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Coping with English at Tertiary Level Instructors' Views

Over 90% of the curriculum material at the University of England is in English. The purpose of the current research project is to explore views of university instructors on how this extensive use of English course material affects their instruction and students' learning. Data was collected through electronic surveys to all instructors at the University of Iceland. The questions asked were: How do Icelandic university instructors' perceive their own proficiency in English and their ability to cope? Is there a difference between academic fields in instructors' views of the use of English? Do instructors use scaffolding devices to help their students cope; which and how? The findings indicate that most instructors in the survey rate their English proficiency as very good although they need help with their academic writing. Although the study also suggests that instructors believe that using English curriculum material causes few or no problems to their students, many of them feel they need to use a variety of scaffolding devices to support their students' learning.

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Enska á háskólastigi: Viðhorf kennara

Um 90% kennsluefnis við íslenska háskóla er skrifað á ensku. Markmið rannsóknarinnar sem hér er fjallað um var að kanna viðhorf kennara við Háskóla Íslands til notkunar námsefnis á ensku. Kannanir voru sendar til allra kennara við Háskóla Íslands og þeir spurðir: 1. Hvernig meta kennarar eigin enskukunnáttu og hæfnina til að nota ensku? 2. Er munur á viðhorfum kennara til enskunnar eftir sviðum? 3. Nota kennarar stoðir til stuðnings fyrir nemendur, þá hvaða og hvernig? Niðurstöðurnar benda til að að kennarar telji enskukunnáttu sína mjög góða eða góða en margir þurfa aðstoð við greinaskrif á ensku. Rannsóknin bendir einnig til að þrátt fyrir að kennarar telji að nemendur ráði vel við enskuna finnst mörgum að þeir þurfi að nota ýmsar aðferðir til að styðja nemendur við að tileinka sér námsefnið.

Coping with English at Tertiary Level: Instructors' views

It seems that the use of English at tertiary level in Iceland is increasing considerably. At the moment this trend is most visible in the use of course materials, although courses taught in English are increasing in number (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2009). In this paper we will discuss the use of English at the University of Iceland from the instructors' point of view. It has been claimed that "for the first time in recorded history the entire known world has a shared second language of advanced education" (Coleman, 2006, p. 6). Kachru (1985) has defined the term "expanded circle" relating to countries where English has no official status but is nevertheless widely used. We define the use of English in Iceland as belonging to Kachru's "expanded circle".

In a recent survey it was found that approximately 90% of the curriculum at University level in Iceland is in English. The percentage is even higher in the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences, and the Faculty of Medicine where over 95% of the textbooks are in English (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2009). By contrast, a brief survey of the national curriculum guidelines of the amount of English instruction of students in the Natural Science track in secondary schools (age 16–20) shows that students take only 9 credits or maximum 3 i.e. one course each semester (out of a total of 8) of English instruction. A survey of the University of Iceland's Prospectus (University of Iceland, Prospectus, 2007–2008) revealed that during the 2007–2008 academic year, English was the language of instruction in 276 courses. Out of the 301 courses in the Faculty of Engineering, 110 are taught in English.

Thus, there are strong indications that universities in Iceland are heading the same way as other Nordic higher education institutions where English is increasingly used as a language of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2001; Hellekjær, 2005; Ljösland, 2007). However, research on tertiary programs taught in foreign-languages indicates that using English constrains both teaching and instruction methods in spite of instructors and students rating the English-medium content good or very good (Hellekjær & Westergaard, 2003).

Although the majority of programs in Icelandic universities are for the most part taught in Icelandic, the University of Iceland is in a somewhat controversial situation; the programs are taught in Icelandic, students write their assignments for the most part in Icelandic yet at the same time nearly all the curriculum material is in English. Higher education in Iceland is thus in a situation where teachers and students are engaged in a constant simultaneous parallel code use, i.e., students are required to work with two languages in parallel and simultaneous situation; to negotiate meaning back and forth between a receptive language and a productive language. While substantial research is emerging on the effect on the quality of teaching and learning when programs are taught in a foreign language, in most cases English (Coleman, 2006; Hellekjær 2005; Hellekjær and Westergaard, 2003), there is hardly any literature on the effect simultaneous parallel code use may have on instruction or students' learning. The study reported here aims to address this knowledge gap and add to our knowledge of the use of English within the 'expanded circle'. The study is a part of a larger research project on the use of English in Iceland. In this paper we will explore instructors' attitude and experience of this particular use of English at the University of Iceland.

Theoretical background

Research on using English in higher education addresses mainly programs where English is used as a medium of instruction within the 'expanded circle'. While this present study focuses on instructors' views of the use of English curriculum materials when teaching in Icelandic, it is nevertheless of relevance to report findings from studies on using

English as a medium of instruction within the expanded circle as they offer important theoretical insights for this study.

The Netherlands have led the way in Europe in offering programs with English as a medium of instruction in an 'expanded circle' environment. The studies which have been carried out there in order to find out how the language affects teaching and instructional methods yield contradictory results (see e.g. Vinke, Snippe & Jochems, 1998). It seems that in spite of various language problems being reported as restricting instruction in general, and the increased workload, these disadvantages are not reflected in the overall ratings of the programs by instructors or students. The reason seems to be that both partners see that the perceived benefits, i.e., their own improved proficiency in English, outweigh the constraints and increased amount of work.

Wilkinson (2005) investigated the impact on instructional methods by teachers in three Dutch universities which used English as a medium of instruction. His findings indicate that lectures were not seen as very effective and that students needed supplementary support. However, the teachers held a slightly more positive opinion of the adequacy of their own level of English than their students did.

This raises the question of whether the pressure from above, i.e. from university authorities all over Europe to use English as the language of the academic world makes instructors disregard the constraints this has for them as teachers and for their learners. This pressure needs to be given careful consideration as using English within an extended circle may encourage surface approaches which further lower order thinking rather than deep approaches related to higher order thinking and hence higher quality learning outcomes (Trigwell, Prossner & Waterhouse, 1999). While there is significant research on the effect of teaching methods regarding deep versus surface approaches in higher education (see e.g. Entwistle, & Ramsden, 1983; Prosser, Trigwell & Taylor, 1994; Trigwell et al., 1999) research in this area with a focus on language code and language use seems to be nonexistent.

Brock-Utne (2001) has drawn our attention to this pressure and has claimed that far more prestige and financial bonus are given to academic writing in English within Norwegian universities than writings in Norwegian. This claim is supported by Ljösland (2007), who adds that in the reward system from 2004 publishing in English indirectly leads to increased funding. Instructors may thus have reason to believe that using English gives them a greater advantage in the academic world.

It should be noted in this context that in Norway, as well as in other European countries, the degree to which English is used at tertiary level differs between academic fields. It seems that in Europe, using English as the language of instruction and the language for writing Master's and Ph.D. theses is most widespread in the Natural Sciences and Engineering, although other fields are following suit (Björkman, 2008; Ljösland, 2007). Thus there seems to be a longer tradition for the use of English within these fields of study. Why this is the case is not clear but could possibly partly relate to the nature of the Natural Sciences since in these subjects figures and numbers (which are less language dependent than words) play a key role. It would therefore be interesting to investigate whether there is a difference in the attitude of instructors with regard to their academic field.

Hellekjær (2005) found in his study on the reading proficiency of Norwegian students in higher education that they have problems reading English texts and textbooks on reading lists. Another part of Hellekjær's study amongst upper-secondary EFL students indicates that students overestimate their reading proficiency with respect to what will be required

of them in higher education. Hellekjær therefore calls into question the assumption that Norwegian upper-secondary level EFL teaching effectively prepares for the reading of English texts and textbooks in higher education (ibid.) which again leads to the question of whether and how teachers react to this dilemma, an issue which this present study seeks to explore.

These findings have bearings on this present study as the pressure to publish articles and write theses in English is increasing in Iceland. This can be seen from regulations governing professional advancement (framgangsreglur) and also in guidelines for research grants. This year, 2010, twenty six Ph.D. theses have been submitted at the University of Iceland of which 24 were written in English and one was translated into English by the pertinent Faculty prior to the defense. The one thesis written in Icelandic was on Icelandic history. Looking at previous years there is a similar tendency to submit in English, with the exception of theses on Icelandic language and literature and Icelandic history (University of Iceland, n.d.)

It therefore needs to be considered whether instructors also possibly overestimate their students' reading proficiency and choose not to see the extensive use of English texts as problematic. Instructors (and probably students as well) realize that the option of offering curriculum materials in Icelandic to any extent is not and will not be viable due to the small market.

The huge amount of reading material in English at The University of Iceland also raises the question of whether the high dropout percentage among first year students may partly be due to this simultaneous parallel code use which teachers may or may not take into account in their instruction with regard to instructional methods, such as various scaffolding devices. In light of the reported research and subsequent identification of a serious knowledge gap, three research questions were developed in order to take the first steps towards gaining information on how instructors perceived the effect of the use of simultaneous parallel code:

1. How do Icelandic university instructors' perceive their own proficiency in English and their ability to cope when working with two languages?
2. Is there a difference between academic fields in their views of the use of English?
3. Do teachers use scaffolding devices to help their students cope; which and how?

Method

The study is a mixed-method which consists of detailed questionnaires to university instructors and in-depth interviews with ten teachers. In this paper we report the findings from the quantitative part of the study, which is a cross-sectional survey.

The questions pertain to the instructors' background, proficiency and use of English; what effect they felt using curriculum texts in English had on their teaching; and if and how they were scaffolding students to cope with the English texts. Finally, we wanted to explore whether there was a difference between academic fields in instructors' use of English.

The questionnaire was administered to all instructors at the University of Iceland, who in 2009 numbered 643 full-time academic faculty and 1250 part-time staff (The University Website, 2009). The participants represented all five Schools at the university. The majority of participants were between 41 and 60 years of age and approximately 48% were women. This reflects the distribution of age and gender of academic staff. The questionnaires were sent electronically to all instructors at the University of Iceland in November 2009 and a reminder was sent out two weeks later. There were a total of 230 respondents, which limits generalisation of the findings. However, the answers expose some

significant patterns on instructors' views and their coping strategies regarding the use of English curriculum materials and give indications of what measures should be taken to help teachers cope.

Results

It was considered important to investigate instructors' background and how they evaluated their own proficiency of English, as these might have direct bearings on their point of views.

Instructors' background and self-assessment

After asking about their background, we asked teachers about how they felt about their own proficiency in English (see *Table 1*).

Table 1 Teachers' perceived proficiency		
	Percent	Frequency
Very good	52.3	128
Good	20.0	80
Not good	6.7	30

As we can see from *Table 1*, 72.3% of the instructors rate their proficiency in English as either very good or good. Over half, or 57%, report having studied in an English-speaking country. In *Table 1* instructors are evaluating their general overall proficiency.

What we find noteworthy is that when the question is narrowed down to this specific but important skill, academic writing, 18.1 % of respondents rate their proficiency as not good or poor, see *Table 2*. With the increasing demand on university instructors to publish in English this may be a cause for some concern. This leads us to the following question:

Which of the following is closest to your own situation with regard to academic writing in English?

Table 2 Teachers' perceived proficiency in writing academic texts		
	Percent	Frequency
Very good	39.9	95
Good	42.0	100
Not good	18.1	43

In *Table 3* we see that only 35.7 claim they never need anyone to check their writing in English. Asking an open-ended question where they get this help, we see a variety of answers. The majority seem to have to pay English experts to read the papers over but many say they get help from research colleagues abroad or colleagues in Iceland who are either native speakers or have spent a number of years in an English-speaking country. Sometimes they ask friends and family and only seek professional help if it is "a very important paper".

Table 3 –Help needed with academic writings in English		
	Percent	Frequency
I never need help from an English expert	35.7	85
I sometimes need help from an English expert	30.2	72
I usually need to have my work checked by an English expert	17.6	42
I always need to have my worked checked by an English expert	16.4	39

To sum up it would appear that the pressure of writing in English is an additional burden on instructors.

Publishing and the Schools

We were interested to see if there were differences between the five academic Schools in their attitudes to writing in English due to different traditions. As mentioned earlier, writing in English has the longest tradition in the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences.

Table 4 Attitudes of teachers' in the different Schools with regard to writing in English					
	I never need help	I some- times need help	I usually need help	I always need help	Frequency
Total	35.7	30.3	17.6	16.4	238
School					
Social Sciences	30	38.3	18.3	13.3	60
Health Sciences	31	40.5	19	9.5	42
Humanities	41	17.9	7.7	33.3	39
Education	14.9	21.3	36.2	27.7	47
Engineering and Natural Sciences	63.3	28.6	6.1	2	9

Table 4 shows a difference between the various Schools regarding the help teachers feel they need.

Language support provided by instructors

One of the issues we wanted to explore was whether instructors felt they encountered any problems having to use two languages in their teaching. We therefore asked the following question:

How easy or difficult do you find it as an instructor having to work with two languages when teaching?

Table 5 Degree of difficulty in working with two languages		
	Percent	Frequency
Very or rather difficult	12.4	28
Rather easy	34.6	79
Easy	53.1	121

Instructors' seem, on the whole, to hold the view that there are minor or no problems using curriculum materials in English (a great majority or 87.7% find it easy or rather easy to work with two languages), however, 80% of the respondents use a variety of scaffolding devices or strategies to support their students with the language. We therefore asked about translations and other support they give to students.

Table 6 Instructors' translations for students			
	Number	Percentage	Frequency
Lists of concepts	113	38.7	59.5
Glossaries	40	13.7	21.1
Abstracts	42	14.4	22.1
Parts of texts	41	14.0	21.6
Whole articles or books	8	2.7	4.2
Other	48	16.4	25.3

Respondents could mark more than one option and therefore the numbers exceed 100%

The most common answers to an open ended question to name other common scaffolding devices were:

- I use English and Icelandic concepts simultaneously when lecturing
- I give English concepts in brackets on transparencies
- I give Icelandic translations on handouts
- I go through the English text with students
- I distribute transparencies in Icelandic at the beginning of the course
- I ask students to compile a list of concepts on the web

It thus seems that instructors expect students to have some problems if not aided in some way. This support, however, is restricted to vocabulary and it seems that there is no support given with reading comprehension as such, for example guidance with reading strategies.

Discussion

It was stated earlier in this paper that Icelandic instructors and students in higher education were in a controversial situation having to negotiate meaning through

simultaneous parallel code use. Brock-Utne (2001) reports that the situation in Norway regarding texts was similar to Iceland some decades ago, although in the years that followed, readings in Norwegian or Danish gradually took over from English. Both Brock-Utne (2001) and Ljösland (2007) argue that the old trend is clearly reappearing along with increased pressure to offer courses and programs where English is the medium of instruction as well. There is no reason to doubt that Icelandic universities are heading in a similar direction and the pressure of using English in all areas of university work is clearly mounting (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2009).

These increasing demands call for high level of proficiency in English, particularly in English for special purposes (ESP) within the different academic fields, among instructors as well as students. From our data it seems that although university instructors rate their proficiency in English as good or very good, many of them claim they need help with revising and editing their academic papers written in English. There is also a significant difference between University Schools in how instructors assess their proficiency. Why do instructors in the Schools of Engineering and Natural Sciences and Medicine seem to need the least help with writing papers in English? It is also interesting that the data indicate that women seem to need more help than men since, according to the myth, women are better than men at languages (Horowitch, 1988).

On the whole it can be argued that instructors do not see their proficiency as problematic, which corroborates with some findings from other research (Vinke et al, 1998). Neither do they see students' lack of proficiency as a major problem provided they get help with vocabulary. Jeeves (in press) has, however, found in her study on upper-secondary school students that: *Students' talk about "getting by" or "coping" in English suggests that they do not have the near-native competency of level C2 of the Council of Europe's Language Portfolio. C2 is defined as the level of competence you would need for academic studies (Europe, 2010).* Jeeves argues that students' competence seems to approximate a more basic level B1 where students are expected to be able to deal with spoken language situations when travelling. Johnson and Swain (1994) claim that students often only have general language courses in secondary schools to prepare them for demanding academic English. A similar situation has been found in Icelandic upper-secondary schools where the lower level modules are general English courses and the emphasis in the last year modules seems to be mostly on literary texts (Hafðís Ingvarsdóttir, 2004). It needs to be pointed out that the heavy emphasis on literature reading in English in upper-secondary schools may not offer the most effective preparation for university studies. Now, that Icelandic upper-secondary schools will have more independence in writing their curricula, the issue of preparing students for academic reading needs to be taken into serious consideration when writing the curriculum for English, making decisions about the content, and offering courses in reading academic English. Even though such courses were to be on offer in upper-secondary schools it does not free the university or instructors from their responsibility to provide students with language support since the vocabulary and writing traditions are discipline specific.

The difference between the Schools at the University of Iceland with regard to English is worth some attention. According to this study, the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences seems to have very few problems regarding their own use of English, i.e. writing academic papers or working with two languages, whereas the School of Education is at the other end of the spectrum and instructors there seem to face some problems in both areas. We can only speculate as to what the reason for this can be as we have found no studies reporting research in this area. The only studies related to this show that English is most widely used in the field of Science and Engineering (Björkman, 2008; Ljösland, 2007).

One possibility is that research methods and writing traditions are more standardised within the field of Science and Engineering whereas Education is by nature an interdisciplinary field. The School of Education offers studies in a number of different academic subjects with different vocabulary, a variety of research methods and hence different writing traditions. Finally, many instructors at the School of Education may see it as one role of the School to protect the Icelandic Language and hence hold other views in this matter. As no studies can either sustain or reject these speculations it would be an interesting topic to investigate. Meanwhile the reasons remain unknown.

In spite of this difference between the University Schools, instructors in all Schools support their students' coping with English texts in a variety of ways. However, this support is restricted to vocabulary and it seems that there is no provision for support with reading comprehension as such, for example guidance with reading strategies. This type of support might be more helpful in the long run than glossaries or other forms for translation (see more on reading strategies in Birna Arnbjörndóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir in another article in this journal).

The findings of this study call for further research into several areas; we need to understand better what kind of English curriculum in upper-secondary schools would serve prospective university students best. According to Hellekjær (2005), Norwegian students report that they did not have the necessary preparation for reading academic texts at the beginning of their university studies. This may also be the case with Icelandic students.

The notion of 'Communities of Practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) calls attention to the specific discourse associated with certain textual genres and professional and academic disciplines. Within this view, the goal of language instruction is to prepare students for their community of practice. At universities and other higher education institutions, students must rely on academic language skills rather than general proficiency skills in conversational English. This leads us to contemplate whether poor performance on tests and assignments at university level may be a reflection of poor English skills and not just a lack of ability to master the content of the curriculum. This may be one factor in understanding the high dropout rate at the University (University of Iceland, 2008).

This study indicates that many instructors try to accommodate students in a number of ways in order to help them cope with the vocabulary of English texts. This may, however, not be sufficient and help with strategies for understanding the deeper meaning of the text may be necessary. There are also some indications that the scaffolding instructors give is incidental, sporadic and dependent on the individual instructor in terms of whether and what strategies he/she uses rather than on students' needs. We do not know what lies behind the decision of the instructors to offer this support. Neither do we know if the fifty or so instructors in our study who report not using any strategies to help students to cope do so because they do not find it necessary as they do not get any complaints or because they do not see it as their role as university instructors.

This study calls our attention to the importance of raising instructors' awareness of the need to support students with the English texts and build up knowledge and understanding of how instructors can best support students who are struggling with simultaneous parallel code use.

Conclusion

We find that this study has raised more questions than it has answered. With the steady growth of higher education the extended use of English has gradually crept upon us without giving serious thoughts to its consequences. Do we need a writing centre for univers-

ity instructors where they can obtain assistance with editing and revising? Do university teachers need some preparatory courses in scaffolding reading comprehension? Do we have to change the emphasis in the teaching of English at upper-secondary schools or can we just assume that reading comprehension in academic texts and converting their essence simultaneously into another language can just be picked up through extensive exposure and use?

Another pivotal issue closely related to the use of English which we need to face is whether by taking for granted and asking no critical questions about this extensive use of English we are perhaps losing academic and possibly also professional domains in our own mother tongue to English? Phillipson (2003) has pointed out that the consequences may be inadequate quality of learning with a wide-ranging impact on both programs and the reputation of the universities. This present study is intended to be a wake-up call; a point of departure for further research in this field. The study has identified areas that need further investigation of to what extent learning through a foreign language has an impact on the quality of learning, and we need to know more about what impact this extra demand has on students and instructors.

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