

Challenges and Possibilities for English-speaking Teachers Instructing a Group of Danish Students

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Introduction

The academic world is international and the University of Copenhagen (UCPH) is no exception with staff and students from all over the world. Teaching at UCPH is in Danish or English with the number of classes given in English increasing in the last few years (Nissen, 2019). More teaching in English is considered a necessary step in the internationalization and English-mediated instruction could help students succeed in a global workplace (Thøgersen, 2013). On the other hand, transition to English Medium Instruction (EMI) is associated with challenges for teachers as well as students and the effects of EMI is an active field of research (Nissen, 2019).

EMI research focuses mainly on programs and courses where English is the stated language of instruction and the expectation from the students is that teaching is in English. At the same time, the large number of foreign researchers at UCPH means that there will be English-speaking teachers in programs and courses normally taught in Danish. Consequently, there will be cases where students expect a Danish-speaking teacher but get instruction in English. At the Faculty of Health Sciences (SUND) Danish is the main language of instruction in Bachelor level courses while Masters level courses are often taught in English. Teaching in the Bachelor program in Medicine is, according to the program description¹, mainly in Danish but students should be prepared to read academic texts in English (see footnote

¹ <https://studier.ku.dk/bachelor/medicin/undervisning-og-opbygning/>

for original text in Danish²). A similar statement³ is found in the course description of the Stomach, Intestine and Liver (Mave, Tarm og Lever, MTL) course, which is given during in the fourth semester of the Medicine program⁴. The program is large and the MTL is an extensive course, which means that, in total, over 60 teachers teach around 280 students divided into 13 groups. Therefore, each group of students will interact with a number of different teachers with different language skills. Some groups may have only a few lectures with English-speaking teachers while for other groups English-speaking teachers may be in majority.

The MTL course is divided into three sections; Anatomy, Physiology and Biochemistry with a final test, covering all sections, which determines the students' grades. Biochemistry is the largest part and entails 24 hours of lectures, and 29 hours of teaching in smaller groups of 12 or 24 students (referred to as SAU classes). The SAU classes consist of problem-based classroom teaching and a lab exercise. I teach SAU classes in the Biochemistry section, meaning that I spend around 30 hours with the same group of 24 students. As a Swedish national with only two years of experience in the Danish academic system, I understand spoken and written Danish but I teach in English.

Aim

Before I started teaching the course, other teachers advised me in informal discussions that, in general, the students prefer Danish-speaking teachers. They will accept it if you make it very clear that you will teach in English but they like being able to express themselves in Danish. In this study, I aimed to get the students' perspectives on instruction in English and see how they matched the information I got from my colleagues. In addition, I wanted to test if I can use Danish in more ways in my teaching without fully mastering the language. The goal was to use my results to help other teachers that face a similar situation to understand the students' perspective on having an English-speaking teacher and to provide guidelines and tools

² På bacheloruddannelsen i medicin foregår undervisningen overvejende på dansk, men du skal være forberedt på at læse akademiske tekster på engelsk.

³ Undervisningssproget er dansk – men engelsktalende undervisere kan forekomme i mindre omfang.

⁴ <https://kurser.ku.dk/course/smeb12013u>

an English-speaking teacher can utilize when instructing a class of Danish students, who may expect and prefer someone else in their place.

Methods

My teaching of SAU classes in the MTL course was adapted to follow the informal advice from my colleagues and to test ways to introduce Danish by an English-speaking teacher. My oral and written communication with the students was always in English but I introduced elements of Danish into the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) in the following ways:

1. The students could choose to use Danish or English in all oral or written communication with me.
2. Problems and questions were given in Danish
3. Subject-specific terms that were different between Danish and English were translated and shown in both English and Danish

One week before the first TLA, I sent an e-mail to the whole class with information about what to expect from the Biochemistry SAU classes. The first two paragraphs were:

My name is Martin and I will be your teacher for the Biochemistry SAU classes. I apologize in advance for a long e-mail but I just wanted to give you some information prior to the first class on Tuesday so you know what to expect. First of all, I am originally from Sweden and came via the US to Denmark less than two years ago. Therefore, I am not proficient enough in Danish to write or speak, which means I will teach and write in English. However, I understand written and spoken Danish so you should feel free to speak Danish in class and write to me in Danish or English.

This e-mail contained a lot of additional information since the teaching was temporarily moved online due to the Covid-19 pandemic but the language information was at the top. In the first TLA, I repeated this information orally and on a power point slide. The general format of a TLA was that I (the teacher) gave some background and then introduced either a clinical case or a problem, the students worked with questions related to the case/problem in breakout rooms and we then discussed the answers in a teacher-led session.

After the last TLA, I interviewed three students about their experience with the TLAs and specifically the use of Danish and English. In addition to the interviews with students, I questioned the MTL course leader about his experiences with the students' views on having an English-speaking teacher and how this is reflected in written course evaluations and oral feedback from the students.

Results

Early and clear establishment of the pedagogical contract before and at the beginning of the first TLA is very important

In the interviews, I asked the students about their feelings before the first TLA and their reaction to the information they got over e-mail and at the beginning of the first class. Two of the three students said they reacted negatively when they found out they would not have a Danish-speaking teacher. However, both mentioned that their concerns vanished after the first TLA once I had explained why I teach in English and saw what it was like in practice. The third student did not consider it a problem but got the feeling that other students did. All three students agreed that the written information in the e-mail and the oral information at the beginning of the first TLA was very important to accept the situation and one student mentioned negative experiences with teachers that just "show up and start teaching in English".

Mixing Danish and English did not lead to confusion

I then asked the students what they thought about the use of language on the slides. I had questions and cases in Danish, since this was provided to all teachers and students ahead of the course but whenever I added information to a slide, I did so in English. This meant that there was a mixture of Danish and English and some slides contained information in both languages, which could potentially be confusing. However, when asked none of the students saw this as a problem or something they had given much thought. One of the students mentioned that it helped with note-taking to have some Danish on the slides even if the rest of the information was in English.

An English classroom may reduce participation but a challenging subject is a bigger obstacle

In my e-mail and in the first TLA I told the students that they should feel free to communicate with me in English or Danish, whichever they preferred. I was somewhat surprised that, despite this, the majority of the students' oral communication was in English. The comments or questions in Danish were often not specifically about the subject, for example, asking me to stop and go back to the previous slide or suggestions how to divide the groups for the practical exercise. Subject-specific comments, for example answers to questions, were almost exclusively in English. Written communication to me from the students was equally split between English and Danish and all lab exercise reports were written in Danish. All three students mentioned that it felt good to know that you could express yourself in your native language but, based on the language used in class, most students felt comfortable speaking English. In fact, one of the students who mentioned feeling comfort in the possibility to speak Danish was one of the more vocal in class and only spoke English.

Throughout the TLAs, I felt that the group was quiet and that only a few students participated in the discussion in the common Zoom room. On the other hand, I could see that the students were more vocal in breakout rooms of 4-5 students where they communicated with each other in Danish. I asked the students if they were less likely to speak in class with an English-speaking teacher and if they thought this contributed to the low participation. One of the students did not speak less and the two others were unsure. They speculated that maybe some students talk less when they have an English-speaking teacher. On the other hand, they mentioned that the level of participation in this group is quite low also in other classes. In addition, many medicine students find Biochemistry to be a difficult and complex subject, which makes them less likely to speak in class. Other students put the same points (complex subject, low oral participation also in other courses) forward in shorter one-to-one discussions I had with them during the course. This picture was further supported by an evaluation I did with the group halfway through the course. Taken together with the comments from the interviews, this suggests that language may have provided a slight barrier to oral participation but that it played a secondary role compared to the difficulty of the subject.

Translation of key terms and expressions can help the students' understanding

When there were key English term or expressions, which are different in Danish, I put the Danish translation in parenthesis. This was not something I stated in the e-mail or first TLA but when these words came up I repeated the word in both languages. When I asked the students about this, they did not seem to have noticed it. I also realized during the course that the number of occasions where words were significantly different enough to warrant a translation was lower than I initially expected. One of the students actually brought translation of words up as suggestions for something that would have helped with understanding the content. His point was that having to translate adds an additional level of difficulty to an already difficult subject. I think this suggests that providing translations could still be helpful but that it should probably be more systematic, maybe by providing a list of words. It bears mentioning that the students can choose between Danish and English Biochemistry textbooks. Students that use an English textbook may find translations to be a less important in the TLAs.

Students do not think their learning is negatively affected by having an English-speaking teacher

In the end, the most important outcome of teaching in any language is the students' learning. In this study, I had no way of evaluating the effect of English instruction on the learning outcome of the students. I still asked the students if they thought that having an English-speaking teacher affected their learning. All three students said no, and two of them with very strong emphasis. Participation in the majority of the SAU teaching is voluntary and based on discussions with the MTL course leader, the attendance of TLAs is a good indicator of how the students perceive the teaching. Throughout the course, the average attendance was around 75%, which is average for the course and suggested that having an English-speaking teacher did not have a negative effect on the turnout.

Clear and loud communication to understand an English-speaking teacher

One of the potential issues with teaching in English is that the language provides an extra barrier to learning a complex subject. All three students

said no when I asked if there was ever any problems with understanding due to the language of instruction. However, one of the students mentioned that in one TLA where I had some problems with the sound it was hard to understand. This may seem like a parenthesis and unrelated to the subject of this study; the sound would have been bad in Danish as well. However, I think this is a very important point. If you are an English-speaking teacher, it is even more important to make sure that your speech is loud and clear and that the sound is good if teaching is online. In fact, based on my discussion with the course leader, not understanding the teacher is the main complaint from the student in course evaluations. This is not necessarily related to the students understanding of English but to the way the teacher speaks or, as in my case, the quality of the sound.

Discussion

In this study, I investigated how Danish students react and adapt to having a non-Danish speaking teacher and tested tools an English-speaking teacher can use when teaching a class of Danish-speaking students. Course evaluations and my interviews with students supported the generally held view among my teaching peers that the students prefer instruction in Danish. However, none of the interviewed students felt that being taught in English affected their learning and their concerns about having an English-speaking teacher vanished after the introduction I gave at the start of the first class. This is consistent with the information I obtained from my colleagues. The most important factors in accepting a teacher is not the language but that the teacher through clear communication establishes how the teaching will be done leading to alignment in expectations between the teacher and the students. From the students' perspective, having an English-speaking teacher can be viewed as a breach of the didactical contract, as described by Brosseau (Brosseau, 1997). This contract has been implicitly formulated based on prior courses as well as the course and programs descriptions. By clearly establishing the format of the teaching, in this case the language, the contract is reformulated and can be accepted by the students.

The students reacted positively to the elements I introduced in Danish. They mentioned specific benefits, for example, note-taking being easier with Danish on the slides. However, they gave few concrete examples of how introducing elements in Danish benefited them. Even if they were given the option to speak Danish in class, they rarely did. I think this sug-

gests that the benefits of introducing Danish was likely related to the students feeling that the teacher had a strong commitment to their learning. When you, as an English-speaking teacher, make an effort to introduce elements in Danish, you show that you value the students' perspective and is dedicated to their success in the course. This shows the commitment of the teacher to follow the established didactical contract. Introduction of Danish elements shows that formulation of the contract is not a one-way process solely based on the teachers' language proficiency. Instead, it is a negotiation involving the needs of the teacher and the students, which can give a feeling of inclusion and aid the acceptance of the reformulated contract.

As relayed by the course leader, students' complaints about teaching in English frequently relate to problems with understanding the teacher. This is consistent with the findings by Jensen et al. (Jensen, 2013) who found that students' attitudes toward an English-speaking lecturer correlated with language skills. When students perceived the teacher to have poor English skills it also negatively affected their views on the teacher's general lecturing skills and vice versa. Klassen (Klaassen, 2001) reached the same conclusion in a study of Dutch engineering students. The study by Klassen also showed that clarity was the most important factor in determining success of an English-speaking teacher. The students did not have problems understanding my English but I have spent most of my academic life (>10 years) in the United States and, from a teaching perspective, English is my first language. However, this is not the case for all teachers and presents an additional obstacle for teachers who are not used to teaching in English. Jensen et al. argue that this is an issue that should be acknowledged and addressed by teachers but also at an institutional level (Jensen, 2013).

It is important not to solely describe students' concerns with English-speaking teachers as related to expectations and acceptance of instruction in English but also a genuine concern for their learning. Even if the interviewed students did not perceive instruction in English affected their learning they represent only a small subset of the MTL students. There is some support in literature for instruction in English negatively affecting students' learning. For example, a study of Swedish physics students showed that even if students did not perceive there to be any differences between lectures given in English and Swedish, they asked fewer questions and had to focus more on note-taking when instructed in English (Airey & Linder, 2006). Some of these issues could potentially be ameliorated by introduction of elements in Danish, for example, one student mentioned taking notes as one thing that was easier with Danish text on the

slides. Klaassen showed that instruction in English had a negative effect on learning outcomes (Klaassen, 2001) and Airey showed that learning of first-year physics students with a low English competency is negatively affected by instruction in English (Airey, 2010). There are few studies on this subject and the ones referenced above focused on lectures. Further studies are needed to determine if the conclusions also apply to problem-based teaching in smaller groups. Either way, with the large number of foreign academics at the University, situations similar to the one described in this study will continue to be frequent in the MTL course and elsewhere. The goal with the study was to find out how to handle the current situation in the best way and provide a hopefully valuable resource for other teachers facing similar challenges in the future.

Conclusions

The conclusions from the study can be summarized in three suggestions for English-speaking teachers instructing a group of Danish-speaking students:

1. **Make sure there is an alignment of expectations.** Your interactions with the group will differ from the course description and the interactions the students have with other teachers in the course. Be very clear that the teaching will be in English, both in writing before the first TLA and orally at the beginning of the first TLA.
2. **Show the students that you are making an effort to facilitate their learning in Danish even if you speak English.** This could be by, for example, inviting answers or providing questions in Danish. The accessibility of these tools depend on how familiar the teacher is with Danish but, for example, taking a minute translating a word from English to Danish is something that any teacher can do independent of their Danish skills.
3. **Make sure that your communication with the students is loud and clear and make an effort to articulate.** Not understanding the teacher is a frequent complaint from students and can mask the subject expertise and didactical skills of the teacher.

These points are always important to consider but as an English-speaking teacher in a course like MTL, where the students expect and hope for instruction in Danish, they are crucial.

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