



Preparing Students and Lecturers for English Medium Instruction at the University of Copenhagen

Sophie Swerts Knudsen, Pete Westbrook

Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use University of Copenhagen (Denmark)

Introduction

In 2009, as part of the move towards increased internationalisation, the Department of Human Nutrition (IHE) at the Faculty of Natural and Life Sciences at the University of Copenhagen (KU) changed the language of instruction on its MSc programmes in Human Nutrition, Clinical Nutrition and Gastronomy & Health from Danish to English. This change proved in many cases to be a struggle for students and teaching staff alike, apparently leading to considerable increases in exam failure rates and a decline in the number of students applying for the MSc programmes. This was perhaps hardly surprising as it is in line with recent research that suggests that English Medium Instruction (EMI) often exacerbates the problems that may occur even in a mother tongue higher education setting (e.g. Airey & Linder, 2006; Tange, 2010; Hellekjær, 2010).

These results prompted the IHE to consider how to tackle the language problems the students evidently had. They decided to enlist the services of the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use (CIP) at the University of Copenhagen to pilot a workshop for students on how to successfully participate in English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. In 2010, the workshop took place for the first time, aimed at equipping students with tools and strategies to help them meet the challenges of EMI. Consequently, the exam results seemed to improve almost to their pre-EMI levels and the number of students applying increased.

Encouraged by these results and the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the students, the IHE decided to run the student workshop again in 2011. Besides the student workshop, a one-day workshop for teachers was added aimed at giving teachers similar tools and strategies to enable them to both help students and themselves cope more easily with the challenges of teaching through the medium of English.

In 2012, with the funds from DGU1, CIP was able to offer the workshops at the Department for Media, Cognition and Communication (IMEF) and the Faculty of Law (JURA).

For the purpose of this presentation, the focus of this paper deals with the structure and content of the student workshop as it was taught at IHE, JURA and MEF.

Student Workshop

The aim of the EMI student workshop is to equip students with tools and strategies to cope with the problems and challenges that may occur in an EMI setting, and to raise their awareness in terms of their individual strengths and weaknesses in English.

The student workshop consists of two full days. During the first day, the students attend a joint three-hour introductory lecture followed by three diagnostic tests: a 40-minute Cambridge Proficiency listening test, a one-hour IELTS² reading test, and a one-hour written test. The second day covers reading, writing and listening strategies, and provides the students with collective and individual feedback based on their test results.

In the next section, we elaborate on the activities covered on Day 1 of the workshop, and conclusions based on the student test of the past three workshops.

¹ Den Gode Uddannelse: a KU fund to support new educational initiatives.

² The International English Language Testing System



DAY 1

In the introductory lecture, the main focus is on the different strategies the students themselves can apply to successfully participate in EMI classes. These are divided into five main areas: vocabulary, reading skills, listening skills, oral skills and written skills.

Vocabulary

Most students are not aware of Averil Coxhead's Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) and they have little or no experience of how to expand their general and academic vocabulary. We therefore introduce students to the 570 word families of the Academic Wordlist, which also serves to improve all four language skills, in particular their writing skills. Moreover, the majority of the students lack the skills to consolidate new vocabulary. Therefore vocabulary-learning techniques such as the use of word cards, considered one of the most effective tools in acquiring new vocabulary (Nation, 2001), are therefore introduced to the students.

Reading skills

Based on the test results, it seems that students feel most confident with their reading skills. Most students manage the test easily, and encounter few problems answering the questions related to the different reading skills, such as skimming, scanning and reading in detail.

Listening skills

In general, the scores of the listening tests have been fairly low in all three workshops, and it is clear that most students encounter problems with some of the listening skills, in particular with making inferences and recognising implications. To cope with the challenges of academic listening, the students are encouraged to determine a purpose for what they will listen to, to predict the information they will hear, and to apply before-, during- and after-listening strategies. In addition, it is recommended that they do not dwell on incomprehensible words. Finally, they are given advice on how to take effective notes, and how to find structure in the lectures based on signposting language used by the lecturer.

Oral skills

During the workshop, most students feel reluctant to ask and answer questions in English and, especially on the first day, they keep their active participation to a minimum. Nevertheless, during both days, the students are urged to always speak in English; this is usually the point where they realize they need to improve their oral communication skills. The following advice is therefore offered: first, whenever the students study material taught in English, whether in groups or pairs, they should discuss it in English. Second, it is recommended that students practice speaking aloud parts of their material before they deliver it in a presentation or an exam situation so as to be more confident in terms of fluency and pronunciation. Then we move on to the need for structure and signposting in English in students' oral presentations and answers. Finally, the workshop emphasizes the importance of getting rid of L1-based strategies such as borrowing words from Danish, anglicising and literal translations from Danish to English.

Written skills

The last skill addressed in the workshop is written academic English, which over the course of the last three workshops has proved to be the biggest hurdle for most students. It appears they struggle with two central issues: how to actually set about writing such an assignment, and how to create structure in their writing. We therefore explain what the genre of academic writing entails as a skill; we introduce the technique of process writing and look at coherence and cohesion. Furthermore, we continue with a brief description of what a paragraph, a topic sentence and a thesis statement are. Finally, we equip the students with a list of useful tips to avoid common mistakes in written academic English. Obviously, the instruction on written English during the workshop does not suffice to turn the students into eloquent writers overnight; however, it does set them on the right road to improving their written English.

The following section deals with the content of the second day of the workshop.

DAY 2

The aim of the second day's workshop is to follow up on the students' test results, to give them an opportunity to work on some of the strategies presented in the introductory lecture, and ultimately, to



raise their awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses in English, which helps students to focus on where to best channel their energies to enhance their learning through English.

There is a general discussion on how the students experienced the different tests, and they interpret the scores of the reading and listening tests to define their own individual strengths and weaknesses in particular skills. Through pair- and group work, the students are then given the opportunity to try out some of the strategies and tools introduced to them on Day 1.

Finally, the students summarize what they have learned during the workshop, and they each draft their own action plan for how they will continue to tackle their specific linguistic challenges. At the end of the day, the students and the lecturer engage in a feedback discussion on the workshop and the students fill in a questionnaire in which they evaluate the learning outcomes.

Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from the student workshop is that for the students at least it seems to function very well in a standardized format. Through the diagnostic tests, a built-in tailor made component exists which means that the students do receive individual feedback on their strengths and weaknesses.

The teacher workshop evaluations on the other hand suggest that, while the workshop has been generally well-received, we need to ensure that we tailor each workshop as much as possible to the individual department or faculty through carrying out thorough needs analyses. As one participant pointed out in their evaluation, the workshops “should be more specialized towards specific disciplines”.

As a result, we are also interested in going into more detail about the different needs across disciplines. Based on our experience so far, this seems to be apparent in what each discipline wants to focus on in their workshops. Taking a very rough guide, we can see that the natural sciences (represented by IHE) had more language-focused needs, compared to JURA (social science) who required more emphasis on exchange of ideas and intercultural competence, through to humanities (IMEF) who seemed to prefer a rather more discussion-based workshop.

In the future, we would like to apply the combined student/teacher workshop concept to more departments and faculties across the whole of the University of Copenhagen so as to support a greater number of students and staff in dealing with the challenges of EMI, and to hone our own knowledge and competences in providing that support.

References

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