

Hochschuldidaktik

Hochschuldidaktik A - Z

Teaching in English

Teaching in English

English as a lingua franca (in higher education) Increasing academic mobility is leading to more courses being offered in English worldwide, rather than in local languages. This presents a number of challenges for students and staff. Whilst sound teaching skills are a basic requirement in all contexts, the use of English as a lingua franca in teaching, with students and teaching staff from different cultural backgrounds, increases the complexity of the teaching task. Teaching staff may therefore benefit from reflection on the issues involved, and practical support in dealing with the challenges effectively.

English as a lingua franca (ELF) can be defined as a contact language used between speakers who do not share the same mother tongue(s) or cultural backgrounds. It is a global phenomenon, with a much wider range of people using it as an additional language than native speakers. Indeed, over 80% of interactions in English worldwide are now estimated to be between non - native speakers (Graddol 2006). Consequently, for many ELF researchers and users, native speaker competence is no longer relevant as a model to imitate or a “golden standard” to reach. When ELF is used for communication the focus tends to be effective communication rather than correctness. Speakers find common ground in their disciplinary or professional fields and tend to focus on effective communication as opposed to attention to language itself. This is particularly evident in speech, which is processed “on - line”, giving little time for reflection on form.

The interface between pedagogy, language and culture(s) when teaching in English

There are three overlapping fields involved when teaching in English. These are the role of English as a lingua franca in Higher Education, learner - centered pedagogical approaches, and academic culture(s) in higher education. The interplay between these three areas needs to be taken into consideration in course planning and delivery when teaching in English. The module “Teaching in English in a non - English speaking envi-

ronment” – run by the Center for University Teaching and Learning and the University/ETH Language Center – addresses the ELF context in learning and teaching situations within higher education from all three perspectives and the interfaces between these fields.

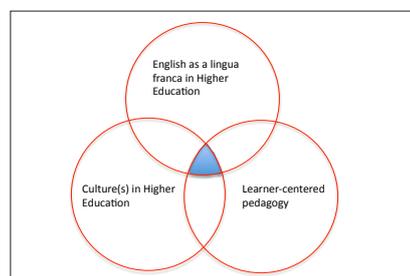


Figure 1: Overlapping fields of Teaching in English

Language

Studies on teaching in English by non - English speakers have shown that a threshold level of language is necessary to teach effectively. Staff teaching in English need to speak the language fluently and have a sufficient range of language to cover their topic and interact with the students. However, the research shows that confidence and good teaching skills are more important than perfect mastery of the linguistic code. Self - awareness and awareness of the students is important in terms of language, and teaching and learning. The table below lists some points that are important for both lecturers and students for effective teaching in English. It may sometimes be the lecturer’s responsibility to advise students to take a course in English for Academic Purposes if he or she feels a student is having difficulty with a course because of poor language skills. It is noteworthy that confidence appears on both sides!

Lecturers	Students
- clear pronunciation	- sufficient listening comprehension ability in English
- appropriate speed	- knowledge of general and domain specific vocabulary
- ability to structure input clearly	- sufficient background knowledge of the subject

Hochschuldidaktik A - Z

Teaching in English

- ability to maintain interest & promote learning	- awareness of sources of problems including cultural differences
- awareness of sources of problems	- confidence e.g. to ask questions, clarify difficulties
- confidence	

Pedagogy

2 Research on university teaching in non - English speaking environments tends to underline the importance of interaction in teaching, even if the teaching takes the form of lectures. Interaction can be through questions, either real or rhetorical, or small group work. For group work lecturers might decide to use buzz groups. They are simply small groups of two or three students formed impromptu to discuss a topic for a short period. In a pair it is almost impossible for a student to stay silent and once students have spoken "in private " they are much more likely to speak afterwards "in public" in the whole group. From a pedagogical point of view, for questions in this context, teaching staff should wait at least 20 seconds before repeating a question and subsequently rephrasing the question can also help comprehension. It is also advisable to pause after receiving an answer before commenting on it. The use of open questions that begin with „how“, „why“, „where“ can also be helpful in eliciting information and encouraging interaction and involvement. These points also reflect another area of overlap between language and pedagogy which concerns the need for more time to process information and the importance of linguistic “signposting” that highlights or makes explicit the structure of a lecture and particularly important areas of focus for the students.

Culture(s)

Academic cultures differ from country to country and discipline to discipline and differences may be reflected in patterns of behavior or cultural conventions. Such routines or schema are often taken for granted and considered ‚normal‘. However, this can lead to misunderstandings and frustration if students’ and lecturers’ expectations regarding teaching and learning differ. For example, in some cultures it may be considered inappropriate to ask the lecturer questions as it could be interpreted as questioning his or her authority. Similarly, some students may not be used to group work as this may be little practiced in their home university. In a multi - cultural lecturer hall it may be advisable to make cultural conventions explicit in terms of common proce-

dures in the host context and the lecturer’s expectations. It may also be of value to build on a variety of perspectives, for example through group work, drawing on student s’ experiences in other contexts and expectations that derive from these. Using this variety of perspectives as a resource within teaching might take time, but it is clear that the whole group can benefit from the different cultural backgrounds present.

Culture

can also overlap with pedagogy in relation to examples chosen to support teaching content. Studies on teaching in English have shown that examples are important in helping students understand complex issues. However, it is important that examples chosen are not anchored in local contexts and thus impossible for international students to understand without local cultural or political knowledge. Examples should therefore be chosen carefully to enhance understanding for students from any cultural background.

Ways forward

Teaching in English requires openness and the ability to reconsider the way one teaches. It also requires confidence and self - awareness in terms of language and culture in relation to both the lecturer and his or her students. Teaching in English is not simply a question of translation, it involves far more, both at the planning stage of courses and during delivery. The acceptance of different uses of language, teaching styles and the presence of other cultures is essential.

Resources

Graddol, David (2006): English Next. Why global English may mean the end of ‘English as a Foreign Language’ British Council. Available online: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-research-englishnext.htm>
Module “Teaching in English: http://www.hochschuldidaktik.uzh.ch/weiterbildung_en.html
Weil, M.; Pullin, P. (2011). Teaching in English. Didaktische Konsequenzen in der internationalen Hochschullehre. In: In: Berendt, B.; Voss, H.-P.; Wildt, J. (Hrsg.). Neues Handbuch Hochschullehre. Berlin: Raabe Verlag., S. 1-20.
Weil, M.; Pullin P. (2011). English as a lingua franca in education - Internationalisation speaks English. In: Education permanente, 1, S. 28-29.