

When fear takes over: A case study of ELT in Danish higher education

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Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) is a reality in Danish universities. Since the European Ministers of Education signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the amount of ELT in higher education has risen considerably. While the Bologna Declaration primarily aimed at facilitating exchange, universities quickly realized that an increased internationalization invites a wider set of candidates – both on students’ as well as on researchers’ level – resulting in higher research excellence. As a result, at the University of Copenhagen, today, 37 per cent of faculty members are non-Danish researchers and most of their teaching is in English.

A university, however, is not a language school. Students are speakers and not learners of English. The primary focus of classroom teaching should be on content and not on form (Björkman 2011). As long as language learning is not an explicitly stated intended learning outcome, the English language is considered to be a tool and not a goal in itself (Ljosland 2011).

Yet if proficiency in English language is not a learning outcome, then it should not influence students’ learning and in particular not their grades. Thus this paper examines if there is an influence of ELT on students’ learning, and if yes, how this influence is manifested. Based on Ljosland’s (2011) findings, the paper hypothesizes that there is a split between students: on the one hand, there are students who have a neutral attitude to ELT, maybe even perceive it as an unexpected learning outcome; on the other hand, there

are students who perceive ELT as a barrier to their learning outcome. In the latter group, ELT would affect students' learning considerably.

Related Research

The Nordic countries are considered to be perfect candidates for ELT, because these students possess a “near-native speaker level they have acquired in secondary education and through the wide exposure to the English language in everyday life characteristic” (Shaw et al. 2008, pp. 269) and thus ELT should have fewer or no influence on learning. Yet when asked in a Danish 5th semester bachelor class at the University of Copenhagen, only 50 per cent of the Danish students rated their level of English as fluent, while 15 per cent said they had problems speaking English, 11 per cent had problems writing English and 18 per cent did not feel comfortable with English at all (more details on the class follows below).

Research shows that ELT indeed can have an influence on learning. Tatzl (2011) provided evidence that ELT can be a barrier to participation in class and de Cillia & Schweiger (2001) showed that student's objections against English teaching are linked to a fear of not being able to cope with the content. This is supported by Hellekjær (2010) who found that students had difficulties taking notes while listening to lectures. In an English taught classroom, students adopt a more passive classroom behavior that could be a barrier to their learning outcome (Airey & Linder 2006, Tange 2011).

Ljosland (2011) reported from interviews with students at a Norwegian University about the introduction of English in the curricula and summarized the different ways student reacted to ELT:

“The students displayed mixed reactions to the language of instruction becoming English. Some were positive, explaining that the opportunity to develop their language skills in addition to the main contents of the course was an added bonus for them. Some were neutral, saying that most of the course literature and much of the instruction [...] normally would be in English anyway [...] Some of the Norwegian students, however, were negative, worrying that their post-graduate theses or their exam answers would not be as good as they could have been had they been allowed to write in their mother tongue” (Ljosland 2011, pp. 998).

In order to prevent this kind of split in attitudes between students, teachers need to know why this split occurs in the first place. Stephen Krashen's

Theory of Second Language Acquisition (1982) provides one possible answer (figure 9.1). Krashen assumes that every comprehensible input, in this case every English word spoken by a teacher or a fellow student, runs through an affective filter.

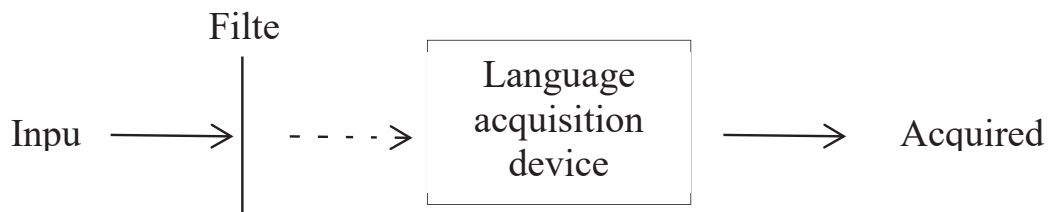


Fig. 9.1. Operation of the affective filter as proposed by Krashen (1982).

This filter functions as a screen and “is influenced by emotional variables that can prevent learning. This hypothetical filter does not impact acquisition directly but rather prevents input from reaching the language acquisition part of the brain”¹. The affective filter can be prompted by different variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, motivation or stress.

Good ELT must therefore aim at preventing the occurrence of affective filters such as anxiety, low-self-esteem or stress. The classroom should be a safe and welcoming environment, in which language mistakes do not matter and in which students can take risks. When students need language skills for course completion, teaching and learning activities need to combine content with language mediation. This can be in form of English reading material, of peer assessment or in-class group-discussions in English. Teachers can also be sympathetic in grading, meaning that “students are given credit for demonstrating understanding even if their ability to express their understanding in clear and accurate English is limited”².

¹ Bilash 2011: online source: <http://www.educ.ualberta.ca/staff/olenka.bilash/best%20of%20bilash/krashen.html>, accessed 26 July 2014

² Shoebottom 2013: online source: <http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/faq1.htm>, accessed 26 July 2014.

Methodology

This paper presents a case study of a Bachelor course on the 5th semester with English as teaching language. The course took place in the fall 2013 at the Royal School of Library and Information Science at the University of Copenhagen and the theme of the course was information behavior and interactive spaces. The school makes no special provisions for facilitating language learning through English for Specific Purposes courses. A total of 81 students (26 males and 55 females) took part in the course and submitted a written assignment, which was graded.

The course was co-taught between a Danish professor, teaching in Danish, and a German assistant professor, who taught in English. The students had to complete two assignments: a first short assignment of 2300 words, in which students had to analyze given interview material and write a short article in English showcasing their capacity of analyzing empirical data and relating it to theory. The second assignment counted more and was considerably longer. It could be submitted in Danish. Because the second Danish assignment was graded by a different teacher and was a group-work as required by the study regulations, statistically valid comparison of the two assignments was not possible. Yet, the aim of this research was not to compare the two assignments, but to uncover issues with ELT as described below in student's feedback.

25 of the 81 students had had teaching in English on the 2nd semester by a male colleague from the Netherlands. The students in his course were allowed to write the course assignment in Danish, though. All other students have never been exposed to ELT during their university studies. For all students, the assignment was the first assignment they had to write in English.

Before the start of the semester, the form of assessment and the teaching and learning activities were redesigned to be constructively aligned (Biggs & Tang 2011), especially to a context in which the exam language is English. The activities aimed at reducing students' fear of writing an assignment in English.

A few days after submission of the English assignment, a mid-term evaluation was performed in class. A second, end-of-term, evaluation was performed after students had received their grades for the English assignment. All evaluations were performed in class, on paper and used open questions. No question specifically asked about ELT and English assignment writing. Instead, the survey asked what they had liked about the teach-

ing and what should be improved. This approach avoided asking directly for comments on the ELT. All comments reported are therefore comments students felt the need to say, because it was in some way important to them.

Results

The teaching and learning activities

Teaching and learning activities were designed to help students accomplish the first English assignment – both in terms of content as well as in terms of English writing. The teaching was dialog-based and made heavy use of group-work. Students were encouraged to participate, in English, but were also allowed to ask the teacher questions in Danish (and having a fellow student help translating) and to speak Danish in the group-work. Students were repeatedly told that the classroom is a safe place to discuss content and that content matters and not language. The teacher also emphasized that the course was about the course's topic and was not a language course. Many students took an active role in the dialog-based teaching; yet it was also possible to hide and not to speak English and thus not make use of the safe training environment.

For the course, students had to read a total of 600 pages, of which most were in English. Through the intensive reading of materials in English on the course topics, students were able to learn the content specific vocabulary – at least in a passive way.

The readings included for example two articles that both made use of interview data examining the same topic (with different results). In class, students participated in a learning activity in which they had to analyze these articles and find out what sections the articles have (introduction, method, results, discussion and conclusion) and what they should write in each section. By this approach, students both learnt what their assignment should look like, and also the vocabulary used in English empirical articles. In a second activity, the students analyzed how the two different authors presented their interview materials (as direct quotes or by paraphrasing). Again, this activity aimed at showing how English articles are structured and also how the students can present interview data themselves.

Students were also invited actively to train their writing. For example, students were asked to submit a self-written abstract of an article, which was intentionally deleted from one of the course's readings. Submitted abstracts were then individually corrected by the teacher and students received

a written feedback on the correctness of the content of the abstract. They also received feedback on how they could improve their written English. All students were told that the teacher's comments are just suggestions for improvement and that they do not need to worry about their English language. Students who showed a low command of English were told the same, but were also encouraged to find a peer and read each other's assignments. All abstracts were graded for internal purposes.

Two weeks before final submission, students were invited to write one page of their assignment and bring it to class. In class, students were randomly assigned to peers and had time to read the one page and give each other feedback. During this time, the teacher quickly scanned all one-page-trials and gave individual feedback at the end of the class. At this stage, feedback was entirely on content and the teacher used the above mentioned approach of sympathetic reading and blinded out all language issues.

Relationship between grade and English language command

Despite the various efforts on the teacher's side, the difference in grades between students whose English writing skills were weak and those with high command of the language was troubling. All assignments were graded by two independent researchers (the German teacher and an external Danish censor) with the above mentioned sympathetic intent, meaning language did not matter as long as the content was understandable and the data analysis and the argumentation was convincing. Grading was performed on the Danish 7 grading scale (A = 12, B = 10, C = 7, D = 4, E = 02 Fx = 00 (failed) and F = -3 (failed)). For the purpose of this analysis, the teacher internally rated the English in all assignments using three simple categories: weak command of English, good command and excellent command.

A Kruskal-Wallis Test revealed a statistically significant difference in grades across the three different language skills groups (weak command, $n = 33$; good command, $n = 35$; excellent, $n = 13$) $p < .01$. The student group with the weakest command of English received a much lower average grade ($M = 5.03$) than students in the other two groups (good command of English $M = 8.23$ and excellent command of English $M = 10.08$).

Other influencing factors were examined, but no further statistically significant differences between groups could be found. There was no evidence of a difference between genders (Mann Whitney U Test, $p = .789$) and no evidence of a difference between students who had previously attended a class with English as teaching language and students who were first-timers in an ELT class (Mann Whitney U Test, $p = .065$). Also a regular attendance

in class did not statistically influence the average grade (Mann Whitney U Test, $p = .225$) and the submission or not-submission of an abstract as part of the homework did not result in a statistically significant difference in grades between the groups (Mann Whitney U Test $p = .109$).

Of those who had submitted an abstract as homework, 63 per cent of the students received a similar (internal) grade for the abstract than they did for the final assignment and equally 18.4 per cent received a better or a worse grade than the grade that was given internally for the abstracts. This means that the activity of writing an abstract might not significantly help to improve student's grade average, but the short one paragraph homework appears to be a good predictor of the grade of the final assignment. Teachers could make more effective use of this indicator and offer more targeted help, especially for those students who run low in scores.

While submitting the abstract homework had no significant influence on the average grade, it had a small effect on the command of English language writing. All abstracts were internally rated as weak command, good command and excellent command and from the 38 students who had submitted an abstract as homework, 71.1 per cent showed a similar command of English in the final assignment. Since the boundaries between good and excellent English were sometimes hard to define, a good command in the abstract homework and an excellent command of English in the assignment counted as similar level and vice versa. A real step from weak to good or excellent command of English language made 18.4 per cent of the students, while only 3 students (7.9 per cent) showed a lower command of English in the assignment than in the abstract.

Student feedback and evaluations In order to further explore the influence of ELT on students' learning, two written evaluations and one oral feedback session were conducted. 56 students completed the first, mid-term, evaluation a few days after submitting the assignment; 46 students completed a final, end-of-course evaluation that is after they had received the grade. The latter evaluation was in Danish; the first one was in English. The questions in the two evaluations were slightly different with the first one asking about what students liked and did not like about the teaching and the second one (the official university evaluation) what was good and not so good, what they found rewarding for their learning and what did not support their learning. A last question in the second evaluation asked students to name three things they learnt in the course. In addition to the two written evaluations, 46 students received an oral ten minutes feedback from the teacher

on their assignment. The results of these feedback sessions are presented below³.

The split between students' attitude towards ELT that Ljosland (2011) discussed was clearly visible in the present case. There was one group who had a very positive attitude towards ELT. These students described the experience as "a good challenge", "a good exercise", as exciting ("spændende og udfordrende") or even as "immensely engaging". They said that they were actually glad to have ELT, because it improved their language skills ("Jeg har været glad for undervisningen på engelsk, da det helt personligt styrkede mine sprogkundskaber"). Without explicitly being asked for a comment on the ELT, about 20 per cent of all students in the mid-term evaluation wanted to make a positive comment on the ELT. In the end-of-term evaluation, 11 per cent offered a comment how they experienced ELT as positive. The lower number might be explained by the fact that students were less positive after having received their grades or that the ELT was less dominantly in their mind after a few weeks of Danish teaching since the last evaluation.

A second group acknowledged that they had doubts about the ELT in the beginning, but that they had actually learned something. This means, without being asked if the teaching and learning activities helped them to complete the assignment, students' evaluation comments strongly suggest a constructive alignment of the two. Students commented that it was "a good learning experience", that they "got better", that it was "a good training" and that it was hard at the beginning, but got easier ("I starten var det svært /forvirrende med engelsk undervisning, men det er blevet lettere"). One student commented that "there was a challenge in the whole 'write-in-English' thing, but [he/she] was actually surprised at how smooth it went when [he/she] got used to it" and another one said that "at first it was quite difficult to remember how to write in English, but it was very giving during the process". In total, in the mid-term evaluation 16 per cent of students

³ Some students did not take part in any of the evaluations; other students attended the sessions when evaluations were carried out and did not submit an evaluation. The latter makes it difficult to judge how many students did actually take part in only one of the two evaluations. 13 students, who attended the first evaluation session, were absent in the second evaluation session and 18 students who did not take part in the first evaluation were participants in the second evaluation session. 43 students attended both sessions. It can be concluded, that while the two evaluation groups are not identical, the majority of participants participated in both evaluations.

who commented on the ELT made a statement on their learning progress. In the end-of-term evaluation, 15 per cent commented on their learning progress. In 28 per cent of all submitted end-of-term evaluation sheets, students ranked having a better command of English as one of their three most important things they have learnt in that class. Students said that their English has clearly improved (“Mine engelskkundskaber er klart forbedret”), that they are better writing in English (“bedre til engelske formulering”) and that they actually know now that they are capable of writing an assignment in English (“at jeg rent faktisk kan skrive en opgave på engelsk”).

There is a third group who displayed a more negative attitude towards ELT with no obvious signs of a positive learning progress. Students commented that they were not so confident in English “and was thus not able to participate as much in class as [they] would like to have”. Students in this group said that it was “a bit hard [and] demanded extra time”, that it was “difficult”, “quite difficult”, or even “very difficult”. This group also uses the term challenge as the first positive group did, but these students use the term in a negatively experienced way like “writing in English proved quite a challenge” or “it was a challenge [because] it makes the process much harder”. Yet level of difficulty and challenges do not explain the significant difference between good and weak command of English and the grades entirely. The assignments, which received low grades, lacked proper introductions, clear research statements; they missed the points between problem statement and analysis or conducted no data analysis at all. None of these elements are directly linked to language writing. Some of the students who received a low grade told the teacher in the oral feedback that they usually receive better grades. Additional comments from the evaluations reveal what might be the reason behind student’s failures. Students commented that they did not like that the assignment was in English, because it “made [her/him] very unsure about the assignment”. Another stated that he/she had “the fear of misunderstanding something, because of the language”. When they learned that the class was to take place in English “it came as a shock for many of [them]”. Speaking and writing in English was a large barrier for them (“var en stor barriere”; “en klar barriere”) and the English assignment was experienced as stressful (“den engelskopgave var virkelig stressende”). Around 20 per cent of the students offered a comment that falls under this group, both in the mid-term and end-of-term-evaluation.

ELT is not only considered as being difficult for the students in this last group. As a female student of the third group explained it in the oral feedback session the act of writing the assignment in English stressed her

so much that she focused entirely on language and forgot everything about how to write an academic paper. Students were afraid, that they were mentally blocked. The affective filter, postulated by Krashen, came to full force. Students mentally blocked any logical reasoning, and in doing so forgot basic academic writing. One student was even so desperate that he/she copied the whole assignment from another student and therefore committed fraud.

What can teachers do when this fear takes over? While the teaching and learning activities seemed to have worked for many students, they were not effective for the students who fall under the last category. The latter show a behavior that might be best compared to oral exam fear. If the behavior is similar, then just more ELT will not help these students, because more oral exams do not make people feel less panicked in oral exams. Yet, this is exactly what many departments suggest: offer more ELT and students will get used to it. It is also unclear if English for specific purposes courses will help to reduce the panic. The best teaching solution might be to facilitate success stories: with every success story the fear may slowly fade away. Group-assignment-writing might support this aim. Teaching must seek to provide these success stories.

Conclusion

This paper described the influence of ELT on students' grades and how this influence is manifested. Students were part of a 5th semester Bachelor course taught at the University of Copenhagen and were confronted to English assignment writing. A grading approach was applied in which the grade depended entirely on student's understanding of the material and not on the correct use of language. The results showed that language does matter – institutions should not introduce teaching and learning in English and act as if nothing has changed.

Despite the grading system there was a statistically significant difference between students whose language command was rated as weak and those who possessed a good or excellent command of English. Written evaluations and oral feedback sessions revealed that there exist three groups of students of which one had a positive attitude towards ELT from the beginning and another one that saw the ELT as a positive learning experience. The third group differed fundamentally from the first two groups and showed signs of panic, fear and stress caused by the ELT, which resulted in worse grades.

Good teaching and learning activities should offer challenges for the first group, enable the learning progress of the second group and reduce the fear of the third group students. If the fear takes over, even the best, interactive and inspiring teaching will be inept in the assignment writing phase.

All contributions to this volume can be found at:

http://www.ind.ku.dk/publikationer/up_projekter/2014-7/

The bibliography can be found at:

http://www.ind.ku.dk/publikationer/up_projekter/kapitler/2014_vol7_nr1-2_bibliography.pdf/