

Work Package 3: Identification of linguistic, cultural and pedagogical / didactic challenges

Synthesis report

Alessia Cogo, University of Southampton, UK

Kirsi Westerholm, University of Jyväskylä, FI

In this report we identify the linguistic, cultural and pedagogical/didactic challenges faced by staff and students in the international university. The present discussion is based on the [IntUni questionnaire](#) results and comments from the focus groups. As demonstrated in the results, it is difficult, and often even impossible, to separate language from culture. Even so, in the following sections an effort is made to focus on the linguistic challenges as separate from the cultural and didactic ones in an attempt to make sense of the increasingly complex learning and teaching landscape in HEI contexts.

The linguistic challenges

The first challenge mentioned concerns the staff and students' proficiency skills in the language of instruction/learning. Most HEIs use internationally recognized language tests as entrance requirements (mainly IELTS, TOEFL), the *can-do* statements of the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR) or national certifications, the required level of which differ according to institution and programme. The questionnaire showed that respondents felt students have a sufficient level of proficiency in the language of instruction. However, most comments show that the situation is much more complex than that. While at the entrance stage students are required to be proficient in the language of study, practically only some students are prepared for operating in the learning space of another language (L2), and responses highlight the academic language and communication barriers. This obviously shows how international tests are not necessarily an accurate reflection of students' linguistic ability to work in an academic environment, though they are still used as gatekeeping tools by most HEIs (Shohamy 2013). Another related problem concerns the standards of English used as reference points by the HEIs, which leave students and staff in doubt as to whether non-native but intelligible usage is accepted, or any non-native variation is considered defective (see Björkman 2011 and 2013; Jenkins 2011 and 2013).

For most students and lecturers, learning and teaching in an L2 is an added cognitive load and a time-consuming effort. Respondents mentioned that students may develop different skills at different levels – while some students may be generally able to communicate, they may not have sufficient academic proficiency to be able to understand lectures and do academic work. The added linguistic challenge is also felt by the lecturers, who are required to teach in an L2 they may not be sufficiently familiar with. This often results in negative attitudes by members of staff towards the language of instruction, loss of confidence and possible unwillingness to engage with the L2 (Coleman 2006). The linguistic challenges of

working with an L2 are repeatedly mentioned in the survey also in terms of students' diversity of background and level of proficiency – some international students may come from academic backgrounds where they are already required to work in an L2 and are therefore more equipped to face a multilingual learning space. Research shows that in some countries HEIs have a long-standing tradition of functioning in an L2, and this is especially the case for English as a medium of instruction in northern European countries (e.g. Airey 2011 for Sweden; Mauranen 2012 for Finland; Wilkinson 2013 for the Netherlands), but others are less equipped for the challenges that working in an academic L2 involves, and they often lack support in terms of courses offered to lecturers, students and stakeholders in the internationalisation process (more about this in the following section).

This aspect of limited support is strictly linked to another important issue mentioned in the survey – the instructors and students' perceptions of their proficiency in the language of instruction/learning. One of the interesting aspects of the survey is the fact that a considerable amount of comments concerned the instructors' and students' perceptions of their own skills in the L2 and those of the other party. Though responses differ, students are generally considered able to function informally, but their academic skills are perceived as quite limited. Students, on the other hand, perceive lecturers' academic knowledge as adequate, but lacking in informal and colloquial L2 instruction. Though the questionnaire results and comments differ quite considerably, so much so that it is practically impossible to provide a clear picture, current research also confirms differing perceptions of competence for the students and lecturers involved in the multilingual space (see, for instance, Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2013). This is an aspect that calls for more investigation and requires consideration of the cultural and pedagogical background of the students and lecturers, as well as linking these to other aspects, such as lecturers' mobility, participation in staff exchanges, experiences of teaching abroad, etc. All of this requires consideration of the cultural and pedagogical/didactic challenges, to which we now turn.

The cultural and pedagogical/didactic challenges.

In this part of the report, we make an overview of what kind of cultural and educational factors the respondents face in their courses and programmes with multicultural and multilingual student groups. Furthermore, the support measures offered to teaching staff in these diverse settings are summarized and evaluated.

In the first part of this report linguistic challenges were discussed and it was concluded that teaching and learning through a foreign language increases the cognitive load of both teachers and students, slows down the process of learning, and requires a significant amount of preparation and planning work. In addition, both teachers and students alike need to operate in a cognitively and conceptually demanding subject-specific academic language. These challenges are increased by the differences in not only *ethnic* and *local* cultures, but also in *academic* cultures and practices as well as *disciplinary* cultures in HEI contexts. In research (see e.g. Räsänen 2011) academic culture is defined as national or institutional approaches to academic practices. These would include teaching methodologies, assignment types, teacher-student roles, promotion and level of learner autonomy, to name but a few. Partially overlapping and intertwining with the academic culture is the disciplinary culture, which can be seen to involve the notion of so called soft (e.g. humanities) vs. hard (e.g. mathematics) sciences and the type of knowledge construction,

methodology, and language needed in order to learn that subject content (see e.g. Smeby 1996; Neuman 2001; Kuteeva & Airey 2013).

The survey findings/results/comments seem to suggest that the most important cultural issues teachers have to deal with, fall under the concept of academic cultures and practices. There are a few remarks on the influence of religion on academic practices; however, a large number of comments are directly related to how international students perceive and understand the host country academic norms and ways of working. We can see the following emerging themes under the concept of academic culture and practices in multicultural classrooms: diversity of educational experience, integration of students in the host university/country, adaptation of/to new learning environments and working methods, and the involvement of all stakeholders within a HEI.

Entering a new, culturally and linguistically diverse programme leaves teachers and students in what for them is a unique setting, and at its best it results in excellent outcomes where students learn the content and develop their linguistic and intercultural communication skills and competences. However, needless to say, there are several obstacles that both students and teachers are faced with. Teachers and students may not share the same understanding of the academic context and requirements or the same prior content knowledge, in which case a lot of mediation needs to take place in order for students to reach the same or similar cognitive levels, which again may delay the learning process. In other words, students come from different educational backgrounds.

According to the survey comments, students' attitudes towards education may be influenced by various aspects such as financial constraints, accommodation, and integration into local life outside academia – either in the sense that education is paid for and 'good service' is expected, or in the sense that there are serious financial problems influencing the progress of studies.

A number of respondents have commented on international students' lack of motivation to integrate and socialize with host country students and vice versa, that the home students are perhaps not open enough to include foreign students in their daily student-life activities. A question then arises if home students are willing and prepared for [Internationalisation at Home](#). It seems that neither party uses every possible opportunity to increase their intercultural awareness and communication skills. Furthermore, this tendency to divide the student population into local and international students ('us' and 'them') obviously does not promote student mobility and internationalisation, let alone intercultural competence.

When we explore the comments concerning actual studying in multilingual and multicultural HEIs, in other words students' adaptation into new learning environments and new educational practices, there are several examples showing that these issues are the reality in today's tertiary education contexts. For instance, international students' have different concepts of learner autonomy and independent work, in fact some of them hardly have such a concept at all. In addition, there are different attitudes towards collaboration, group work and teacher-student roles. This is seen, depending on which culture the students come from, as active class participation on the one hand and passive (non-)participation on the other. In some cultures students are not used to challenging the teacher or there is no tradition of critical thinking, and therefore at times even asking questions may be problematic; the same goes for participation in problem-solving and brainstorming activities as equal members of a group. Furthermore, the idea of giving

and receiving feedback from a peer may be new. There have also been instances when a male student ignores feedback given by a female teacher.

There are intercultural differences in understanding the idea of academic integrity. This can be seen in many cases of plagiarism although they could be partially explained by the students not having good enough skills and experience in academic writing assignments. Whatever the reason, several survey comments reported about plagiarism especially among international students.

Earlier in the report we have seen that by far most universities offer their international and home students support measures in order to help them to learn through a foreign language and familiarize them with academic practices in the host country/university.

Based on this survey, it seems that HEIs and their international programmes do cater to the needs of their international students. Erasmus students have a variety of introduction and orientation courses in order to learn about host institute academic practices; they are also introduced to survival skills on everyday issues dealing with infrastructure in the particular host country. Tutoring system seems to exist in many countries, and degree students have their own tutoring and information sessions. Still, almost 35% recognize a lack of these support measures within their institution. A large majority of respondents state that there are measures to ensure the integration of all students irrespective of their background, language and culture. These support activities are seen to be the responsibility of all stakeholders within an institution, varying from the international offices (strong support) to department heads and individual teachers. Examples of such activities could be buddy programmes, International Students' Weeks, learning needs support, networks, intercultural communication courses, consultation possibilities and information through websites.

Recent research (see e.g. Välimaa *et al.* 2013) suggests that it is not with the actual foreign language skills that teachers need support measures, such as in-service training, but rather training in multicultural teaching skills, in other words, the didactics suited to guarantee the best learning outcomes when the working language is not one's first language. The survey answers seem to reflect these findings: *Methodology and language go hand-in-hand, so the level [of language] required depends on the type of instruction. Also, if lecturers have good intercultural competences and/or didactic skills, this will compensate to some extent for gaps in language proficiency.*

Over 85% of the respondents are of the opinion that lecturers have a sufficient level of proficiency in the language(s) of instruction. At the same time, the fact that most universities do not have official guidelines to define that language level (e.g. C1 in CEFR), is commented on many times. In spite of the fairly low number of staff courses for new recruits or lecturers not familiar with the host country's educational culture as such, there are optional in-service teacher development programmes as well as courses available where some of these elements are embedded. A suggestion is made to recommend compulsory courses for lecturers teaching in multicultural settings.

Concluding comments

In order to move from HEIs offering English medium or other L2 programmes towards truly international universities, there is still systematic development work to be done requiring active and willing participation from all stakeholders, from students to teachers, from other staff members to policymakers, so that in the future surveys such as the one forming the basis for this report show that the planning and implementation of international programmes leads to high quality learning in the classroom.

References

- Airey, J. (2011) Talking about teaching in English: Swedish university lecturers' experiences of changing teaching language. *Ibérica* 22: 35-54.
- Björkman, B. (2011) Pragmatic strategies in English as an academic lingua franca: Ways of achieving communicative effectiveness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 950-964.
- Björkman, B. (2013) *English as an Academic Lingua Franca. An Investigation of Form and Communicative Effectiveness*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Coleman, J. (2006) English-medium teaching in European higher education. *Language Teaching* 39, 1-14.
- Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2013) *English-Medium Instruction at Universities*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Flowerdew, J. and Miller, L. (1995) On the notion of culture in second language lectures. *TESOL Quarterly* 29, 2: 345-74.
- Jenkins, J. (2011) Accommodating (to) ELF in the international university. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43/4, 926-936.
- Jenkins, J. (2013) *English as a Lingua Franca in the International University. The politics of academic English language policy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kuteeva, M. and Airey, J. (2013) Disciplinary differences in the use of English in higher education: reflections on recent language policy developments. *Higher Education*.
- Mauranen, A. (2012) *Exploring ELF: academic English shaped by non-native speakers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [http://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/publications/exploring-elf\(017f3f0d-381e-4333-af46-d17dff3be06a\).html](http://tuhat.halvi.helsinki.fi/portal/en/publications/exploring-elf(017f3f0d-381e-4333-af46-d17dff3be06a).html)
- Neuman, R. (2001) Disciplinary Differences and University Teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26 (2), 135-146.
- Räsänen, A. (2011) International classrooms, disciplinary cultures and communication conventions: a report on a workshop for content and language teachers. *Quality Assurance for Higher Education*, 3(2), 155-161.

Shohamy, E. (2013) A Critical Perspective on the Use of English as a Medium of Instruction at Universities. In Doiz *et al.* (eds).

Smeby, J. (1996) Disciplinary differences in university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 21 (1),69-79.

Välimaa, J., Fonteyn, K., Garam, I., van den Heuvel, E., Linza, C., Söderqvist, M., Wolff, J., Kolhinen, J. (2013). An evaluation of international degree programmes in Finland. The Finnish Education Evaluation Council FINHEEC. http://www.finheec.fi/files/1822/KKA_0213.pdf

Wilkinson, (2013). English-Medium Instruction at a Dutch University: Challenges and Pitfalls. In Doiz *et al.* (eds).