The Role of Language in the International Classroom

Thematic Text

Abstract

This text is a thematic introduction to the role of language in the international classroom. It gives a brief overview of language and classroom communication and their impact on learning, drawing upon concepts from applied linguistics (Swales 1990, Airey 2011) and learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991). It then addresses the particular role of English as a *lingua academica* in higher education today in English Medium Education (EME) contexts. Using a shared language (which is not the native language of all) impacts all aspects of learning and teaching and this, in turn, needs to be addressed in the pedagogical approach. In the international classroom teachers should be aware of the impact of language on learning and learners but also consider language diversity as a potential resource for learning. The development of intercultural skills of linguistically diverse groups of learners is discussed – in connection with the *Intercultural Group Dynamics* module of the EQUiiP project.

Key words: language, classroom communication, multilingual learning, discourse communities, English Medium Education, English as a lingua Franca, active learning pedagogies.

Introduction

For many people today a discussion of the role of language in the international classroom will necessarily be a discussion related to the use of English as learning and teaching language. However, in order to approach the role of language in the international classroom it is important to step back from viewing the issue as solely related to the use of English to consider the role of communication and language in any learning and teaching context. There is not one common definition of the international classroom (for definitions see resources for the EQUiiP module *Introduction to the International Classroom*) – depending on context, it may involve learners and teachers from a variety of backgrounds, or not, learning through a shared language, often English but not always, which may or may not be the local language of the institution. The key factor here is that in such diverse groups of learners where the language of instruction is not the first language of all, extra care and attention around language and communication will be important for supporting learning and teaching. At the same time, being able to work effectively in multilingual contexts is a key 21st century skill, so it is important that international classroom learning is designed in such a way that
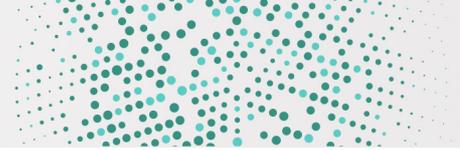
allows both learners and teachers to see linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier to learning.

In the last two decades, and in strong connection to the internationalisation process of higher education across the world, English-medium education has gained momentum in universities where well-established national and/or local languages have traditionally been the means of instruction. While this phenomenon is growing at a rapid pace, explicit support for the range of professionals engaged in this new reality from lecturers and students, to administrative staff may be scarce. Also, responsibility for such support is often spread across diverse structures and agencies within institutions, leading to a fragmentation in the provision with, on the one hand, language specialists focussed on language and, on the other, educational support staff focussed on the wider context of learning and teaching within a programme. One of the key aims of the EQUiiP project is thus to help bridge the gap between these different, complementary competencies – firstly in **clarifying the impact of language and language diversity on learning in international classrooms** and secondly in exploring **how multilingual learning contexts can be a resource** for developing intercultural competence.

The EQUiiP *Role of Language in the International Classroom* module draws upon a wide range of fields in applied linguistics and educational sciences - communicative competence, discourse communities, classroom interaction, multimodality, superdiversity, cognitive load theory, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and of course English Medium Education (EME). This introduction is thus necessarily selective and limited, it sets out first to clarify what we mean when we talk about "the role of language" in higher education classrooms before approaching the question of what we mean by "English" in higher education. Finally, the implications of multilingual, multicultural classrooms for pedagogical approaches will be discussed.

A note on terminology

Here the expression English Medium Education (EME) will be used throughout – this term is preferred because it is a more precise representation for the use of English as learning and teaching language which is appropriate to the ethos of the EQUiiP modules. This is in contrast to the familiar expression English Medium Instruction (EMI) which is widely used in research literature. The term English-Taught Programmes (ETP) will also be found in discussions of implementation at the institutional level. Other closely related concepts for EME are CLIL (Content and language integrated learning) or ICLHE (Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education) or CBI (Content Based Instruction) - these terms refer to

courses that have an explicit dual focus on both language learning and disciplinary learning. However, since language is a key component in the construction of knowledge with the "ongoing teacher-student discourse as an integral part of teaching and learning" (Smit and Dafouz 2012:4 in Dafouz 2017) such distinctions can be misleading – hence our preference for the wider and more inclusive term English Medium Education (EME).

Learning and teaching in higher education - from language to classroom communication

The traditional model of university education tends to be associated with lecturing – an academic expert giving a lecture on a disciplinary subject with students listening and taking notes. Although the modalities of university learning and teaching are today much more diverse and wide-ranging, and may vary greatly between disciplines and cultures, the stereotype of the academic expert transmitting knowledge to students persists, and lecturing is still very present in university teaching. Academic identity is thus grounded in a disciplinary expertise where language is seen as a vehicle for communicating knowledge, and at the same time, excellent communication – writing, publishing, teaching – is a fundamental trait of the teaching professor.

These are, admittedly, stereotypes, but they are important here because they highlight potentially problematic interpretations of the role of language in the international classroom. This is because the transmission model which is implicit to our idea of university teaching would tend to frame the language issue as being principally related to lecturer performance – a position of considerable anxiety for some. In this scenario, language is not viewed as playing a dynamic role in the co-construction of knowledge but as a vehicle for content. In international classroom settings this "translation" model can lead to the belief that simply providing course documents in English will be considered sufficient. Within this stereotype, the focus will be on linguistic productions – slideshows, prepared, continuous speech, written productions, written outputs - rather than on the way in which language circulates within a classroom and contributes to learning.

In the international classroom, it is important to take **a holistic approach to classroom communication** and to view the classroom as a specific type of discourse community (Swales 1990), a group that has "goals or purposes, and uses communication to achieve these goals". Framed in this way, a classroom can be seen to have a broadly agreed set of common goals, a wide variety of means of intercommunication, mechanisms for providing information and feedback, a repertoire of genres which are used for communication, some specific vocabulary
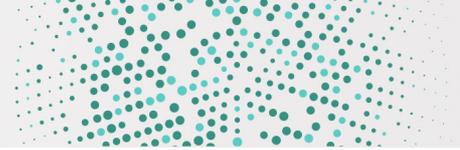
for this aim and participants who have differing levels of relevant discursive and content expertise. In much the same way as research biologists learn and participate in the discursive genres of their scientific field – *research articles, posters, conference presentations* - university teachers and their students have a shared classroom repertoire of language genres which are deployed for learning. Identifying the different language repertoires at work in any learning context - *question types, turn-taking, hypothesizing, reformulating and representing information, giving instructions, rapport-building etc.-* is thus key to being able to support linguistically diverse international classrooms. This holistic approach to the wide range of classroom discursive repertoires will allow teachers to develop strategies to help both themselves and their students communicate effectively. When we talk about the role of language in international classrooms, the focus should thus be on the range of language productions and interactions within the classroom setting rather than exclusively on individual expertise in disciplinary communication.

Classroom communication in higher education is also linked to what has been termed disciplinary literacy, i.e. "*the ability to appropriately participate in the communicative practices of a discipline*" (Airey 2011). However, it is important not to make an easy equation between, on the one hand, classroom communication for learning a discipline and, on the other, disciplinary genres. The language repertoires at work in the classroom will be determined by the pedagogical modalities and needs of the learning situation rather than the discourse genres of the discipline as they are imagined to be outside of the classroom, for example in a professional or a scientific context. The two will of course be connected but learners need to be able to participate fully in the language repertoire of the classroom in order to be able to build expertise in disciplinary literacy.

In all these respects, it is useful to consider university programmes in both their formal and informal modalities as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) with all participants being engaged in negotiation of meaning as they learn the socio-cultural practices of their community. For learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the shared norms and expectations of a given academic and cultural context thus need to made very explicit since they need to become accultured both to a local academic context and the culture of the discipline they are studying. This is one of the key ways in which EDs can support teachers, by helping them to identify such "taken for granted" aspects and making those explicit for all learners.

English medium education - English as a lingua franca – Communicative Competence

The increase in English Medium Education across Europe and the world in recent decades is a well-documented if sometimes controversial phenomenon. Positions with regard to English-taught programmes vary considerably and tend to be polarised between on the one hand a "maximalist" position where English is presented as the unique inevitable tool of international diffusion of knowledge and, on the other hand, a more nuanced language ecology position where greater attention is given to the way English coexists with national languages in university programmes and settings. Research on EME in Southern European contexts, where it has emerged more recently, has reinforced the language ecology approach to EME and highlighted how local language identities, local higher education practices, and local attitudes to multilingualism are determining factors in the way EME is implemented.

Whatever the context, for teachers and learners, it is important to consider EME in connection with **English as a lingua franca (ELF)**. ELF is defined as "an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages" (VOICE Corpus definition 2011 in Jenkins):

> *International Academic Communities communicate in largely non-native groups. What counts is clarity, effectiveness, and contextual appropriateness of communication. While high academic standards are vital, native-like English is not.*

> (Mauranen 2007, quoted in Jenkins 2010)

In international classrooms, whatever their communicative competence, all participants need to be able to adjust their communication to interact with others and learn successfully. In fact, the opportunity to acquire this intercultural skill is one of the advantages of learning in an international classroom.

Key features of lingua franca (adapted from Jenkins 2010)

- The goal of lingua franca users is to communicate effectively with others, not to attain native speaker competence in the language.
- In lingua franca contexts, differences from native English may be seen as legitimate variation where appropriate within a given disciplinary learning context.

- In lingua franca contexts, code mixing and code-switching[1] between languages are considered to be pragmatic strategies making full use of the multilingual resources available.

What are the implications of English as a lingua franca for teachers and learners in EME contexts?

First of all, understanding how lingua franca competency and disciplinary expertise fit together is enabling – it frees teachers from pressure to conform to a native-speaker-like norm and helps them to feel confident in their role as an EME teacher. The context of EME can thus be usefully framed as a *lingua academica* context – where disciplinary expertise and communication skills come together with the aim of ensuring that the learning and teaching is effective using the language resources available.

Secondly, understanding that EME is a particular type of ELF underlines the fact that having a native-speaker-like command of English does not automatically lead one to be an effective teacher of EME. For that, being able to adjust and accommodate for the diversity of ELF language profiles in the international classroom is essential. Care and attention to supporting effective communication between and among learners and teachers will be key to ensuring quality in EME.

One of the difficulties for EME is that in contrast to other ELF contexts (for example in the workplace) higher education institutions are specifically identified as places for learning and perfecting (academic) communication skills. It may thus be hard for both teachers and learners to balance this language *learner* profile with a pragmatic ELF *user* of English. And yet, as we have seen above, students in EME classrooms are learning relevant forms of disciplinary communication as part of their university training. The key issue here is that teachers need to situate this clearly for students and to make what is expected of learners explicit. This is particularly true for the formal evaluation of learning where it may be difficult to distinguish between non-standard ELF use of English and disciplinary skills. Being aware of the types of *lingua academica* that will be used and integrating this into programme design and evaluation is another key step that supports quality in EME.

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[1] Code-switching = The practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation. (Oxford English Dictionary)

Disciplinary teachers may be, understandably, a little reluctant to identify with Airey's assertion that "*all teachers are language teachers*" (Airey 2012) since their motivation is based on helping students to reach disciplinary learning outcomes – even though all of those will necessarily involve communication. However, having a clear understanding of both their own and their students' language profile are part of the essential toolkit for EME teachers[2].

## Multilingual classrooms – pedagogical implications

One of the most interesting aspects of research publications on EME is the consensus that has emerged rapidly in a wide body of international research that teaching methodology plays a determining role in the quality of the international classroom (see for example: Ball and Lindsay 2012). In particular, an active student-centred approach that compensates for and supports the extra cognitive load that using a second language may place both on learners and on teachers has been shown to be of benefit:

> "*In short, the teacher can no longer assume (for purely linguistic reasons) that students understand the content of the course.*" (Ball and Lindsay 2012).

Attention, listening stamina, and note-taking may be more fragile in multilingual contexts, and this needs to be taken into account. Interaction and student participation may be less spontaneous and will need to be managed and planned for, and thus group dynamics will take on a new importance. Pedagogical modalities that provide opportunities for reformulation - for example: peer-to-peer sharing, small group work - will ensure that information circulates among learners and provide multiple entries into learning. The language load on learners can be managed through careful attention to the timing of different steps in the class plan, the scaffolding provided for learners and access to/use of learning supports upstream and downstream of classroom time - these are but a few of the adjustments that can be made which allow for and address learning issues related to language diversity in international classrooms.

As regards communication in English, having a native-speaker-like level of English may not be as important as having a good ability to communicate and awareness of the constraints that EME may place on learners. However, this does not mean that we should not aim for teachers to have the best possible competence in communication. There are certain language aspects that are

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[2] To gain a clear understanding of language competencies, it may be helpful for both educational developers and disciplinary teachers to consult the Can-Do statements contained in the *Common European Framework of reference for languages*: https://rm.coe.int/168045bb52
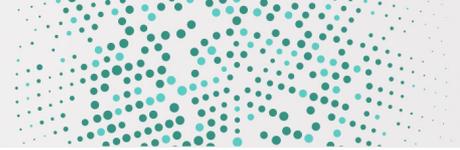
important and that can be usefully targeted so that teachers develop strategies to optimise their classroom communication. For example: working on effective pronunciation and intonation; the ability to ask and answer questions; different types of question; use of classroom English; the language used to organise learning and to guide learners through the materials; thinking carefully about the interaction between information shown on slides and provided in oral presentation; etc.

Many of these language aspects are connected to reflection on pedagogical modalities and the scaffolding provided to learners – this attention to communication is thus an extension of active learner-centred pedagogy. This leads us to two points that underpin the EQUiiP module on the role of language in the international classroom.

- Firstly, the key to successful learning in multilingual classrooms is the key to successful learning in any classroom - a clearly planned student-centred pedagogical approach with appropriate activities and tasks will be supportive of successful learning.
- Secondly, this approach to international classrooms will be valid for any multilingual, multicultural learning situation and is not specific to EME classrooms.

For this last point, we note that the rise of English Medium Education across the world and an emerging body of research on EME is contributing to our wider understanding of how students in linguistically diverse groups learn. This also throws light upon superdiversity in language use as it emerges in our globalised 21st century world. There are however many international classrooms where the impact of language diversity may be invisible – in particular, in settings where international students are absorbed into existing higher education programmes in the "home" context, which do not have a specific international "label" to them (for example: students from francophone areas of the African continent coming to study in France). Being aware of the impact of language diversity on learning is thus supportive and, it can be argued, appropriate for learning in all contexts.

The role of language in the international classroom – seeing diversity as a resource

For multilingual, multicultural groups of students it is important for teachers and learners to recognise that the multilingual nature of a group is a resource for, rather than an obstacle to, learning. Language diversity in the international classroom makes an important contribution to the development of intercultural competence, and this can be leveraged with explicit attention to intercultural

group dynamics and, in particular, to the way in which peer interaction and group work are organised – for more detailed consideration of this see the EQUiiP module *Intercultural Group Dynamics*. Similarly, comparative approaches which draw upon different ways of expressing ideas in different languages may contribute to concept development and to disciplinary learning. However, it is important to underline the importance of an inclusive approach, appropriate for each context, and with a focus on shared language and understanding. Code-switching and code mixing may be appropriate in some settings but not in others – there is no one-size-fits-all recommendation. Rather, teachers should make explicit choices in the way in which they choose to manage the language diversity of a group which are inclusive for all learners and which fit with the learning outcomes for the discipline being studied.

Conclusion

This thematic introduction to the EQUiiP module, *The Role of Language in the International Classroom* has briefly set out the way in which language impacts learning in international classrooms. It aims to show how teachers can approach multilingual groups in a way which is supportive of learning. It also highlights the potential of language diversity for learning development and intercultural skills. This text is preparation for participants in the module, and fits with the complete set of EQUiiP modules*.* Although, the module may be taught as a stand-alone module, the content is closely linked to, and in many ways dependent upon the EQUiiP module *Intercultural Group Dynamics.*

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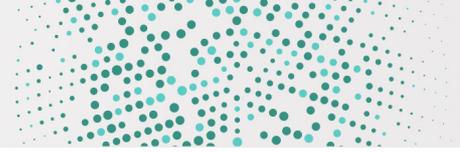
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