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The Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom - Take One

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The Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom
- Take One

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My point of departure: The Aarhus School of Business, Denmark

- An accredited business school in what strives to be an international university.
- A small European country with a less widely used a taught language.
- Internationalisation has entailed English Medium Instruction (EMI).
- 26 per cent of researchers are international.
- 8000 students: 900 of these are from 80 different countries.
- 400 exchange students/200+ partner uni.s
The challenges we observe:
The language issues

Our teacher is supposed to be a specialist on this topic, but we do not understand what he says! He is Chinese!
The challenges we observe: The cultural issues

Why do the students call me by my first name when I am Dr. So and so?
The challenges we observe:
The pedagogical or didactic issues

What do they mean by independent project work? I thought I was supposed to remember and repeat what the professor has said!
The International University: Mapping the research field

- English Medium Instruction
- Socio-economic context & sociological studies
- International University
- Foreign Languages & Linguistic studies
- European Multilingualism Agenda
- Cultural Aspects
- New Technologies
- Pedagogy & Didactics
- CLIL
1. Are we talking about the teachers or the students?
2. Are we talking about
   A. Native speakers of English?
   B. Non-native speakers of English?
      a. The locals?
      b. International faculty or students?
3. Is it EMI or textbooks in English (reading and comprehension <=> all four skills)?
English Medium Instruction (EMI): Questions on different dimensions (2)

4. Are we talking about proficiency, e.g. TOEFL test scores, or about attitudes?

5. And if we are talking about attitudes, is it
   A. Personal attitude or emotional reaction?
   B. A political stance or language policy point of view?

6. Do students choose
   A. An EMI program?
   B. A program in the local language with EMI modules?
7. Is the socio-economic context
   A. An English language country (immersion)?
   B. A non-English language country?

- Recent years have seen a growing body of research that adds to our understanding of these issues. However, the data sets are often relatively limited – action research & exploratory studies.
- We need local solutions to global challenges.
The cultural issues (1)
The university as a global village?

- The **global university contact zone**: Singh (2005) sees the role of universities as facilitators of intercultural communication that are to encourage cross-cultural exchanges and interaction between international and local faculty, students and staff.

- Universities cannot be transformed to global villages overnight. – Do we want them to become global villages?

- How do we avoid hegemony and at the same time insist on a given framework of reference?
The cultural issues (2)
Situational adaptability

- How do we get away from “us” as opposed to “them”?  
- How do we get away from the silos as vantage points from which we observe “the others”?  
- How do we teach and how do we learn situational adaptability? SA is based on the premise that ‘people adapt – or at least try to adapt – to the situation, to each other, and that success or failure is always the result of situated action and human intention’. Marsh 2009
Pedagogy & Didactics (1)
Who sets the agenda?

- At many universities, privilege is given to research to the detriment of pedagogy and didactics. But even if pedagogical and didactic issues are (also) prioritised, there are still challenges:
- How do we make sure that everyone (teachers and students) are able to meet the requirements within a given (national) context?
  - E.g. the independent project work?
  - Exam forms? Grading scales?
Pedagogy & Didactics (2)
Who sets the agenda?

Recognising the internationalization of student populations goes beyond simply acknowledging that there are culturally and linguistically different students in the HE classroom. It involves understanding how such diversity is constructed within a complex interweaving system of pedagogical practices, knowledge about students, their histories and possible futures.

Hirst & Brown (2008:197)
How do we navigate in the Bermuda Triangle?

- Language
- Culture
- Pedagogy
We already have some answers (1)

The students (examples)

• Most students get used to being taught in a foreign language – at least if they survive the first year.
• Teachers’ pronunciation is top of the list of challenges for many students (especially if the teacher also teaches in a foreign language).
• Students find it easier to cope in a foreign language, and perform better, if lectures and classroom activities are supported by visuals (text and pics).
• Students benefit from other support materials.
• Some of this always applies! Learning Styles!
We already have some answers (2)
The teachers (examples)

• Teachers’ claims that it is the international students who are the problem, is not necessarily well-founded. – This may reflect the teachers’ own uncertainties.
• Teachers often underestimate the importance of their own language skills (when teaching in a FL).
• Teachers often underestimate the importance of visuals and other support materials.
• Teachers who have good languages skills, find it easier to focus on the integration of students in the classroom.
We already have some answers (3)

Examples

- There are many examples of successful practice in the literature. Such examples include:
  - Collaborative learning & other student activating forms of teaching and learning.
  - Blended learning and other forms of learning involving new technologies (Generation Y; Web 2.0).
  - Focus on language skills integrated in non-language subjects (various forms of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)).
  - Focus on Learning Styles.
The challenges (1)

• We are currently progressing towards a moving target as the international university is still evolving, and universities and colleges are at different stages in this development process.
• We cannot navigate by means of anecdotal evidence only, we need more solid research.
• Mapping existing research gives us parts of the puzzle, but there are still quite a lot of pieces missing. – More research is needed.
• While we are waiting for more results, we still need to move forward in the classroom.
The challenges (2)

• How do we ensure that everyone has the sufficient and necessary language and intercultural competences & skills to navigate in the int’l university?
  • In-service training of teachers (local and international) < New in-service training programs (based on updated research).
  • Can we rely on teachers doing the job in the multilingual and multicultural classroom – or do we need to help students cope with the challenges they are bound to meet? How?
The challenges (3)

• How do we get from the mission and vision of the international university to the everyday reality of

  • Different language backgrounds?
  • Different cultural capital?
  • Different pedagogies and different didactic traditions?

• Have we underestimated the challenges?
Thank you for your attention!