

The role of English as a language in teaching and as a language for reflection: A case study



Summary

Throughout all three methods of the IntRef project, English language was used as communication medium by the international team members and the participants. Because for many of the participants English is not their first language, and English-medium instruction is far away from being standard at universities in Germany and Italy, specific problems arose and creative solutions had to be found to overcome the barriers of English as language used for the reflective processes or when filming teaching sessions in different countries.

This case study aims at providing insights into the benefits and barriers as well as the solutions found to overcome the challenges arising from using English as communication medium in an international project.

Keywords

International reflection on teaching, reflection on teaching in English, benefits and barriers of English as lingua franca in reflection



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Introduction

The choice of using English as language for communication within the IntRef project group and also for the three methods was quite obvious, as English is the lingua franca in scientific contexts, as a matter of course. For many academics, it is an everyday practice to write English papers and to communicate in English within their scientific community. At the same time, it is not as common for Higher Education teachers outside English-speaking countries to teach in English. In fact, not only as a consequence of the Bologna Process, many European universities have made attempts within the last decade to use English as instruction language (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Some countries, as for example Sweden, the Netherlands, or Finland offer more than half of their study programs in English language (e.g., Airey, 2011). Still, there is a gap between the Nordic European and other European countries regarding the number of English language study programs: In Germany, the proportion of English study programs is not yet 8 % (HRK Hochschulkompass, 2020), even though many universities in Germany aim at increasing the number of international students. Also, the government encourages universities to augment the number of English-medium instructed courses (GWK, 2013). The shift towards bilingualism in Italian universities is still in its infancy, too. The proportion of English study program is 14,93%, with 672 degree programs activated in 70 universities out of around 4.500 degree programs (Universitaly, 2020). However, there was a very rapid rise of degree programs entirely taught in English within the last year (with only 351 programs in 2018/2019) in Italy.

Regarding the situation at Goethe University in Frankfurt, there are 10 % (22 out of 212) of study programs using English-medium instruction (Goethe University, 2020), which is only slightly more than the German average. Each semester, about 600 courses (seminars and lectures) are announced as English-medium instructed. Though, some of these courses are eventually held in German, when the lecturer realizes that all students have fluent German language skills. Compared to other German universities, there is more diversity regarding the cultural and especially the language-related background of the students at Goethe University: For 89 % of the students German is the main communication language in everyday life, more than 30 % have a migration background (Goethe University, 2018). Regarding the number of non-native German speaking lecturers at Goethe-University, there are no statistics available.

English as the medium of instruction was formally introduced at the university of Padua back in 2009, with a few individual courses taught in English. In the last decade, the educational offer in English has grown rapidly and out of 179 active degree courses, 23 are now completely held in English; among them there are 2 bachelors and 21 master's degree courses, plus approximately 730 single course units as well as 28 PhD programs (University of Padua, 2019). This huge transformation in teaching has been accompanied by initiatives to support the lecturers teaching in English, with the University Language Centre providing diversified training pathways for these teachers (see e.g. Guarda & Helm, 2017).

Plurilingualism and the adoption of English as a medium of Instruction has been promoted to play a strategic role at the university, attracting international students and lecturers, and providing learning opportunities in line with the internationalisation of the curriculum and the development of language proficiency, thus favouring the mobility and employability of students in the international environment. In this regard, out of approximately 60.000 students, for the first and second cycle degree courses students with international background account for about 5%, PhD students 18.4%, while out of 2.300 lecturers well over 90% are Italian.

Durham has a long history of recruiting international students and academics from all over the globe and partnerships with international universities. In 2019, Durham University had a total student population of 18.707, of whom there were over 4.500 international students from 156

countries. 4.300 academic staff at Durham are of non-UK origin which makes up over 40% of academic staff (Durham University, 2020).

What the literature says

Because in Nordic countries English-medium instructed courses are common (see above), there is a considerable discourse as well as a number of studies around implications for teachers and students that have been published (for an overview, see Airey, Lauridsen, Räsänen, Salö & Schwach, 2017). Some researchers report limiting effects of English-medium instruction on teaching, as for example less expressivity, clarity, or accuracy of expressions (Lehtonen & Lönnfors, 2001; Vinke, Snippe & Jochems, 1998). It has also been found that more time for the same amount of material is required in teaching (Thøgersen & Airey, 2011). As for options in academic development, there is a claim that pedagogical training for Higher Education teachers is more important than English language training above a certain language proficiency level, as student-centered teaching is more important for good teaching than perfect language proficiency (e.g. Klaassen, 2001; Suviniitty, 2010).

But what about the teachers' emotions, thoughts, and beliefs when using English as a medium of instruction instead of their first language? An interesting study by Airey (2011) analyzed these questions based on interviews and discussions with 18 Swedish lecturers. One result was, that teachers felt nervous when teaching in English, as they lacked preparation time and training. Also, the preparation of the courses took them longer than for courses taught in their first language and they experienced their teaching in English as less detailed, less fluid, and less flexible, e.g. seldomly using examples or jokes. Similar to this, Klaassen and De Graaff (2001) found that switching the language of instruction can influence 'the lecturers' didactical skills, resulting in more difficulties to convey the lecture contents, coinciding with long monologues, a lack of rapport with students, humor and interaction. Additionally, in a study conducted at Padua university, Guarda and Helm (2017, p. 14) found that "when faced with the challenge of teaching in a language that is foreign to them, many university lecturers feel that their teaching approach needs to be more student-centered in order for the students to be able to cope with the additional complexity of learning in a language which is not their first language."

In our IntRef project, we used three reflective methods and brought together Higher Education teachers from Durham (UK), Padova (Italy), and Frankfurt (Germany). In all methods, the participating teachers discussed and reflected on their teaching in English. In two of the methods (intercultural Teaching Process Recall and intercultural Peer Observation), it was further required for the participants to have English-medium instructed courses, as they videotaped their teaching in order to view the recordings and discuss them with colleagues from one or two of the other institutions. For the methods themselves, the role of English was not in the focus of our evaluation, but during the course of the project, we encountered some obstacles related to English as our communication language as a reoccurring theme. This inspired us to the following questions for this case study:

Questions

- 1) What were the benefits of English as communication language for the IntRef methods?
- 2) What were the barriers of English as communication language for the IntRef methods?
- 3) How could barriers be overcome?

Description of the data used to answer the questions

As these questions were not in the main focus in our project, we could not answer them based on the data collected in our questionnaires for the purpose of evaluation of our methods. However, we inspected the answers to the open questions in the evaluations of the three methods for aspects related to language.

To answer the questions, we therefore conducted three interviews with each one of the IntRef team members per location.

Results

What did our participants say?

Four commentaries related to “language” in the open questions in our evaluation-sheets of the IntRef methods:

iTPR-participant, Durham: “... I would have liked to have talked to non-English speaking teachers as well”

iTPR-participant Frankfurt: “English is required”

iTPR-participant Frankfurt: “Sometimes (not often) accent in language, I did not understand everything from the clips”

iRT-participant Frankfurt: “Sometimes the language competencies can be a problem because you cannot exactly express specific concepts in the foreign language”

1) Summary of benefits

The most obvious benefit of using English as communication language for the IntRef methods is, that it simply was an inevitable prerequisite for international exchange to use a common language. As English is the European lingua franca, it was the language to choose. To use a common language allowed the participants to be exposed to different practices of teaching in other European universities, to reflect on their own practices, beliefs, and roles in teaching.

For some of the participants for whom English is not their first language, it seemed even to be an opportunity to practice reflection using advanced English skills, which motivated them additionally to join the IntRef methods. For many disciplines, English is also the main language for publications and international conferences. Most of our participants were therefore used to read and write in English language as well as to give presentations on their own research. We experienced that most coped very well with the linguistic demands during the IntRef methods. Reflecting and talking in another language for the purpose of exchanging thoughts with international Higher Education teachers further seemed to force them to think of the categories and descriptions they used in a deeper way.

2) Summary of barriers

A main barrier was that using English as communication language in our IntRef methods excluded those teachers who perceived their English as not being good enough while it privileged those participants living and working in UK and people from countries where English as a lingua franca is more commonly used. In iRT and iTPR, both methods with more than two participants interacting, having English native speakers or very proficient English speakers in the group occasionally led to a certain imbalance: Less self-confident English speakers tended to participate less compared to more proficient speakers. Further, in the reflective sessions, participants are encouraged to comment other people’s teaching. This can be a very sensitive issue and requires careful wording. Participants who are less proficient in English may not be able to use indirect statements as they would in their native language or less able to understand others, who use this strategy.

Second, as the number of teachers that actually teach English-medium courses is quite low at Goethe university in Frankfurt and also low at Padua university, it was especially difficult to recruit participants for iTPR and iPO – both methods requiring video-taping of an English-medium course.

Third, as the students in English-medium courses at Goethe university Frankfurt and university of Padua often struggle with English as the course language, it is not easy for them to actively participate.

Combined with the effect that teaching in a non-native language may impact teaching styles (cf. Airey, 2011), it can mislead impressions observers get when watching videos on teaching in iTPR and iPO: The teaching style could be perceived as teacher-centered, with only limited participation from students, or the teacher-student-relation could be misinterpreted as even cold and rigid.

3) Ways to overcome barriers

To help with the recruitment and make the participants feel more comfortable, we emphasized in the recruitment process, that despite being able to interact in English being a necessary requirement for taking part in the IntRef methods, no one expected perfect English proficiency from the participants. We attempted to question the native-speaker norms as a standard for participating and tried to focus the attention more on the intercultural and developmental aspects of the experience.

To overcome the barrier of English-medium instruction as prerequisite for participating in iTPR and iPO (because of the video-tapes of participants' courses), we came up with the following solutions: (1) Participants from Goethe University in Frankfurt could also record their German-medium instructed courses for iTPR. During iTPR, participants explained the verbal parts of the short video clips in English, so that an exchange about the teaching situation including the nonverbal and contextual parts were perfectly possible, even if the teaching had been delivered in German language. (cf. also Case study on legal/ethical aspects: These explanations helped also to make the method more inclusive.) (2) For iPO, we found some highly motivated teachers at Goethe university who were willing to teach one session in English just for the recording, even if their teaching was usually delivered in German. (3) For the potential difficulties of elaborating reflection and giving feedback in a non-mother tongue, guidance and time factors were essential: We provided the instructional materials for our participants with prompts, grids, as well as reflective questions and gave them enough time to prepare and structure their answers as written texts. (4) The facilitators of the reflective sessions (in iRT and iTPR) played an important role. They ensured that every participant had the opportunity to take part in the discussion and prevented imbalances of participation between different groups of participants.

Summary & outlook

Altogether, due to English as our teaching and communication language, it was not always easy to find participants willing to participate in our methods. However, our participants emphasized the benefits from reflecting about teaching in an international context that clearly overruled the additional effort needed.

In a nutshell: When organizing intercultural reflective sessions including not only native-speakers of English, it is important to provide clear guidance and structure for the interactions (See [Walk-Through Manuals](#)). Further, it is important to plan enough time for reflection and for the negotiation of meanings between participants, as language problems may impede the production of language and misunderstandings can occur more easily compared to interactions in a native language.

For future evaluation, it could be interesting to explore, whether academics with the same subject background can understand each other's teaching more easily, even if they do not teach in the same language.

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