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Introduction to Thematic Section: Lecture Comprehension and Learning in English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education

The present online edition of *Hermes* (*Hermes* no 45) presents a thematic section on lecture comprehension and learning in English-Medium instruction in higher education. English-Medium instruction can be defined as the teaching of one or more courses, or entire programs in non-language subjects in English to learners for whom English is not their first language. The lecturers may also have English as a second or third language. Finally, the college or university may be situated in a non-English speaking area.

In Europe, the number of English-Medium courses and programs has grown rapidly. This has been motivated by the need to facilitate student and staff mobility, to promote institutional internationalization, and in some cases, the belief that the switch to English is inevitable, or even desirable. However, the transition to English often fails to consider the linguistic and pedagogical implications of teaching and learning in a second or third language. Unless carefully prepared, such a transition may over time have serious implications for study quality and learning outcomes in English-Medium courses and programs, and this is part of the motivation for the accounts included in the present thematic section.

A number of European researchers working with different aspects of teaching and learning in English-Medium courses and programs have contributed to this section. They provide various perspectives on English-Medium instruction, ranging from surveys of student lecture comprehension to the testing of staff English proficiency, an experiment to improve student-lecturer interaction, a comparison of students' ability to describe science concepts in English and their L1, a study of language use in study environment, and corpus studies of the role that pragmatic strategies play in content lectures and of intertextual strategies employed to enhance student language learning.

The first contribution, "Lecture Comprehension in English-Medium Higher Education", is a quantitative study in which **Glenn Ole Hellekjær** examines student lecture comprehension in English and the first language (L1) with a sample comprising 364 Norwegian and 47 German student respondents. While the difference between English and L1 scores was not substantial, a considerable number of students still had difficulties understanding the English-Medium lectures due to inadequate English proficiency. Furthermore, one of the most striking findings was that the difficulties were similar in English and the L1. The study argues the need to improve the quality of lecturing in English and L1 as well as the lecturers' and students' English proficiency.

"The Ability of Students to Explain Science Concepts in Two Languages" is a qualitative study where **John Airey** analyzes transcripts of student descriptions in which twenty-one physics undergraduates at two Swedish universities orally describe and explain in both Swedish and English the science concepts met in their lectures. Their competence to do that is related back to the language used to teach the concepts (English, Swedish or both languages). As does Hellekjær, the study concludes that for some students disciplinary English is indeed a problem. However, it also

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shows that the other students give similarly good (or bad) descriptions of physics concepts in both Swedish and English, regardless of the language used in the lectures.

Robert Wilkinson's contribution "Enhancing Lecture Interaction through Live SMS" reports on an experimental design to test the feasibility of allowing live SMS messaging as a means to stimulate interaction during large English-Medium lectures with more than 500 students. The students were invited to send text messages to a dedicated phone line connected to a computer, which, at chosen intervals displayed messages for everyone to see. The set-up allowed the lecturer to switch instantly from slides to the message display. It became clear that using a new technology, even a pervasive one like SMS messaging, in a lecture entails modifications to the design, delivery and content of the lecture itself, and the article presents recommendations for further implementation.

The need for lecturers to have adequate levels of English proficiency is one of the bottlenecks in English-Medium instruction. In "English Language Screening for Scientific Staff at Delft University of Technology" **Renate Klaassen** and **Madeleine Bos** report on how the Delft University of Technology (DUT), where all instruction is in English, screened (non-native English) scientific staff on their level of English proficiency. This was a large-scale operation, involving both planning and policy decisions, such as determining levels of proficiency, means of assessment, advice and training. While this massive effort was undertaken as the result of student complaints about the lecturers' language proficiency, these persisted after a brief decline. This led Klaassen to ask whether poor student English proficiency must also be taken into account to explain student dissatisfaction.

In the fourth contribution, "So You Think You Can ELF: English as a Lingua Franca as the Medium of Instruction" **Beyza Björkman** presents the findings of a study investigating the role pragmatic strategies play in English-Medium content lectures. The findings show that lecturers make less frequent use of pragmatic strategies than students, who deploy these strategies frequently in group-work projects. The use of such strategies is critical, as effectiveness appears to be achieved not necessarily with high levels of proficiency as many seem to assume but with the ability to adjust to the communicative situation by appropriate pragmatic moves. The paper argues the need to increase interactivity through the use of pragmatic strategies, increasing the awareness on target language usage through clearly written language policies and training for teachers and students.

Next, in a case study of an English-Medium MSc programs at a Norwegian university, "Teaching Through English: Monolingual Policy Meets Multilingual Practice", **Ragnhild Ljosland** examines situations where English meets other languages within the teaching and learning situation. She finds that in the surrounding environment within officially English-Medium study programs there is a certain scope for multilingual practices. Ljosland also seeks to build a more detailed understanding of what constitutes a sociolinguistic domain, and where its boundaries are.

Finally, in the seventh contribution "Intertextual Episodes in Lectures: A Classification from the Perspective of Incidental Learning from Reading", **Philip Shaw, Aileen Irvine, Hans Malmström**, and **Diane Pecorari** examine intertextual episodes in a corpus of lectures. These can be understood as references to English terms and literature during content lectures that may serve to enhance the students' incidental acquisition of English. The goal of the study is to develop categories that can be used in the further examination of such episodes in a parallel-language environment.

A common denominator in this collection of articles is that language proficiency among staff and students is only one of several variables impacting on the quality of English-Medium instruction. In other words, being able to speak English fluently does not by itself make a good lecturer, nor does advanced proficiency guarantee that students understand a poorly delivered lecture. Indeed, our research indicates that changing the language of instruction merely exacerbates difficulties that are already present, i.e. that a bad lecture in the L1 becomes even worse in English. Both the contributions to this thematic issue and increasing research evidence in the field of learning and teaching in a foreign language argue strongly for the need to work with effective lecture

behavior and other aspects of study quality no matter which language is used for instruction purposes. We therefore hope that this thematic section can contribute to increased awareness of the linguistic and pedagogical implications of English-Medium instruction as well as to further research this area.

