

Students' Perceptions of the English of Academics (SPEAC)

Scope and aims

The Copenhagen Business School (CBS) has undergone a rapid process of internationalisation. Today, 30 % of CBS degree programmes are taught in English. In addition to this, CBS offers 188 short English-medium courses (2008 figures). The Danish government's strong commitment to internationalisation and CBS's ambition to be an internationally recognised business university at European top level will undoubtedly mean a further increase in the number of English-medium degrees in the coming years.

There are significant advantages to offering English-medium teaching and learning. CBS can attract foreign students and faculty, and can prepare Danish graduates for global employment.

But there are also serious disadvantages, one of which relates to the use of English by people whose proficiency in the language is inadequate. This issue has been debated heatedly in the university sector and in the media.

What is the problem?

At Danish universities, including CBS, English-medium courses are taught almost exclusively by non-native English-speaking lecturers who have not been given training to upgrade their competence in English, nor any screening to verify that their language skills are adequate to the task.

If teachers are having problems with speaking and/or understanding English, it may mean that both lecturers and students spend more energy on decoding the language and consequently less on content and/or learning. In addition, language problems may affect the teachers' pedagogical performance.

Students at CBS have expressed dissatisfaction with the English language of the teaching staff, and this poses a threat to CBS's ability to attract international students and to ensure high academic standards.

The SPEAC project (Students' Perceptions of the English of ACademics) investigates the use of English in the international degree programmes at the CBS. The aim is to examine the attitudes of students and teachers to the use of non-native varieties of English as a medium of instruction. A key question is whether or not students respond negatively to these varieties on a number of variables. For instance, does variation in the teachers' linguistic abilities have an impact on whether students perceive them to be competent, academically and/or pedagogically? Another important matter is to discover to what extent the lecturers themselves find that teaching in English is problematic.

Data collection was completed in November 2008. For preliminary results, see the publications below.

The results of the study will make an important contribution to the empirical basis that is needed in the debate concerning the need for in-service training or a revision of educational practice.

Why the SPEAC project is needed

In order to propose appropriate strategies for dealing with problems in English-medium teaching, it was decided to carry out a large-scale empirical study. We wished to examine the extent and nature of the students' response to classes conducted in English to enable us to determine in which areas an investment of resources and effort will yield the greatest return.

Consequently, the SPEAC project has the following research aims:

- to discover whether or not students respond negatively to non-native varieties of English.
- to establish if students' perception of teachers' linguistic abilities have an impact on whether they perceive the teachers to be competent academically and/or pedagogically.
- to discover to what extent the lecturers themselves regard teaching in English as a problem.

These issues have been addressed through a questionnaire study involving both students and teachers.

In 2010, the study will enter a second phase where the subjective responses to the questionnaires are compared to expert evaluations of the teachers' linguistic competence.

Data collection

Data collection took place during the autumn semester of 2008. In total, 33 lectures were included in the study, 22 of which were at undergraduate level and 11 were at postgraduate level. They were all part of social science programmes,

in fields such as economics, politics, management and business administration. The 33 teachers comprised 24 Danes and nine non-Danes, including two native speakers of English.

Altogether, 1,794 student questionnaires were handed in, but the actual number of individual students is smaller than this, since some students may have attended two sessions. Approximately 60% of the respondents were Danes, whilst the remaining students had a variety of other language backgrounds.

Student questionnaires

Students' attitudes towards non-native English-medium teaching were examined through questionnaires.

The teacher gave a 30- minute lecture (some included a short discussion with the students), at the end of which students filled in questionnaires about the specific session. The student questionnaire consisted of 38 items concerning

- the lecture: overall assessment, content and structure
- the teacher: competence and teaching style
- the teacher's English: different aspects

The items were phrased as statements to which the students were required to respond on a four-point Likert scale (like the item in example 1) or on a scale 1-5 (example 2).

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
I found the lecture well-structured	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

On a scale from 1 to 5, how would you rate the academic level of this lecture (please circle number):				
1	2	3	4	5
(very low)				(very high)

The attitude questions were followed by a large section on students' biodata as well as questions on exposure to English and self-assessment of English skills.

All student responses were completely anonymous, and the response rate was close to one hundred per cent. The number of responses per session varied between 20 and 183, with a mean of 55.

Teacher questionnaires

In order to establish whether the lecturers regard teaching in English as a problem, they were asked to fill in a questionnaire at the same time as the students.

The teacher questionnaire was similar to the student version but included sections on the teachers' own presentations and their perceptions of the students' motivation and interest in the specific class.

The teachers were also asked to provide information about their preparation for giving the lecture in English, e.g. checking terminology, pronunciation and grammar. In addition, a question was included on whether they thought they would have been able to perform better (on a number of parameters) in their native language.

Finally, there were questions on biodata and self-assessment of a very similar kind to the ones asked of the students.

Audio recordings

All lectures were audio recorded and have been rated by three experts using the global scale criteria of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

Members of SPEAC

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Publications

Denver, L., Jensen, C., Mees, I.M. & Werther, C. (2009) English as a medium of instruction in higher-level education. In Ken Farø, Alexandra Holsting, Niels-Erik Larsen, Jens Erik Mogensen & Thora Vinther (eds). *Sprogvidenskab i Glimt: 70 tekster om sprog i teori og praksis*, pp. 377-384.

Denver, L., Jensen, C., Mees, I.M. & Werther, C. (in press). "Ingen engelskkurser, tak!" *Sprogforum*.

Jensen, C., Denver, L., Mees, I.M. & Werther, C. (to appear). "Students' and teachers' self-assessment of English language proficiency in English-medium higher education in Denmark – a questionnaire study". In B. Preisler, A. Fabricius & I. Klitgård (eds) *Language and Learning in the International University: Practicing Diversity in the Face of English Language Uniformity*. Multilingual Matters.