The Impact of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education

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Advantages of a second language

– Language of academic publication
– Many textbooks are in English
– Develops local teachers’ competence
– Can use visiting lecturers in teaching
– Prepares local students for study abroad
– Overseas students can participate
– Job market

(Airey 2003:12)

Advantages

1. The lecturer experience of teaching in English
2. The student experience of learning in English

Background

Bologna declaration—free movement of students.
Increased use of English in higher education


We know very little about the effects of changing the teaching language in this way.

Research Background

Studies of lecturing in English
Vinke (1995)
Questionnaire to 131 lecturers
Recorded 16 engineering lecturers when they taught in both English and Dutch
Lecturers noticed very little difference
Reduced redundancy, speech rate, expressiveness, clarity and accuracy of expression (Vinke, Snippe, & Jochems, 1998:393)

Lecturers report an increase in preparation time needed for English-medium teaching
Select group
Highly experienced
Teach in English on a daily basis

Klaassen (2001)
Examined the relationship between lecture intelligibility, language competency and pedagogical approach.
Student-centred lecturing much more important than the lecturer’s language competence.
Suggests a threshold level of TOEFL 580 (approximately equal to level C1 on the Common European Framework)
Below this level language training may be necessary.
Klaassen (2001:176)

Lehtonen and Lönnfors (2001)
Questionnaire (n=43)
Interviews with university teaching staff (n=9)

Findings
Similar to Vinke (1995).
Problems of pronunciation.
Uncomfortable correcting students’ English.

Thøgersen & Airey (2011)
– Built on earlier work with students that suggested people speak more slowly in a second language (Hincks 2010; Airey 2010)
– What happens when people change to lecturing in a second language?

– Same lecturer gives same lecture 5 times
  » English (2)
  » Danish (3)

– Authentic data
– Measured articulation rate (sps) and mean length of runs

Articulation rate [normalised]

Adapted from Thøgersen & Airey (2011)
Research background

Results:
- The same lecture section takes longer (21.5%)
- Lecturer speaks more slowly in English (23%)
- Lecturer has shorter runs (30%)

However:
- Disciplinary content is very similar
- Lecturer adopts a more formal style in English

Questions:
- Is this true for all lecturers?
- Is this true for all languages?
- Is this true for all subject areas?

Lecturer profiles

- 18 lecturers at two Swedish universities
- Course teaching in English
- Eight disciplines:
  - 6 Business administration
  - 5 Media studies/journalism
  - 2 Physics
  - Environmental science
  - Maritime studies
  - Industrial engineering
  - Nursing
  - Law

Data collection

- Video
  1. Ten-minute mini-lecture in Swedish on a subject they usually teach
  2. Ten-minute mini-lecture in English on the same subject
- Text
  Online comments and discussion tasks (circa 60000 words)
- Interview
  Individual interviews with participants (n=12)

Lecturer reflections

Themes
- Short notice
- No training
- More preparation
- Less detail
- Less flexibility
- Less fluent
- No correction

Differences between lectures

Lecturers spoke more slowly had more pauses and shorter runs in English
Comparison of matched pairs

Tentative findings

- Lecture recordings were not uniformly longer in English—some were actually shorter!
- These could always be explained
  - Moved to Powerpoint for English
  - Free, unstructured presentation
- Left with lectures of about the same length or longer in English.

Three types of lecturer

1. Structured no change in English
   - Two options:
     - Lecture is longer
     - The end of the lecture is cut off

2. Structured works differently in English
   - Three options:
     - Choose to miss out some content
     - Cover all content but have less redundancy
     - Cover all content but in less depth

3. Free structure
   - Presents different information (but probably would in L1)
   - Shorter

Tentative conclusions

1. Lecturers probably need more time to do the same job in English
2. Some lecturers might be able to rationalize and ‘work more effectively’ (Pedagogical effects?)
3. Lecturers who tend to be less structured (more student centred?) may have problems changing to English. (cf Klaassen 2001)
   - Places greater demands on language ability.
   - May be pragmatic to change style to a more structured approach.

Research background

- Very few international studies have examined content learning outcomes of learning in L2 at university level.
- All find negative correlations.

Research background

- Klaassen’s (2001) study of Dutch engineering masters students perhaps most interesting.
  - Found a negative correlation
  But:
  - Disappeared after a year
  - Klaassen suggests that students had adapted to English-medium instruction
Quote:
“...my own credit and are unrelated to the performance of the lecturers in this programme”
Klaassen (2001:182)

This is, of course, an unacceptable state of affairs and leads to new questions:
– What is it specifically that students initially find problematic?
– How do the students compensate for the language switch?

– Do all students have this strategic ability or are certain groups disadvantaged by second-language teaching?
– Can the lecturers do anything to help their students cope with the language shift?
– Etc, etc.

The study:
– Parallel courses in English and Swedish
– Videoed two lectures – one in each language
– In total 22 students at two universities
– Each student interviewed individually ~ 1.5 hrs
– Selected video clips used to stimulate recall

When taught in English:
– Students ask and answer fewer questions
– Important finding

– Students report no difference in their learning when taught in Swedish or English
– However, during stimulated recall students do report a number of important differences
When taught in English

– Students who take notes have difficulty following the lecture
– The success of these students appears to depend on doing extra work outside class

Results

Students adapted their study habits…

– Only asked questions after the lecture
– Stopped taking notes in class
– Read sections of work before class
– Simply used the lecture for mechanical note-taking

Airey and Linder (2006, 2007)

The following are seven recommendations for lecturers based on my results and my own experience:

1. Discuss the fact that there are differences when lectures are in a second language.
2. Create more opportunities for students to ask and answer questions in lectures.
3. Allow time after the lecture for students to ask questions.
4. Ask students to read material before the lecture.
5. Give out lecture notes in advance or follow the book
6. Exercise caution when introducing new material in lectures
7. Give as much multi-representational support as possible.

Recommendations

8. Don’t use lectures!
Post lectures online
Use face-to-face for seminars, group work etc.

One extra recommendation

Need to accept there may be some negative effects on content teaching and learning.

Need to weigh these against the positive effects.

Lecturers need to carefully think through their linguistic and content learning goals.

What do we want students to be able to do? In what language(s)?