PREPARING EFL¹ STUDENTS FOR UNIVERSITY EMI² PROGRAMS: THE HIDDEN CHALLENGE³

BIRNA ARNBJÖRNSDÓTTIR

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the specific challenges faced by Icelandic students trained in traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) when they enter university programs that are partially or entirely taught in English (English as a Medium of Instruction, EMI). This includes the measures taken by the Department of English to meet English majors' and non-English majors' growing demand for academic English support. The lack of academic English skills of Icelandic students is a "hidden challenge" (Ingvarsdóttir and Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2014) caused by an overconfident perception of students' English proficiency by University officials and by the students themselves. The goal of the Department of English is to bring students quickly to a level of academic English that allows them to access curriculum and instruction where ENL (English as a Native Language) norms are expected. As the identified challenges differ from those encountered in students' previous EFL dominated environment with minimal writing experience, there is a critical need to adapt teaching and learning practices to a new linguistic context where English functions as an additional language. The article concludes with a description of a new intensive instructional approach that targets identified English academic literacy needs of students entering the University of Iceland. The foundation of the new approach is that all students can acquire skills in organizing ideas and composing clear and effective text in English across all genres. The approach accomplishes this by developing awareness of English writing conventions, knowledge about which strategies to employ and when to employ them, revision skills and the persistence to rewrite until the text authentically reflects the views of the author. The idea is that through writing, students also gain an aware-

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- [1] EFL (English as a Foreign Language). The reference is to students who receive their academic English training in general EFL programs
- [2] EMI (English as Medium of Instruction)
- [3] The Hidden Challenge is a term that originates from my colleague and research partner Hafþís Ingvarsdóttir and refers to the fact that even though students and faculty struggle with English, the struggle is seen as a individual problem rather than a general challenge that should be addressed by the University as a whole.

ness of the nature of English academic texts and thereby hone their reading skills.

[1] INTRODUCTION

Every year, a growing number of Nordic students are accepted to their local universities and expected to pursue their studies largely in English. Nordic university language practices take for granted that students are prepared for studies in courses that have English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) although their previous academic training has been in their first language (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015, 2010; Hellekjær, 2009; Swerts & Westbrook, 2013; Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012). This is true for the University of Iceland where over 90% of textbooks are written for native speakers of English and courses and whole degree programs are increasingly taught in English (EMI) (Ingvarsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2014). Students who enter tertiary education in Iceland receive no systematic English language support, yet studies show that as many as 40% find using English problematic and that a third struggle significantly (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2010, 2015, Jeeves, 2013). The findings parallel those found in other Nordic countries (Hellekjær 2009, 2005; Brevik et al., 2016; Percorari et al., 2011; Percorari et al., 2012). This paper discusses the specific challenges faced by Icelandic university students in programs that are partially or entirely taught in English and the measures taken by the Department of English to meet English majors' and non-English majors' growing demand for academic English support. The issue has been called a "hidden challenge" (Ingvarsdóttir and Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2014) as by the time they enter university, graduates of Icelandic secondary schools have received rich extramural informal English input reinforced by traditional EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction⁴ (Jeeves, 2013; Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011). They have thus acquired advanced conversational English skills, mostly in receptive language leading to a high level of confidence in their English skills. The Department's challenge is to bring students quickly to a level of academic English that allows them to access curriculum and instruction where ENL (English as a Native Language) norms are expected. As the identified challenges differ from those encountered in students' previous EFL dominated environment, there is a critical need to adapt teaching and learning practices to a new linguistic context where English functions as an Additional Language (EAL). The paper concludes with a description of a new intensive instructional approach that targets identified English academic literacy needs of students entering the University of Iceland.

[4] EFL instruction that is culture and literature based and emphasises the four skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

[2] THE FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

Previous studies have shown that Icelandic students come to university confident in their English skills, which are mostly receptive and mostly developed extramurally through their recreational activities (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015; Jeeves, 2013). However, formal registers of language used in writing and in professional and educational discourse are problematic for most students. Furthermore, many students seem to be unaware of the limitations of their English skills. This is an issue well known to educators in second language contexts where fluency in colloquial speech masks the lack of proficiency in formal language usually attained through literacy and formal education (Cummins, 1979, 2008; Harklau et al., 1999; Hyland, 2009). Two differences between this new situation and general ESL or EFL contexts are that 1) unlike many ESL students, most students who use EAL have literacy skills in their L1, and 2) officials seem largely as unaware of the challenges related to studying in a second language as the students themselves. The question remains how instruction in Nordic universities can adjust to the needs of seemingly highly English proficient students in the new linguistic context where English serves an Additional Language (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015).

The hesitancy of Icelandic university officials to acknowledge and respond to students' language challenges and provide support may have at least three causes: first there is a dissonance between public policy and linguistic reality that may hamper action, second there is a long tradition of using foreign language texts without specific support, and finally there seems to be a general overconfidence in Icelanders' English skills.

To take the first of these possible causes, there is an identified dissonance between official language policy and the linguistic reality of the learning environment. Icelandic is the official language of Iceland including at all education levels (Ingvarsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2014; Kristinsson & Bernharðsson, 2014), while the reality is that over 90% of curriculum materials at tertiary level is in English, increasingly courses are taught in English and final theses are written in English. This means that Icelandic university students are required to read and write academic English at near native levels, functions for which their previous EFL training in secondary school has been shown to be inadequate (Jeeves, 2013; Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvarsdóttir, 2010).

Another possible cause of inaction may simply be tradition. Icelandic students have always had to access information through texts written in foreign languages. Today, however, instruction is also increasingly in English and more demands are being placed on formal reading and writing skills. Furthermore, while previously only 10% of the top students went on to higher education, in

2014 the number was closer to 95% (www.hagstofa.is). Students who pursue higher education are thus more heterogeneous linguistically and educationally than when University degrees were only for the chosen ten percent (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2012).

Finally, Icelanders overestimate what functions their English skills can serve. A survey that included a representative sample of 750 randomly chosen Icelanders found that 86% of respondents hear English daily and more than half listen to English for up to 4 hours a day. Only a quarter of respondents in the same survey reported speaking or writing English on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, rich English exposure and good comprehension of texted, highly contextualized language of TV and movies leads to high confidence in English proficiency (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011). Another study found that 75% of a representative sample of almost 900 Icelanders say that their English comprehension is good or very good, while 65% say that their spoken English is good or very good and 56% report their writing as very good. It is not clear on what evidence these claims are based as only a quarter of the respondents report ever writing or speaking English as mentioned above. The study also found that the younger the respondent is, the more likely he or she is to report good or very good English skills (Gunnarsson & Jónsdóttir, 2014; Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2010; Jeeves, 2013). These findings reveal that English is pervasive at all levels of society, and that there is a clear and overarching predominance of receptive English exposure over productive English use among Icelanders, which in turn leads to overconfidence as to what actual functions English can be employed for (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011).

[3] USING ACADEMIC ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY

Comprehension of conversational English is not sufficient for academic study, and over the years it became more apparent that with every new and growing group of first year students in English, students' informal English skills were getting better while academic skills lagged behind. This observation, along with a proliferation of EMI programs at the University, prompted a large scale mixed method study at the University of Iceland about what effect, if any, students thought using English had on their studies and workload. The study comprised surveys and in-depth interviews. Participants included almost 1,100 of the approximately 14,000 students enrolled at the University from all five schools. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a further ten students from different disciplines, five men and five women. The findings of the study were divided into five themes: English proficiency, preparation, workload, strategies used and translanguaging (For a more detailed discussion, please see Arnbjörnsdót-

tir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015, 2010).

Of the university students surveyed, 65% believed their English proficiency to be good or very good, while a little over half thought their writing was good or very good, and 76% of the almost 1,100 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were adequately prepared to study in English. However, the in-depth interviews revealed that students' English proficiency did not cover academic reading proficiency and some had thought about quitting in the first semester due to slow reading and difficulty with comprehending text (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015).

Almost half of the 1,100 students surveyed said that using English increased their workload. Part of the challenge is an unfamiliarity with academic genres as some students mentioned how the overemphasis on literature in secondary school English did not prepare them for reading academic books (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015; Jeeves, 2013; Ingvarsdóttir, 2011). Students report having to look up words frequently, which is time consuming, and as one student remarked, "even if you think you know them, you look them up anyway because it can make such a huge difference. One word can completely change the whole text ... ". Some students confess to not reading the set reading material at all as "it takes too long". The notion that many students who use English in academia avoid reading the textbook and simply depend on the teachers' overhead slides is supported by Percorari and her colleagues in Sweden (2012).

The survey also revealed that students use various strategies to access the English materials, and their responses suggest that working with English texts proves more problematic than indicated by the confidence they report in their preparation. Sixty percent say they create an Icelandic glossary and a third write a summary in Icelandic. Almost 70% use an online dictionary and over 40% use Google Translate (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015). Students organize study groups where they divide articles between them and either translate them chapter by chapter or write summaries and then discuss them "because sometimes the translation is so odd that we can't understand it so we discuss it in a group". These translation groups are not without problems; as another student remarked, "I stopped taking part in translation groups because once I happened to have read the actual chapter in English and found that the summary they gave me was not accurate". This illustrates the lengths to which students must go to access the curriculum, extra work that is not acknowledged when course workload is converted to course credits.

The largest group of students, 83%, reported problems working with two codes and mention that a "connection" is sometimes missing between the lan-

guages. We have termed this phenomenon *Simultaneous Parallel Code Use* (SPCU) (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015) as the text input is mainly in English, instruction in Icelandic or English or both, and output, upon which students are evaluated, is in Icelandic or English, and increasingly only in English in the case of final theses.

Students were also asked about what type of support they receive, and the response was that it is haphazard and depends on the individual instructor. Use of Icelandic and English varies between instructors as almost two-thirds use both Icelandic and English terminology in class, while only 25% use only the Icelandic terms and 14% only English terminology; a third use English slides in an otherwise Icelandic lecture. According to the students, almost 30% of teachers provide some type of English support by discussing the meaning of important terms or by disseminating glossaries or translations or part translations. Nevertheless, most instructors do not see it as their role to provide language support to their students.

The effect of SPCU on the quality of teaching and learning has not been explored, but it is likely that the cognitive effort needed to do translanguaging constantly strains the cognitive capacity available to the student to ponder or master the content (Arnbjörnsdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir, 2015).

To summarize the findings of the studies, students report increased workloads and confusion while working with two languages simultaneously. A third of the students confess to struggling with academic English, and many go to great lengths to try to glean information from the English content. Many confess to not reading the English texts at all as it is too time consuming. The confidence in English proficiency which appears in the survey may be explained by the fact that students feel that they have, and probably do have, a good command of general informal and receptive English. This gives them a rather misplaced self-confidence when entering university as they have very limited awareness of university academic genres despite almost 10 years of EFL study prior to university.

[4] EAL, ENL, ESL, EFL?

The new linguistic context (English as an Additional Language) of the university may be illustrated in the following manner especially its dissimilarity from traditional EFL, ESL and ENL contexts. This distinction is clarified here as it is crucial to the pedagogy described below.

ENL Context

L1 Native Proficiency

L1 Reception and Production Skills

L1 Academic Language Skills

ESL Academic Context

L2 Proficiency (adaptation/awareness of different levels of students' L2 proficiency)

L2 Reception and Production

L2 Academic Language

EFL Context

L2 Proficiency (adaptation/awareness of different levels of L2 proficiency)

L2 Reception skills/Limited L2 Production, often class based

L2 Emphasis on four basic skills, culture and literature.

EAL Academic Context

L2 Proficiency (no adaptation/no awareness of different levels of L2 proficiency or how it may affect learning)

L2 Reception (input is in English) /L1 Production (output is in L1 Icelandic and L2 English (SPCU)) Academic Language.

The University of Iceland has been slow to acknowledge the new context and its consequences for students' ability to master the content of their degree programs. General writing assistance is provided through writing centres for Icelandic; the view is that writing is writing, regardless of language or genre, so Icelandic writing tutors are also called upon to assist with English, a task for which they are not equipped. No assistance is provided for English academic reading. Students who seek assistance independently, by attending Academic English courses, meet resistance when trying to transfer English credits to other programs.

The Department of English, on its own initiative, reorganized the range of programs it offered in an effort to meet the increased demand for English support from students enrolled in other programs. From the perspective of the Department, the new context manifests itself in the following manner: on the one hand, there are the needs of BA student in English Literature or Linguistics for enhanced genre-based writing skills, and, on the other hand, there are the academic English needs of students across disciplines who are enrolled in EMI programs⁵ with different amounts of English use. The latter, struggling with

[5] These are not CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) classes as there is very little attention paid to the language.

course content in English, were registering for courses in the BA in English program that are content rather than skills-based and not designed to meet general academic language needs. The influx of students whose goal was to enhance their academic English was straining Department resources and adversely affecting curriculum and instruction with the result that the BA English students had even less opportunity to hone their academic writing skills in over-enrolled courses.

The Department's response was twofold: firstly, an intensive writing program for English majors was developed that included an intensive basic academic writing course as well as advanced genre-based courses focusing on writing in linguistics and writing for literature. Our EAL students are not challenged by grammar nor pronunciation, which is near native for many, but rather they struggle with registers and genre-based rhetorical conventions. Secondly, an Academic English Program was established with courses targeting academic English oral and literacy skills followed by advanced genre-based courses. This meant moving non-English majors out of content courses in linguistics and literature to more appropriate skills-based English courses.

[5] ACADEMIC WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

The Department's initial response to the need to provide preparation in academic English for BA students was to develop a series of intensive writing courses to replace the previous ineffective traditional English Composition course. The previous course was based on a Composition and Rhetoric philosophy intended for native speakers of English. The course was heavily literature based and did not target the specific needs of our EAL students. For years, this course had been overenrolled with over 200 students in a class, many of whom were non-English majors. Students had a wide range of English skills, from very advanced to lower intermediate English skills. The course had received poor evaluations and there was a constant instructor turnover.

Students who were not pursuing an English degree were transferred out of the BA program into the English for Academic Purposes program (see next section). In redeveloping the course, the English Department reviewed available English Composition and ESL writing textbooks and were concerned that the long readings typical of Composition and Rhetoric based writing texts minimized time for actual writing. Examination of ESL texts focused too much on form, which did not meet Icelandic students' needs as they did not make many grammatical mistakes. A new program and textbook were therefore developed. The goal was to unlock the academic genre by making the key structural features which students already knew but couldn't apply transparent and give

them time to practice them step by step. The text, *The Architecture of Academic Writing* (Prinz & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2016), focused on the academic essay as a foundation which would allow students to deepen and expand their skills for participation in the genre-specific discourse of their discipline (Artemeva & Fox, 2010). They then move on to genre specific courses in writing about Linguistics or Literature, the two foci of the Department.

[6] A NEW ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES PROGRAM

The Department of English also established a new program of study, the Program in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The EAP is intended for non-English majors, exchange students, and others who are required to read English textbooks and write assignments in English (in any discipline) and/or wish to improve their academic English skills. The program prepares students to undertake university studies in EMI programs. Because students' English proficiency and language needs vary, individual courses are open to students who are not enrolled in the program as a whole and the Faculty of Languages and Cultures is working on making individual courses in EAP transferable into the student's majors within the Faculty and to programs in other Faculties. The goal of this program is to help students develop English academic reading and writing skills through explicit teaching and practice. Effective critical reading and writing strategies are presented to support new English academic study skills. Oral academic discussion and presentations skills are practiced, vocabulary and discourse skills enhanced and genre-specific texts read, analyzed and written. At the same time, the EAP program serves as a laboratory for research on English as an Additional Language, instructional practice and other related topics in Applied Linguistics.

[7] MEETING EAL STUDENTS' NEEDS: A NEW PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The foundation of the new academic English teaching approach developed at the University of Iceland is learning to write a thesis-driven academic essay (Lavelle, 2001), in the belief that all students can acquire skills in organizing ideas and composing clear and effective text in English across all genres. The approach accomplishes this by developing awareness of English writing conventions, knowledge about which strategies to employ and when to employ them, skills in revising and the persistence to rewrite until the text authentically reflects the views of the author. The idea is that by writing, students also gain an awareness of the nature of English academic texts and thereby sharpen their reading skills. Our first year students seemed to recognize the concepts and terminology used in academic writing from their EFL courses at school, but

lacked an understanding of their function and did not have the tools and strategies to apply them. Essential to the new approach is that students must master the basic structure of an English academic essay in much the same way a painter must master the basics of drawing before moving on to more creative expression. What differentiates this approach from others are three key principles. First, the approach hones the content into a set of core competencies that support thesis-driven writing. This is a departure from the broad sweep of writing skills which is typical of academic writing texts for both native and ESL/EFL users. The second feature of the approach is that it minimizes reading and explanation in favour of learning by doing. The approach makes each element of writing explicit by “showing” how it is constructed and then maximizing the time students spend in active strategy practice, scaffolded production, independent writing, revising, and reflection. A third unique feature is that it builds writer autonomy by assigning topics that draw on students’ own knowledge rather than outside sources. This approach requires students to focus on meaning and lessens the tendency of insecure EFL writers to reproduce others’ ideas through cut and paste or plagiarism.

Specifically, this program shows students how to:

- (i) write in his or her own voice
- (ii) produce clear, concise and well-organized text
- (iii) recognize the relevance of writing to their academic needs
- (iv) practice using effective strategies at different stages of the writing process
- (v) follow the writing conventions of the English academic community
- (vi) compose and revise an expository essay (Prinz & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2016, p. 6)

Each unit or chapter follows the same principles. As an example, students are initially introduced to the concept of language registers and genres and reminded that this is relevant to their own needs as grades for content are often affected by the quality of the writing, and that informal language is not effective in conveying the complex, abstract ideas of academic content. Students are directed to reflect on the differences between informal and formal language by examining tone and word choice in texts. They then complete a series of ex-

ercises on the use of conversational language vs. academic language based on Coxhead's list of the most common academic words (Coxhead, 2000). Finally, students are asked to apply the concepts they have learned by producing texts that require the use of different levels of formality and then analyzing the different characteristics of the texts. The sequence that leads students from awareness exercises to practice and to production is used to teach all topics in the program. Topics include prewriting, developing thesis statements, cohesion, revision, and so on. Step by step, the activities guide students through the writing process, through several drafts, culminating in a short academic essay which strictly follows English academic writing conventions and formatting.

The pedagogical approach and a representative text, *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing*, has been pilot tested for three semesters at the Department of English. Approximately 500 first year university students and five experienced writing instructors provided feedback through surveys, focus groups and interviews. Student and instructor feedback ranges from evaluations of the overall program to specific feedback on the effectiveness of individual writing tasks. Students also document their writing progress through reflective writing assignments. In general, students' evaluation of the course is very positive and evaluations are above university average. A pre-survey question about students' ability to write academic texts yielded a 38% yes response while a post survey indicated a 74% yes response to the same question. Importantly, the same instructors have taught the course since the adoption of the approach and textbook. Instructors on other English courses report a marked improvement in students' ability to compose basic academic text. The EAP program is only two years old and general evaluations have been encouraging. A formal study of the program's effectiveness is in progress.

[8] DISCUSSION

The challenges faced by Icelandic university students when accessing English academic texts seem to go largely unacknowledged and most degree programs have yet to allow transfer of Academic English credits into their programs.

At university level the language policy needs to reflect reality, accepting that English is no longer a foreign language in Iceland, but is used by a large percentage of the population as an additional language on a daily basis. Speaking and listening skills at higher education level are becoming more important as EMI courses proliferate and the number of foreign lecturers and students increases. Students need more support which is different from traditional ESL and EFL support. Studies in Iceland and elsewhere in Northern Europe have demonstrated students' need for formal academic English skills, both in ter-

tiary education and in the workforce.

There is a growing recognition of the need for a paradigm shift in the emphasis on both content and teaching methods in secondary schools is beginning to develop as well as greater awareness of the challenges posed by increased use of EMI at the tertiary level. However, a review of school curriculum guidelines indicates that very few English courses at secondary level focus adequately on formal and academic language skills (Guðmundsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2013; Arnbjörnsdóttir & Prinz, 2014, Hellekjær, 2009).

The paradigm shift is not likely to be achieved by adopting pedagogies and textbooks written for populations with very different needs from those of Icelandic students. While the majority of required reading at university is based on expository text, traditional instruction in advanced secondary school English classes relies on the reading of literary sources. Familiarity with literary discourse may not be the most appropriate way to prepare students who will be required to read other genres at university and in professional contexts. Nor is it likely that adding academic content to existing courses that teach primarily informal receptive skills will help students develop their academic language and literacy skills.

Finally, academic language skills in a second language are strongly tied to academic skills in the first language. There is no research available that measures Icelandic secondary students' ability to use their first language in academic pursuits. Further research is necessary both at secondary and tertiary level; more specifically studies are needed that measure students' actual proficiency in Icelandic and in English, rather than their perceptions of their proficiency. These are beginning to appear (Edgarsson, 2017). Most Icelandic students acquire informal receptive English skills outside the classroom. This provides an opportunity for developing curricula and instruction that builds on those skills and broadens and deepens students' language proficiency to better meet their needs later in life.

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CONTACTS

Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir
University of Iceland
birnaarn@hi.is