

**Multiple Status Signals in Multinational Teams: Implications of Lingua Franca Proficiency  
and Task Expertise for Informal Leadership**

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**Abstract**

Lingua franca proficiency and task expertise coexist in multinational teams as prominent status signals that are often relied upon to infer a member's competence. These personal attributes, however, do not always suggest consistent information since those with lower lingua franca proficiency might be more expert at the task and vice versa. In examining their joint implications, we draw on status characteristics and expectation states theories to identify the signaling nature of each attribute. Unlike the categorically specific quality of task expertise, lingua franca proficiency possesses characteristics commensurate with both specific and diffuse signals: it represents a social group and, at the same time, carries valid information about performance for certain tasks. Using archival (Study 1) and experimental (Study 2) data, we explore how the hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency shapes its interaction with task expertise and implications for subsequent leadership outcomes. We provide further evidence for the generalizability of our findings through a supplemental study that includes 18 interviews with current members of multinational teams across various organizations.

*Keywords:* multinational teams, status signal, leadership, lingua franca, task expertise

### **Multiple Status Signals in Multinational Teams: Implications of Lingua Franca Proficiency and Task Expertise for Informal Leadership**

The term ‘lingua franca’ refers to a common language (usually English) adopted to enable and facilitate communication among people whose native languages are different. Lingua franca is the heart of multinational teams. It permeates nearly every aspect of coordination, collaboration, and performance in this environment (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Li, Yuan, Bazarova, & Bell, 2019; Piekkari & Zander, 2005). When unable to use the same language, members grapple to develop shared missions and values, convey knowledge, and accomplish collective goals (Marschan, Welch, & Welch, 1997). In addition to greasing the wheels of global teamwork, lingua franca enhances a sense of connection and belonging for non-native employees (Harzing & Feely, 2008).

Despite its immense importance, the common language policy has been found to be a double-edged sword and not without challenges—many of which arise from the language’s inadvertent role as a status signal. A series of work by Neeley and her colleagues (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Neeley, 2013; Neeley, 2017; Neeley & Dumas, 2016; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012) reveals that lingua franca complicates the intricate art of teaming across countries by engendering status differentiation between native and non-native speakers. Other researchers lend credence to and further elaborate this argument, suggesting that one’s lingua franca proficiency can shape their relative competence ranking within a team, and the resultant differentiation in performance expectations might lead to undesirable outcomes including inaccurate competence recognition and decreased collective effectiveness (Li et al., 2019).

Lingua franca proficiency can markedly bias team members’ evaluations, but it is by no means the only status signal in multinational teams. Under many circumstances, the performance

expectations inferred from lingua franca proficiency are at odds with what other attributes indicate about each member's potential contribution. For example, since multinational teams are often formed with the explicit goal of accessing a wide range of knowledge, perspectives, and skills (Dahlin, Weingart, & Hinds, 2005; Lazear, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), task expertise is likely to be another prominent status signal. It is not uncommon that those recruited for their expertise are non-natives who experience challenges using the mandated language.

Inconsistent information provided by lingua franca proficiency and task expertise requires researchers to identify the nature of each signal before attempting to predict their joint implications (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Bunderson, 2003). Yet, lingua franca proficiency possesses unique characteristics that have not been disentangled by extant literature. Research has identified two distinct types of status signals, namely specific (i.e., relevant to the task) and diffuse (i.e., perceived to be related to one's general aptitude) (Humphreys & Berger, 1981; Hembroff & Myers, 1984). And while task expertise is unequivocally specific, distinct qualities of the diffuse and specific categories can both apply to lingua franca proficiency. Lingua franca proficiency can be considered specific since it is perhaps among the first credentials a multinational organization looks for in foreign job applicants; one cannot process information and collaborate effectively with others without being able to use the common language. It might also be diffuse since it represents a social category (Berger et al., 1980), and its status-signaling role appears to go beyond the task context and influence encounters non-native speakers have with native speakers (Bourdieu, 1991).

The hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency gives rise to questions regarding how it interacts with task expertise to shape social structures in multinational teams. Theoretical

frameworks often adopted to explain similar phenomena, such as status characteristics and expectation states theories (Berger et al., 1972; Berger et al., 1977; Berger et al., 1980; Bunderson, 2003), are solely centered on the concurrence of diffuse and specific status signals. The extent to which these frameworks can be utilized to make predictions concerning hybrid and specific signals is still little known.

To address these issues, we develop a multilevel model examining the interactive implications of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise for informal leadership in multinational teams. We specify two forms of informal leadership as dependent variables, including leadership emergence at the individual level and leadership centralization at the team level. Leadership emergence revolves around individual team members being perceived, either implicitly or explicitly, as influential by others (Badura, Galvin, & Lee, 2022), whereas leadership centralization captures the structure of leadership distribution within a team—referring to the extent to which leadership responsibilities are assumed by one or a few members (i.e., high centralization), as opposed to being shared among most or everyone on the team (i.e., low centralization) (D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2014; Mayo, Meindl, & Pastor, 2003). Our decision to focus on these forms of informal leadership, first, is guided by the notion that leadership represents the “power and prestige structure” consequence of status signals (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003, p.29). In addition, as the relationship between status signals and leadership is considered classic in the literature (e.g., Ridgeway, 2001; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012), investigating it allows us to draw comparisons with previous studies and, at the same time, extend them by providing a nuanced insight into when and how the coexistence of multiple signals might result in different leadership outcomes. Finally, even though research has established that informal leadership is critical to individual and team

performance (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Spisak, O'Brien, Nicholson, & van Vugt, 2015), our understanding of the emergence process of this leadership form in multinational teams is relatively limited. We do not know, for example, the extent to which expertise can serve as an advantage for non-native members in assuming leadership roles, given the unique knowledge this group of employees can bring to their team.

To our knowledge, we are the first to examine lingua franca proficiency and task expertise as coexistent status signals. This approach enables us to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we bring the notion of hybrid status signals to the forefront and make an initial attempt to conceptualize it in comparison with another status signal. Second, our model acknowledges the fact that individuals possess not only one but multiple, sometimes contradictory, status signals at a given time (e.g., Sauer, Thomas-Hunt, & Morris, 2010; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2011). Even though this well-known fact has inspired a considerable portion of extant status theories, it has rarely been incorporated into prior work on lingua franca proficiency, which may lead to an unintentional assumption that lingua franca proficiency is the only reference source of social ranking information. Third, through our research model, we shine a spotlight on a prevalent yet understudied issue in multinational organizations: the experiences of employees recruited for their high expertise who may encounter challenges with the mandated language. We emphasize the status dynamics these individuals may need to navigate and the difficulties they are likely to face when participating in coordinating team activities. Finally, our study advances the leadership literature by investigating the emergence of different informal leadership forms in the less-explored context of multinational teams. We present results from a field study, an experiment, and a supplemental interview study with employees of multinational

organizations. The three studies aim to enhance the internal validity, external validity, and generalizability of our research model.

### **Theoretical Background**

#### **Status Signals and the Formation of Expectations**

The signal view of status suggests that people, especially when working with those whom they do not know previously, have the tendency to develop expectations of one another's task performance to compensate for inherent uncertainty. Such expectations then exert direct or indirect influence on the amount of status they accord to their coworkers (Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1986; Fisek, Berger, & Norman, 2005). Oftentimes, performance expectations are formed spontaneously (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 1991), are widely shared among individual actors (Berger et al., 1977, Correll & Ridgeway, 2003), and are determined by available personal indicators (i.e., status signals) related to the people of interest.

In understanding performance expectations as a basis of status differentiation, we draw on status characteristics (Berger et al., 1977; Bunderson, 2003) and expectation states (Berger et al., 1972; Berger & Zelditch, 1985) theories which have significantly contributed to the elaboration of how status develops in work teams. These connected lines of research have posited that performance expectations can emanate from a variety of sources (i.e., status signals), such as a member's formal position or job title or their past contributions to team performance. Performance expectations, however, can also arise from visible physical characteristics (e.g., attractiveness) and stereotypes associated with social groups (e.g., gender and race) that are not necessarily predictive of one's competence on the job (Berger et al., 1977; Ridgeway, 2011; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). These arguments suggest that, even though status differentiation is

dictated in part by legitimate cues, it might contain biases against certain demographic groups that lead them to be perceived as incompetent in their work domain (Cohen & Zhou, 1991).

A substantial body of the literature on status characteristics and expectations revolves around the co-existence of multiple status signals (e.g., Berger et al., 1992; Webster & Driskell, 1978). This is unsurprising since people often differ on demographic backgrounds in addition to personal attributes specific to the team context or goal. To understand and predict how performance expectations are formed under such circumstances, status characteristics theory categorizes status signals into *specific* and *diffuse* (Berger et al., 1980; Hembroff & Myers, 1984; Humphreys & Berger, 1981). Specific status signals (e.g., task-relevant education) refer to personal attributes that convey shared expectations for competence or expertise at a limited, clearly defined range of tasks, and as a result, only influence the formation of performance expectations within this narrow range of settings. Diffuse status signals (e.g., gender), meanwhile, are social category-based and indicate a person's general aptitude, thus they tend to impact the formation of performance expectations in not just one but a variety of situations.

Status signaling processes develop following the principles of *task relevance* and *salience* (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001). When specific and diffuse status signals simultaneously exist yet provide inconsistent information, the specific signal tends to be more strongly associated with attributions of performance because it is relevant to the task (Berger et al., 1997; Webster & Driskell, 1978; Wood & Karten, 1986). Male participants, for example, are likely to be considered more competent in masculine tasks (e.g., knot-tying task) than their female counterparts, but the reverse might apply when the tasks are deemed feminine (e.g., hair-braiding task) (Ho, Shih, & Walters, 2012). Such an outcome, however, is conditional on the salience of the specific signal—that is, if the specific status signal is not effective in

differentiating among members, the diffuse one will end up carrying more weight in the final performance expectations (Berger et al., 1972; Humphreys & Berger, 1981).

### **Lingua Franca Proficiency and Task Expertise as Status Signals**

The review above suggests that under circumstances when there exist multiple status signals, explicating the nature of each signal is an essential step to predict the implications of their concurrence. Thus, in the following sections, we discuss how lingua franca proficiency and task expertise are situated in the status literature and how they compare to one another.

#### ***The Signaling Nature of Lingua Franca Proficiency***

A number of studies have documented the status-related implications of lingua franca proficiency in multinational settings. Bourdieu (1991) was among the first to suggest that lingua franca creates a status differentiation-inducing context where those who master the language are socially attributed more competence than those who do not. Building on this argument, Neeley (2013) articulated the effects of lingua franca on changes in status perceptions, reporting status gain for native speakers and status loss for non-native ones. Studying the phenomenon in a team context, Li et al. (2019) lent additional support to this line of reasoning by finding a significant positive relationship between lingua franca proficiency and speaking-up behavior. The authors explained that members with a low level of lingua franca proficiency might not want to share thoughts in order to avoid making linguistic mistakes and losing their status as a result.

While it is clear that lingua franca proficiency is a prominent status signal in multinational teams, the attribute's signaling nature has not yet been captured by extant frameworks such as status characteristics and expectation states theories (Berger et al., 1972; Berger et al., 1977; Berger & Zelditch, 1985; Bunderson, 2003). Specifically, the distinct qualities of specific and diffuse status signals fail to conveniently classify lingua franca

proficiency, highlighting the need to create another category. Lingua franca proficiency can be considered specific because it contributes to one's ability to communicate and collaborate on tasks where members use the lingua franca, and because the use of lingua franca is required by multinational organizations (Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Lingua franca proficiency, however, also has characteristics of a diffuse status signal. For example, it represents a social group where some members can achieve status without effort and pursuit, whereas others must work hard with no guarantee of obtaining a similar level of prestige (Neeley, 2013; Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Moreover, its signaling role might go beyond the task context and govern any interactions between native and non-native speakers (Bourdieu, 1991). The hybrid nature of lingua franca suggests that its interplay with other status signals in forming an individual's performance expectations can be different from what has been theorized for the diffuse and specific categories.

### ***The Signaling Nature of Task Expertise***

Similar to lingua franca proficiency, task expertise is an important status signal that individuals rely upon in forming performance expectations for themselves and others (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Thomas-Hunt, Ogden, & Neale, 2003). Members who possess higher expertise often experience higher status (French & Raven, 1959) and report a significantly higher level of confidence (Trafimow & Sniezek, 1994) than those with lower expertise. In multinational teams where accessing functional expertise is considered a key goal (Dahlin et al., 2005; Lazear, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), task expertise's relevance to performance is emphasized, and its role as a status signal is likely to become even more pronounced. Unlike the hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency, task expertise is categorically specific; it influences performance expectations only in a limited, defined range of tasks (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003).

Prior research primarily adopted a perceptual approach to examining task expertise, arguing that team members are often unaware of each other's actual expertise or inaccurate in their evaluations of that expertise (Bunderson, 2003). In this study, we focus on a different set of realistic situations where a member's actual expertise is made known to the team even before everyone starts working on the task. For example, marketing specialists at a U.S based company that aims to expand its market to China might need to collaborate with local experts to devise appropriate strategies. The U.S personnel as well as their Chinese counterparts, in that case, know what resources each of them can bring to the team.

### **Research Model**

In exploring the interactive effects of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise, we draw from status characteristics and expectations states theories (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001) to develop a multilevel model addressing the task-relevant and salient dimensions of the status signals. We focus on manifestations of informal leadership—leadership emergence at the individual level and leadership centralization at the team level—as dependent variables, given that leadership represents the “power and prestige structure” consequence of status signals (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003, p.29). Further, investigating the classic relationship between status signals and leadership allows us to draw comparisons with prior studies, demonstrating the extent to which the implications of a concurrence of hybrid and specific signals are different or similar to those concerning diffuse and specific signals.

### **Lingua Franca Proficiency, Task Expertise, and Leadership Emergence: The Principle of Task Relevance (Individual-level Relationships)**

#### ***Effects of Lingua Franca Proficiency and Task Expertise on Leadership Emergence***

Both expertise and lingua franca proficiency are task-relevant status signals. Carrying validated information about competence, they provide immediate socio-cognitive schemas that are likely to shape members' performance expectations and behaviors in a self-fulfilling fashion (Miller & Turnbull, 1986; Ridgeway, 2003). Those advantaged by the signals might appear more competent and credible, and thus are given chances to contribute and influence the team's decision-making process. Members disadvantaged by the signals, by contrast, might be given fewer opportunities to assume leadership responsibilities and coordinate team activities, and thus might approach the task in a more reactive manner. In other words, relative performance expectations inferred from lingua franca proficiency and expertise are likely to create and maintain a hierarchy of influence among members; the greater the performance expectation of a member compared to others, the more he or she will emerge as a leader.

*Hypothesis 1: Lingua franca proficiency is positively related to leadership emergence.*

*Hypothesis 2: Task expertise is positively related to leadership emergence.*

### ***Interaction between Lingua Franca Proficiency and Task Expertise***

Despite being a critical credential in the context of multinational teams, lingua franca, compared to task expertise, should be less associated with task performance. After all, language is often considered an instrument, a means, rather than an end (Robichaud & Schutter, 2012). Organizations might impose a language requirement for non-native employees during the recruitment process yet place little emphasis on a person's proficiency after they are hired. Conversely, task expertise is a critical ingredient for the competitive advantage multinational teams aim to acquire and nurture. Its value is consistently confirmed by organizations through professional training programs and reward systems. Based on the task relevance argument (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001), task expertise should exert more

influence on individual leadership emergence than lingua franca proficiency and might supersede lingua franca proficiency as the primary source of competence information.

Nevertheless, it is also possible that team members do not carefully weigh lingua franca proficiency and task expertise against one another since both signals meet the task relevance requirement, and the formation of performance expectations tends to occur instantaneously (Anderson et al., 2001; Berger et al., 1980; Eagly & Karau, 1991). Instead, members might choose to focus on the signal that provides more information about general aptitude which is language proficiency—due to its hybrid state. Task expertise, in this case, might not outweigh language proficiency as a status signal; it might only reduce the strength of the lingua franca proficiency effect on leadership emergence.

***Research Question 1:** How does lingua franca proficiency interact with task expertise to influence leadership emergence?*

### **Lingua Franca Proficiency Dispersion, Task Expertise Dispersion, Leadership**

#### **Centralization: The Principle of Saliency (Team-level Relationships)**

To address the principle of saliency (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001), we extend our research model to the team level, positing that a status signal's saliency can be represented by its within-team dispersion (e.g., Li et al., 2019). The dispersion value captures the extent to which the signal in question is effective in differentiating among the members; the larger the dispersion, the more salient the status signal becomes. We then explore the interactive effects of dispersions of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise on leadership centralization. This dependent variable refers to a social hierarchy structure reflecting the extent to which leadership emerges mainly from one or a few focal members rather than from most or everyone on the team (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Mayo et al., 2003).

***Direct Relationship between Lingua Franca Proficiency Dispersion and Leadership******Centralization***

Status characteristics and expectation states theories suggest that team members act according to their individual social standing associated with a salient status signal (Berger et al., 1997; Ridgeway, 2001). High levels of lingua franca proficiency and expertise dispersion are, therefore, likely to cause a wide variance in leadership behavior within the team (i.e., high leadership centralization). Conversely, when team members are equally proficient at the language or equally expert at the task, these signals might be considered less reliable to make inferences about competence. The direct effects of lingua franca proficiency and expertise dispersions on leadership centralization might thus be weaker.

***Hypothesis 3:*** *Lingua franca proficiency dispersion is positively related to leadership centralization.*

***Hypothesis 4:*** *Task expertise dispersion is positively related to leadership centralization.*

***Interaction between Lingua Franca Proficiency and Task Expertise Dispersions***

Based on the principle of salience (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001), the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization is likely to vary across levels of task expertise dispersion. When task expertise dispersion is high, an individual's tendency to behave according to the competence rankings suggested by lingua franca is reduced because, compared to lingua franca proficiency, task expertise is not only salient but also relevant to goal achievement. As Hembroff and Myers's (1984) state, "differentiating characteristics explicitly relevant to the task will produce greater differentiation between actors [...] than will characteristics not explicitly relevant" (p. 337). Thus, we expect the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership

centralization to weaken in this case. When members do not differ on task expertise (i.e., low task expertise dispersion), lingua franca proficiency dispersion becomes the primary source of competence information which shapes the team's leadership structure. The relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization is then likely to be strengthened.

It is, however, important to note that if team members indeed prioritize comparing lingua franca proficiency's and task expertise's signaling strengths on general aptitude instead of task relevance, as discussed previously, lingua franca proficiency might 'take precedence' over task expertise in shaping team member behaviors even if task expertise dispersion is high. Taken together, the following research question is raised about the interaction between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and task expertise dispersion.

***Research Question 2:** How does lingua franca proficiency dispersion interact with task expertise dispersion to influence leadership centralization?*

### **Overview of Studies**

We analyzed an archival dataset collected from in-person leadership boot camps (Study 1) and conducted an online experiment (Study 2). This data collection approach enabled us to compare the viability of our research model (see Figure 1) across both in-person and virtual work environments, which is important due to previous research indicating that communicating via computer-mediated channels can equalize status differentiation among speakers (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Li et al., 2019). The demographics of the participants in the two studies also differed. Participants in Study 1 had similar educational (i.e., undergraduate sophomores and juniors majoring in business-related areas) and cultural backgrounds (i.e., nearly 95% came from East and Southeast Asian countries), while those in

Study 2 were differentiated on such attributes (i.e., participants were domestic and international graduate students majoring in various disciplines). In addition to Studies 1 and 2, we conducted supplemental interviews with 18 current members of multinational teams to offer evidence supporting the generalizability of our findings to full-time employees across various organizations operating under different lingua francas and language proficiency levels. With these three studies, we sought to maximize the internal and external validity as well as enhance the generalizability of our research. The data and analysis code for the studies is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### **Study 1: Archival Dataset**

#### **Research Setting and Sample**

We used an archival dataset consisting of 336 members of 83 teams who participated in three in-person leadership boot camps held in Hongkong and Singapore from 2013 to 2015. Participants were undergraduate college students majoring in business-related programs (i.e., human resources, marketing, operations management, and finance) and were either in their second or third years. Nearly 95 percent of them came from East (e.g., China, Korea, and Japan) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand). Other participants were international students from different countries around the world. The majority of teams (i.e., 331 out of 336) had four members and the remaining had three or five members. Team assignments were designed to maximize national diversity.

Each boot camp lasted for seven days. Students undertook training activities in the form of group coaching sessions and local business visits in the first half of the program and spent the remaining time participating in a case competition. English was chosen as the lingua franca. All

official communications among the organizers, staff, coaches, and students were conducted in English. Students were strongly and explicitly encouraged to use English during the boot camps even if they were interacting with people from their own country.

### **Data Collection**

In the first activity of the boot camps, team members worked together to solve a small case study on one of the following business functions: human resources, finance, marketing, or operations management. The main goals of the activity were to break the ice and to allow coaches to adjust their curriculum to each team's specific needs. For these reasons, the case was designed to be of low difficulty such that participants whose expertise was not the focus of the case would still be able to solve it. All participants, however, were unaware of the activity's purposes and were encouraged to perform their best. The activity included two 40-minute, non-facilitated discussion rounds. Before the team discussion started, each member took a turn introducing their name, educational background, and nationality. Data on individual leadership emergence was collected in the first round by a coach who monitored the discussion. Other items of information were derived from participants' application packages.

### **Measures**

#### ***Lingua Franca Proficiency***

As English was the lingua franca in the boot camps, all participants were required to show proof of English language proficiency at the time of application. Those who had taken a recognized examination such as IELTS, TOEFL, and TOEIC could submit the results of their Speaking and Listening portions. Participants also had the option of sitting for a substitute test provided by the organizer at no additional cost. The proficiency scores were then converted into

the same 100-point scale by the organizer. The conversion process followed the guidelines of a third-party educational services provider to ensure consistency and accuracy.

### ***Leadership Emergence***

One common approach in the literature to measure leadership emergence is through behavioral assessment. For example, Sorrentino and Field (1986) assessed leadership emergence by monitoring the frequency of verbal interactions a participant had with other team members that directly contributed to the team's goal achievement. Similarly, Foti and Hauenstein (2007) employed trained observers to track the number of times each participant engaged in certain leadership behaviors such as facilitating team processes and clarifying the situation. In line with previous research, we measured leadership emergence using the number of leadership attempts—which was counted by each team's coach. A leadership attempt was defined as “*every time a student engages in directing activities of other team members and stimulating personnel to work together as a team,*” according to the coach guide.

### ***Task Expertise***

Participants were asked to specify their major/area of expertise (i.e., human resources, finance, marketing, and operations management) at the time of application. Those whose major/area of expertise matched the topic of the case study were dummy coded as 1, whereas those whose major/area of expertise did not match the topic of the case study were coded as 0.

### ***Lingua Franca Proficiency & Task Expertise Dispersions***

We used standard deviation as a measure of dispersion because it has been proven to be superior to other dispersion indexes such as average deviation, interrater agreement, and coefficient of variation, in detecting strength of interaction effects (Roberson, Sturman, & Simons, 2007).

### ***Leadership Centralization***

Our approach to measuring leadership centralization was consistent with the construct's conceptualization in the literature as a form of leadership dispersion (Paunova, 2015). Thus, we adopted the standard deviation method, which has been demonstrated to be effective in measuring dispersions (Roberson et al., 2007). The leadership centralization score for each team was calculated as the standard deviation of the leadership emergence variable within the team.

### ***Control Variables***

To account for potential alternative explanations for our findings, we included several control variables. At the individual level, we controlled for gender, college year, nationality, extraversion, and conscientiousness. Extraversion and conscientiousness have been consistently found to be important predictors of leadership emergence (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002) and were measured using a scale developed by John and Srivastava (1999). At the team level, we controlled for year of participation and team size.

### ***Analyses***

We analyzed individual-level relationships (Hypothesis & Research Question 1) using a two-level hierarchical linear modeling (HLM)—whereby members (Level 1) were nested in teams (Level 2)—and reported Bryk and Raudenbush's (1992) pseudo  $R^2$  for the models. Moreover, before examining the moderation effect (Research Question 1), we group-mean-centered the predictors (i.e., language proficiency and task expertise) to improve the interpretation of the results (Algina & Swaminathan, 2011; Enders & Tofighi, 2007).

We used hierarchical regression to examine the team-level relationships (Hypothesis & Research Question 2). Before examining Research Question 2, which is focused on the

interaction between lingua franca proficiency and task expertise dispersions, we grand-mean-centered centered the predictors to avoid multicollinearity issues (Aiken & West, 1991).

## Results

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and correlations for the individual- and team-level variables.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### *Individual-level Relationships*

At the individual level of analysis, we specified models where lingua franca proficiency and task expertise predicted leadership emergence (Hypotheses 1-2) and where lingua franca proficiency interacted with task expertise to predict leadership emergence (Research Question 1). As shown in Table 2, both lingua franca proficiency (Model 2:  $b = .01, p < .001$ ) and task expertise (Model 2:  $b = .10, p < .05$ ) were positively related to leadership emergence, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The interaction term was insignificant (Model 3:  $b = -.00, p = .55$ ), indicating that the effect of lingua franca proficiency on leadership emergence did not vary by expertise.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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### *Team-level Relationships*

At the team level of analysis, we specified models where lingua franca proficiency and task expertise dispersions predicted leadership centralization (Hypotheses 3-4) and where lingua franca proficiency dispersion interacted with task expertise dispersion to predict leadership centralization (Research Question 2). As shown in Table 3, lingua franca proficiency dispersion was positively and significantly related to leadership centralization (Model 2:  $b = .08, p < .01$ ), thus supporting Hypothesis 3. The direct relationship between task expertise dispersion and

leadership centralization, however, was statistically insignificant (Model 2:  $b = .07, p = .93$ ).

Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Further, similar to what was found at the individual level, task expertise dispersion did not significantly moderate the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization (Model 3:  $b = -.19, p = .31$ ).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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### **Study 1 Discussion**

In summary, the first study found that members with higher lingua franca proficiency or higher expertise expended more effort in performing leadership functions. There was no evidence, however, that task expertise offset the effect of lingua franca proficiency on leadership emergence. In addition, only lingua franca proficiency dispersion determined the structure of team leadership, and this effect was not influenced by the salience of task expertise.

To examine the internal validity and generalizability of our findings, we conducted an experimental study where participants from different cultures and disciplinary backgrounds were randomly assigned to controlled conditions. As part of maximizing the generalizability of our findings, the second study involved fully virtual teams whose members interacted through an online conference platform—unlike Study 1, which focused on in-person teams. Another reason for testing our research model in a virtual setting was because previous research revealed that communication through computer-mediated channels can equalize status differentiation among speakers (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Li et al., 2019). The second study was also designed to further accentuate expertise differentiation among members and the importance of expertise for successful task completion, enabling us to investigate how expertise moderates under different levels of relevance and salience.

### **Study 2: An Online Experiment**

### **Participants and Procedure**

The sample was 30 teams composed of 120 graduate students from various disciplines at a large university in the northeastern United States. Ninety out of 120 participants were professional master's students, including those pursuing MBAs, and the remainder were enrolled in research master's or PhD programs. On average, at the time of the experiment, the participants had 5.35 years of professional work experience ( $SD = 3.56$ ). Each team was designed to have exactly four members: two positions were reserved for domestic students of non-Asian descent, and the other two were reserved for Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, Japanese, or Vietnamese international students. Similar to prior studies (Bazarova & Yuan, 2013; Li et al., 2019), only international participants living in the United States for less than 5 years were eligible for the experiment, as one's communication styles might change significantly if they spend more time living in Western societies.

The experiment included a pre-session survey and a main session. For the pre-session survey, participants answered questions about their demographic background and personality traits, in addition to taking an English-speaking test. Two to three weeks after the pre-session survey, participants joined the main session where they met other members for the first time and worked together to solve a problem. The main session was organized over Zoom (an online conference platform) and recorded so that we could extract information on leadership emergence later. Before logging in, participants were instructed to change their display names into "Member 1," "Member 2," "Member 3," and "Member 4." In the session, participants were first sent to separate breakout rooms where they worked on the task individually for 15 minutes. Then, they were directed to a conference room to discuss ideas and complete the task as a team within 30 minutes. We did not impose any formal structure on the teams nor appoint any leaders.

Each team was randomly assigned to either an equal expertise or a differential expertise condition. The tasks in both conditions were designed following the leaderless group discussion model (Bass, 1949, 1950, 1954). Specifically, participants were asked to consider themselves active members of the university's graduate student association who had been called together to outline a tentative marketing proposal aimed at increasing graduate student enrollments. In the equal expertise condition, the marketing campaign was focused on "both prospective domestic and international students." The target was changed into "prospective international students from Asian countries" in the differential expertise condition.

### **Pretest**

We recruited two distinct groups of Prolific participants, each had 20 domestic non-Asian and 20 international Asian college students. Group 1 evaluated the prompt used in the equal expertise condition and Group 2 evaluated the prompt used in the differential expertise condition. Participants were asked to read the assigned prompt and rate how much expertise they thought they could bring to the task on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = none at all, 5 = a great deal).

An independent-samples t-test on Group 1 (equal expertise condition) showed no significant difference in self-rated expertise scores between international Asian ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) and domestic non-Asian participants ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(38) = -.87$ ,  $p = .39$ . Applying the same analytical strategy to Group 2 (differential expertise condition), we found that international Asian participants perceived higher expertise ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .59$ ) than did domestic non-Asian participants ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = .98$ ),  $t(38) = 5.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results present strong evidence for the validity and efficacy of the manipulation.

### **Measures**

#### ***Lingua Franca Proficiency***

We measured language proficiency using a publicly available sample of SPEAK—an English test adopted by many U.S. universities to evaluate the spoken English of their international teaching assistants. The full test consists of 12 questions and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. To maximize the response rate, we used a shortened (four-question) version of the test which asked participants to tell a story about a series of pictures, express their opinions on a familiar topic, and define a term used frequently in their field. Participant responses were audio recorded and submitted as part of the pre-session survey. We then hired a professional English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher who was blind to the study's purpose to grade the responses. The grader used the SOLOM (Student Oral Language Observation Matrix) and OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) integrated rubric which focuses on five linguistic domains: comprehension of context/function, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. In each domain, participants were rated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = beginner, 2 = novice, 3 = intermediate, 4 = advanced, and 5 = superior). The overall proficiency score for a participant was calculated by summing their scores across all four domains.

### ***Leadership Emergence***

To measure leadership emergence, we adopted the verbal interaction coding system developed by Putnam (1981) and Zigurs, Poole, and DeSanctis (1988). A member's leadership emergence was the total amount of their verbal messages aimed at directing the team process and facilitating successful task completion.

To identify such messages, we recruited two coders who were blind to the study's hypotheses and research questions. The coders analyzed the transcripts of the recorded discussions, rather than the recordings themselves, to minimize biases based on participants' accent or physical attributes. All the transcripts were provided by Zoom and proofread by the

first author. The coders worked together on one transcript until they achieved acceptable reliability (i.e., at least .80), then completed the remainder separately. Inter-rater reliabilities for 30 transcripts ranged from .81 to .87. Discrepancies were reconciled by averaging the coding results provided by the coders.

### ***Task Expertise***

All participants in the equal expertise condition were coded “1”. Domestic participants in the differential expertise condition were coded “0” and international participants were coded “1”.

### ***Lingua Franca Proficiency Dispersion and Leadership Centralization***

Similar to Study 1, lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization scores for each team were measured using standard deviations (Roberson et al., 2007).

### ***Task Expertise Dispersion***

A team’s task expertise dispersion can be represented by its experimental condition. We coded the differential condition = 1 and the equal condition = 0.

### ***Control Variables***

We included several control variables to account for alternative explanations for the individual-level relationships. Specifically, we controlled for gender, experimental condition, extraversion, and conscientiousness. Extraversion and conscientiousness were measured using Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, and Lucas’ (2006) short version of the International Personality Item Pool developed by Goldberg (1999). We did not include control variables for the team-level relationships because participating teams were already established with specified characteristics.

### ***Analyses***

Adopting the same analytical strategies in Study 1, we examined the individual-level relationships (Hypotheses 1-2 & Research Question 1) using a two-level HLM and reported Bryk

and Raudenbush's (1992) pseudo  $R^2$  for the models. For the interaction effect (Research Question 1), we group-mean-centered the predictors to improve the interpretation of the results (Algina & Swaminathan, 2011; Enders & Tofighi, 2007).

We used hierarchical regression to examine the team-level relationships (Hypotheses 3-4 & Research Question 2). For the interaction effect (Research Question 2), we grand-mean-centered centered the predictors to minimize multicollinearity issues (Aiken & West, 1991).

## Results

Table 4 reports descriptive statistics and correlations for the individual- and team-level variables.

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Insert Table 4 about here  
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### *Individual-level Relationships*

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted positive effects of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise on leadership emergence. As shown in Table 5, the effect of lingua franca proficiency was statistically significant (Model 2:  $b = .02, p < .001$ ) but that of task expertise was not (Model 2:  $b = .03, p = .75$ ). Thus, only Hypothesis 1 was supported. In examining Research Question 2 which was centered on the moderating role of task expertise, we found that the product term was insignificant (Model 3:  $b = .03, p = .62$ ), consistent with Study 1.

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Insert Table 5 about here  
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### *Team-level Relationships*

At the team level of analysis, we examined the effects of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise dispersions on leadership centralization (Hypotheses 3-4) and the interaction between lingua franca proficiency and task expertise dispersions (Research Question 2). First, as shown in Table 6, lingua franca proficiency dispersion was not significantly related to leadership

centralization (Model 1:  $b = -.03, p = .84$ ), contrary to what was found in Study 1. A scatter plot (see Figure 2) demonstrating the relationship between these variables provided an explanation for the insignificant finding. That is, lingua franca proficiency dispersion predicted leadership centralization only to a certain point after which the relationship became negative. In other words, we found an inverted-U relationship between the variables (Model 2:  $b = -.02, p < .05$ ), partially supporting Hypothesis 3. The direct effect of expertise dispersion, consistent with Study 1, was statistically insignificant (Model 2:  $b = 1.12, p = .24$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

To address Research Question 2, we allowed lingua franca dispersion to interact with task expertise dispersion and found the product term to be insignificant (Model 4:  $b = .00, p = .87$ ). Thus, consistent with Study 1, task expertise dispersion did not significantly moderate the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization

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Insert Table 6 about here

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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## Study 2 Discussion

To maximize internal validity and generalizability, we replicated Study 1 in a controlled, cross-cultural setting. Even though lingua franca proficiency was found to predict leadership emergence—as in Study 1, the relationship between task expertise and leadership emergence was insignificant. This finding may be explained by cultural differences between domestic and international students. Communication styles of Asians and Americans are vastly different, with the former emphasizing the value of listening whereas the latter focusing more on speaking skills (Yuan, Liao, & Bazarova, 2019). Therefore, the international students might have behaved

reactively more than proactively while the domestic students might have felt compelled to express themselves, regardless of their expertise levels.

At the team level, we found that the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization was curvilinear rather than linear as hypothesized and found in Study 1. The inconsistent result might be explained by the different contexts of the studies. In the cross-cultural context of Study 2, domestic students, who also had higher English competence than their international peers, might have easily recognized the language gap between the sub-groups when dispersion was high and thus intentionally provided more opportunities for the international members to contribute. Consequently, teams with a very high level of lingua franca proficiency dispersion experienced less centralized leadership than those with a lower level of lingua franca proficiency dispersion. In Study 1, the faultline (Lau & Murnighan, 2005) based on language skills was less defined, as culture and race were homogenous among the members.

Again, we did not find a significant moderating effect of task expertise dispersion on the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization. The result suggested that participants prioritized relying on lingua franca proficiency to infer each other's task competence, even in situations where task expertise was designed to be noticeably different among them. In other words, the signaling influence of lingua franca proficiency was unaffected by the principle of salience.

### **Supplemental Study: Qualitative Analyses**

Acknowledging that the use of student populations in Studies 1 and 2 might raise concerns about the generalizability of our findings to real-world work contexts even when most participants in our Study 2 were professional master's students with multiple years of work

experience, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with current members of multinational teams from different organizations. Our informants comprised both native and non-native employees who spoke various lingua francas, such as English, French, German, Japanese, and Korean. This sampling approach enabled us to (1) examine the impact of lingua franca and task expertise from the perspective of all team members regardless of their language proficiency levels and (2) ensure that the dynamics we describe are not solely tied to the English language or specific organizations. Detailed information about the data collection and results of the supplemental study is available in the Appendix and on the Open Science Framework:

[https://osf.io/fjsb9?view\\_only=dc7969902eb94272b70c22931e009a4a](https://osf.io/fjsb9?view_only=dc7969902eb94272b70c22931e009a4a).

Overall, the interviews lent further credence to our argument that lingua franca proficiency assumed a vital role in shaping leadership perceptions in multinational teams. The higher a team member's proficiency, the more likely they were considered capable of leading the team effectively. Those with a lower level of proficiency in the lingua franca, on the other hand, reported experiencing marginalization and reduced confidence in interacting with others due to their non-native status. Our informants also emphasized the crucial role of task expertise in shaping perceptions of leadership emergence, consistent with what was found in Study 1 but not in Study 2. This finding supported our contention that the absence of a significant relationship between these variables in Study 2 could be attributed more to the research design rather than the true influence of task expertise. Considering the differences in communication styles between Asians and Americans (Yuan et al., 2019), it is possible that the international Asian students in our sample behaved reactively more than proactively, while the domestic students might have felt compelled to express themselves regardless of their expertise levels.

In addition, consistent with Studies 1 and 2, the supplemental study revealed that lingua franca proficiency surpassed task expertise in influencing leadership perceptions. Individuals highly skilled in their tasks, yet not as proficient in the mandated language as their peers, might encounter disadvantages in assuming leadership roles.

### **General Discussion**

Taken together, we found that lingua franca proficiency was a strong status signal across in-person (Study 1) and virtual (Study 2) settings, whereas the effect of expertise was significant in the in-person setting but became insignificant in the virtual context. The supplemental study, based on semi-structured interviews with employees of multinational organizations, further supported the signaling effects of both lingua franca proficiency and task expertise. The three studies also revealed that the hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency might cause it to deviate from the principles of relevance and salience. Lingua franca proficiency remained the primary source of competence information even when expertise was more relevant to the team task and effective in distinguishing among the members.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Our first theoretical implication highlights the underexplored hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency. Similar to diffuse signals, prestige attainment associated with lingua franca is not necessarily a result of personal effort or achievement (Neeley & Dumas, 2016), as some need to earn it through merit while others might experience an equal or higher increase in their relative standing in an unexpected and unsolicited fashion. Lingua franca proficiency, however, also possesses features only seen in specific signals; for example, it provides relevant information about one's ability to successfully collaborate, share knowledge, and accomplish assigned tasks in a multinational context. Its value is not only intuitive but also validated by the organizational

language mandate (Neeley, 2013; Neeley & Dumas, 2016). Sharing distinct characteristics with diffuse and specific status signals, lingua franca proficiency stands alone in a separate category and carries unique implications for interactions among team members.

Recognizing the hybrid nature of lingua franca proficiency is critical because, as this research shows, extant theoretical frameworks might fail to predict how team members will react when a status signal of a different category also exists. First, although the literature suggests that individual behaviors are primarily shaped by the signal that is more relevant to the task (Berger et al., 1997; Webster & Driskell, 1978; Wood & Karten, 1986), we did not find task expertise to moderate the effect of lingua franca proficiency on leadership emergence. It is possible that team members, once realizing the signals were both germane to team performance, were further interested in one another's general aptitude which is more easily inferred from lingua franca proficiency. This result contributes to the literature by demonstrating that team performance is not always the sole focus when it comes to status allocation and that the functionalist assumption is true only to a certain extent. Second, although salience is theorized to be a key factor explaining why teams rely on one personal attribute rather than another to accord status to members (Berger et al., 1997; Bunderson, 2003; Ridgeway, 2001), the effect of lingua franca proficiency dispersion on leadership centralization was not weakened when task expertise was highly salient. A possible explanation for this result is that lingua franca proficiency, due to its sharing qualities with diffuse signals, was easier to notice and evaluate than task expertise. Indeed, many informants in our supplemental study indicated that concealing deficiencies in their expertise was much easier than in their lingua franca proficiency. While they could rely on others for task knowledge support, they could not do so with lingua franca proficiency which is highly individualized and salient. Third, by examining both lingua franca proficiency and task

expertise, this line of inquiry also allows us to situate lingua franca proficiency into the broader status literature which has revolved around the co-existence of multiple status signals (e.g., Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2011; Sauer et al., 2010; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008).

Another implication of our research for the status literature emerges from the consistent results we observed across the in-person setting in Study 1 and the online setting in Study 2. Specifically, while previous research suggested that certain types of computer-mediated communication (e.g., via email and instant messaging) can equalize status differentiation among speakers (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Li et al., 2019, we found that lingua franca proficiency remained a key source of status information even when team activities were conducted entirely over Zoom. This finding indicates that the equalization effect might not apply to media-rich environments, especially those resembling real-life interactions such as video conferencing.

The next implication of our research underscores the viability of a multilevel model of status signals and leadership. The status literature is built on a central tenet that status signals shape team members' social rankings and the overall team hierarchy (e.g., Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Ridgeway, 2014; Webster & Rashotte, 2010); as a result, the link between status and leadership has been extensively studied such that it can be considered a cliché. However, social rankings (e.g., leadership emergence) and hierarchy (e.g., leadership centralization), albeit often mentioned together as outcomes of status signals, concern different levels of analysis—with the former specified at the individual level and the latter specified at the team level. A multilevel approach, therefore, provides an opportunity to accurately capture such conceptualizations as well as obtain further insights into the status-leadership relationship.

Our research also extends the leadership literature in two ways. First, it shows the development of both individual- and team-level forms of informal leadership in the understudied context of multinational teams. Given the importance of informal leadership to team effectiveness (e.g., Carson et al., 2007; Spisak et al., 2015) and the growing prevalence of multinational teams, examining when and how members in this environment step up to manage themselves warrants research attention. Second, by specifying lingua franca and task expertise dispersions as predictors of leadership centralization, it contributes to an emerging line of inquiry (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, & Ashford, 2015) that investigates the formation of leadership structures in teams.

### **Practical Implications**

Our research offers several implications for managers and organizations. First and foremost, it lends further credence to the argument that a language mandate might exert unexpected impacts on multinational team dynamics. Members with higher lingua franca proficiency are likely to move to a dominant position while those with lower proficiency might find themselves near the bottom of the social hierarchy. The hierarchy triggered by lingua franca might consequently affect collective performance by impairing the quality of overall leadership emanating from the team. Indeed, research suggests that informal leadership is not any less important than formal leadership since it is nearly impossible for managers to successfully guide and promptly address every aspect of the work without the help of their team (Carson et al., 2007; D’Innocenzo et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, our conversations with current members of multinational teams in the supplemental study revealed minimal organizational awareness regarding the implications of lingua franca proficiency. Most interviewees reported that their organizations had limited support

programs for non-native speakers; or the support, if available, was limited to providing language courses. Based on the research findings, we recommend that organizations invest more in formulating appropriate strategies in response to a language mandate and possible status changes that may ensue. The first step toward this goal, as suggested by our informants, is to initiate regular dialogues with non-native employees to understand their challenges and determine the support organizations can provide. Meanwhile, organizations should raise awareness of lingua franca-related issues among native and non-native employees in addition to offering language training to non-native employees. The role of managers is also important to create and cultivate a psychologically safe team climate (Edmondson, 1999) where all members understand the importance of being proactive and are encouraged to participate in directing the team. One informant highlighted that their organization had mentorship programs for new non-native employees, which they found particularly helpful in facilitating the adaptation of these newcomers. When a non-native employee joined the company, they would be paired with an experienced employee who shared a similar cultural and linguistic background. This mentor-mentee relationship was typically expected to last at least a month and could continue if both parties wished to do so.

As multinational teams are often established to access talent from around the world, it is possible that those more expert at the task are less proficient in the mandated language, and thus less likely to participate in coordinating team activities. Under such circumstances, immediate interventions from managers, sponsors, or executive coordinators are needed to help the team fully capitalize on the available knowledge of its members. Specifically, rather than letting members make competence assumptions about one another based on lingua proficiency, they

might consider highlighting each member's unique contribution to the team and how everyone can work together to enhance overall performance.

### **Limitations and Research Directions**

As with any other research, ours has several limitations. First, the task used in both the archival and experimental studies was the same (i.e., leaderless group discussions), which narrows the generalizability of our findings. In addition, since a considerable portion of the task must be completed through synchronous communication, a member's English proficiency was likely to occupy a more critical role in helping them appear competent than in a different situation where the task is less interdependent and direct interactions are less expected. Therefore, although leaderless group discussions have been validated as an appropriate method for examining informal leadership phenomena in teams (Bass, 1949, 1950, 1954) and the supplemental qualitative analyses supported the conclusions drawn from the archival and experimental studies, we believe that scholars would benefit from replicating our research model using a variety of tasks, especially those that allow expertise to be demonstrated beyond speaking the mandated language synchronously.

Second, discussion sessions in the main studies were arranged to last for short periods (i.e., 40 minutes in Study 1 and 30 minutes in Study 2), and thus did not fully represent social dynamics typically seen in work teams. While time constraints are specified as part of the leaderless group discussion model (Bass, 1949, 1950, 1954), such a design feature makes it impossible to detect trajectories characterizing the relationships of interest as teams evolve. For example, the respective importance of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise for informal leadership might change in the latter half of a team's lifecycle, with the former becoming weaker and the latter becoming stronger, because teams can then easily validate and compare the

relevance of each attribute for collective performance (Bunderson, 2003). In this case, task expertise is likely to moderate the relationship between lingua franca proficiency and leadership emergence, and task expertise dispersion is likely to moderate the relationship between lingua franca proficiency dispersion and leadership centralization. This temporal issue was briefly discussed in our supplemental interviews, and the responses we received greatly varied. Some informants believed that the interactive effect between lingua franca proficiency and task expertise would remain unchanged as time went by, while others felt that the effect of lingua franca proficiency would weaken. The mixed insights from the interviews suggest that future studies may want to explore the potential existence of contextual factors (e.g., team and task characteristics) that shape the evolving dynamics of hybrid and specific status signals over time.

Another fruitful avenue for future research is investigating whether this study's conclusions still hold when task expertise is replaced with a different specific signal. For example, future research is encouraged to consider signals concerning the interpersonal aspect of teamwork (e.g., conflict management, internal cohesion, and identification) which can be a means to performance or an end in its own right (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Li, Chen, & Blader, 2016). Such an approach might be an important step to further our understanding about the joint signaling effects of hybrid and specific signals. It is also worth exploring the status-signaling nature of lingua francas other than English. One reviewer noted that English is often seen as a high-status language itself, but whether the same holds for other languages remains unclear. We concur with this argument, and while our supplemental interviews provided preliminary evidence of similar effects for other lingua francas (e.g., French, German, Japanese, and Korean) on leadership, we believe more research on other lingua francas is needed to evaluate the generalizability of our theory.

Finally, even though we attempted to increase internal validity by randomly assigning participating teams to different expertise conditions in Study 2, we could not manipulate lingua franca proficiency and thus are unable to fully rule out potential endogeneity threats. That said, the current experimental design emulates how work is carried out in most multinational organizations. In future research, it would be interesting to manipulate lingua franca proficiency directly, for example by comparing situations when someone has to rely on a translator versus having some proficiency.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we conceptualized lingua franca proficiency as a hybrid status signal whose characteristics are shared with both diffuse and specific status categories. We then explored the extent to which current theoretical frameworks can be employed to predict the interactive implications of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise for informal leadership in multinational teams. We hope our findings not only contribute to the status, leadership, and teams research but also offer practical insights for multinational organizations.

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**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Individual- and Team-level Variables (Study 1)*

Individual-level Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Female	.59	.49	-											
2. Nationality 2	.23	.42	-.03	-										
3. Nationality 3	.16	.36	-.03	-.24***	-									
4. Nationality 4	.15	.36	-.03	-.23***	-.18**	-								
5. Nationality 5	.09	.29	.03	-.17**	-.14*	-.13*	-							
6. Nationality 6	.06	.24	-.02	-.14*	-.11*	-.11	-.08	-						
7. Third year	.52	.50	-.00	.00	.05	-.05	-.10	.06	-					
8. Extraversion	6.02	.83	.04	.03	.01	.00	-.03	-.12	-.03	-				
9. Conscientiousness	5.86	.74	.04	.07	-.02	.05	-.06	-.05	.02	.02	-			
10. Language proficiency	52.84	10.46	.03	-.04	-.04	-.05	-.06	-.05	-.04	.03	-.04	-		
11. Leadership emergence	10.18	2.43	-.06	-.07	-.06	.05	-.03	-.03	-.08	.16*	.09	.58***	-	
12. Expertise	.68	.47	-.03	-.04	-.03	.06	.01	.03	.10	-.02	-.02	.25***	.33***	-
Team-level Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16				
9. Year 2	.29	.46	-											
10. Year 3	.46	.50	-.59***	-										
11. Team size	4.05	.27	-.12	.20	-									
12. Group-mean language proficiency	52.81	5.61	-.12	-.06	-.02	-								
13. Group-mean expertise	.68	.24	-.18	.04	.00	.13	-							
14. Language proficiency dispersion	9.39	4.39	.07	.10	-.09	.10	-.06	-						
15. Leadership centralization	2.08	.98	.02	-.01	-.15	-.04	-.10	.36**	-					
16. Expertise dispersion	.40	.23	.18	-.07	.05	-.05	-.77***	.18	.12	-				

*Note.*  $N = 336$  individuals in 83 teams.\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Two-tailed tests

**Table 2***Multilevel Poisson Regression Analyses of Individual-Level Outcomes (Study 1)*

Variable	DV = Leadership Emergence		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Female	-.04 (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.05 (.04)
Nationality 2	-.04 (.06)	-.01 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Nationality 3	-.06 (.06)	-.01 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Nationality 4	.00 (.06)	.04 (.06)	.03 (.06)
Nationality 5	-.01 (.08)	.03 (.08)	.03 (.08)
Nationality 6	-.04 (.09)	.00 (.09)	-.00 (.09)
Third Year	-.04 (.04)	-.04 (.04)	-.04 (.04)
Extraversion	.05 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.04 (.03)
Conscientiousness	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.00 (.03)
Language proficiency		.01*** (.00)	.01*** (.00)
Task expertise		.10* (.05)	.10 (.06)
Task expertise x Language proficiency			-.00 (.01)
Pseudo $R^2$	.05	.39	.28

*Note.*  $N = 336$  individuals in 83 teams. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. DV = dependent variable.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Two-tailed tests

**Table 3***Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Team-level Relationships (Study 1)*

Variable	DV = Leadership Centralization		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Year 2	-.01 (.31)	-.18 (.30)	-.24 (.30)
Year 3	.04 (.28)	-.15 (.27)	-.21 (.28)
Team size	-.56 (.42)	.40 (.41)	-.41 (.41)
Group-mean language proficiency	-.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Group-mean task expertise	-.40 (.46)	-.27 (.69)	-.29 (.69)
Language proficiency dispersion		.08** (.03)	.13* (.05)
Task expertise dispersion		.07 (.74)	.74 (.99)
Language proficiency dispersion x Task expertise dispersion			-.19 (.18)
$R^2$	.03	.15	.17
Adjusted $R^2$	-.03	.08	.08

*Note.*  $N = 83$  teams. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. DV = dependent variable.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Two-tailed tests

**Table 4***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Individual- and Team-level Variables (Study 2)*

Individual-level Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Female	.50	.50	-					
2. Extraversion	3.83	1.39	.03	(.86)				
3. Conscientiousness	5.07	1.09	-.03	.40***	(.76)			
4. Language proficiency	91.28	10.54	-.02	-.06	.09	-		
5. Leadership emergence	8.59	5.60	.02	.26**	.18*	.32***	-	
6. Expertise	.74	.44	-.02	-.00	.02	-.22*	-.04	-
Team-level Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	7	8	9	10	11	
7. Group-mean language proficiency	91.28	4.46	-					
8. Language proficiency dispersion	9.52	5.62	-.82***	-				
9. Leadership centralization	4.92	2.52	.08	-.10	-			
10. Expertise dispersion	.50	.51	.13	-.19	.14	-		

*Note.*  $N = 120$  individuals in 30 teams.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Two-tailed tests

**Table 5***Multilevel Poisson Regression Analyses of Individual-Level Outcomes (Study 2)*

Variable	DV = Leadership Emergence		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Female	.02 (.06)	.03 (.06)	.01 (.06)
Differential Expertise Condition	.06 (.11)	.02 (.13)	.00 (.12)
Extraversion	.07** (.03)	.09** (.03)	.09** (.03)
Conscientiousness	.04 (.03)	.01 (.04)	.02 (.04)
Language proficiency		.02*** (.00)	.02*** (.00)
Task expertise		.03 (.10)	.01 (.10)
Task expertise x Language proficiency			.03 (.21)
Pseudo $R^2$	.28	.37	.38

*Note.*  $N = 120$  individuals in 30 teams. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. DV = dependent variable..

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Two-tailed tests

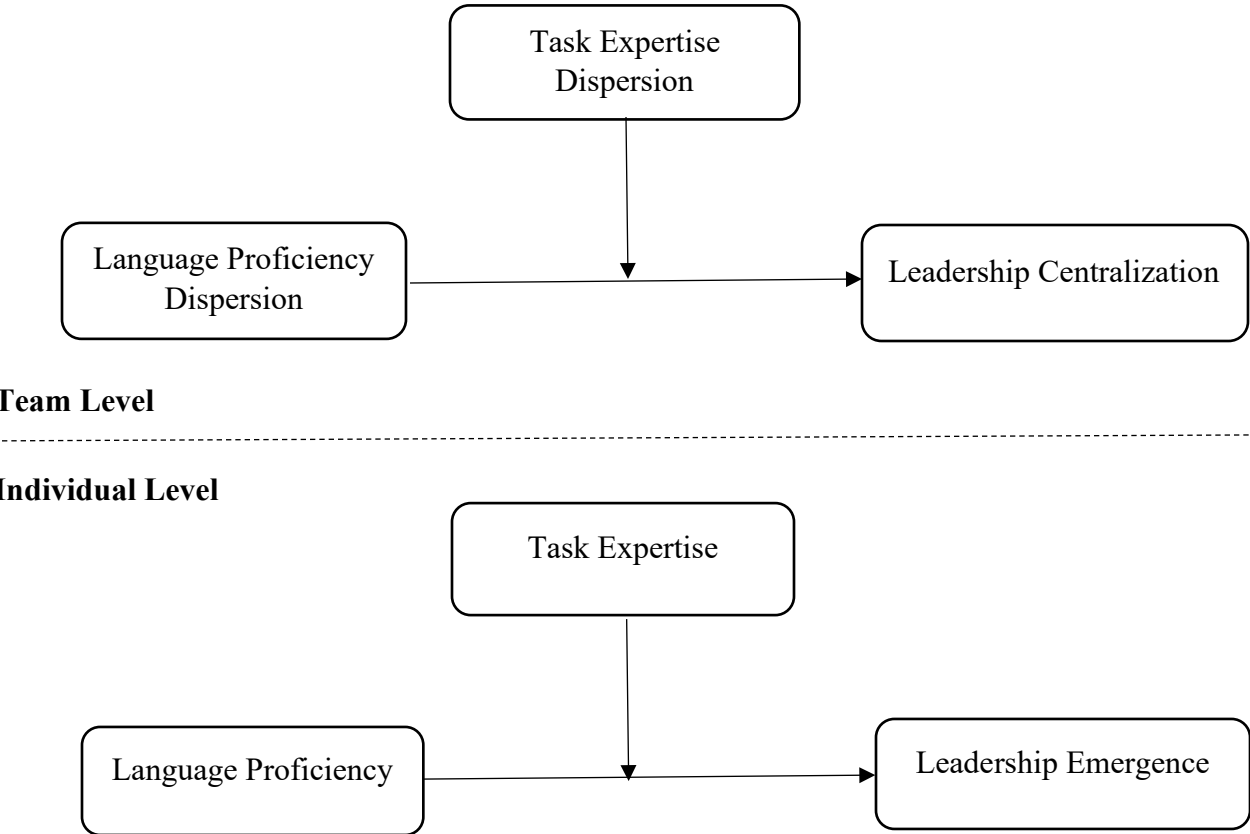
**Table 6***Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Team-level Relationships (Study 2)*

Variable	DV = Leadership Centralization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Group-mean language proficiency	.00 (.19)	.13 (.18)	.05 (.20)	.14 (.19)
Language proficiency dispersion	-.03 (.15)	.64 (.31)	-.01 (.16)	.64 (.32)
Language proficiency dispersion <sup>2</sup>		-.02* (.01)		-.02* (.01)
Task expertise dispersion	.63 (.98)	1.12 (.92)	-.10 (1.21)	1.16 (.96)
Language proficiency dispersion x Task expertise dispersion			.19 (.18)	
Language proficiency dispersion <sup>2</sup> x Task expertise dispersion				.00 (.01)
$R^2$	.02	.21	.06	.21
Adjusted $R^2$	-.09	.08	-.09	.04

*Note.*  $N = 30$  teams. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. DV = dependent variable.

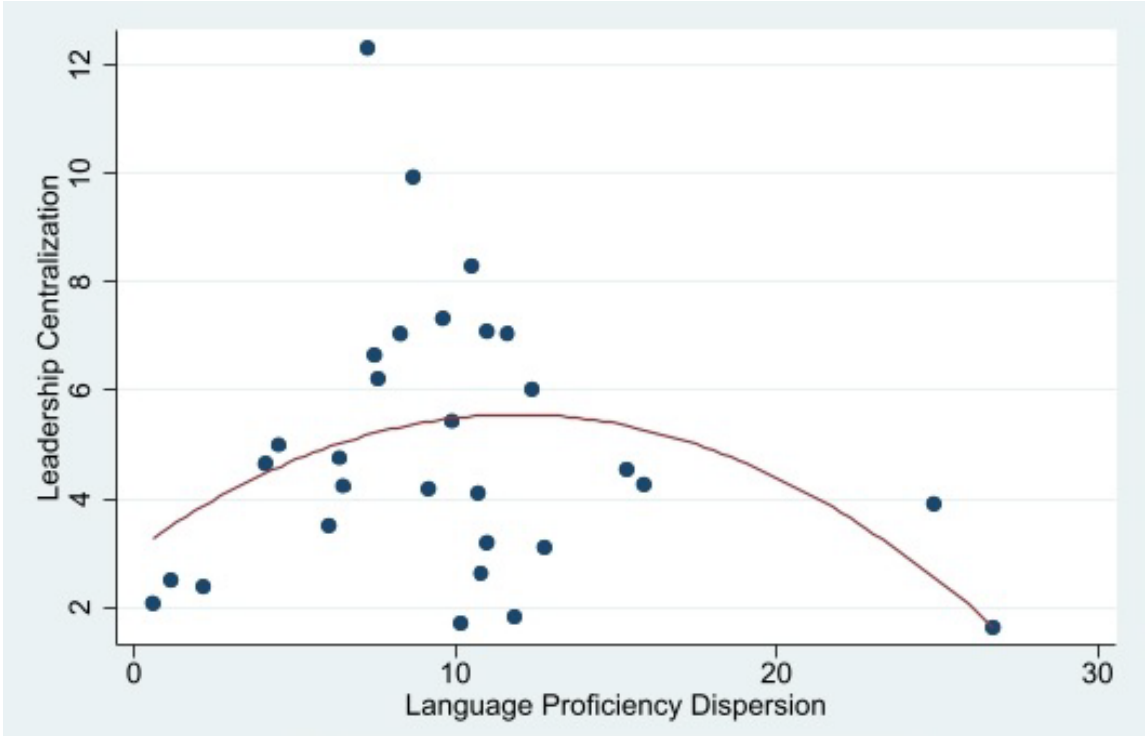
\*  $p < .05$ . Two-tailed tests

**Figure 1**  
*Research model*



**Figure 2**

*Inverted U-shaped Relationship between Language Proficiency Dispersion and Leadership Centralization (Study 2)*



### **Supplemental Study: Qualitative Analyses**

To evaluate the generalizability of our findings to real-world work contexts beyond student samples, even when most participants in our Study 2 were professional master's students with multiple years of work experience, we conducted semi-structured interviews with current members of multinational teams from different organizations. Our informants comprised both native and non-native employees who spoke various lingua francas, such as English, French, German, Japanese, and Korean. This sampling approach enabled us to (1) examine the impact of lingua franca and task expertise from the perspective of all team members regardless of their language proficiency levels, and (2) ensure that the dynamics we describe are not solely tied to the English language or specific organizations.

#### **Sample**

We conducted a total of 18 interviews. We set an a priori sample size of 15 based on the anticipated complexity and depth of our research questions, as well as the typical saturation range of 9-17 often observed in qualitative studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Our sample included both native and non-native speakers of different lingua francas to minimize the chance of overlooking important themes. To assess data saturation during our data collection, we followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) definition of saturation as a degree rather than a fixed point. These scholars argued that saturation may never be complete as new information always emerges. Therefore, saturation should be considered achieved when further data collection provides diminishing returns, and the new information does not significantly contribute to the overall theory. In our study, minimal new themes emerged after the 7<sup>th</sup> interview, and subsequent interviews (8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>) did not significantly deepen our understanding of the implications of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise for informal leadership. While we believed that data

saturation had already been reached, we conducted three additional interviews for further confirmation.

Our informants were recruited through personal connections and the snowball method (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019). As shown in Table 7, the informants spoke eight different mother tongues (e.g., French, German, and Japanese), represented four ethnicities (i.e., Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White), and worked across ten industries (e.g., finance, healthcare, technology). Out of the 18 informants, five mentioned that their organizations operated with two lingua francas instead of one (e.g., English and Korean), resulting in occasional language switches in their work activities. Six informants were female, nine were native speakers, and two identified themselves as both native and non-native speakers due to their organization's use of two lingua francas. On average, they had 7.67 years of work experience ( $SD = 4.13$ ) and had been involved in more than 4.11 multinational teams ( $SD = 3.56$ ).

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Insert Table 7 about here  
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## Interviews

We conducted the interviews via Zoom and utilized open-ended questions to probe responses (Lee, 1999). The questions were designed to gather detailed insights into the status signaling roles of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise in shaping leadership perceptions in multinational teams. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, a duration similar to that observed in prior research of similar scope (e.g., Keller & Dlugos, 2023). While the majority of the interviews were conducted in English, two were conducted in Japanese at the interviewees' request. All interviews were audio recorded and translated into English (if necessary) before transcription. We closely reviewed the transcripts and analyzed them using an iterative process in

which we coded the responses to discern patterns and categorize aspects of the interviews relevant to our questions of interest (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

## Results

### *Lingua Franca and Leadership*

Our first set of questions focused on the status-signaling nature of lingua franca proficiency, especially regarding its effect on leadership. Supporting our theorizing, all 18 informants, regardless of their language proficiency levels, considered lingua franca proficiency a valued characteristic in multinational teams. They stressed how acquiring a strong command of the mandated language is “vital,” “important,” “crucial,” and “a big deal” for any employee to make meaningful contributions. Informants perceiving themselves as less fluent in the mandated language reported a lack of confidence, security, and self-esteem—feelings commonly recognized as indicators of status loss (Neeley, 2013). For example, a non-native team member mentioned feeling undervalued and less inclined to voice opinions in their early days at a Japanese-speaking company when their lingua franca proficiency was low:

*I lacked confidence, felt insecure about my job, and was worried about making a bad impression.[...] I often felt like my ideas were being ignored. It seemed like there was always someone else saying pretty much the same thing, and people would applaud that idea. And when someone brought up something I disagreed with, I usually stayed quiet, hoping that someone else would pick up on the issue with the idea. (Informant 8)*

Some informants even observed shifts in their status upon transitioning between lingua francas, especially when they had higher proficiency in one language than the other. For example, in the following excerpt, a Korean-native speaker who had experience working in both English- and Korean-speaking teams described an increase in their status when the lingua franca was Korean, and a decrease in their status when the lingua franca switched to English.

*Using Korean works to my advantage and gives me a higher status compared to my non-native colleagues. It makes me feel more confident when it comes to expressing myself,*

*having conversations, debating with others, and looking out for my own interests. [...] When my company expanded to other countries and I had to use English, things changed completely. [...] At the time, I couldn't even argue with my English-speaking colleagues, even if I disagreed with them. They pretty much dominated all the discussions and took charge of everything. Eventually, I just naturally gave up my authority to them. (Informant 4)*

The vast majority of the informants (16 out of 18) believed that there is a clear connection between lingua franca proficiency and leadership in multinational teams; that is, those more proficient in the mandated language are more likely to be considered better suited for leadership. To explain, the informants articulated how lingua franca proficiency not only indicates one's ability to accomplish tasks and collaborate with others but also serves as an important prerequisite for engaging in leadership-specific activities (e.g., networking, managing relationships among team members, and representing the team to outside stakeholders), which typically require excellent communication skills. A non-native employee who had experience working on teams that used different lingua francas (i.e., English and Japanese), stated:

*To be a really effective leader for the team, it's super important to be good at the main language everyone speaks. That way, you can make sure communication is smooth, your instructions are crystal clear, and you can motivate and inspire your team members. (Informant 6)*

A native speaker at a German-speaking company shared the same view, noting:

*You don't have to be a know-it-all, but you sure need to win people over, build trust, handle conflicts, and convince them to follow your lead – and that's a whole lot of talking. (Informant 12)*

### ***Task Expertise and Leadership***

Our next set of questions focused on examining the status-signaling nature of task expertise and its effect on leadership. Consistent with what was found in Study 1, our informants universally indicated that employees with high expertise are highly regarded in multinational teams and that the link between expertise and leadership is a “no-brainer.” We heard quotes

similar to “[E]xpertise is a big deal when it comes to being a good leader” (Informant 12) and “When you excel in your role, others will naturally respect your abilities and be more inclined to follow your leadership” (Informant 10).

Two reasons were given to explain the effect of task expertise on leadership. First, task expertise was considered an antecedent of successful job performance, impacting not just the individual with the expertise but also the performance of the team. As an informant elaborated:

*I believe everyone wants to work with a smart colleague because they can help get things done faster and save you a ton of time and energy. If someone can contribute to moving things forward and making us more effective, I'd be happy to consider them a leader. (Informant 6)*

Second, task expertise held significant value in all the informants' organizations, often serving as a basis for recruitment, promotions, and other rewards. The following quotes illustrate this point:

*Companies promote people who have performed well, so I really think being an expert is key when it comes to leadership. (Informant 2)*

*My company has put in a ton of cash to track down the top biotech experts because we're well aware that our success hinges on their expertise. (Informant 12)*

*If you're truly skilled and know your stuff, it definitely ups your chances of getting promoted or being seen as a top-notch leader. At my company, we are constantly looking to bring on board the best talent out there. (Informant 18)*

### ***Interactive Effects of Lingua Franca and Task Expertise on Leadership***

Lending further support to our findings in Studies 1 and 2, the supplemental study revealed the prominent role of lingua franca proficiency in shaping leadership perceptions, even when information concerning task expertise is present. The prevailing belief among our informants was that lingua franca proficiency imposes a considerably greater impact on one's recognition as a leader than task expertise. They elaborated that while leaders need to develop a deep understanding of the team's job, their daily tasks primarily revolve around communication.

Thus, low proficiency in the mandated language might hamper one's ability to effectively carry out leadership responsibilities, as represented by the following interview excerpts:

*I believe that communication is a key aspect for leaders. To lead effectively, you've got to be in constant communication with your team members and others outside the team to secure resources and support your team. Expertise is important, but as long as the leader isn't clueless, they can always lean on others for knowledge. But if you can't communicate effectively, well, that's a tough one to overcome, isn't it? (Informant 12)*

*I think that being a great communicator and having the ability to express your ideas clearly becomes even more crucial as you move up the ladder. The higher you go, the more people expect top-notch communication from you. Expertise, on the other hand, might take a bit of a back seat because you'll have plenty of support from assistants and experts. (Informant 13)*

Moreover, as teamwork is essentially about task coordination, low lingua franca proficiency individuals might struggle to engage in and influence the team's decision-making processes. To illustrate this point, our informants spoke about instances where their low lingua franca proficiency colleagues "faced challenges in explaining their ideas to the team," or "bounc[ed] ideas around." An intermediate lingua franca proficiency informant, for example, stated:

*If I were working solo, I reckon my current Japanese wouldn't be a big obstacle to my success. [...] But here's the kicker—I'm not working in a vacuum; I'm part of a team where we're constantly bouncing ideas around. Since I spend at least a third of my time interacting with others, I can't help but feel like my Japanese is holding me back. It's like my engineering expertise gets overshadowed by my language skills. (Informant 9)*

From our informants' perspective, another factor contributing to the more significant role of lingua franca proficiency is that in several professions (e.g., marketing and consulting), mastering the mandated language is an indispensable prerequisite for effective task execution. Insufficient proficiency in the common language could hinder individuals from showcasing their true talents, potentially resulting in their expertise going unnoticed. As Informant 6 put it, "[E]xpertise needs to be demonstrated to be recognized." Echoing this sentiment, Informant 15

expressed concerns about the adverse impact of low lingua franca proficiency on how others would perceive a non-native speaker's knowledge and skills, stating, "*If their language proficiency remains low, it might overshadow their talents.*"

It is important to note that the tendency to prioritize lingua franca proficiency over task expertise in leadership does not necessarily indicate a complete disregard by multinational teams for employees who face challenges with the common language. According to our informants, even though employees with low proficiency might not be the preferred choice for leadership roles, their contributions are still widely acknowledged through various organizational reward programs. Informant 8, for example, described how their Japanese-speaking company rewarded a talented employee with low lingua franca proficiency:

*[T]he company throws all kinds of perks, benefits, and a hefty compensation package to keep him happy. They even give him regular promotions, but they're all on the technical side, not the management side. I've got a hunch that one of the reasons for this might be his limited Japanese proficiency. He struggles to express himself clearly, can't hold lengthy conversations, and his pronunciation is a bit tricky to understand. Even though we all turn to him for guidance because he's the top expert in our team, we've got someone else with better Japanese skills who acts as our liaison with other departments and the company's leadership team. (Informant 8)*

### **Supplemental Study Discussion**

In this supplemental study, we discovered further evidence for the distinct characteristics of lingua franca proficiency as a hybrid status signal. Our interviews revealed that lingua franca proficiency assumed a decisive role in shaping leadership perceptions in multinational teams; the higher a team member's proficiency, the more likely they were considered capable of effectively leading the team. On the other hand, those with a lower level of proficiency in the lingua franca reported experiencing marginalization and reduced confidence in interacting with others due to their non-native status. Our informants also emphasized the crucial role of task expertise in shaping perceptions of leadership emergence, consistent with what was found in Study 1 but not

in Study 2. This finding supported our contention that the absence of a significant relationship between these variables in Study 2 could be attributed more to the research design rather than the true influence of task expertise. Considering the differences in communication styles between Asians and Americans (Yuan et al., 2019), it is possible that the international Asian students in our sample behaved reactively more than proactively. Meanwhile, the domestic students might have felt compelled to express themselves regardless of their expertise levels.

In addition to testing the individual signaling effects of lingua franca proficiency and task expertise, the interviews revealed that lingua franca proficiency surpassed task expertise in influencing leadership perceptions. Individuals highly expert at their tasks, yet not as proficient in the mandated language as their peers, might encounter disadvantages in assuming or performing leadership roles.

Despite its contribution, the supplemental study has an important limitation: out of the 16 interviews conducted in English, six involved informants whose both native language and lingua franca in the workplace were not English. English was chosen for these interviews because the informants expressed a high level of comfort with the language during our initial interactions and indicated a willingness to continue using English during the interviews. We also found no significant differences in responses between these six informants and those whose native language and/or lingua franca was English. Nevertheless, we recognize the importance of greater flexibility in selecting interview languages for future research endeavors. Such flexibility can encourage informants to share more detailed and nuanced information, which is critical for enhancing the depth of insights gained on the topic.

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**Table 7**

## Informant Profile Summary

Informant	Gender	Ethnicity	Mother Tongue	Lingua Franca	Lingua Franca Proficiency	Number of Multinational Teams Worked	Company Industry
1	Female	Asian	Vietnamese	English	fluent	> 6 teams	technology
2	Female	Hispanic	Spanish	English	fluent	>10 teams	healthcare
3	Male	Asian	Chinese	Korean	intermediate	2 teams	technology
4	Female	Asian	Korean	Korean	native speaker	> 10 teams	manufacturing
5	Male	Asian	Korean	English	fluent	1 team	manufacturing
6	Female	Asian	Vietnamese	Korean	native speaker	5 teams	finance
7	Male	Asian	Japanese	English	intermediate	1 team	finance
8	Female	White	French	Japanese	native speaker	2 teams	food
9	Male	White	German	Japanese	intermediate	1 team	electronics
10	Male	Asian	Japanese	English	fluent	2 teams	finance
11	Male	White	English	Japanese	native speaker	3 teams	biotech
12	Male	White	German	German	intermediate	> 10 teams	biotech
13	Female	White	French	German	native speaker	2 teams	cosmetics
14	Male	Black	French	French	native speaker	1 team	healthcare
15	Female	White	German	French	native speaker	1 team	telecoms
16	Female	Asian	English	German	native speaker	2 teams	finance
17	Male	White	English	English	native speaker	> 10 teams	consulting
18	Male	Hispanic	English	English	native speaker	5 teams	healthcare