16 We're all language teachers now: teaching subject discipline content through the medium of a second language

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Abstract

This paper looks at the teaching of subject discipline content through the medium of a second language. It begins by looking at the globalisation of discipline content teaching through second languages, whereby increasing numbers of academics and students are either teaching or learning in universities across the globe in a language other than their mother tongue. It then looks at the ways in which questions about the language of subject content delivery are being addressed by departments of languages in UK universities. The paper argues that practice is differentiated along up to 3 main and several sub-dimensions of both comprehension and communication. The third section sets out some of the research evidence into the effectiveness of subject content teaching in the target language, in particular, for developing students' academic writing skills. It concludes with recommendations about the future direction of language and content teaching in the UK.

Keywords: globalisation, target language, content, academic writing.

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1.   The globalisation of discipline content teaching through second languages

Teaching and learning discipline content through a second language is an increasingly common feature of the global Higher Education (HE) scene. Europe, for example, has seen a significant increase in this practice as universities across the region have shifted delivery from their official national language to English. The main driver of this development is a process of global market formation in HE. Thus, as national barriers to the marketing of education services have been eroded, the study destination choices of those with the necessary qualifications and economic resources have increased. As competition from English-speaking countries has grown, universities in non-English speaking countries have been compelled to provide courses in the global lingua-franca as they struggle to both retain their best home students and provide them with the skills they need to compete in the global marketplace. This is a theme addressed by Dickson (2009), who argues that in the context of globalisation, universities are under pressure from national governments to provide the highly educated workforce equipped with the skills, including foreign language proficiency, necessary in the global knowledge economy. There are of course, also financial pressures. As Fortanet-Gómez (2013) explains, universities are being urged to cut costs and boost income by increasing recruitment of fee-paying English L1 and L2 students from around the world.

For universities in the UK, the global HE market is seen as an opportunity to increase income in a challenging funding environment in which the burden for financing HE is shifting inexorably from the state to students. Given that international students pay as much as three times more than home students for a university place in the UK, it is unsurprising that universities have sought to increase recruitment from abroad. According to the UCAS website (2015), there are currently over 400, 000 international students in the UK studying subjects in what for many of them will be a second language. The majority of these students are located in London, where in some institutions, the number of international students exceeds that of home students. For example, whilst at the London

School of Economics, 67% of its students are described as international, at the London Business School more than 7 out of 10 students are from overseas.

Given the extent of this change, it must be of some concern that little consideration appears to be given to the pedagogical implications of teaching large numbers of students through a language, English, that most have learnt as a foreign language at schools or in other contexts. As Fürstenberg and Kletzenbauer (2015) point out, in the Austrian case, many of the teachers involved are non-native English speaking content teachers with little preparation and support from their institutions. As a consequence,

> "there is often little awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning through an additional language. Not only are the challenges of this situation not addressed, the potential for this situation for integrating content and language learning is sadly not realized either" (Fürstenberg & Kletzenbauer, 2015, p. 2).

2. Content and language integrated teaching in UK departments of languages

One area of HE where the question of how best to teach content knowledge to non-native speakers has attracted attention is in the UK's many and varied departments of languages. Anecdotal evidence and personal experience suggest that the ways in which academics located within them address subject content delivery is as eclectic and diverse as the cultural and societal knowledge taught on their programmes. Regarding the language of delivery, for example, instead of in terms of an antagonistic binary (either English or the target language), academics located in these departments approach this issue in a more complex and nuanced way that takes into account various dimensions of delivery, including, but not restricted to, the language used in the classroom.

To understand the range of approaches employed, I argue that it is helpful to think in terms of three main dimensions of language comprehension and

communication: input, output and social interaction; and several sub-dimensions including teacher talk, written, audio and audio-visual textual input, essay writing, oral output and face-to-face and computer-mediated social interaction. In each case, it is useful to think of a continuum ranging from 100% exclusively in English to 100% exclusively in the target language (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Communication and comprehension continuum

Output
English 100%-----------------Input: Reading------------------------   **TL 100%**
English 100%-----------------Input: Listening------------------------   **TL 100%**

Input
English 100%-----------------Interaction: Speaking------------------   **TL 100%**
English 100%-----------------Interaction: Writing-------------------   **TL 100%**

Social Interaction
English 100%-----------------Output: Writing----------------------   **TL 100%**
English 100%-----------------Output: Speaking----------------------   **TL 100%**

In order to illustrate how academics approach these dimensions it is helpful to imagine two hypothetical teacher typologies. These are conceptually rather than empirically derived types that are used here heuristically to help investigate and make recommendations about practice. Type 1 is the academic that believes that classroom use of the target language is an impediment to the intellectual exchange between academics and students. As a consequence, his/her position is firmly to the left in every dimension. Type 2 on the other hand, is less sceptical about comprehensibility and convinced of the language learning benefits of target language delivery. His/her practice is more likely to be located to the right of the dimensions.

The reality on the ground in language departments is that a much more eclectic range of practices exists than these typologies suggest. Thus, in the case of academics delivering their cultural and/or social content through the medium

of English, it is likely that at least some, if not all, of the primary texts will be read in the original language of publication. If we take an example from my own teaching, a Latin-American Studies module delivered at Nottingham Trent University to second year post A-level students studying Spanish on a joint-honours programme, the approach might be more usefully described as hybrid. As Figure 2 suggests, whilst some of the sub-dimensions (teacher talk) were delivered almost exclusively in the target language, others were located elsewhere on their relevant continuum. In the case of reading input, for example, students were exposed to a range of texts both in English and the target language.

Figure 2.   Hybrid approach

Dimension 1

English 60%-----------------Input: Reading--------------------------- **TL 40%**

English 10%-----------------Input: Listening----------------------- **TL 90%**

Dimension 2

English 0%-----------------Interaction: Speaking----------------- **TL 100%**

English 0%-----------------Interaction: Writing-------------------- **TL 100%**

Dimension 3

English 80%-----------------Output: Writing--------------------- **TL 20%**

English 0%-----------------Output: Speaking---------------------- **TL 100%**

3.   Impact of target language delivery

What then of the language learning impact of teaching cultural and societal content through the medium of the target language? My own research suggests that there are very important benefits ensuing from this approach, particularly in the area of students' acquisition of academic writing skills. This is an issue I discuss in a paper published in the Latin-American Content and Language

Integrated Journal (Hughes, 2013). In it, I assess the development of academic writing skills amongst students taking a final year undergraduate module in Latin American Studies.

The paper demonstrates, through discourse analysis of student contributions to an online discussion forum, how through exposure to discipline content in the target language and regular opportunities to practice academic writing, students develop the capacity to communicate information in a discipline specific way using many of the lexico-grammatical features commonly found in Spanish academic writing such as discipline-related technical terms, use of the passive *se*, impersonal statements, cual clauses, and nominalisation:

> "The paper provides evidence of students' proficiency in the productive use of complex academic-prose in a teaching and learning context lacking an explicit focus on form. Like Kern (2000), it identifies the key variables in the development of students' academic writing as regular access to authentic academic discourse in the subject area and sustained opportunities to practice writing about syllabus content. It also, like Kern (2000), emphasises the importance of discussion and debate and the role new technologies can play in stimulating this. This framework is proving sufficient to ensure that the academic language (as well as the content, and critical thinking) goals of the module are being achieved" (Hughes, 2013, p. 44).

4.   Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed the issue of subject content teaching through a second language. In it, I have shown that regardless of discipline, many institutions across the globe require their academics to teach in languages (primarily English) other than their mother tongue. I have also demonstrated that despite its rapid increase, little thought has been given to the many pedagogical challenges posed by teaching discipline content through a second language to mixed cohorts of home and international students with very different levels of

proficiency in the language of instruction. If universities are to develop a more systematic approach to the needs of these teachers and learners, they could do worse than draw on expertise residing in language departments, where strategies for making input comprehensible, providing opportunities for social interaction and communicating meaning through speaking and writing are standard features of the pedagogical toolkit.

Finally, I suggest that those academics delivering cultural and social content in language departments in the UK might also give some thought to the input, output, social interaction profiles of the modules they teach. Although they might still conclude that their content is too complex for classes to be delivered in the target language, such consideration might reveal other ways to integrate exposure and use of the relevant L2 into their pedagogical mix.

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