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Effects of Teaching in English at Swedish Universities

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Johansson, I. and Jonsson, B. Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna, Sweden. Effects of Teaching in English at Swedish Universities

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ABSTRACT

English plays an increasingly important role at Swedish universities but not much is known about its effects on the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, a large research project which is collaborative and interdisciplinary, crossing language studies in humanities with education, is being planned. One of several aims of the project is to study the consequences of teaching in English on learning and study achievements. A few pre-studies have been carried out in order to develop more detailed research questions. Two of the pre-studies will be presented in this paper. In one of them, ten university teachers with Swedish as their native language have been interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of strategies, problems and consequences of teaching in English. Five of the interviewees had no experience of teaching in English and five had experience. A result was that the teachers with no experience of teaching in English seemed to anticipate and fear lower quality in their teaching. This assumption was confirmed by the teachers who had experience of teaching in English. They found it difficult to explain and talk about complicated issues in a profound way and also to use humour. Another problem concerned the big differences in international students' knowledge of English and cultural differences. In the other pre-study, observations have been conducted in lectures, seminars and group-work sessions of a course in social sciences given in English. The results of the latter study indicated that the apprehension of the contents may be inflated among students who have Swedish as their native language. Furthermore, there was empirical support that their skills in both English and their native language were influenced. A conclusion is that the pilot studies confirmed that there is a great need for further research on the effects of teaching in English at Swedish universities.

INTRODUCTION

The use of English is widespread in science today and in higher education around the world. According to Kaplan (cited in Söderlundh, 2004a, 2004b), 85 percent of all scientific publications in the world are written in English or have a summary in English. English plays an increasingly important role at Swedish universities too (Melander, 2004). Not only are scientific articles and many doctoral theses written in English, textbooks in English are often used at undergraduate level and teaching in English takes place not only for international students but sometimes also for native students. However, according to Utbildningsdepartementet (the Ministry of Education and Science), cited by Airey (2004), we know very little about the consequences of the widespread use of English in certain disciplines. There is a worry that the Swedish language will not continue to develop in some areas where English is widely used (Josephson cited in Söderlundh 2004b). Another worry concerns the quality of education and students' possibly impaired understanding and learning. The results of a few research projects that have been carried out confirm that there are reasons for concern. For example, Söderlundh (2004b) studied Swedish students' understanding of the contents of texts in English and in Swedish. The results showed that students who had read the Swedish version of the text had reached a better understanding than students who had read the text in English.

Airey (2006) investigated 22 undergraduate physics students' descriptions of their learning experiences with respect to the lectures they had attended in both English and Swedish. The lectures were videotaped and students were interviewed about their learning experiences. The

results showed that when taught in English the students asked and answered fewer questions. Furthermore, they said that they were less able to follow the lecture and take notes at the same time.

A report by Borgan (2005) described how teaching in English took place on a trial basis during the 9th semester in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Oslo in Norway. An evaluation was carried out in 2005. Both Norwegian and international students and teachers were involved in the data collection, which consisted of surveys, interviews and observations. The result showed, among other things, that the most common problems experienced by the teachers when teaching in English were that they felt less spontaneous and more restricted, that shades of meaning and some distinctive Norwegian terms might get lost and that the students asked fewer questions. But both students and teachers said that they had increased their English proficiency and 75 per cent of the teachers enjoyed teaching in English.

In an article called 'The English language and "global" teaching', Mayor and Swann (2002) discuss the relationship between languages and culture. Among other things, they point out the effects that the choice of language may have on the ways teachers and learners relate to each other. For example, students may have been raised in a culture where the teacher is revered as authority and not seen as a mentor or colleague. The learning style may also vary in different countries. Some students may have been brought up to regard written texts as facts and to believe that memorising facts is the main or only way of learning. This may contrast with a teacher's expectations of critical reading, an understanding of course ideas and how to use them. Another problem is that, for different speakers from different parts of the world, the same word may have a different meaning.

Because of the scarcity of studies on the effects of English in higher education, and inspired by examples of research findings as described above, a large research project which is collaborative and interdisciplinary, crossing language studies in humanities with education, is being planned. One of several aims of the project is to study the consequences of teaching in English on learning and study achievements. Another aim is to investigate the effects on Swedish teachers. A few pre-studies have been carried out in order to develop more detailed research questions. Two of the pre-studies will be presented in this paper.

One of the pre-studies is based on interviews with five Swedish teachers who had no experience of teaching in English and five Swedish teachers who had experience of teaching in English at a university level. In the other pre-study, observations have been conducted in lectures, seminars and group-work sessions of a course in political studies given in English.

Purpose of the pre-studies

The overall purpose of the pre-studies was to develop more detailed research questions and research designs of a larger planned interdisciplinary project on the effects of the use of English in higher education, focusing on both teachers and students and on the two languages Swedish and English.

Research questions of the pre-studies

The research questions of the two pre-studies are:

What perceptions and experiences do Swedish university teachers have of what it means to teach in English? (pre-study 1)

What images do students who have followed a course taught in English and those who have taken a course taught in Swedish have of the subject studied? (pre-Study 2)

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In This Chapter The Methods Of The Two Pre-Studies Are Described.

Pre-study 1 – Interviews with Swedish teachers
In this pre-study, ten university teachers with Swedish as their native language have been interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of strategies, problems and consequences of teaching in English. Five of the interviewees had no experience of teaching in English and five had experience.

The interviewees consisted of four women and one man who had no experience of teaching in English and three women and two men who had experience of teaching in English. Of the teachers who had no experience of teaching in English one was aged 36–40, one was aged 41–45, two were aged 46–50 and one aged 51–55. Of the five teachers who had experience of teaching in English one was aged 25–30, two were aged 31–35 and two were aged 51–55. The average age of all of the interviewees was 43 years. They had all more or less experience of teaching in Swedish at university level and represented various subjects such as education, psychology, sociology, social work and political science.

Of those interviewees who had experience of teaching in English most of them had only given a few lectures in English or been responsible for a part of a course. One of them had more experience of teaching in English in various courses and for a longer time. Three of them had lived abroad for more than a year in an English-speaking country and two of them lacked this experience. One of them had studied English at university level. None of the interviewees with no experience of teaching in English had lived abroad for any longer time. One of them had worked in a multinational company in Sweden where English was the principal language.

One of the teachers with no experience of teaching in English was a senior lecturer and PhD and the other four were doctoral students with experience of teaching in Swedish. Of the teachers with experience of teaching in English three were senior lecturers and PhDs and two were teachers with no PhD.

The interviews with teachers with no experience of teaching in English took place in 2004 and the interviews with teachers with experience of teaching in English were carried out in 2006. The interviews took place at the workplaces of the interviewees, and two interview guides that were more or less the same for the two groups of teachers were used. The interviews took about 40–50 minutes, were tape-recorded and transcribed word for word and then categorised and analysed.

Ethical criteria compiled in ‘Research ethics principles in humanistic-social scientific research’ (The Swedish Research Council, 2006) have been followed. Thus, the interviewees were informed of the aims of the studies, that participation was voluntary and could be interrupted at any time, that the material would be treated in a confidential way and that it would not be used for other purposes than research. Quotations from the interviews that might reveal the identity of an interviewee have been avoided. For the same reason no biography of any interviewee has been presented.

Pre-study 2 – Observations in lectures, seminars and group work
Non-participant open observations were conducted in two lectures, one seminar and during four occasions of group work on a course in political studies given in English in November 2004. Informal non-structured interviews have also been carried out with the students and two teachers in connection to the observations. When the course started, the students were informed about the pre-study. One group participated voluntarily in the observations. It consisted of four students who were doing group work, which had to be presented both in a paper and orally at a seminar. Three of them were female students and one was male. Their age varied between 19 and 25 years old. Almost none of the students who participated in the course had English as their native language. Among the Swedish-speaking students, who were in the minority, about 25 per cent, in relation to the total number of students, about 45, the female students dominated in number. Two of them had either lived or travelled in English-speaking countries for quite a long time. Another one had attended some courses in English at upper secondary level. The male student was used to English as he had read English literature voluntarily since his childhood. In the group there were two reasons for doing the course in English. It was considered as an additional qualification and it was apprehended as a way to get to know ‘interesting people’. Because of the number of applicants it

was easier to be admitted to the course in English than to the one in Swedish. However, this was not mentioned by the students. Data were collected by making notes during the observations.

Ethical criteria compiled in 'Research ethics principles in humanistic-social scientific research' (The Swedish Research Council, 2006) have been followed in the same way as described for pre-study 1 above.

RESULTS

Pre-study 1 – Interviews with Swedish teachers

In this section the results of interviews with five Swedish teachers without experience of teaching in English and five teachers with this experience will be presented. At the end of the section there is a summary of the results of pre-study 1.

Teaching in English

The five teachers with no experience of teaching in English were asked if they were interested in teaching in English now or in the future, and they all replied in the affirmative and said that they believed that they would certainly or probably manage to do it.

The reasons why the five experienced teachers had started to teach in English varied. Two of them said that it had started as 'a necessary evil' and two of them had started on their own initiatives. One young teacher looked upon teaching in English as a strategic choice as it might increase her future work opportunities. The teachers' first experience of teaching had been very scaring and difficult for three of them but they all stressed that they now enjoyed it, that they had learnt a lot and that it became easier later on, although to most of them it still was not very easy.

All of the interviewees wished and felt a need to improve their English. A common way of practising was by talking to English-speaking friends and colleagues. Reading English literature was another way of improving their English, and one teacher remembered how she had struggled to understand textbooks in English when studying at undergraduate level. But reading did not help very much when it came to improving their spoken English, they said. Sometimes they found it difficult to know how to pronounce a word that they had only read and never heard. Writing was considered a better way of improving their spoken English than reading.

One of the interviewees with no experience of teaching in English had stayed for a short period at a university in an English-speaking country and she said that she was surprised at her big difficulties in both understanding and making herself understood. Several interviewees pointed out that staying abroad for a period of time would be the best way to improve their ability to teach in English and to gain self-confidence. One of the teachers with no experience of teaching in English said:

'Living abroad is the most efficient way of learning the language. It does not make you perfect but it increases your self-confidence.'

This was confirmed by the teachers with experience of teaching in English as three of them had stayed abroad for a longer time, i.e. more than a year. However, one of the teachers with experience of teaching in English was of the opinion that to be really good at English it would take a stay abroad of up to five years.

The teachers were asked if they found it important for their career to be able to teach in English. A teacher with experience of teaching in English said that it may be all right for some teachers to teach in Swedish only, but teachers who are expected or want to do research, too, must be willing and able to present their results internationally and in English. Another teacher stressed that it was important to publish research in English and to present it at conferences. Thus it was important to have a good command of English.

Teachers' concerns

The teachers with no experience of teaching in English expressed some concerns when imagining teaching in English, and in this section these concerns are described and compared with the answers of the experienced teachers.

One example of concern expressed by the teachers with no experience of teaching in English was lack of support in the department or at the university, for example concerning proofreading of study instructions, handouts, overhead slides or general help with English terminology and pronunciation. Four of the five interviewees had been to international conferences and presented papers in English. Some of them had also published articles in English. In these situations they had received help with the English language by people in their families, friends or private professional proofreaders. Only one of them had experience of having a person at the university to turn to for help.

The situation was more or less the same for the interviewees with experience of teaching in English. None of them had experience of any official support from their universities. But they all agreed that there was a need of support. A man said that you are expected to manage on your own. Another man told about an experience he had had as a doctoral student. He and other doctoral students had been asked to present their research projects for 15 minutes. As it turned out there was a person in the audience who did not understand Swedish and the professor then told the doctoral students to give their presentations in English instead of in Swedish. The interviewee said:

'It was a shock to us. Half of us gave the presentation in Swedish all the same. We felt that the expectations did not match the help we had got.'

A second example of concern was the increased workload. Interviewees who had no experience of teaching in English anticipated that it would take more time to prepare lectures in English than in Swedish and those who had experience confirmed this. Three of them estimated the increased time as 50 per cent and one teacher was of the opinion that it took 100 per cent longer to teach in English. Only one woman, who had learnt some English abroad already as a child, did not think it took longer to teach in English than in Swedish.

Reasons why it could take longer to prepare teaching in English were the need to check words and pronunciation, writing down more in advance, for example expressions and phrases or the whole lecture, and sticking to the words of the textbooks. Another reason was that some of the international students' English was poor and the teachers had to be more careful when explaining matters. Often more overhead slides than usual were used in order to make it easier for the students to understand but also to make the situation safer and more secure for the teacher. It could also take longer to find relevant literature in English. One of the teachers also mentioned that she had to spend more time on general practical questions from international students as they were not familiar with the routines of the Swedish university.

A third example of concern mentioned by the teachers with no experience of teaching in English was the risk of lower teaching quality. A couple of persons were worried about what the students would think if the teachers spoke English badly and had a limited vocabulary and what the consequences would be for the quality of teaching. A woman said:

'You have to have respect for the students. You cannot expose them to anything you like.'

The interviewees with no experience of teaching in English were also afraid of not being able to answer the students' questions or to explain completely. Several people pointed out the risk of poor language. Irony, jokes and words that can have different meanings might also be difficult to handle in English. One interviewee said that there was a risk of both poorer and more boring content, and she added:

'

You risk losing some of your personality. It is more difficult to be yourself.'

The opinions of the teachers with experience of teaching in English concerning the teaching quality varied. One of them, a woman who felt comfortable with the English language, did not find the quality of her teaching in English very different from her teaching in Swedish. But the other four interviewees all agreed that there were disadvantages. Three of them talked about how difficult it was to use humour in English.

Unlike the teachers with no experience of teaching in English, the teachers who had this experience also blamed the students. The teachers had to use very simple language as many international students were not very good at English or because they were uncertain about how well the students could understand. One teacher said:

'Both I and the students have our limitations.'

On the other hand, one teacher pointed out that some international students were extraordinarily ambitious and gifted as the competition in their native countries may be extremely hard. One woman with experience of teaching in English said that it could be an advantage for international students that she as a teacher was not a native speaker in English because that meant that it was easier for the students to understand her poor English.

In spite of the risks of lower teaching quality, many of the interviewees stressed that it was good for the students to get this opportunity to improve their English. One of the interviewees with no experience of teaching in English said that even if her English was not perfect it would be a good opportunity for the students to train their English and hopefully she as a teacher and researcher had something special from her own research to present that would outweigh the shortcomings of her English. However, these teachers referred to Swedish-speaking students, and as it turned out most of the experienced teachers had not had many Swedish students in their classes. The majority of the students seemed to be international students who had another mother tongue than English. Some but fewer were native speakers of English.

Cultural differences

Several teachers with experience of teaching in English said that the English language was not the only difficulty. The backgrounds of international students may vary widely and they are sometimes used to very different norms and rules. One teacher told about students who criticised the teacher and were very mean to him quite openly in front of the other students in the classroom. Other students may have a very strong belief in authorities and are not used to discussing or asking the teacher questions as the teacher is supposed to be the one who knows best and is right. One teacher mentioned a student who had said that, where he came from, there were so many students attending the lectures that it was sometimes impossible to get into the classroom. No wonder they were not used to talking to the teacher, she remarked. This teacher also talked about punctuality and plagiarism and said:

'It takes a while before they understand our study culture. For example, some of them do not have the same view on punctuality or plagiarism as we have.'

Younger and older teachers and students

When the interviewees with no experience of teaching in English were asked if they thought that older teachers and students might have more difficulties with the English language than younger people, three of them answered that in their opinion it had nothing to do with generations. Instead, they referred to other circumstances such as socio-economic background and lack of interest in languages when they went to school.

Two interviewees said that it was a matter of age and generation because both living conditions and the approach to the English language have changed. Today young people grow up with the English language and are exposed to it in a way that older people did not experience when they were young. The approach is different because in former days the main focus was on

grammatically correct English and today it is considered important to be able to speak and to make yourself understood. Two interviewees suggested that people somewhere over 50 years of age may be among those who can feel disadvantaged.

Several of the teachers with experience of teaching in English said that it ought to be easier for younger teachers because the use of English in society in general had increased very much during the last few decades. Young people have also had more opportunities to travel. But when thinking about younger and older colleagues this assumption did not seem to be correct. One man said that he was surprised at how good older colleagues were at speaking English. He said that in society in general younger people were probably better at speaking English than older people but not in the academic world. A reason could be that older scientists have had very much training during many years going to conferences and taking part in international research projects and thus were used to communicating in English. He told about a conference he had attended where a professor aged about 60 and his daughter were going to give a presentation together but the daughter was too nervous, so the professor had to give the presentation himself and his English was excellent.

Another interviewee had a similar experience of older colleagues and said that they had no problem at all speaking English after many years of international contacts. The youngest of the interviewees with experience of teaching in English explained that older people probably had more self-confidence:

‘Older teachers have gained a self-confidence that younger people might lack, and younger people probably also make higher demands of themselves to speak English correctly.’

Another aspect of age was expressed by a young teacher who said that some international students were surprised and a bit sceptical when she was teaching because she was very young. In other countries it might be more difficult to be allowed to teach at university level when being young and not having completed a PhD.

None of the teachers had had international students who were over 50 years of age. Instead most international students seemed to be much younger than the average of Swedish students. Therefore, the teachers interviewed had no experiences of older international students. When asked if Swedish students found it difficult to read textbooks in English one of the teachers answered that he had the impression that it could be more difficult for older students, but the other interviewees had not found any differences between younger and older students. Another teacher pointed out that students’ socio-economic background and the education of their parents may be more important than age. This statement is similar to the answers described above of the teachers with no experience of teaching in English.

General attitude to English in higher education

The interviewees were also asked about their general attitude to an increased use of English in higher education and most of them answered that they had no objection. A woman who had no experience of teaching in English said:

‘We live in such a small country and we are bad at relating to international research. It is important for us to be good at English.’

However, some pointed out the risk of a mixture of Swedish and English, especially when a certain English word does not exist in Swedish. But such risks did not seem to be of very great concern to the interviewees. Instead, they stressed the importance of disseminating research results both in Swedish and in English. Furthermore, they thought that the use of English in higher education will increase in the future.

The interviews with teachers who had experience of teaching in English showed that some of them were slightly ambivalent about the use of English in higher education. Two of them said that it is good as it is now. The other three more or less wished that the use of English in higher education would increase. One woman said that, especially at higher levels, it is very important that the

students can read and use English. Therefore, they should start earlier so that they get used to it. One of the teachers with experience of teaching in English said that it is a pity that not all children get the chance to learn English when they are very young, as it is much easier to learn a foreign language then.

Another woman was of the opinion that there should be more courses with both Swedish and international students and that it would be good for all of them. They could discuss cultural issues and get a broader perspective. Most of the teachers stressed the importance of their being able to talk about their own research issues in both Swedish and English. A man said that there was a risk that this would be difficult if, for example, a person had written a PhD thesis in English. Others did not fear that the Swedish language would be impoverished. A female teacher said:

'I think you can handle it, that you can talk about your research in both languages. I don't think that you will sit down and talk to your colleagues at home in English. It is always easier to find words in your native language and it is easier to learn in your mother tongue, too.'

Another teacher said that it was important that research results are available in Swedish for non-academic people and that research is also published in Swedish scientific journals. A man talked about the risk that the American culture has an advantage over other cultures, and another teacher said that, from a global perspective, he doubted that it was good that the English language has become so dominant. There are many other important languages, too, he added.

Summary of the results of pre-study 1

Below is a summary of the results of the interview study with teachers with and without experience of teaching in English.

– Most of the teachers with no experience of teaching in English so far wished to teach in English and thought they would manage.
– Teachers with experience of teaching in English had found it difficult at the beginning but it became easer later on and they enjoyed it.
– Going abroad was considered to be the most efficient way of improving the teachers' English.
– Having difficulties with the English language could restrict the teachers' careers.
– The teachers' main concerns were lack of support at their universities, an increased workload and a lower teaching quality.
– Not only the language made it special to teach in English. Cultural differences could be stimulating as well as a problem for both teachers and students.
– Younger people were expected to be better at English, but when the teachers looked at their younger and older colleagues they came to the conclusion that their older colleagues had a good command of English.
– The teachers' general attitude to the use of English in higher education was positive.
– The teachers were of the opinion that Swedish students could benefit very much from attending lectures and seminars in English together with international students as a way of both improving their English and broadening their perspectives.

Pre-study 2 – Observations in lectures, seminars and group work

All the conclusions presented are tentative. They are to be regarded as hypotheses that could conceivably be verified. However, we do not plan to investigate these in the forthcoming study. As will be seen in this paper, they have rather resulted in questions about language as a mediator and creator of culture. That is what it is planned to investigate in one of the forthcoming studies (see below). The results are to a large extent based on the group work and are as follows.

Students' attitudes

The attitude towards English appeared to be relaxed. The students had chosen to do the course in English voluntarily. They did not even seem to question their ability to complete the course. The students also appeared to regard it as a rather uncomplicated matter to accomplish studies in English. Furthermore, they supported each other in their efforts to express themselves in English, even if that did not seem to be needed very often.

Inflation of skills

Skills in Swedish are influenced negatively. The students themselves agreed on this conclusion. They did not always know how to express themselves in Swedish. The observer also noticed that they sometimes used English words or phrases when they spoke Swedish with each other. Some students had chosen to read the literature in English even if it was available in Swedish.

Skills in English are influenced negatively. In seminars students tended to speak less and to argue in a more superficial way. The teacher found it more difficult to conduct the discussions. The observer also noticed occasions when students in seminars were talking English in Swedish, so to speak.

Studies and teaching

Students with a high degree of self-confidence as regards their knowledge of English improved their English to a greater extent than the other students. The student with the highest self-confidence in English, in the group that was observed, was the one who was the most active student, compared to the other three, in the seminar. He was also the one who, on his own initiative, brought together the different pieces in the group work into a whole, that is, the different contributions from the individual students.

The apprehension of the contents of the subject may be inflated negatively. The students told the observer that they thought in English while studying. They also sometimes found it difficult to verbalise the contents of the course in Swedish.

The teaching was of an inferior quality. This was according to the teacher who held the seminars in the same subject in Swedish and also according to the results of pre-study 1.

DISCUSSION OF THE TWO PRE-STUDIES

The results of the first pre-study showed that teachers with experience of teaching in English had experienced difficulties and all of the interviewees felt that the support they needed was not available at the universities. But in accordance with Borgan's (2005) results from her study in Norway, the teachers' English proficiencies increased when teaching in English and they enjoyed doing it. The teachers had also had both negative and positive experiences due to cultural clashes similar to examples reported by Mayor and Swann (2002), for instance different views of learning and of the relation between teacher and student. Many reasons for concern and examples of why the teaching risked being of a lower quality were presented, and to a large extent they were in accordance with the results of other studies by e.g. Söderlundh (2004b), Borgan (2005) and Airey (2006). However, teachers' poor English was not only seen as a problem but was supposed to make it easier for international students who also had another mother tongue than English to understand what the teachers were saying.

As far as we know, no other study has been done where possible differences among the teachers due to age have been investigated. There were reasons to assume that it would be easier for younger people to teach in English, as they may have been more exposed to the English language in society and have had more opportunities to travel, but no such difference was confirmed by the interviewees. On the contrary, older teachers seemed to master the English language very well and the explanation given was that during many years of international contacts they had received more training in scientific English than younger teachers. This seems to be an interesting example of the significance of learning by experience and by practising, and it also shows that there may be a need for more research on age differences.

The teachers had a positive attitude to teaching in English and to the use of English in higher education in general. In their opinion the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. A possible negative effect on the Swedish language, for example that it would not continue to develop in certain areas (Josephson cited in Söderlundh, 2004b), did not seem to worry these teachers very much. A reason for this might be that the interviewed teachers expressed experienced advantages for themselves in teaching in English.

The results of the second pre-study indicated that the students in the observed group work felt so familiar with English that they did not regard it as a foreign language. It is their second language and they were aware that they did not have a complete mastery of English. Sometimes they found themselves in situations when there was a lack of proper words. In spite of this, their attitude towards English was relaxed and they did not seem to regret their choice of doing the course in English.

The difficulty of finding proper words probably has an inhibiting effect on the students' learning. They may hesitate to participate actively in seminars and group work. The observation that the students sometimes did their own translation into English, that they invented their own words did not increase their ability to speak English.

The observation that the student with the highest self-confidence in English was the most active student led us to the question whether education in a foreign language may increase the gap between students' knowledge of the subject and of English. One may also wonder why the teacher who held the seminar that was observed in pre-study 2 was less positive than the teachers in pre-study 1. Is it a methodological matter, is it due to discipline or is it just a coincidence? In any case, data that seem contradictory stimulate us to continue researching the topic.

A general conclusion is that the two pre-studies confirmed that there is a great need for further research on the effects of teaching in English at Swedish universities. Another conclusion is that it is a complex matter. The picture of the experiences of the teachers varies, while there is empirical support for the conclusion that English decreases the ability among Swedish students to express and improve their knowledge. One difference between the two pre-studies is that in the first one the focus is on apprehension among teachers. The second pre-study deals with effects among students. One may also stress that in the first pre-study the concern was about subjectively expressed experiences of teaching in English by the teachers. In the other study the aim was to distinguish advantages and disadvantages of being educated in English as they were perceived by the researcher. In other words, the results are in no way contradictory.

According to the interviewees, both teachers and students with another mother tongue than English gained from teaching and learning in English. For the teachers it seemed to be an advantage or even a necessity for many of them to have a good command of English. For the students it was also considered very important to have a command of the English language. However, a conclusion is that the teachers seemed to be the biggest winners. For them teaching in English did not result in any significant negative effects, whereas for the students it could inflate their apprehension and learning as well as their ability to express themselves in both English and Swedish.

English in Swedish higher education has in general been regarded as an unproblematic issue. It has been introduced without any great efforts to prevent foreseeable problems and obstacles. Recently there have been contributions to a debate from scientists in humanities and in natural science. Politicians, however, have not paid any great attention to this. The width of the matter has not been sufficiently illuminated. There are dimensions of quality in higher education and its competitiveness, of the ability to participate in research activities which in a fundamental sense are international, of students' possibilities of learning. Before one forms an opinion one has to be aware of the arguments.

A common argument for teaching in English at Swedish universities is globalisation and the importance of students' capability to express academic knowledge in English. If so, the results indicate that, as regards the students, the aim does not seem to be fulfilled. Perhaps it is true that the fastest thinkers are those who think in their mother tongue. As for the teachers, they already have a good grasp of the subject. The difficulties of apprehending are apparently less. Another point is that at least some of the interviewed teachers had practised English to a larger extent than the students. This is another reason why the teachers seemed to be the winners and the students the losers.

A planned study

There is, as we mentioned in the introduction, not much research on the effects of teaching in English in higher education. Therefore, a large research interdisciplinary project is being planned. We would like to present here one of the planned studies of that research project, based above all on pre-study 2 and to some extent on pre-study 1.

The preliminary results of the observations in the pre-studies are undoubtedly of high priority. As it is not possible to accomplish a study where they all may be further investigated, we have planned to continue with one of them, i.e. the conclusion that the apprehension of the contents of the subject may be inflated negatively. The aim is to investigate whether the language may inflate the conception of the subject as a whole. We pay some attention to language as a culture bearer. To what extent is the apprehension of a subject related to the cultural origins of the language in question? We do not intend to comment on the matter of which conception is preferable. We do not even assume that there is an irrefutable image of the subject in question. The point is whether language, even in the case of higher education, may be considered as a culture bearer. There is a possibility that adults are less easily influenced, i.e. that they have created an identity which makes them more resistant to influence. This stresses the importance of researching the phenomenon in compulsory schools. Nowadays, it is becoming more and more common in Sweden that education takes place in English even at lower ages.

Theory

In phenomenography learning is related to the learner's earlier experiences in life (Marton and Booth, 1997). Learning is considered as a change in the learner's way of seeing, handling and understanding the world. Learning starts in the experienced world of the learner that has been shaped by the experiences she has gained. The object towards which the learning process is directed is ontologically independent of the subject, i.e. the learner. Learning is regarded as the process where the learner is getting closer to the object in order to know it and get in touch with it. The ontological existence of the object, how the object in fact is constituted, is called the 'what' aspect by Marton and Booth. The 'how' aspect is about how the earlier experiences function as the references, the viewpoint or the medium, from which the subject gets in touch with the object. As individual experiences are shaping and even shaped in cultural contexts, e.g. by language, it is reasonable to regard language as a source for understanding the role of culture in the shaping of the 'how' aspect. Culture is shaped in different practices and is symbolically manifested in distinct contexts. Furthermore, it has distinct socio-cultural origins (Barker and Galasinski, 2001). In other words, we cannot treat language as a re-presented system in research on learning (Anderberg and Johansson, 2006). Even language is constituted. Anderberg and Johansson also stress the role of relationships between teachers and students as a constituent element in the learning process. As Barker and Galasinski (2001) state, culture is a product of signifying practices, most notably those of language. Mayor and Swann (2002) assert that English itself encodes values that may be unfamiliar or even unacceptable to students from certain linguistic and cultural contexts. The role of culture may even be understood in terms of colonialism (Bennett, 1998). As has been seen in the presentation of pre-study 1, the cultural aspect of language is also made explicit by the interviewees.

Swedish culture is certainly to a large extent a part of western culture. Therefore it may seem dubious, as in this case, to draw the conclusion that culture causes differences in apprehended contents of disciplines. The answer to this is what is to be researched. It appears to be obvious that the way I express my image exposes how I imagine the imagined. In addition, if there are differences in apprehension of similar languages, as regards their cultural origins, we have to go on to research apprehensions of contents that are expressed in languages that are more dissimilar.

Methods and analysis

The aim of this planned study is to illuminate language, particularly English, as culture bearer and its significance for the apprehension of the contents in higher education. The research question is: Is there a difference in apprehensions between the group that has taken the course in English and the group that has taken the same course in Swedish as regards cultural aspects? All the students' mother tongue will be Swedish. They will be asked to describe in writing the contents of the course.

The prerequisite is that the person they are writing for does not have any knowledge of the subject in question. The students will be instructed that the concept formation of the discipline has to be included.

In the analysis the focus will be on differences in apprehension of the discipline between the two groups, more exactly with reference to cultural aspects. If it is found that there are differences, one must be moderate in drawing conclusions about cause and effect. The aim is rather to see in the case in question, how it is and thus how it might be in other cases, rather than why it is as it is. A crucial point is the discursive function of language. Does language inflict cultural images on students? For the eventuality of distinct images, are they questioned or resisted, in one way or another, by the students?

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