure 5). However, only 8,5% do not feel comfortable discussing their faith in English whereas 18,3% do not feel comfortable discussing their faith in their native language (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Lastly, the participants were asked whether their relationship with English had changed because of their faith-related activities. According to these results (Figure 6), most of the participants felt like their activities in faith either had no impact or had a positive impact in their relationship with English in general. More than half felt more confident speaking English, use English more with their friends, and like to speak in English more now than before (Figure 6). Nearly a third, 29,2%, felt like they even prefer to communicate more in English than in their native language and 44,1% admitted that they struggle more with their native language because they use so much English (Figure 6). Many of the students (72%) now feel more comfortable going to new countries because they can communicate better in English and more than half of the participants feel more connected to international students than students from their own country (Figure 6).

Figure 6.



The responses to the optional questions will only be stated in the discussion.

Regression analysis

As for the regression analysis, the responses of certain questions were transformed into ordinal scales of numbers. For the frequency of faith practices the more often the participant practiced their faith, the bigger score they got. For each different activity the score was between 1 and 4; in the personal practice section “(Almost) every day” would count as 4, “3-5 times per week” as 3, “1-2 times per week” as 2, and “Less than once a week” as 1. Similarly, in the community practice section “Once a week (or more)” would count as 4, “3-4 times per month” as 3, “1-2 times per month” as 2, and “Less than once a month” as 1. Counting all the activities together this way, the highest possible score for faith practicing frequency would be 32 and the lowest 8.

In the same manner, the language chosen for the faith practices was transformed into an ordinal scale where “(Almost) always in English” would count as 7, and “(Almost) always in my native language” would count as 1. In this way, the higher the score was the more

English the participant used. For example, if for the personal faith practices the participant would always use English, the overall score for the four different activities would be 28.

For the question 2 in section C about language preferences, English, native language, and all the other responses were rated as 1, -1 and 0, respectively. In this way the higher the overall score was, the more preference and understanding the person had in English.

In addition to this, the English proficiency was also put into an ordinal scale from 0 to 5 (5 for C2 and 0 for A1). The Likert scale in question 1 from section D was changed into an ordinal scale from 1-5, where both “neither agree nor disagree” and “N/A” were given the score 3, strongly agree the score 5 and strongly disagree the score 1. Also the time when the participants had become professing Christians was also transformed into a scale from 1-5, where 1 indicated “Less than one year ago” and 5 indicated “More than 15 years ago”, and in the same manner the length of their study abroad was transformed into scores from 1-4 (1 for 0-1 years and 4 for more than 5 years). The ages were also turned into an ordinal scale of 1-3: 1 for 18-22 years, 2 for 23-27 years, and 3 for 28-32 years.

Pearson’s correlations showed that several factors had a significant correlation (p-value <0.05) with the participants’ language choice for their personal faith activities. In total there were 11 tested factors (Table 3, Table 4). Besides the personal preferences between English and native language (EN or N.L., Pearson’s r 0.785) the language used in church seems to have the strongest correlation (Pearson’s r 0.558) with choosing English in private faith-related activities (Table 4). The second strongest correlation with English usage was the frequency of practicing faith (Pearson’s r 0.379); the correlation was strong especially in the frequency of personal (private) faith practices (0.419) (Table 4).

How long the participant had studied abroad (Length of study) and the positively changed relationship with English (Benefits overall) seemed to have slightly less significance (p-value 0.018 and p-value 0.021) (Table 3, Table 4). Additionally, the age of the participant

and how long the participant had been a professing Christian did not seem to have any significant correlation with the language chosen for personal faith activities (Table 3). From Figures 7 and 8 we can observe the correlations with more visual illustrations.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations

		AGE	EN proficiency	LENGTH of STUDY	When Christian?	Learned about Christianity
Personal language	Pearson's r	0.086	0.327	0.231	-0.125	0.302
	p-value	0.778	0.001	0.018	0.869	0.003

Note . all tests one-tailed, for positive correlation

Table 4. Pearson Correlations

		Personal score	Community score	How often practice faith?	Church language	EN or N. L.	BENEFITS overall
Personal language	Pearson's r	0.419	0.227	0.379	0.558	0.785	0.226
	p-value	< .001	0.020	< .001	< .001	< .001	0.021

Note . all tests one-tailed, for positive correlation

Figure 7. Church language and personal faith language correlation

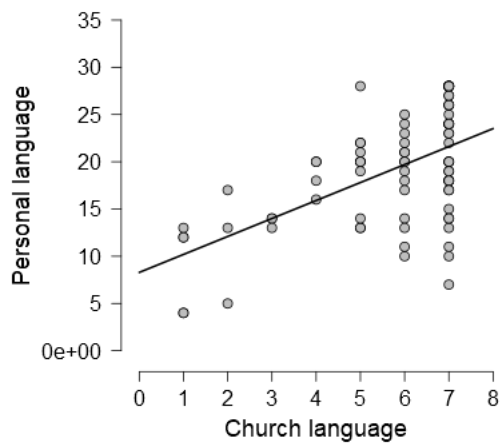
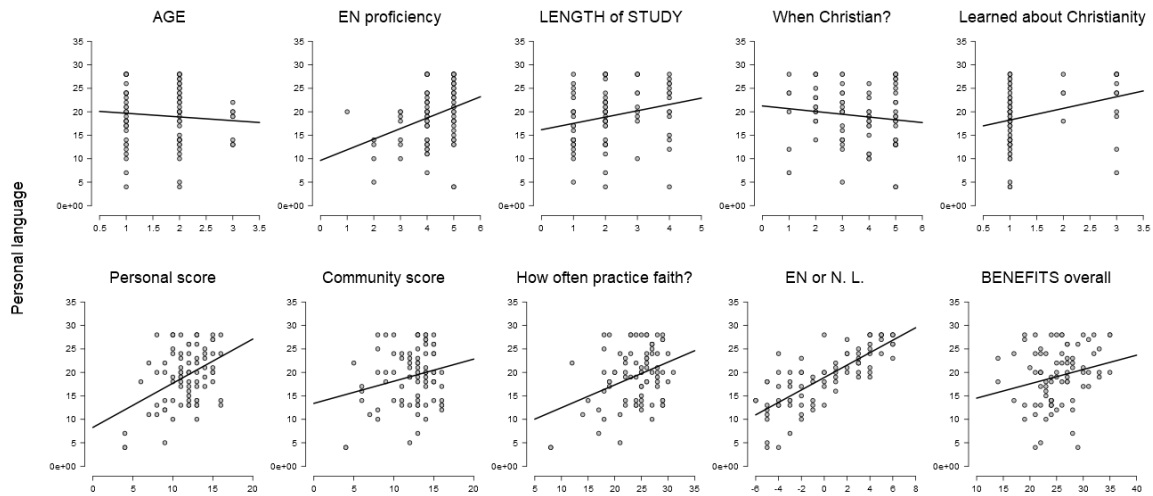


Figure 8. Other correlations

What comes to the correlation between the main religion of the country of the participant and their volume of English use in personal faith practices, the independent samples t-test shows that there are no significant results (p-value 0.172) when assumed that the participants from non-Christian main religion countries would be more prone to use English in their personal faith-related activities.

Also with the independent samples t-test, we can see that gender has no significant results (p-value 0.679) when tested with the personal language used in faith activities.

Discussion

Time and Devotion

Hypothesis 1: *The longer a person has studied abroad, and the more active they are in religious activities, the more they will use English in their personal faith practices.*

When international students are studying in English away from their home country, and handling their daily communication either in English or in another foreign language, it is likely that their linguistic identity gets reshaped through the surroundings. Overall, university students studying abroad seem to get more comfortable in using different languages, especially if English is their language of education (Erling, 2007). Considering students who

study in English for years, and write both terminal academic essays and a final thesis in English, it is not surprising that this research shows a positive correlation between the length of the study abroad and using English language for the personal faith-related activities, namely, reading the Bible or other Christian literature, praying and singing worship.

Since the students follow higher educational level studies in English, and thus frequently use it, it is understandable that they can, and would comprehend the Bible and faith in English easily as well (Teagle, 2019). When one studies abroad for a long period of time, English becomes part of their identity, not only a language for academic and daily use (Erling, 2007; Teagle, 2019). One of the participants of the questionnaire emphasized how the studies abroad had made him more confident in English, and thus, increased his English use in other life domains as well. This can explain why those who have studied abroad longer are slightly more prone to use English in their personal faith activities.

However, the significance of the length of the study abroad is not as high as I anticipated. Perhaps a better measure would have been time lived abroad in general or asking how long the participants have been using English on daily basis. Of course, this is only one factor that has an interaction with all the other possible factors, such as religious activity and devotion.

When it comes to the devotion of the participant towards Christianity, the assumption is that a more devoted person would be more prone to use English in the personal faith practices. According to this research, there is indeed a very strong positive correlation between these two factors. Those practicing their faith more in their individual realm seemed to be more prone to doing it in English. One of the reasons for this could be that there are more materials easily accessible in English for deepening one's biblical understanding and growing in their faith (Dye, 2009; Kouega, 2008). This was also acknowledged by the participants of the questionnaire as one of the respondents stated that "more study resources

and sermons are available in English which help me to grow in my faith” and another noted that there is “more easy explanation about Christianity out there in English”. In addition to this, there might be a lack of resources or fewer options in Bible translations in one’s native language (Teagle, 2019). In my survey, a student from Thailand stated how “the Thai translation of the Bible uses very difficult language that is hard to understand and hard to relate to”.

My findings seem to disprove Teagle’s (2019) original concern that “anyone who preferred reading the Bible solely in English could only have made a superficial commitment” (p. 13). As an example of this, we can consider another influencing factor for devoted Christians to use English, namely, the theological input in Bible study. A Vietnamese Christian observed how English is more helpful with very theological passages of the Bible (Teagle, 2019). In my research, a student from Groningen expressed how “reading difficult theological texts might have contributed to [his] use of tricky English”, which reflects how students seem to prefer to read these theological texts in English rather than in their native language. On the other hand, this could also be connected to the “hybrid identity” that international students tend to develop combining their original linguistic identity with the English and growing more comfortable using the languages interchangeably (Teagle, 2019, p. 16). I will return to this notion in the Emotion and Identity part of the Discussion.

Church and Conversion

Hypothesis 2: The use of English in personal faith-related activities is more likely when the individual goes regularly to an English speaking church and especially if they have learned about faith first in English.

The international Christian students studying abroad often tend to gravitate towards the international English-speaking churches in their university cities. Some, of course in this globalized world, can easily find a church in their native language in their university city.

However, even 80,5% of the survey participants attend more often a Sunday service in English than in their native language. I assumed that those who attend an English speaking church would also be more likely to use English for their personal faith-life, and indeed there is a strong correlation between the church language and the personal faith-language. There are a few reasons that can be considered for this.

A participant from South Africa confessed how “English became [his] language of prayer” after being part of an English speaking congregation for a long time. It seems quite obvious that when one is receiving their spiritual input in English, and learning the prayers and the Bible in English during a church service, it is quite likely that this influences their language use in the non-communal faith practices as well.

Another reason for using English can be the desire for a social group identity that is built together with the other church members, and can help the student to build strong ties to the community, and relate to the (international) culture (Pandharipande, 2006). The language attitudes determining individuals’ language choices are influenced strongly by group membership (Busse, 2017; Erling, 2007). For example, in Han’s (2009) study about immigrants in Canada, the Chinese couple who went to an English-speaking church increased their English usage at home and for personal faith practices. This is because they wanted to be active in church, where English was the language of communication, teaching, and prayer (Han, 2009). This example also reflects the practical benefits in incorporating English in personal faith-life, namely, to enhance also the English use in the community activities, because of the high communicative value of English (Busse, 2017).

One participant of the survey shares: “the first church I ever went to was an international English-speaking church, so everything faith-related was directly linked to English”. This not only indicates the importance of the language of the church services but also how the beginning of one’s faith has an impact on the preferred language of faith.

The regression analysis indicates how there is some correlation between the language in which one first learned about Christianity and the language one uses in their personal faith activities. The significance of this correlation, unfortunately, is not very high according to the statistics from the survey. This might be because the majority of the respondents learned about Christianity in their own language and only 15,9% indicated that they learned about Christianity in English. However, many of the written answers indicate that there is a connection between the language in which Christianity was learned and the language used for personal faith.

Several participants emphasise the importance of the language in which they first learned about Christianity. They tell how their “spiritual awakening” happened in an English speaking environment or how “English was the language [they] got saved into”, which has made them more comfortable and prone to practice their faith in English. Teagle (2019) also shares how the students who come to faith in English find it harder to switch to their native language when it comes to faith practices. Especially those who also grew up with English faith are more likely to use English in their faith-related activities according to the written answers of the survey.

What is more, even those who learned about faith originally in their native language, but experienced more growth in their faith in English are very prone to use English in their personal faith-life. A German participant tells, how she grew up in faith in Germany but truly discovered it in England, and therefore feels more connected to God in English. Another girl shares how her time in a Bible College in the UK deepened her faith and because she learned a lot about Christianity in English, she prefers to use English now in her prayers and Bible reading.

Religious Background

Hypothesis 3: *The religious background of the home country of the student will have an effect, namely, that if Christianity is not the main religion in the home country, it is more likely that the student prefers to practice religion in English, due to the ideological restrictions in the language.*

When the religion of the home country of the student is not Christianity, this might create its own challenges to the language choice for personal faith. The assumption was that students who come from a country where Christianity is not the main religion would be more prone to use English in their faith-related activities, because of the religious ideological restrictions of their country of origin (Pandharipande, 2006). The assumption was based on the idea that the native language is connected to the ethnic identity, which again has a connection to the religious ideology of the country (Dzialtuvaite, 2006; Souza, 2016a).

However, this study showed no significant correlation between the religious background and personal faith language.

Perhaps the plain question “Is Christianity the main religion of your country of origin?” does not provide enough information to research this hypothesis thoroughly. Some participants from Germany thought that their main religion was not Christianity. The subjectivity of the answer might have an influence on the results.

However, Teagle’s (2019) article shows how the language choice can be influenced by the religion of the home country. A Vietnamese student preferred to read the Bible in English because in Vietnamese “certain words were a constant reminder of unhelpful religious pressures from her home country” (Teagle, 2019, p. 14).

How the country of origin may have an influence on the students’ language choice is not only because of religion. A Japanese student found it easier to ask questions in English about faith because of cultural behavioural norms (Teagle, 2019). This indicates that students

from more reserved cultures seem to be able to communicate more freely in English and leave out their cultural inhibitions (Teagle, 2019).

Sometimes the religious background influences in a different manner, namely, that there are no translation or only a difficult-to-understand Bible translation in the native language, as we can see from the Thai-Bible experience of the student in the Time and Devotion section. In my research, however, I find no significant correlation between the religious background and the language choice for personal faith.

Prayer and Native Language

Hypothesis 4: *It is more likely that international Christian students use their native language in prayer and English in other faith activities.*

If the native language truly is “the language used for cries of the heart, the language in which our dreams and emotions are expressed” (Teagle, 2019, p. 18), then prayer is the most likely platform for it. This can be assumed because prayer is the most intimate and informal form of religious practice. Even in those immigrant churches where English was used in general for their services, the prayers were conducted in the migrant language (Souza et al., 2012). Prayer reflects the personal relationship between God and human and creates a space for the Christian to meet with God heart to heart (Dye, 2009). When people use their native language in prayer, it opens their hearts and gives them a sense of worth (Brown, 2009).

Respectively, according to my study, prayer is the most likely of all the personal religious activities to be done in one’s heart language. Prayer was most evenly divided between the native language and English whereas all the other private activities (reading Bible, reading other faith-related books, and singing worship) were all more likely to be done in English. This was also reflected in some of the written responses. “I think I feel more comfortable using English because it’s the main language I use. Regarding praying, I prefer my native language more because I’m very used to praying in my native language.” Another

student shared how he uses “English mostly for worship because the Christian music industry is most prominently represented by English”. These responses reflect how different languages tend to be used for different aspects of religious practice (Pandharipande, 2006).

Surprisingly, only half of the participants were more likely to pray in their native language. It shows that English has a strong influence even in the most intimate and informal part of the international Christian students’ faith-life.

Positive Impact

Hypothesis 5: The use of English in personal faith-related activities has a positive impact on other use of English and on the confidence of speaking English.

When people do not only use English as their academic language but also in their personal activities, such as faith practices, there should be a positive effect on their confidence in English and other English use. According to my study, most participants felt that there was either a positive impact or no significant impact on their use of English when they practiced their faith in English. More than half admitted that they are more confident in speaking English and use it more with their friends.

Using English in their faith practices also made most of the participants (72%) feel more comfortable going into new countries, because of their improved communication skills. Increased English proficiency helps to facilitate, for example, the cross-cultural mobility and travel (Erling, 2007). Moreover, one student shared how using English in her faith “improved [her] communication skills: the ability to express more complex ideas and reasoning”. Another student told how reading the Bible in English increased his vocabulary and made his speech more clear in English.

The improved English skills correspond with the idea that religious faith can increase motivation for language learning (Souza, 2016a). For one student, practicing his faith in English made him “engage more with English literature”. Yet another felt like he had learned

to have more “deep talks”, which he never learned to do in school English classes. For some it can actually help them in their studies, for example with “improved critical reading skills”, as a student from Bradford noted, or with an increased appreciation for the “complexity to formulate things”.

Another positive impact of using English in faith practices is that it gives more opportunity to engage with the culture – in English speaking countries, it can be the culture of the country itself, and with non-English speaking countries it can be the shared cultural experience of belonging to a multicultural international community (Erling, 2007). Thus using English can enhance the integration to a global community and help the students to gain intercultural experiences (Busse, 2017). It can give more perspective and “openness” as a student from Groningen expressed.

Moreover, using English in personal faith-life has made some of the participants feel more confident in sharing their faith with others. “It has made me more confident in discussing faith-related issues in English especially with non-Christians when I’m more familiar with the English translations and the vocabulary.” “I learn more of how to communicate my faith in English, which I never did before while in my home country.”

Other observations

Although I did not formulate hypotheses about the impact of age, gender, language competence, or the number of years the student has been a professing Christian, I looked into these aspects as well in my regression analysis. As expected, age and gender had very little impact on which language the participants chose for their faith-related activities. This makes sense because the age spectrum compared in this research was relatively narrow (18-32 years) and there is no reason to suspect that gender would have a significant influence on the language choice.

The participants' perceived proficiency in English, however, had a significant correlation with their use of English in personal faith-life. This can be explained with the assumption that those who are more proficient in English have a more positive attitude towards it and also feel more comfortable in using English overall (Busse, 2017). When English has become an important part of their daily life and identity, people tend to be more competent in it and feel more prone to use it even in their thinking and praying. According to a student from Groningen "English feels almost like a native language to [her], because [she] think[s], pray[s] and speak[s] in English all the time."

In regards to how long the participants have been professing Christians, there is no significant correlation with their language choice in faith-life. I believe this could be because some other factors cancel each other out in this case. Those who became Christians recently probably learned about their faith in English, which would make them more prone to practice their faith in English. On the other hand, it is more likely for those who are more advanced in their faith, perhaps have been believers for a longer time, and more devoted to God to use more English in their faith. However, many participants also indicated that if they grew up with faith in their native language, they remain more likely to use that for their personal faith-life. A Danish student says: "I prefer to pray in Danish, since that it is how I've prayed my whole life" and another one prefers his native language, "because it's the language in which I was taught the Bible as a child".

Another interesting factor that came forth in the written answers was the increased understanding of the Bible. However, with this perspective, both English and the native language can be seen as a positive influence. In Teagle's (2019) study a girl from Vietnam had a hard time noticing the detailed information when reading the Bible only in English and was able to understand the Bible more comprehensively when she also started reading it in Vietnamese. It was easy to skip over some words she did not understand in English. In my

survey also, more people indicate that there are words they do not understand in Christianity in English than in their native language. On the other hand, some students, even when they return to their home country, continue going to an international church, because they are not used to reading the Bible in their native language (Teagle, 2019).

In general, however, many participants indicated the richness there is in reading the Bible with multiple translations. An Indonesian student says about English and Indonesian: “I also think that sometimes both languages are able to produce different experiences with regard to verses/text/song. So either way, I am glad I have both to refer to.” Several participants mentioned that they read the Bible and worship in languages other than just English and their native language. A Spanish student tells how “getting into Christian faith in different languages allows you to understand Christianity more deeply”. I guess that demonstrates well the international Christian student culture.

Emotion and Identity

The final aspect I will discuss relating to the language choice in personal faith practices is the role of emotional connections and identity. In Devotion and Time section I already mentioned the notion of “hybrid identity” by Teagle (2019), which reflects the fusion of the national home culture identity and native language combined with the more recent international English-speaking Christian university student identity. Switching between English and the native language the students are able to extend the boundaries of their national identity towards this hybrid identity (Erling, 2007).

After all, identity itself is a relatively fluid notion, to some extent being formed through the discourse and linguistic choices (Gnutzmann et al., 2014). It is also noted that there are differences in the personality of the speaker when speaking in different languages (Teagle, 2019). In the context of Christian international students, what can be combined in

the identity are not only the linguistic choices but also the religious identity, which is partly composed of practices, expressions, and affiliations (Souza, 2016a).

In the written parts of my survey, the participants noted the importance of their identity as a factor of their language choice when it was related to their emotions. The emotion-related aspect of Christian faith can be an important factor of Christian living (Dye, 2009). This aspect divided opinions strongly in the survey. Some of the participants felt that using their native language in personal faith practices felt more natural and personal; it made them less distracted and more honest and enabled them to include more of their “being and self” in their faith. Some also said it is not easy to talk about faith in other languages than the mother tongue, because faith is such a personal matter.

On the other hand, some participants indicated that exactly because faith is such a personal and emotional matter, they were more comfortable discussing it in English, because they were, in general, more comfortable discussing their emotions in English than in their native language. Some became surer in their prayers in English and felt more engaged and connected to the words that they would sing in worship because the “emotional barrier” was removed.

From these responses, we can conclude, that when it comes to identity and emotions, the individual preferences influence the perception of the language of faith significantly. The formulation of identity consists of so many different factors, that this survey is not large scale enough to dig deeper into this reason for language choice in faith-related activities.

English as a Lingua Franca of Faith

How can we connect the abovementioned English preferences in personal faith-related activities to the larger phenomenon of English as an ever-rising lingua franca in this globalising world? It is clear that English is the lingua franca of higher education, but does its influence reach to the personal lives of international students? It seems that at least in the

international Christian student community English has a prominent position, not only in the community activities but also in the personal faith practices of the individual Christian students. Especially those who go to an English speaking church and practice their faith actively are prone to use English for their personal faith-life.

Moreover, many participants indicate that not only has English gained more ground as their language in faith, but it has become the language that they think in or even dream in. However, it is yet to be discovered whether the impact of English is strong only throughout the time of higher education or whether it has a longer-lasting impact in the lives of the students when they move into their working field. Since the communicative value of English is high, especially to secure good employment (Coleman, 2006), it seems to be for the students' benefit to incorporate English not only in their academic life but also in their personal realms with a lasting impact.

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this thesis indicate that a surprisingly large proportion of international Christian students use English in their personal faith practices. Those who practice their faith actively, go to an English-speaking church and have high English proficiency seem to be more likely to practice their faith in English in their private time as well. On the other hand, the age of the students, the length of their walk with Christ and the religion of their home country do not seem to have a significant influence on their English use in personal faith-related activities. Additionally, many of the students recognize both their faith and the language thereof as a matter which has a strong connection to their identity and emotions. Although the more intimate faith practices, such as prayer, feel more natural to do in the native language for many students, some feel more emotionally connected to God through English, because in their own language they have difficulties being open and vulnerable. Using English in their studies and daily life as well has an impact to their

language of faith and vice versa; many a student feels more confident in English and more prone to use it also in other private realms of their life because they have chosen to use it in their faith-life.

Considering the data of my research, I believe more qualitative research is needed on this topic. Many of the insights to the language preferences of international Christian students I was able to observe from the open questions rather than from the quantitative questions. There are numerous ways to expand on this research, for example, asking the following questions. Does the church type (Catholic, Pentecostal, etc.) influence the English use? Does active voluntary participation in church influence the English use? Can English use in faith-life have a positive impact on English use in academia? What happens to the English use when the students return home? Has English use in faith practices increased during these past decades? An especially interesting area of further research would be to investigate the emotional connection and identity formation through the language of faith with a more psycholinguistic approach.

To bring it back to the current study and the title of this thesis, what can we conclude from the increased use of English in personal faith-related activities of international Christian students? Perhaps English will be the Lingua Franca of heaven. Perhaps not. I guess we will find out when we get there.

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Appendix

Questionnaire: Language of Faith for International Students

For my BA Thesis in European Languages and Cultures, University of Groningen, I research the language of faith for international Christian students. I would warmly appreciate your participation in my research.

The questionnaire consists of four short sections and should take no longer than 10 minutes to fill.

ONLY ANSWER IF YOU FULFILL THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS:

1. English is NOT your native language.
2. You study in a university (or university of applied sciences) with the language of instruction (mainly) in English. (Or if you finished your studies in such less than 2 years ago)
3. You are an international student; in other words, you do NOT study in your home country.
4. You consider yourself as a Christian.

The survey will be anonymous and the results presented anonymously in the BA Thesis. Please read the instructions carefully and answer all the questions as honestly as you can - there is no right or wrong answers, I am just looking for your personal experiences.

I'm very thankful for your willingness to participate!

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me via email a.e.vahala@student.rug.nl.

Blessings,
Anniina

A. Background Information

1. What is your gender? *

- Female
- Male

2. What is your age? *

- Under 18 years
- 18-22 years
- 23-27 years
- 28-32 years
- Above 32 years

3. What is your native language? *

4. What is your estimated English proficiency level? (If you are unfamiliar with this scaling system, check the explanations here <https://tracktest.eu/english-levels-cefr/>) *

- A1
- A2
- B1
- B2
- C1
- C2

5. Where do you study (city & country)? *

6. How long have you studied abroad (mainly) in English? *

- 0-1 years
- 2-3 years
- 4-5 years
- More than 5 years
- Other:

7. Which language do you use mainly for your daily communication besides your studies? (friends, activities, shopping) *

B. Personal Faith-Life

1. Is Christianity the main religion of your country of origin? *

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

2. When did you become a professing Christian? *

- More than 15 years ago
- 10-15 years ago
- 5-9 years ago
- 1-4 years ago
- Less than 1 year ago

3. In which language did you first learn about Christianity?

- English
- My native language
- Other:

4. How often do you practice your faith in the following ways ON YOUR OWN: *

Check all that apply.

	(Almost) Every day	3-5 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week
Read the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read other faith related texts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pray	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sing worship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. How often do you practice your faith in the following ways WITH A COMMUNITY: *

Check all that apply.

	Once a week (or more)	3-4 times per month	1-2 times per month	Less than once a month
Attend a Sunday church service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attend a Bible study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discuss faith with Christians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discuss faith with non- Christians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Continue the sentence. You can choose more than one option. *

Check all that apply.

	English	My native language	Another language (not English or your native language)	Not applicable/No preference
I understand the Bible better in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy reading the Bible more in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I prefer to pray in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would prefer to have a Bible study in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't feel comfortable discussing faith in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are words in Christianity (f.ex. atonement, transfiguration) I don't understand/know the word in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. (Optional) If you practice your faith in other languages than English or your native language, please indicate here in which language, in which context and to what extent.

4. (Optional) Would you like to explain your reasons why you choose to use English/your native language/other languages in your faith-related activities?

2. (Optional) Is there any other way you feel like using English with faith-related activities has changed your relationship with English?

Thank you for your response! God bless!