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Navigating New Horizons: The Influence of Host-Country Language Proficiency on Shaping the Coping Strategies of Self-Initiated Expatriate Accompanying Partners

Problem-coping vs Emotional coping

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ABSTRACT:
This thesis investigates how host-language proficiency shapes the coping strategies of self-initiated expatriate (SIE) accompanying partners in Finland, drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping framework. Using a qualitative approach and reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the study explores how language functions simultaneously as a stressor and as a resource in everyday life.

Findings demonstrate that limited proficiency heightened stress by restricting access to employment, public services, and autonomy, while developing proficiency facilitated resilience, problem-solving, and a greater sense of belonging. Coping responses were often hybrid, combining problem-focused actions with emotion-focused strategies. This challenges traditional dualities of coping and illustrates its dynamic, situational character in transnational contexts.

A further contribution lies in the identification of a comfort paradox whereby reliance on English eased short-term adaptation but simultaneously delayed host country language learning, thereby limiting meaningful adjustment. This insight extends existing research by showing how the dual role of English complicates adjustment for accompanying partners.

The study contributes at three levels: theoretically, by enriching understandings of coping and adjustment through the lens of language; conceptually, by introducing hybrid coping and the comfort paradox, and practically, by highlighting the importance of targeted integration support for accompanying partners. Ultimately, this research emphasises that host country language proficiency is not merely a technical skill but a socio-psychological resource that profoundly shapes the lived experiences of global mobility.

KEYWORDS: Host country language proficiency; Coping strategies; Stress; Resilience; Belonging; Hybrid coping; Comfort paradox; Adjustment

Contents

1 Introduction 6

1.1 Background of study 6

1.2 Research questions and objectives 8

1.3 Definition of concepts 9

1.4 Thesis structure 10

2 Literature Review 12

2.1 The stress and coping theoretical framework 12

2.2 Host-country language as a stressor and resource 14

2.3 Self-initiated expatriate accompanying partners and adjustment 16

2.4 The Finnish context 18

2.5 Conceptual integration and analytical expectations 19

3 Methodology 23

3.1 Research approach 23

3.2 Philosophical orientation: interpretivist paradigm 23

3.3 Research design 24

3.4 Data collection process 25

3.4.1 Participant selection 25

3.4.2 Recruitment process 25

3.4.3 Interview method 26

3.4.4 Transcription 26

3.4.5 Ethical considerations 26

3.4.6 Researcher reflexivity 27

3.4.7 Visual overview of participant demographics 27

3.5 Data analysis process 28

3.5.1 Familiarisation with the data 29

3.5.2 Generating initial codes 29

3.5.3 Searching for themes 29

3.5.4 Reviewing and refining themes 30

3.5.5 Defining and naming themes 30
3.5.6 Producing the thematic narrative 30
3.6 Trustworthiness and ethical considerations 33
3.6.1 Establishing trustworthiness 33
4 Empirical findings 36
4.1 Theme 1: Language as a stressor 36
4.2 Theme 2: Language as a resource 37
4.3 Theme 3: Hybrid coping and adaptation 38
4.4 Synthesis of findings 40
5 Discussion and conclusion 44
5.1 Discussion 44
5.2 Key findings 44
5.2.1 Language as a stressor: Barriers to autonomy and adjustment 44
5.2.2 Language as resource: From dependence to agency 45
5.2.3 Hybrid coping and adaptation: Integrating emotion and action 46
5.3 Theoretical implications 47
5.4 Practical implications 47
5.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research 48
5.6 Conclusion 49
References 50
Appendices 63
Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions 63
Appendix 2. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) 65
Appendix 3. Interviewee consent form 67

Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: HCL proficiency, coping strategies, and adjustment. 21

Tables

Table 1. Self-initiated accompanying partner demographics. 28

Table 2. The analytical process of the research question. 32

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of study

An increasing number of professionals today are choosing to live and work abroad in search of new experiences and opportunities without being tied to corporate structures and their support systems. These individuals, known as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), relocate for various reasons, including career development, educational opportunities, and personal growth (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). Their decisions reflect a global shift towards greater autonomy and mobility in international careers.

This self-directed form of mobility signals a growing trend where flexibility and personal agency play central roles contrasting with traditional corporate assignments in which assigned expatriates (AEs) are provided with full organisational resources, relocation packages, and structured guidance. As Wurtz (2022) explains, SIEs and AEs differ in the ways they appraise and cope with international relocation. Whereas AEs rely on organisational infrastructure to buffer stress, SIEs depend more on their personal resources and the quality of their social and environmental support. Wurtz's findings further emphasise that differences in expatriate type influence coping mechanisms such that SIEs will often display higher autonomy but also greater vulnerability to stress arising from limited external assistance.

The autonomy of SIEs often encourages stronger engagement with the host environment and greater motivation to adapt. Previous research suggests that they are more inclined toward local interaction and cross-cultural learning (Doherty, 2013) and, as a result, tend to achieve higher host-country language (HCL) proficiency and social integration (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; Hechanova et al., 2003). Additionally, SIE salaries are typically closer to local norms, making it reasonable to assume that this may also encourage more sympathetic support from host country nationals (HCNs) (Oltra et al., 2013). However, this independence also places accompanying partners in a delicate position whereby they share the challenges of international relocation but without access to the structural

support typically provided to AE families. Earlier research tended to refer to accompanying partners as “trailing spouses” (Harvey, 1998; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Du Plessis & Vidwans, 2024), focusing mainly on how they influenced the expatriate’s success or relocation decisions (Harvey & Buckley, 1998), while ignoring their adjustment, identity changes, and career aspirations. (Du Plessis & Vidwans, 2024; Suter & Cangià, 2020). However, their adjustment relies largely on personal initiative and the capacity to cope effectively with the everyday demands of life abroad.

For these accompanying partners, HCL proficiency is not simply a language skill but a resource that shapes stress appraisal and coping choices. Their ability to function in the Finnish language determines access to employment, public services, and social networks which are key factors in promoting psychological wellbeing and a sense of belonging. Yet, Finland’s trilingual context (i.e., Finnish, Swedish, and English) creates a paradoxical dynamic, i.e., while English eases early adjustment, it may delay deeper integration and proactive coping. In this sense, language acts simultaneously as a stressor and a coping resource, influencing how partners navigate the demands of relocation.

Recent studies reinforce this perspective. Aegerter et al. (2025) found that the wellbeing of accompanying partners depends strongly on how they manage non-work stressors such as isolation, identity loss, and cultural distance. Their analysis shows that social support and personal coping resources significantly buffer these stressors. Similarly, Wurtz (2022) emphasises that expatriate coping is a transactional process, influenced by how individuals appraise their stress relative to the resources that are available. This relates directly to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that the coping capacity of SIE partners is context-sensitive, varying according to both individual agency and the social environment.

Given this evolving understanding, Finland presents a unique setting for studying how HCL proficiency shapes coping. Its linguistic and cultural landscape position language as

a key mediator of stress and adaptation. Understanding how SIE accompanying partners interpret, appraise, and then respond to these challenges contributes to a more refined view of expatriate adjustment, one where coping is not just a personal skill but a dynamic interaction between an individual's resources and the contextual mechanisms at play.

Moreover, SIE accompanying partners are not a uniform or static category but are extremely diverse. This diversity shapes how each individual interprets and copes with their relocation experiences. For instance, dual-career couples often face the loss of their professional identity and income more acutely than non-working partners, while parents may prioritise children's schooling and extra-mural activities. Furthermore, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, plus others (LGBTQ+) partners may encounter additional psychological stress in less inclusive environments research (Aegerter et al., 2025).

1.2 Research questions and objectives

SIE accompanying partners face daily decisions about whether and how to engage with the HCL. While prior work links HCL to adjustment, we know far less about how it shapes SIE accompanying partners' coping choices in linguistically distant contexts such as Finland. Building on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, this study addresses that gap by examining how Finnish proficiency acts both a stressor and a resource in the SIE accompanying partners' everyday coping and is guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

Research question (RQ):

How does Finnish language proficiency shape the coping strategies of self-initiated expatriate accompanying partners?

Sub-questions (SQs):

1. *How does Finnish language proficiency enable or constrain SIE accompanying partners' use of problem-focused coping strategies, such as employment seeking and language learning?*
2. *How do SIE accompanying partners with limited Finnish proficiency adapt their coping strategies to manage daily hassles and social integration where English is partially sufficient?*
3. *What hybrid or alternative coping mechanisms emerge among SIE accompanying partners in response to language related barriers, and how do these strategies affect overall adjustment?*

1.3 Definition of concepts

Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)

Self-initiated expatriates are individuals who independently decide to live and work abroad rather than being sent by an employer. Their relocation is typically motivated by personal or professional goals, and they assume full responsibility for organising and financing the move (Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2013).

Host country language (HCL) proficiency

Host-country language proficiency refers to an individual's ability to understand, speak, read, and write in the dominant language of the host society which in turn facilitates access to employment, education, and social networks, supporting both psychological and social adaptation (Selmer, 2006; Peltokorpi, 2008).

Stress and coping strategies

Stress and coping strategies encompass the cognitive and behavioural efforts used by individuals to manage specific internal or external demands that are appraised as overwhelming one's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies fall into two broad categories: (1) problem-focused coping which is aimed at addressing the cause of stress through problem-solving or information seeking, and (2) emotion-focused coping

which is aimed at regulating emotional responses, such as avoidance or emotional support seeking. Furthermore, there is hybrid coping, which combines both forms of coping to maintain balance between acceptance and action.

Adjustment

Adjustment is understood as the ongoing person-environment process through which expatriates and their partners achieve psychological, social, and functional equilibrium in a new environment. It reflects a person's ability to feel settled, competent and connected within the host context (see Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Black Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013, 2014)

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into five chapters that together provide a coherent account of how HCL proficiency shapes the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners in Finland.

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, outlines its background and objectives, defines key concepts, and presents the overall structure of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on expatriation, SIE partners, and HCL proficiency. It also examines coping through the lens of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, highlighting how language functions as both a stressor and a resource in expatriate adjustment. The chapter concludes with a conceptual map that integrates these theoretical insights and identifies the themes guiding the empirical analysis.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including the interpretivist and qualitative design, data collection, sampling, ethical considerations, and analytic approach. It explains the application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and outlines the steps to ensure trustworthiness and reflexivity.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews with SIE accompanying partners. The chapter is structured around three main themes: language as a stressor, language as a resources, and hybrid coping. Each theme illustrates how Finnish language proficiency interacts with stress appraisal and coping mechanisms in everyday life.

Chapter 5 Discusses the findings in relation to existing theory and research. It interprets the results through the transactional stress and coping framework, outlines the theoretical and practical implications, identifies the study's limitations, and proposes directions for future research. The chapter concludes by emphasising how HCL proficiency functions as a dynamic mediator of coping and adjustment for expatriate partners.

2 Literature Review

Globalisation has fundamentally reshaped the international workforce, increasing cross-border labour mobility and the demand for mobile professionals capable of working effectively across bridging cultural and geographic boundaries (Shaffer et al., 2012; Suutari et al., 2018). These global mobility patterns encompass both company-assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), whose experiences differ largely in terms of autonomy and access to organisational support creating different adjustment demands for expatriates' families, especially the accompanying partners.

Against this backdrop, the present literature review positions this study within existing research on expatriate adjustment, coping, and language proficiency. It develops an integrative framework to explain how Finnish host-country language (HCL) proficiency shapes the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners in Finland. Using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory as the core lens, this review examines how SIE accompanying partners appraise daily demands in terms of employment-seeking, public services, and networking with locals, while having limited HCL communication skills, and how these appraisals translate into coping responses. Previous research findings suggest that higher HCL proficiency is associated with more problem-focused coping (e.g., joining local networks and enrolling in language courses (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Madaras & Kunovich, 2021), whereas limited HCL proficiency is linked to greater reliance on emotion-focused strategies (e.g., withdrawing from social interaction or depending on English-speaking networks (Nshom et al., 2022). This pattern prompts a closer, theory-driven look at HCL as a mechanism within the stress-coping process.

2.1 The stress and coping theoretical framework

The stress and coping framework developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides the conceptual foundation for this study. They argue that stress does not originate from events themselves but arises from the way in which people interpret and respond to

them which is a transaction between the individual and their environment. Through a process of cognitive appraisal, people will first and foremost evaluate whether a situation threatens or supports their wellbeing (primary appraisal), and thereafter, assess whether they have sufficient resources they have to deal with it (secondary appraisal). These appraisals interact continuously, making coping a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a fixed personal trait.

Within this framework, coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts people make to manage demands they perceive as exceeding their resources. Two main orientations are usually distinguished: problem-focused coping, which targets the source of stress through planning and action, and emotion-focused coping, which seeks to regulate the emotional impact of stress through mechanisms such as reappraisal, acceptance, or seeking support. In practice, people rarely use one approach alone. Emotional balance often supports effective problem-solving, while successful problem-management can in turn restore emotional equilibrium. This interdependence has led scholars to recognise the value of hybrid coping, which reflects a flexible combination of problem-solving and emotional regulation (Biggs et al., 2017).

Biggs et al. (2017) also expanded the transactional model by highlighting meta-cognitive monitoring, which is the individual's ability to reflect on, adjust, and learn from coping experiences. This perspective aligns closely with the everyday challenges faced by SIE accompanying partners, who must constantly adjust to new linguistic, social, and cultural expectations. For them coping is not a single reaction to one stressor but an ongoing process in which appraisals, emotions, and behaviours evolve over time.

Recent expatriation research supports this view. Wurtz (2022) applied the transactional model to international mobility and found that coping strategies vary by expatriate type, age, and gender. SIEs, who usually lack the structural support provided to AEs, rely more heavily on personal, emotional, and social resources. Their coping tends to be self-directed and adaptive but can also become fragile when multiple stressors accumulate.

These findings reinforce Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) premise that coping effectiveness depends on the *fit* between environmental demands and available personal or contextual resources.

In this study, Finnish language proficiency is understood as one of those key resources that shape how individuals appraise and respond to stress. For SIE accompanying partners in Finland, language ability determines both the practical aspects of daily life such as access to work, services, and networks, as well as the psychological aspects, including feelings of competence, belonging, and control. In this sense Finnish proficiency functions as a mediating mechanism that influences whether relocation demands are perceived as threats, challenges, or opportunities, and whether coping responses are primarily problem-focused, emotion-focused, or hybrid in nature.

2.2 Host-country language as a stressor and resource

Proficiency in the host language has long been recognised as a critical factor influencing expatriate and family adjustment. It functions both as a stressor and as a resource. When proficiency is limited, it restricts communication, social belonging, and employment opportunities, generating frustration and dependency. When proficiency is higher, it enables autonomy, self-efficacy, and integration (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Tenzer et al., 2017). Aligning with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework, host language proficiency shapes both the way people interpret potential stressors and the range of coping options available to them.

Language also carries symbolic meaning. It is not only a communication tool but also a marker of identity and belonging. As Lamont & Molnàr (2002) and Lauring (2008) explain, language choice can include or exclude, signalling social boundaries and group membership. Fechter (2007) and Drewski (2023) further argue that language shapes how people see themselves within social hierarchies and cultural contexts. Hence, language learning is also identity work whereby it helps define who they are within the host society.

When HCL proficiency is inadequate, like in everyday situations such as understanding official documents, attending social events, and job searching, it can feel unmanageable, triggering threat appraisals. This often leads to emotion-focused coping such as withdrawing into self-isolation, blaming oneself for being inadequate or more commonly, relying on English-speaking networks (Nshom et al., 2022). Over time, this can erode confidence and reinforce exclusion from local opportunities (Froese et al., 2021; Selmer and Lauring, 2015).

Higher HCL proficiency, on the other hand, facilitates problem-focused coping by allowing accompanying partners to take proactive steps such as independent job searching, building cross-cultural networks, and engaging confidently with public services (Peltokorpi, 2010; Selmer and Lauring, 2015). As Bandura (1997) highlights, the sense of self-efficacy that comes from perceived competence strengthens motivation and reduces stress. In this way, HCL fluency becomes both an instrumental and psychological resource that supports wellbeing and adjustment.

In Finland, where English is widely spoken and functions as the lingua franca in many workplaces, this dynamic takes a unique form. The accessibility of English creates what can be described as a *comfort paradox*. Earlier studies have referred to this as a comfort zone (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Selmer & Lauring, 2015), where expatriates can function effectively without learning Finnish. Building on this idea, the comfort paradox captures a deeper psychological tension: English proficiency makes communication easy but may reduce motivation to learn Finnish and engage more fully with local culture. The result is that adjustment appears smooth on the surface but remains shallow in terms of belonging, which can shift coping from proactive adaptation towards passive maintenance of comfort.

For SIE accompanying partners, who often arrive without organisational support or established networks, Finnish language proficiency quickly becomes a decisive factor in their adjustment. It not only opens pathways to employment but also fosters friendships and a stronger sense of identity (Madaras & Kunovich, 2021; Kemppainen et al., 2023). Within the stress and coping framework, HCL proficiency therefore operates as a situational stressor and a coping resource making it a multidimensional factor that influences how individuals evaluate and respond to the challenges of relocation.

2.3 Self-initiated expatriate accompanying partners and adjustment

The global rise of self-initiated expatriation has diversified international mobility, shifting attention from corporate-assigned employees to individuals who relocate independently. This autonomy includes their families and their accompanying partners, who share the relocation experience but without the institutional support structures typical of corporate assignments. As McNulty and Brewster (2017) observe, SIEs and their families often navigate overseas assignments with limited organisational assistance as they rely instead on self-directed problem-solving, host-country national (HCN) networks, and personal adjustment. While such autonomy fosters agency, it also exposes accompanying partners to stressors such as career disruption, changes in identity, and social isolation.

Within this evolving landscape, accompanying partners have moved from the margins of research to becoming pivotal actors in the expatriation process. Earlier work described them as “trailing spouses” whose adjustment influenced the expatriate’s assignment outcome (Harvey, 1998; Shaffer & Harrisson, 2001). More recent studies are recognising them as active agents who shape their own integration through problem-focused coping, community engagement, and HCL learning (Du Plessis & Vidwans, 2024; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019). These findings demonstrate that adjustment is a personal process of negotiating expectations, resources, and opportunities rather than a passive reaction to the expatriate’s situation.

Haslberger et al. (2013) describe expatriate adjustment as a multidimensional process that incorporates cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements. For accompanying partners, this means continuously balancing personal capacities against environmental demands. Lazarova et al. (2015) found that families who manage repeated moves successfully tend to develop resilience, flexibility, and a normalised view of uncertainty and change. These coping resources help partners transform potential stressors, such as employment difficulties or language barriers, into opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery.

Despite these adaptive potentials, research shows that accompanying partners remain vulnerable to non-work stressors. Aegerter et al., (2025) found that wellbeing depends more on how accompanying partners appraise and cope with these challenges than on the actual amount of stress they face. Emotional support and a sense of belonging play key roles in sustaining adjustment, especially for SIE accompanying partners who must build new support systems in host countries where institutional help is limited, and HCL proficiency is key to connecting with others.

An accompanying partner's career identity also plays a central role in adjustment and adaptation. Suutari et al. (2018b) observed that while international experience can build long-term career capital for expatriates, accompanying partners often face barriers to employment that undermine their professional identity. In Finland, where labour-market entry frequently depends on advanced Finnish skills and recognition of qualifications, this challenge can intensify the accompanying partner's loss of agency and purpose. Many accompanying partners respond through hybrid coping approaches such as volunteering, entrepreneurship, or continuous language learning, which combine problem-focused and emotion-focused elements to maintain wellbeing.

Overall, accompanying partners emerge in recent research as resilient individuals whose adjustment involves managing personal resources, emotional responses, and contextual barriers simultaneously. For SIE accompanying partners in Finland, the interplay

between HCL proficiency, social belonging, and labour-market access is key to understanding how they cope and build meaningful lives abroad.

2.4 The Finnish context

Finnish language proficiency emerges as a pivotal mediating factor shaping how partners interpret relocation demands and the types of coping strategies they employ. For SIE accompanying partners when language skills are limited, everyday situations are often appraised as threats (e.g., Finland's cultural and social norms, the job market and work culture, communication styles, attitudes towards foreigners, and policies around integration and employment) eliciting emotion-focused or avoidance responses. When their proficiency increases, these same situations are re-evaluated as manageable challenges, encouraging problem-focused and hybrid coping. Thus, the Finnish context can be interpreted as a set of interacting mechanisms which either magnify or alleviate the stressors associated with relocation (Peltokorpi, 2010).

Even though Finland is officially a bilingual country with Finnish and Swedish as its official languages, Finnish remains dominant in everyday communication, be it at work or in dealing with government bureaucrats. Although Finns, in general speak fluent English especially in urban areas, research indicates that functional English competence does not fully substitute for Finnish fluency in securing employment or developing meaningful networks (Forsander, 2013; Kemppainen et al., 2023; Nshom et al., 2022). As a result, expatriate accompanying partners who solely rely on English often experience a comfort zone (see Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta, 2005; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). This study, however, refers to English language reliance by expatriates as a "comfort paradox" because it enables surface-level participation but limits deeper social inclusion and access to professional opportunities.

The labour market further intensifies these dynamics. Finnish employers tend to prioritise Finnish language skills even for roles requiring international expertise (Peltokorpi, 2010). For SIE accompanying partners, this expectation can create a

persistent mismatch between qualifications and employment opportunities. These employment barriers typically affect self-esteem and personal agency, which in turn increases stress levels. This pattern is consistent with secondary appraisals, whereby perceived resource limitations influence coping choices (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Social norms in Finland place high value on privacy, thus reinforcing emotional dimensions of coping by expatriate accompanying partners. Additionally, Finns are low-context communicators and display little to no emotional expression making it difficult for newcomers to Finland to build close relationships quickly (Leinonen, 2012). Hence, without HCL proficiency, the cultural nuances tend to increase feelings of isolation for the accompanying partner, leading to dependence on other expatriates or English-speaking groups. For many SIE accompanying partners, language becomes a symbolic boundary (Lamont & Molnàr, 2002; Drewski, 2023) separating adaptation from marginality.

Consequently, the Finnish context operates in a way that links HCL proficiency to coping and adjustment outcomes depending on how salient a given context is, be it job accessibility or social networking, a viable coping response will be utilised by the accompanying partners by either engaging proactively versus withdrawing emotionally. A contextual overview makes it possible to understand how structural and cultural conditions interact with individual coping processes to shape SIE accompanying partners' adjustment paths.

2.5 Conceptual integration and analytical expectations

The preceding sections integrate stress-coping theory with HCL proficiency and the Finnish context. These four main streams of research create a framework based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory which views coping as an ongoing process influenced by how people interpret and react to the challenges they encounter.

Within this framework, HCL proficiency operates as both a stressor and a resource. Limited proficiency heightens the appraisal of stressors such as limited employment access, social exclusion, and dependency on English speaking circles, often leading to emotion-focused or reactive coping such as avoidance, withdrawal, or reliance on external support. In contrast, higher proficiency enhances perceived control, enabling problem-focused or proactive coping strategies like job seeking or building local relationships. These coping processes influence broader adjustment and general wellbeing outcomes.

Finland, as the contextual environment, functions as a moderator impacting how strongly, and in what way these relationships unfold. Structural features, such as the way the job market is divided by language, and cultural aspects like Finnish communication styles or the ease of using English as a common language, can either intensify or ease language related stress. Consequently, successful adjustment and integration depend both on an individual's HCL skills and how these skills interact with the broader social environment (see Figure 1 below).

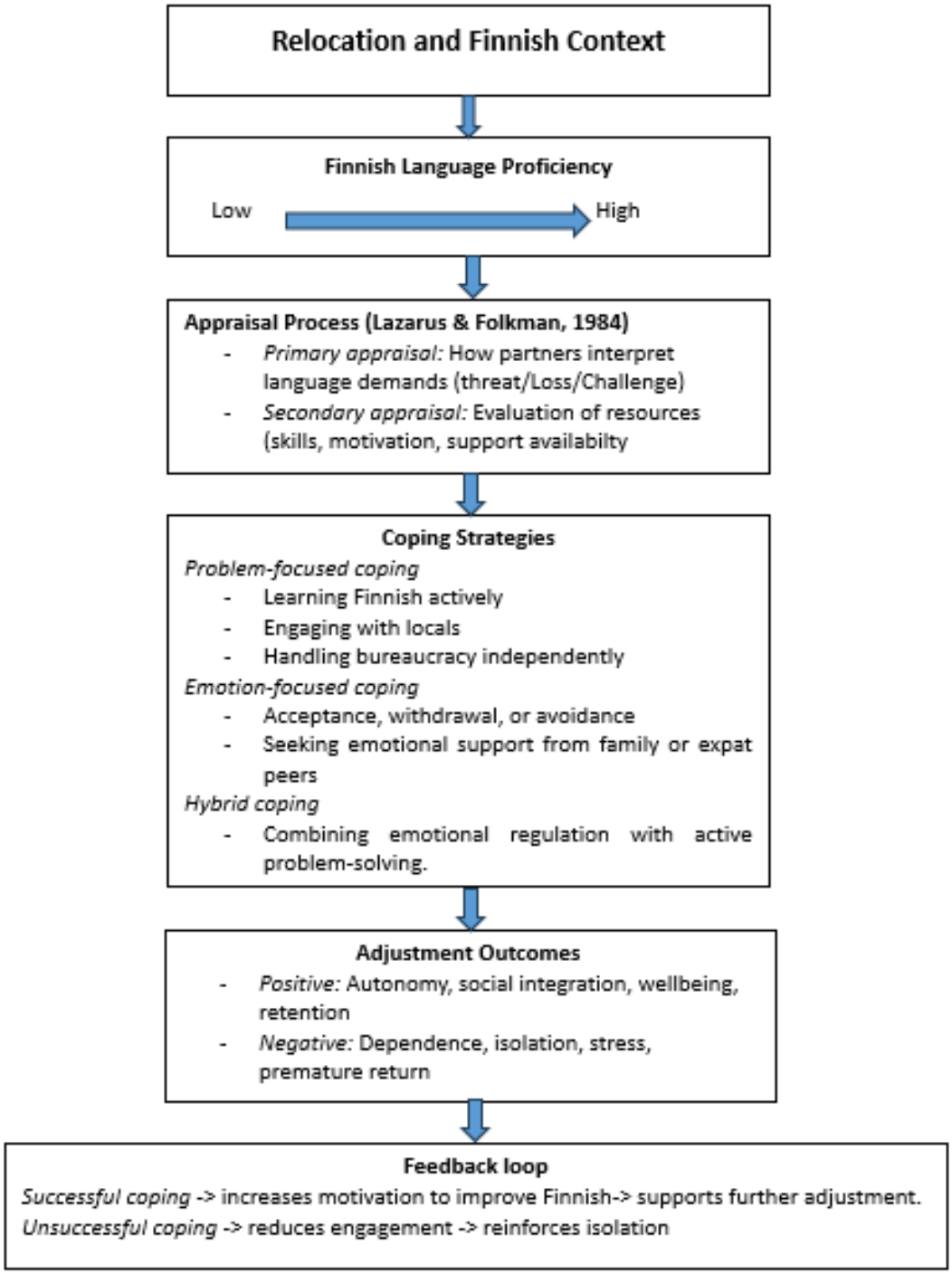

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: HCL proficiency, coping strategies, and adjustment.

(Based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory).

Note: The image was generated by an AI tool (ChatGPT, OpenAI) based on the researcher's conceptual description and refined for visual clarity.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model illustrating how Finnish language proficiency influences the coping strategies and adjustment outcomes of SIE accompanying partners in Finland. The model is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory showing that Finnish language proficiency can function both as a stressor (when limited) and as a resource (when advanced). Low proficiency may lead to negative appraisals, low perceived control, and emotion-focused coping such as withdrawal or avoidance. In contrast, higher proficiency promotes positive appraisal and enables problem-focused or hybrid coping, including active engagement, communication, and participation in local life. The outcomes of these coping strategies determine whether accompanying partners experience greater autonomy, social integration, and satisfaction, or continued dependence and isolation. A feedback loop indicates that successful coping reinforces motivation to further improve Finnish, while unsuccessful coping reduces engagement.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research approach

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore how Finnish language proficiency shapes the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners living in Finland. Qualitative research is appropriate for this topic because it focuses on understanding meaning, experiences, and perspectives rather than measuring variables. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative enquiry aims to capture how individuals interpret their social worlds and make sense of their lived experiences in natural contexts.

The qualitative approach allows participants' voices to guide the findings rather than fitting them into preset categories. This is important because each SIE accompanying partners' experience with language, integration, and coping is personal and influenced by cultural, emotional, and situational factors. The researcher, therefore, serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, while remaining reflexive about personal assumptions and background. The reflexive role helps ensure that interpretations are grounded in the participants' realities, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018).

3.2 Philosophical orientation: interpretivist paradigm

This research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning arises through interaction and interpretation. Interpretivism fits this study because it focuses on understanding *how* and *why* people experience events the way they do, rather than seeking universal laws. In this view, knowledge is created through dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Additionally, the interpretivist perspective aligns closely with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, which supports this study's theoretical framework. The theory suggests that coping depends on how individuals appraise their environment and available resources. Similarly, an interpretivist approach allows

exploration of how SIE accompanying partners interpret HCL challenges and how these appraisals influence their coping responses. The emphasis on understanding rather than predictions makes interpretivism particularly suitable for examining the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of language-related stress and adjustment.

3.3 Research design

Based on this philosophical foundation, the current study followed an exploratory qualitative design using semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate because they allowed flexibility to explore the participants' experiences in depth while keeping the discussion focused on key themes such as language learning, adjustment, and coping. This open and guided format encouraged participants to describe how they perceived challenges and the strategies they used to manage them in daily life.

After data collection, the material was analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clark (2006). Thematic analysis is a systematic and flexible approach that helps identify, organise, and interpret patterns (or themes) within the data. It is well suited for studies aiming to explore experiences and perspectives without imposing rigid theoretical categories. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, the researcher familiarised herself with the transcripts, generated initial codes, reviewed and refined themes, and interpreted them, while constantly bearing in mind the Transactional Stress and Coping theory and relevant literature.

This method provides a transparent and meticulous way to move from raw interview data to meaningful insights about how HCL proficiency influences the coping and adjustment processes of SIE accompanying partners. Thus, by adopting a qualitative, interpretivist, and inductive approach, this study is consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidance. Furthermore, by using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, it seeks to understand the lived realities of SIE accompanying partners in Finland. This design supports rigorous scrutiny of how HCL proficiency shapes both the reactive

and proactive strategies that SIE accompanying partners use to manage stress, build resilience, and adjust to Finnish society.

3.4 Data collection process

3.4.1 Participant selection

The participants in this study were SIE accompanying partners currently living in various parts of Finland. They were selected through purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse information about the phenomenon being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria adopted was firstly, that they had moved to Finland independently (not through corporate relocation). Secondly, that they were accompanying a partner who was working or studying in Finland. Thirdly, that they had lived in Finland for at least six months to ensure meaningful experiences of adjustment. There were eight participants in this study representing different nationalities, age groups, and family situations, thus providing a broad understanding of how HCL influences coping. Each participant was given a pseudonym (P1-P8) to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality.

3.4.2 Recruitment process

Participants were recruited through expatriate community groups and personal networks. They came from Vaasa, Kokkola, and Helsinki. A short invitation message explaining the purpose of this study, participation criteria, and ethical considerations was shared directly to each of them via local contacts. Thereafter, interested individuals connected with the researcher through emails or private messaging. Once they agreed to participate, everyone was sent a consent form outlining the purpose of the interview, their rights, the voluntary nature of participation, and how the data would be used and stored.

3.4.3 Interview method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility for the participants to express their thoughts freely whilst ensuring that all key topics were discussed. The interview guide included open-ended questions which related to their experiences with learning and using Finnish, their everyday challenges and integration, their emotional reactions to the HCL barrier, their coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused, emotion-focused, or hybrid), and their perceived outcomes of adjustment and wellbeing.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and was conducted in English using Microsoft Teams, allowing participants to join from different locations in Finland. This format also accommodated health guidelines (e.g., the flu) and personal convenience. With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio recorded and automatically transcribed by in-built artificial intelligence (AI).

3.4.4 Transcription

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using a secure AI transcription tool in-built into Teams and then reviewed carefully by the researcher for accuracy. Transcripts were stored in password-protected folders on the University of Vaasa's cloud system, following GDPR and institutional ethical standards. Thereafter, the transcripts were sent to the participants who were offered the opportunity to review and confirm them. This step ensured that their views were represented accurately and that any misunderstandings could be corrected. Minor adjustments were made when participants clarified details or requested the rewording of sensitive comments.

3.4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained according to the University of Vaasa's ethical guidelines for student research. Participation was voluntary, and the participants could withdraw at any time without consequence. All data were anonymised, and pseudonyms

(P1-P8) were used in all transcripts, notes, and quotations presented in this thesis. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and will be deleted after the completion of the research project. Thus, respect for confidentiality, informed consent, accurate representation of the participants' voices was maintained throughout the research process. These ethical principles are essential in qualitative studies where personal stories and lived experiences form the core of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.4.6 Researcher reflexivity

The researcher remained aware of her own background as an SIE accompanying partner in Finland and reflected on how personal experiences might influence interpretation. A reflexive journal was maintained during the data collection and analysis phase to record thoughts, assumptions, and emerging insights. This practice helped ensure transparency and supported the study's trustworthiness and confirmability.

3.4.7 Visual overview of participant demographics

Table 1 below, provides a visual overview of the demographics and pseudonyms of the eight participating respondents. They were aged between twenty-eight and fifty-eight years and originated from India, Nigeria, the United States, Mexico, and Nepal. The outcome of the interviews was extremely insightful for the researcher, due to their substantial data contribution. Some participants followed partners on self-initiated corporate posting, while others joined SIEs or moved through family ties.

Table 1. Self-initiated accompanying partner demographics.

Coded Pseudonym	***Gender***	***Age***	***Nationality***	***Children***	***Time in Finland***	***Current City***
P1	Female	37	Indian	Two (6y; 2½y)	10 yrs	Vaasa
P2	Female	38	Nigerian	Two (7y; 4y)	<1 yr	Vaasa
P3	Male	28	Nigerian	One (4y)	1,5 yrs	Kokkola
P4	Female	58	Indian	Two (Independent)	21 yrs	Vaasa
P5	Female	43	Nigerian	Two (11y; 9y)	8 mo	Vaasa
P6	Male	35	American	None	13 yrs	Espoo
P7	Male	28	Nepali	None	2 yrs	Vaasa
P8	Female	44	Mexican	One (Independent)	4 yrs	Vaasa

Table 1 provides an overview of the diverse profiles of the interview participants, whose individual experiences as SIE accompanying partners contributed to a rich and comprehensive dataset for the thematic analysis.

3.5 Data analysis process

The data in this study were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen because it provides a clear and flexible way to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meanings (or themes) with qualitative data. It is suitable for exploring lived experiences and social processes, such as how HCL

proficiency influences the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners. Moreover, thematic analysis allows the researcher to move from detailed descriptions of the participants' accounts to broader insights that explain how language, coping and adjustment are connected. This analytical approach thus aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and Creswell and Poth's (2018) view that meaning should be constructed from the participants' perspectives rather than imposed by external frameworks.

3.5.1 Familiarisation with the data

The first stage of the analysis involved immersing in the data by reading and rereading all interview transcripts several times. This process helped the researcher gain an overall understanding of the participants' stories and emotions. During this stage, initial notes and reflections were written in a research journal, focusing on first impressions, repeated ideas, and expressions related to HCL learning, stress, and coping.

3.5.2 Generating initial codes

Next, each transcript was examined line by line to identify meaningful units of text. These segments were labelled with codes that captured their essence, for example, "language barrier", "seeking help", "emotional frustration", or "self-confidence through language." Coding was done in Microsoft Word using a table format to record comments and mark emerging ideas. Furthermore, codes were not fixed but refined as new insights appeared. Similar codes were grouped together to reduce overlap and to start identifying larger patterns across participants.

3.5.3 Searching for themes

After initial coding, the researcher reviewed the coded data and started to organise them into potential themes. Themes represented broader concepts that described how participants experienced and interpreted their situation. For example, codes which related to communication challenges and feelings of dependency were combined under the theme *"Language as a stressor",* while codes which related to motivation to learn

Finnish and feelings of achievement were grouped under *"Language as a resource."* This stage involved both inductive and theoretical reasoning. While themes were allowed to emerge naturally from the participants' experiences, they were also interpreted through the lens of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, which emphasises the role of appraisal and coping in stress management.

3.5.4 Reviewing and refining themes

The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the data. The researcher revisited all the transcripts to check that each theme was supported by sufficient evidence and that there was a clear distinction between themes. Some themes were merged, renamed, or divided to capture specific nuances in the participants' coping experiences. For example, the initial theme "language barriers" evolved into two more precise themes: *"Language as a source of stress"* and *"Adaptive coping through Finnish learning."* This iterative process strengthened the reliability and clarity of the analysis.

3.5.5 Defining and naming themes

Once the themes were confirmed, each was clearly defined and named. Short summaries were written to explain what each theme represented, how it related to the research question, and how it connected to other themes. Representative quotations from participants were selected to illustrate each theme and give authenticity to their voices. These quotations were coded with pseudonyms (e.g., P1-P8) to maintain confidentiality.

3.5.6 Producing the thematic narrative

In the final stage, themes were organised into a thematic narrative that answered the research question: *How does host country language proficiency shape the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners?* The narrative linked the participants' experiences to existing literature and theory. It showed how HCL proficiency influenced

both appraisals of stress (whether language challenges were seen as threats or opportunities) and coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused, or hybrid).

Table 2 below provides an overview of how the research questions were operationalised into emerging themes, ensuring alignment between the theoretical framework, data collection, and analysis. By conducting iterative comparisons, the researcher managed to refine code families into higher themes that captured the core relationships among HCL proficiency, coping, and adjustment.

Table 2. The analytical process of the research question.

Research & Sub-Questions	**Interview Foci**	**Initial Code Families**	**Emerging Themes**
***RQ**. How does Finnish language proficiency shape the coping strategies of self-initiated expatriate accompanying partners?*			
***SQ1.** How does Finnish language proficiency enable or constrain SIE accompanying partners' use of problem-focused strategies, such as employment seeking and language learning.*	Experiences of using Finnish in work, education, and job search contexts	Employment access, motivation, learning challenges, resource mobilisation	Language as stressor / Language as resource
***SQ2.** How do SIE accompanying partners with limited Finnish proficiency adapt their coping strategies to manage daily hassles and social integration where English is partially sufficient?*	Everyday communication, bureaucracy, friendships, and integration activities	Daily hassles, adaptation tactics, emotional regulation, English comfort paradox	Adaptive coping / Hybrid coping
***SQ3.** What hybrid or alternative coping mechanisms emerge among SIE accompanying partners in response to language-related barriers, and how do these strategies affect overall adjustment?*	Balancing emotional and problem-focused efforts, redefining success, building resilience	Identity negotiation, acceptance, re-evaluation of goals, sense of belonging	Hybrid coping / Adjustment outcomes

Table 2 was developed by the author using OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-5, October 2025 version) [Large language model] to organise the thematic analysis procedure. The framework aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis and Creswell and Poth's (2018) qualitative research design principles.

3.6 Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

3.6.1 Establishing trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to how confident readers can be that the findings are accurate, meaningful, and grounded in the participants' real experiences. Instead of statistical measures of reliability or validity, qualitative studies assess rigour through trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework was chosen for this study because it offers practical approaches for evaluating quality in qualitative research. Their four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, provide a structured way to ensure that findings are trustworthy and transparent. This model fits well with the philosophical position of this thesis, which is interpretivist and constructivist. These perspectives assume that knowledge is co-created through interaction between the researcher and participants, and that multiple realities can exist depending on the individual experiences.

By applying Lincoln and Guba's framework, this study acknowledges that the goal of qualitative enquiry is not to measure truth statistically but to provide authentic, well documented interpretations of human experiences. Each criterion directly supports the research process: credibility ensures that findings reflect participants' voices; transferability allows readers to relate the results to similar contexts; dependability provides transparency and consistency; and confirmability safeguards a neutral stance through reflexivity.

Credibility

Credibility means confidence in the truth of the findings. To achieve this, several strategies were used. First, the researcher spent time engaging deeply with the data by reading the transcripts several times and comparing emerging themes with the participants' original words. This process helped ensure that the interpretation truly

reflected their experiences. Second, participant checking was carried out. Each participant received their interview for review and confirmation. They were encouraged to make corrections or clarify meanings, and minor adjustments were made accordingly. Third, supervisor feedback throughout the research process helped refine the analysis and interpretation, strengthening the overall credibility of the results.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be applied or compared to other contexts. While qualitative research does not aim for generalisation, providing thick descriptions of the participants, setting, and experiences allows readers to judge whether the findings are relevant to other expatriate contexts. Thus, detailed background information about the Finnish environment, the role of English as a lingua franca, and the specific situation of SIE accompanying partners was included in the thesis. Participant profiles (using pseudonyms) also help illustrate diversity in gender, nationality, and length of stay, supporting transferability.

Dependability

Dependability concerns the stability and consistency of the research process. To ensure dependability, a clear audit was maintained. This included documentation of all key decisions, such as how participants were recruited, how interviews were conducted, how data were coded and analysed. Notes taken during coding, as well as several revisions of the thematic structure, were stored systematically in a secure digital folder. Peer discussions and supervisory feedback also supported consistency by confirming that the analytical process followed logical and transparent steps.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the findings are shaped by the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's personal views or biases. To achieve this, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study. This journal included personal reflections, assumptions, and methodological notes after each interview and during data

analysis. These reflections helped the researcher remain aware of her own background as an SIE accompanying partner in Finland and avoid imposing personal interpretations. Moreover, by keeping all the raw data, coding notes, and analytic memos in an organised archive, this study provides a transparent trail that demonstrates how conclusions were reached.

This chapter has thus explained the methodological framework used to explore how HCL proficiency shapes the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners living in Finland. Chapter 4, Empirical Findings, will present the results of the thematic analysis by demonstrating the main themes that emerged from the data. It will show moreover, how the level of HCL proficiency influences the appraisal of stressors and the choice of coping strategies among the SIE accompanying partners.

4 Empirical findings

This chapter presents the findings from eight semi-structured interviews with SIE accompanying partners living in Finland. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three major themes emerged (see Table 2) after several iterations showing how HCL proficiency affects the SIE accompanying partners' stress and appraisal, coping choices, and adjustment outcomes. The analysis is guided by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory, which views coping as a transactional process between individuals and their environment, involving both primary and secondary appraisal of the resources available to manage them. The themes reflected each participant's lived experiences of HCL learning, coping, and adjustment, in the context of the Finnish environment, and they answer the main research question which is, *"how Finnish language proficiency enables or constrains coping among SIE accompanying partners",* and its sub-questions on *adjustment, integration, and hybrid coping strategies*.

4.1 Theme 1: Language as a stressor

Linked to SQ1: *How does Finnish language proficiency enable or constrain SIE accompanying partners' use of problem-focused strategies, such as employment seeking and language learning?*

For many participants, limited HCL proficiency acted as a major constraint in using problem-focused strategies in their relocation experiences. In Lazarus and Folkman's terms, the primary appraisal framed the Finnish environment as a threatening or uncontrollable demand that limited access to employment, communication, and self-expression. The SIE accompanying partner interviewees described their dealings with bureaucrats and their attempts at finding a job as frustrating. Additionally, they felt stifled and stressed by casual social interactions with locals because of their inability to communicate intelligibly in the HCL provoking feelings of exclusion from the host society as a whole. The HCL barrier heightened their perceptions of dependence on others and reduced their sense of personal agency. As participant (P7) explained, *"I applied for jobs*

in my field but faced challenges because of the language barrier … Finnish employers prioritise their own citizens." In a similar vein, participant (P3) expressed making *"Thousands of applications… it's very challenging if you don't speak Finnish."*

These experiences reveal how HCL proficiency determines access to instrumental coping resources like employment and education. When such resources were blocked, participants reported emotional distress and feelings of dependence. Participant (P3) described *"sleepless nights after rejections … even for housekeeping jobs"* and linked his anxiety directly to language-based exclusion. Such experiences illustrate proactive efforts that fail when situational demands exceed perceived control.

Their daily life experiences also reflected this tension. Without adequate HCL skills, SIE accompanying partners struggled with bureaucracy, schooling, and healthcare systems, often leading to withdrawal from society. For example, (P8) had this to say*, "If I would speak and understand more Finnish, I would feel much better… it affects my self-esteem."* While (P7) articulated how outside of work he had *"limited social interactions due to the language barrier,"* relying mainly on the Nepali community for social networking. Similar frustrations were echoed by participant (P4): *"The silence was getting to me … I just wanted to work and talk to people."*

These narratives show how language shapes both instrumental and emotional domains of coping, restricting problem-solving while provoking loneliness. Thus, Theme 1 captures the constraining role of limited HCL proficiency in applying active coping strategies, showing how language can become a stressor that triggers emotional and behavioural exhaustion.

4.2 Theme 2: Language as a resource

Linked to SQ1 (positive dimension) and transition to SQ2: *How does Finnish language proficiency enable SIE accompanying partners to use problem-focused strategies and develop adaptive responses in social integrations?*

Over time, several participants reappraised the Finnish language not purely as a barrier but as a potential resource for empowerment and belonging. This shift illustrates secondary appraisal, where individuals identify available supports and skills to manage stress more effectively. Thus, through repeated exposure, community support, and structured language learning, Finnish (or Swedish in the bilingual regions like Vaasa) became a tool for empowerment. This can be seen through observations made by participant (P5), that *"We had people from Wärtsilä and Danfoss come to talk to us, it gave me insight into job expectations,"* and participant (P4) who echoed similar sentiments by noticing that switching to Swedish for her children's schooling in Vaasa allowed her to participate actively with school parents, "*I joined PTA meetings even though they were in Swedish*."

Continuing in this vein Participant (P2) made her contribution, *"My pastor's wife only speaks Finnish to us until we can't continue, then she switches. She really helps us practise."* A similar situation was experienced by Participant (P3) who described a store clerk that *"kept speaking Finnish to help me learn … it boosted my confidence*." This kind of transformation from emotional withdrawal to active learning exemplifies adaptive reappraisal, turning stress into growth. Furthermore, positive interactions with host nationals reinforced continued effort. Such experiences show how emotional support from locals can transform coping from avoidance to engagement, sustaining motivation. Through such reappraisals, Finnish (or Swedish) proficiency turned into a coping resource that enhanced autonomy, restored self-esteem, fostered inclusion, shifting the balance from stress to growth.

4.3 Theme 3: Hybrid coping and adaptation

Linked to SQ2 and SQ3: *How do SIE accompanying partners with limited Finnish proficiency adapt their coping strategies to manage daily hassles and social integration where English is partially sufficient?*

What hybrid or alternative coping mechanisms emerge, and how do these strategies affect overall adjustment?

Most of the participants reported developing hybrid forms of coping that blended emotional regulation with practical problem-solving, confirming the recursive nature of coping in Lazarus and Folkman's model. They combined them flexibly according to situational demands. Participant (P2) described balancing acceptance with effort: *"I think one thing that helped me was the long walks… I started to process my thoughts and pray. Then I started to plan… with my TE-officer."* She used positive reframing to manage loneliness (emotion-focused strategies that stabilised her mood), followed by proactive job-seeking and Finnish courses, representing problem-focused coping. She concluded, *"Now I'm here … what do we do to move forward?"*, which is self-talk and captures active cognitive re-appraisal.

Participant (P6) shared a more pragmatic hybrid approach. *"In Helsinki I can manage with English…"* He relied on his English fluency to navigate work life while gradually accepting that learning Finnish was essential outside the capital. *"… but moving to a smaller town means I have to learn Finnish… but that doesn't scare me,"* reflecting situational flexibility by adapting his strategies depending on the context and perceived control, without loss of identity.

Participant (P5) used a dual-language strategy*: "Swedish is easier for me and useful in Vaasa … I'll start Finnish after summer,"* illustrating adaptive compromise, she is balancing emotional ease with long-term goals, and such redefinition shows cognitive reappraisal where participants shifted from external measures (like seeking employment) to internal measures (a sense of belonging and peace)

Hybrid coping also involves redefining success and identity, and some of the participants described how gaining the confidence to manage communication challenges transformed the HCL from a source of anxiety to a practical coping resource. Participant

(P4) reflected, "*… I need enough words. We learn to ask if it was OK if we spoke in English. People were open enough to tell me what exactly I was looking for".* This example illustrates a shift from emotion-focused stress to problem-focused coping. Rather than withdrawing due to inadequate HCL skills, (P4) acted by negotiating the language of interaction. By asking to use English, she re-established control and maintained meaningful communication. Such proactive adaptation reduced uncertainty and restored confidence, demonstrating the secondary appraisal process by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), where individuals assess their ability to manage a situation. Importantly, (P4)'s sense of acceptance from other turned the exchange into a positive experience, reinforcing motivation to continue engaging across language boundaries. This kind of behavioural flexibility typifies how HCL use can evolve from a stressor into a valuable coping resource.

Generally, Theme 3 focuses on coping as dynamic and cyclical, whereby emotional acceptance reduces distress, enabling problem-solving and successful problem-solving reinforces emotional balance. This recursive loop exemplifies the transactional process of stress and coping in practice.

4.4 Synthesis of findings

Drawing on the interviews, this study found that SIE accompanying partners face a multilayered adjustment process in Finland, where HCL proficiency becomes both a stressor and a resource shaping how individuals cope with relocation. The experiences of participants can be understood through personal, social, and environmental dimensions, echoing the dynamic and multidimensional nature of adjustment proposed in research (e.g., Mäkelä et al., 2011). Each dimension interacts with the others continuous process of appraisal and coping, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model.

Personal adjustment emerged as the most immediate challenge after relocation. Many participants described emotional strain, loss of confidence, and loneliness. These

reactions stemmed from the Finnish environment as difficult to control because of the language barrier, reflecting the primary appraisal stage in the Stress and Coping Theory, where events are evaluated as threatening.

For several participants, the early months in Finland were marked by emotional exhaustion, often intensified by the long, dark winters and the absence of familiar social cues. Feelings of isolation and frustration mirrored finding by Furnham & Bochner (1986), who noted that psychological fatigue often accompanies limited cultural competence in new environments. Yet, as some participants reappraised their situation, they began to shift towards problem-focused coping by enrolling in Finnish courses and setting small achievable goals to manage setbacks.

Over time, emotional regulation became a foundation for resilience. The ability to manage disappointment and maintain motivation distinguished those who progressed in language learning and integration from those who remained stuck in avoidance. This pattern highlights Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) claim that coping is recursive whereby emotional balance restores problem-solving capacity, which in turn reinforces self-efficacy. HCL proficiency thus acted as both a symbolic and practical marker of regained personal control.

The social adjustment process centred on building meaningful relationships within Finnish society. Participants repeatedly cited the reserved nature of Finnish culture and the dominance of Finnish in informal settings as barriers to establishing deep connections. As one participant put it *"I can manage daily life in English, but it keeps me outside real conversations.*" This duality echoes the "comfort paradox" or comfort zone described by Louihala-Salminen & Kankaanranta (2005), where English enables functionality but limits inclusion. In response, many accompanying partners formed expatriate networks as safety nets. These circles offered empathy and shared understanding, however, reliance on such networks also perpetuated social

segmentation, confining interactions within English-speaking bubbles and slowing Finnish language acquisition.

As participants gained confidence through language study, several began bridging the gap between expatriate and local groups by joining community groups, volunteering, or attending municipal events. This transition from isolation to cautious participation represents secondary appraisal, where individuals identify available social resources and act upon them. Dufva et al. (2011) emphasised that language is inherently social; it creates access to shared practices and cultural meaning. Participants who engaged in local language use, even basic levels, reported greater belonging and emotional satisfaction.

The environmental context of Finland played a significant role in shaping stress appraisal and coping. While Finland is globally recognised for stability and equality, participants often found institutional structures linguistically rigid. Bureaucratic systems, healthcare, and employment platforms were heavily Finnish-centred, leaving many SIE accompanying partners dependent on spouses or peers for translation. This aligns with Peltokorpi & Froese (2013), who argued that HCL policies directly influence expatriate adjustment. At the same time, the Finnish climatic environment which has very long and dark winters exacerbated emotional vulnerability, linking weather conditions to mood fluctuations and reduced motivation. Nevertheless, some participants reframed these limitations as opportunities for independence by creating routines and seeking learning environments as well as developing self-care habits that maintained psychological balance. These adaptive responses highlight secondary appraisal in action which identifies personal and environmental resources to manage stress. In doing so, participants transformed restrictive surroundings into spaces for agency and learning.

Across all dimensions, a pattern of hybrid coping emerged. Participants alternated between emotion-focused strategies (e.g., acceptance, reframing, seeking social support) and problem-focused actions (e.g., language learning, volunteering, networking). Rather

than viewing these modes as opposites, participants integrated them fluidly depending on the context which is precisely the transactional process described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Thus, those who achieved a balance between emotional regulation and proactive engagement reported higher wellbeing, stronger relationships, and a clearer sense of belonging. Ultimately, HCL proficiency does not merely signal integration, it creates it. Through the slow, arduous act of learning, SIE accompanying partners reconstruct identity and transform stress into growth. The three themes: *Language as a stressor, language as a resource,* and *hybrid coping and adaptation*, together illustrate the transactional process central to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model: appraisal, coping, and reappraisal. HCL thus operates as both a barrier and a bridge, shaping both practical adjustment and emotional resilience.

5 Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This chapter discusses how Finnish language proficiency shapes the coping strategies of SIE accompanying partners in Finland. The analysis is framed by Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, which conceptualises coping as a continuous interaction between individuals and their host environment. Within this framework, stress is understood through primary appraisal (the perception of a situation as threatening or manageable) and secondary appraisal (evaluating one's coping resources).

Additionally, the discussion connects the empirical findings: *Language as a stressor, Language as a resource, and hybrid coping and adaptation,* to these theoretical ideas and previous research on language, adjustment, and expatriate partner experiences. The discussion, moreover, notes how these findings enrich understanding of expatriate life in Finland's multilingual context, where English, Finnish, and Swedish coexist as tools of inclusion as well as exclusion. Furthermore, issues like emotional isolation and social fragmentation due to the HCL barrier are revealed, contributing to the broader narrative of how SIE accompanying spouses navigate the challenges of living in a new country, often with limited structural support.

5.2 Key findings

5.2.1 Language as a stressor: Barriers to autonomy and adjustment

The first theme, *Language as a stressor*, reflected participants' early experiences of frustration, exclusion, and dependency due to inadequate HCL proficiency. From the perspective of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), these experiences represent primary appraisals of the Finnish environment as threatening and uncontrollable. Participants described how their lack of Finnish prevented them from engaging in problem-focused

coping, especially in employment, education, and bureaucratic tasks. The finding supports earlier work by Peltokorpi and Froese (2013), who found that HCL barriers limit expatriates' access to work and social networks, leading to reduced confidence and isolation. Similarly, Furnham and Bochner (1986) observed that language competence is essential for daily autonomy, while Suter and Cangià (2020) hinted that accompanying partners' social invisibility often stems from limited access to local language and institutional systems.

The Finnish case intensifies this pattern. Although English functions as a lingua franca in professional settings, daily integration from filling in forms to small talk still depend on speaking Finnish. As Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2005) observed, English in Finland operates as a bridge in international communication but not always a gateway to local involvement. Participants' reliance on English thus created what might be called a *comfort paradox*, meaning that they could function linguistically but not fully belong socially. This contradiction reinforced feelings of powerlessness and emotional exhaustion, leading to emotion-focused coping strategies such as withdrawal, reliance on other expatriates, or acceptance of marginalisation.

5.2.2 Language as resource: From dependence to agency

The second theme: *Language as a resource* saw several participants gradually reappraise Finnish (and, in bilingual regions, Swedish) as a potential resource rather than an obstacle. This transformation aligns with secondary appraisal in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model as the moment when individuals evaluate their available resources and perceive an opportunity to act accordingly.

In this instance, participants described how language learning increased their confidence, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. Even partial proficiency enabled them to navigate everyday interactions independently. Dufva et al., (2011) explain that learning Finnish is not just a cognitive process but a form of social participation and identity construction. Similarly, Mäkelä et al., (2011) argue that successful adjustment among expatriate

partners depends not only on access to social networks but also recognition as active contributors rather than passive dependents.

In this sense, Finnish proficiency became a form of problem-focused coping that restored participants' sense of agency. Some described small victories, such as locals persisting in speaking Finnish to them or then, preparing for the hygiene passport test to be able to actually work in a restaurant, as emotionally rewarding, supporting Lazarus and Folkman's idea that positive emotions reinforce ongoing coping. Over time, language learning became both an instrument of adjustment and a symbolic act of belonging which is a way to rebuild control in an unfamiliar environment.

5.2.3 Hybrid coping and adaptation: Integrating emotion and action

The third theme, *Hybrid coping and adaptation*, revealed that participants' coping processes were fluid and cyclical, rather than strictly problem- or emotion-focused. Instead of separating emotional adjustment from practical action, participants integrated the two, showing what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) called the transactional nature of coping. For instance, participants used emotional regulation like, prayer, self-reflection, or social support to manage stress, then re-engaged with learning or job applications once emotional balance was restored. This iterative pattern illustrates the recursive loop of coping whereby successful emotional regulation enables renewed problem-solving, and vice-versa.

These hybrid strategies mirror the evolving understanding of SIE accompanying partners as active agents, not passive followers. Petriglieri and Obodaru (2019) emphasised that expatriate partners engage in identity work by reconstructing their sense of purpose during relocation. Similarly, Suter and Cangià (2020) showed that accompanying partners redefine success through relational and emotional wellbeing rather than traditional career metrics. This study confirms these insights within the Finnish context whereby hybrid coping enables SIE accompanying partners to reclaim control, build resilience, and create new meanings of success beyond professional achievement.

5.3 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Stress and Coping Theory by introducing HCL proficiency as a significant factor in both stress appraisal and coping. The findings show that Finnish language proficiency functions simultaneously as a stressor and a coping resource. Limited HCL skill triggers feelings of helplessness and threat, while increasing proficiency facilitates control, problem-solving, and emotional balance.

Furthermore, the study highlights that coping among SIE accompanying partners is recursive and hybrid. Rather than alternating between emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies in distinct phases, the participating SIE accompanying partners moved fluidly between the two, depending on context and perceived control. This suggests that coping should be understood as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed response.

By demonstrating how language mediates this transactional process, this study adds a sociolinguistic layer to the understanding of stress and coping. The ability to communicate in the HCL does not simply reduce stress but reshapes how individual interpret and respond to it, confirming Dufva et al. (2011) who view language as both a social and psychological resource.

5.4 Practical implications

The results of this study point to several important implications for policy and practice in supporting SIE accompanying partners and their families. The findings highlight that integration programmes should not only address the technical proficiency of HCL learning, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but also its emotional dimension, which includes confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging. Participants' experiences revealed that emotional fatigue, embarrassment, and self-doubt were recurring stressors that shaped their coping capacity. When individuals felt supported emotionally, their willingness to engage with Finnish learning increased.

Therefore, integrating psychological support, confidence-building exercises, and peer mentoring into HCL courses could enhance motivation and improve overall wellbeing.

Moreover, this study shows that employers, local government services, and universities play a key role in facilitating adjustment by recognising English as a bridging language while encouraging gradual progress towards Finnish proficiency. Providing bilingual communication options during the early stages of relocation can help reduce immediate stress and support a sense of inclusion. As the interviews revealed, the SIE accompanying partners were more settled when workplace-based Finnish support or informal learning opportunities promoted long-term integration. These findings suggest that linguistic inclusion should be seen as a phased process, where English or Swedish may function as temporary coping tools before full Finnish proficiency is achieved. This flexibility reflects the concept of language ecology discussed by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2005), which recognises the interaction between different languages, speakers, and their social environments.

Finally, the findings emphasise the value of community networks and peer groups that provide safe spaces for SIE accompanying partners to share experiences and celebrate partial successes. Such spaces validate hybrid coping where emotional regulation and problem-solving co-exist. Recognising coping as an evolving and personalised process helps SIE accompanying partners set realistic expectations, reduces pressure to achieve fluency quickly, and promotes sustained engagement with the host community. In this way, integration becomes not only a linguistic achievement but also an emotional and social journey, one that transforms language learning into a vital resource for resilience, adjustment, and belonging.

5.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this study provides deep qualitative insight, it is limited to a small sample of eight participants living mainly in Western Finland, and as such the findings are not intended to be generalised statistically, but to provide in-depth insight. The participants were all

SIE accompanying partners, proficient in English, and living in Finland. This may limit transferability to other language or cultural contexts. Moreover, this study reflects experiences within a specific time frame, which may evolve as Finland's labour market and integration policies change. Therefore, future research could (1) compare SIE partners across different host-languages or examine couples jointly to explore their dynamics and how these dynamics influence coping and (2) explore other regions in Finland, including Lapland where Finnish is the dominant language, making it more conducive for expatriates not to use English as a crutch. Longitudinal studies could also track how language proficiency and coping strategies co-develop over time as SIE accompanying partners' proficiency gradually improves, offering a more process-oriented view of adjustment. Moreover, comparative studies between AEs and SIEs could clarify whether institutional support changes the balance between stress and resource appraisals, as suggested by Mäkelä et al. (2011) and Peltokorpi and Froese (2013).

5.6 Conclusion

This study concludes that host-country language proficiency is central to the coping process of SIE accompanying partners. In the early stages of adjustment, limited proficiency acts as a stressor, constraining autonomy and reinforcing dependency. Gradually, however, as individuals reappraise HCL learning as a challenge rather than a threat, it becomes a coping resource, promoting feelings of confidence and belonging, and also encouraging social participation.

By integrating both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, SIE accompanying partners develop hybrid coping approaches that reflect resilience, adaptability, and a self-redefinition. These findings affirm Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) view of coping as a dynamic transaction but extend it by showing how language functions both as a medium and a measure of adaptation. Thus, in Finland's linguistically complex environment, Finnish proficiency is not only a skill but a psychological resource in that it transforms exclusion into participation, and stress into growth.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview questions

Semi structured interview questions for expatriate spouses in Finland

Definition of Coping Strategies: Coping strategies are the thoughts and actions individuals use to manage stress and challenges in their lives. They can be problem-focused (actively addressing the issue) or emotion-focused (managing feelings related to the issue).

Section 1: Personal and Contextual Information
Full Name
Age
Gender
Male
Female
Non-binary/Other
Prefer not to say
Nationality
Current Location in Finland
Length of Stay in Finland
Number of Children and their age(s)
Where does your partner work?
Do you have any previous international experience? Yes /No
If yes, where?
What is your profession/type of work?
Are you currently employed? Yes/No
If yes, what kind of work is it?
If not, please explain.

Section 2: Coping Strategies

- When you are faced with challenges in your adjustment process, how do you deal with it/what approaches have you found helpful to cope with those situations?
- When adjusting to life in Finland, do you take an active approach (e.g. learning the language, networking), or do you focus on emotional coping (e.g. acceptance, avoiding stressors)?

- Can you describe any specific approaches you take when facing challenges during your international assignment?
- How effective do you find these coping strategies (approaches) in helping you adjust to your new environment?

- Do you prefer to focus on
  - problem-solving (proactive)?

- managing your emotions (reactive)?
- or a combination of both? (Hybrid)?
- Please explain your preference.

Section 3: Impact of Language Skills

- Rate your Finnish proficiency:
  - Fluent
  - Intermediate
  - Basic
  - None
- How does your level of Finnish proficiency affect your coping?
- Does your level of Finnish proficiency influence whether you adopt an active (problem-solving) or passive (emotion-focused) approach to challenges?

Section 4: Challenges in Finland

- What language challenges have you faced in Finland?
- How have cultural differences impacted your adjustment?
- How have cultural differences impacted your adjustment, and what coping strategies have you used to navigate them?

Section 5: Language and Career Adaptation

- How has learning Finnish affected your job situation?
- If faced with career challenges due to language barriers, how do you cope?
  - Did you take proactive steps (training Finnish courses) or alternative approaches (freelancing, switching fields)?
- What impact has it had on your overall well-being?

Section 6: Social Support and Resources

- What kinds of social support has helped your adjustment (e.g., language classes, community groups)?
- What kind of additional support do you need in your adjustment process?

Section 7: Additional Insights

- Do you have any other thoughts on your experiences and coping as an expatriate spouse?

Source note.

Developed by the researcher (T. Kuivanen, 2025) for this master's thesis, Navigating New Horizons: The Impact of Host Language Proficiency on Expatriate Spouses' Coping Strategies.

Appendix 2. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Theme	Illustrative Verbatim Quotes (Pseudonyms P1–P8)
1. Host-Country Language Proficiency as Resource and Barrier	"Even to buy food I needed to know the Finnish names—what is potato, cucumber, we are vegetarian." (P4) "Yes, yes, I did learn Finnish language… I started this assistant teaching course that was also in Finnish for two years." (P1) "So, at the moment through the TE office, I was enrolled for a Finnish learning course in VAMIA." (P2) "Currently, I go to Finnish school in Kronoby… I can speak basic Finnish now." (P3) "I'm learning Swedish now because it's more useful in Vaasa." (P5) "Primarily within any situation with elderly people, they tend to expect that you speak the language of their country if you live here." (P6) "Language is the main thing… they will prefer the Finnish first, their own citizen." (P7) "If I would speak and understand more Finnish, I would feel much better… it affects my self-esteem." (P8)
2. English as a Temporary Coping Buffer	"I can do my job entirely in English; Finnish is not required." (P1) "They immediately switch to English when I struggle." (P6) "Sometimes I just follow the lead and continue in English as well." (P2) "At work I just speak English… my colleagues are very good in English." (P7) "Using English helps me manage, but it also delays my Finnish learning." (P8)
3. Family-Centred Adaptation and Role Adjustment	"I took a back seat… I would prefer to call it homemaker because my children were small." (P4) "Kids learned the language very fast and really integrated well." (P4) "My husband keeps motivating me when I feel low." (P1) "We wanted a better life for our children; they love their school." (P2) "We try to be active and socialise more through the children's activities." (P1)
4. Social Networks, Support Systems and Belonging	"After joining the Vaasa Spouse Programme, I got to connect with many people and get job information." (P1) "My pastor's wife only speaks Finnish to us until we can't continue, then she switches—she really helps us practise." (P2) "Our Nepali community here supports each other; we have our own group." (P7) "I started volunteering very early when I came—in the library." (P8) "Joined PTA meetings even though they were in Swedish." (P4) "We had people from Wärtsilä and Danfoss come to talk to us—it gave me insight into job expectations." (P5)

5. Emotional and Hybrid Coping Mechanisms	"I think one thing that helped me was the long walks… I started to process my thoughts and pray." (P2) "Through therapy and with the support of my family, I'm trying to be more social." (P8) "I involve myself in activities; it helps my mental health." (P1) "I don't allow myself to get too worried for things I can't control." (P5) "I invented my own volunteering opportunities and projects." (P8) "After learning the language, it makes much difference." (P1) "I applied everywhere and kept adjusting my CV each time." (P3)
6. Cultural Adjustment and Perceptions of Finnish Society	"Like people are very reserved… it's difficult for us to take initiative to talk." (P1) "The bigness on personal space and silence—it was too much, but I had to adjust." (P2) "The lack of small talk and reserved nature were shocking for me." (P6) "Here everyone is busy and individualistic; in Nepal, families stay together." (P7) "They are very introverted… it has an impact compared to my culture." (P8)
7. Employment Barriers and Systemic Constraints	"Thousands of applications… it's very challenging if you don't speak Finnish." (P3) "Every time I apply for a job, the only thing I face is the language." (P1) "Sometimes the advert says, if you're not fluent in Finnish, don't bother applying." (P2) "Finding work matching my qualifications took years." (P5) "I didn't get the job because I wasn't an internal applicant." (P3) "I think language is the main thing… they will prefer Finnish citizens." (P7)
8. Motivation to Stay and Perceived Quality of Life	"No, I would love to stay in Finland because it has clean air, it's very safe even at night." (P1) "There's a lifestyle of independence that the children have; I appreciate that." (P5) "My kids love it here, and our integration is going well." (P2) "We feel secure here even though we still miss home." (P7)

Source Note. *This table was generated and formatted with the assistance of ChatGPT (GPT-5, October 2025 version), a large language model developed by OpenAI (https://chat.openai.com). The thematic clustering and organisation follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for reflexive thematic analysis.*

Appendix 3. Interviewee consent form

University of Vaasa
School of Business Management
Master's Degree Programme in International Business March 2025

Master's Thesis Research Title: Navigating New Horizons: The Role of Host Country Language Proficiency in Shaping the Coping Strategies of Self-Initiated Expatriate Spouses.

Research investigator: Tanya Kuivanen

Research Participants name:

This research study briefly: *The aim of this empirical research study is to understand the role that host country language proficiency (or lack thereof) plays in the personal coping strategies of expatriate spouses currently navigating their new environment (Finland). It is acknowledged that English is the lingua franca in Finland, and therefore widely used in both work and social settings.*

The interview will take approximately 30 – 60 minutes. I don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above Master's Thesis research study. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from Finnish institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation.

Would you therefore read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced,
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors,
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by Tanya Kuivanen, as research investigator,
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to Tanya Kuivanen and, academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process.

- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed,
- the actual recording will be handed over, together with the final draft of this research study, to my supervisor, Professor Rodrigo Mello, University of Vaasa.
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.

Quotation Agreement

I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:

	I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.
	I agree to be directly quoted.
	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published, and a pseudonym (made-up) is used.
	I agree that the researcher may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

All or part of the content of your interview may be used:

- In academic papers, policy papers or news article
- In an archive of the research study as noted above

By signing this form, I agree that

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this study. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time.
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.
3. I have read the information sheet.
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and make edits I feel necessary, to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality.
6. I have been able to ask questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

FULL NAME OF INTEVIEWEE (PRINTED)

_____

INTERVIEWEE'S SIGNATURE:

DATE:

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE:

DATE:

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:
Researcher: Tanya Kuivanen
Email: tanya.kuivanen18@gmail.com or e122635@student.uwasa.fi
Cell: +358 449 759 179

Source: *Adapted from Interview consent form (University of Edinburgh, n.d.).*