Everybody knows English? Language use in the world of learning

Krista Varantola
Krista.Varantola@uta.fi
University of Tampere (Finland)

ABSTRACT: This article will focus on the use of English as a global means of communication in higher education (HE) and research. The use of English is taken for granted as a global means of communication in the academic world. Therefore language issues are rarely problematized in science-policy contexts. This article will try to make the language issue visible by addressing aspects of a use of a lingua franca from a historical and pragmatic perspective and discuss its effects on everyday university life in non-English-speaking countries.

KEYWORDS: global English, internationalization of HE and research, invisibility of language, differences between natural sciences and social sciences, ethical aspects.

1. Introduction

This article will focus on the use of English as a global means of communication in higher education (HE). When the globalization of HE is discussed today, the use of English is taken for granted and, as a result, language issues are rarely problematized or analyzed at depth at least in science-policy contexts. In this context I would therefore like to address a few aspects concerning the use of English that are not normally highlighted when the benefits of the internationalization of HE and research are discussed. I will approach my topic from a historical and pragmatic perspective and discuss the effects of a lingua franca on everyday university life. My examples will be mainly based on the Finnish experience.

2. The quest for a lingua franca

Until about the mid-17th century, everyone who mattered in the world of learning used Latin to tell their peers about their scholarship and findings. These linguistic conventions started to change at the time when scientific

academies and learned societies were being established in the different countries in Europe. As a consequence, national languages began replacing Latin in academic contexts and for example, Isaac Newton started his correspondence with the Royal Society in Latin but switched over to English in the course of time. The same period was also a time of reawakened interest in an academic lingua franca that would be universally applicable and unambiguous in its meanings. An additional aim was to protect the purity and beauty of the national languages and not allow them be contaminated by the needs of scientific language use.

In England, Bishop Wilkins tried to classify all ideas and things into 40 basic classes in his famous attempt at a symbol language *"An essay towards a real character and a philosophical language"* from 1668. Later on, the creation of Esperanto, the most famous of the artificial languages**,** took place in the late 19th century. In the 20th century, there have been several attempts at creating a simplified version of English for international use. (Cf. e.g. Lyons 1987: 352-356).

Thus far, none of these attempts has been successful enough to replace natural languages in the academic context. Work on normative terminologies and nomenclatures has taken on the responsibility for the disambiguation of meaning in field-specific contexts. Furthermore, in most countries, the use of national languages as the language of higher education and learning has until now been regarded as being essential for the development of the national language and national self-respect. At the same time, English has gradually become the de facto lingua franca of international HE and research.

Are we now about to enter to a new linguistic era in which a different logic and new preferences will override the importance of national languages in the world of science? Would it be better that we all admitted the superiority of English as the language of science and scholarship and agreed that, in the name of globalization, English should be the sole medium of instruction and in research, irrespective of the national languages of the country? Universities are after all global operators, train global citizens for the global labour market, and compete with each other in a global context. All self-respecting universities want to become world-class universities and to beat each other in global rankings and global citation indexes.

This type of argumentation is actually rather common these days,

particularly in the fields of science and technology where language and language use is often considered to merely have an instrumental role. This is, however, not the case in the humanities and social sciences, for they typically focus on issues dealing with language, literature, cultural heritage or societal development, etc.

Back in 1977, Sandor Karcsay pointed out in his perceptive article in *Babel*, a scholarly journal for translators and interpreters, that there are considerable differences between translating natural science texts or technical texts and legal or sociological texts. According to Karcsay, natural science texts tend to be more formulaic in structure and their use of terminology is more constant. The actual research is usually conducted outside the text and the results exist as data prior to being written up, whereas in the "softer" sciences, such as the social sciences, it is the argumentation and formulations, the forms of expression and thematic development, that are an essential part of the analysis and results. (Karcsay 1977, cf. also Varantola 1987).

To polarize further, it can be argued that in the exact sciences, language has the role of a code that is useful for presenting the research results in a fairly formulaic way to the research community. In contrast, in the softer, non-exact sciences, in the humanities and social sciences in particular, language has a completely different role. It is an inseparable part of the research and of societal values and aspirations. Language is also inseparable from the community in which the university operates and from the role that higher education has to promote the prosperity of society.

Fortunately, thus far the most common pragmatic solution at the universities located in non-English-speaking countries has been to apply some type of parallel language strategy. For example, instruction is offered in the national language and in Finland, for instance, the official language of the university is stipulated in the law. In addition, instruction in English is offered for the benefit of international exchange and degree students.

3. The invisibility of language

Using a foreign language as a means of spoken and written communication at the university level is not as simple as it sounds. This is actually a fairly complicated matter and is probably therefore usually ignored by politicians

and other decision makers alike when they get on their high horse about the benefits of internationalization of HE. They tend to keep repeating the same internationalization mantras and keep referring to various global university rankings and citation indexes without giving a thought to what lies behind these evaluation systems, how relevant their criteria are, or whether their motivation is really only to promote science and learning in the world. This has led to a situation in which universities, in order to be respectable, must respond by aspiring in their mission statements to become world-class institutions, preferably in research, because educational accomplishments are harder to rank mechanistically.

In this article, however, I would like to make language visible and discuss various aspects related to internationalization. These days when we talk about international education, we refer, of course, to courses and programmes taught in English. No other language qualifies and if we want be provocative, we could refer to the linguistic neo-colonisation of HE that is accepted all over the world in the name of global competition. As Saarinen (2012) points out:

> The invisibility of language and the euphemization of *English* for *foreign* seems to reflect a paradox of internationalisation. Increasing international co-operation may, in fact, lead into increasing linguistic homogenisation, as the increase in global mobility reduces the available common languages into English (in comparison with the earlier, more regional internationalisation).

We are thus happy to accept the the over-representation and impact of scientific journals published by U.S. or U.K. publishers and we are happy to accept their standards and preferences in different academic fields as being globally relevant.

However, we can also look at the matter from a different angle, and say that the research community has always been internationally oriented and thanks to a common language, the internet, as well as to the almost instant access to newly acquired knowledge, science is developing faster than ever and can be applied to the benefit of the humankind everywhere in the world. Furthermore, it is not a national English variant that rules the world but global English and those publications in English are intended for

the global scientific community.

4. Who owns global English?

No national English can claim ownership. Global English is global property. In the research world, it is the journals, the journal editors and publishers that serve as the gate keepers, set the standards and write the guidelines. The most important matter, of course, is to ensure that global English is comprehensible to the readership irrespective of its origin.

In many cases this means that there is an army of editors working behind the scenes all over the world who help researchers to express their thoughts in comprehensible English. There is also an ever-growing need to teach both spoken and written academic English skills to both junior and senior researchers all over in the non-English speaking academic world.

5. Implications of the use of English as the lingua franca of university education

My examples are predominantly based on the situation in Finland. In 2006 there were over 2.7 million foreign students in HE mostly in the USA and in Western Europe (Garam 2009). In Finland, we have witnessed a steady rise in the number of programmes taught in English at the BA and MA levels (Saarinen & Nikula, forthcoming). In quantitative terms, Finland has ranked second to the Netherlands. Measured by the proportion of institutions providing English language programmes, Finland is ranked first in Europe (Wächter & Maiworm 2008). Nevertheless, the overall share of foreign students in degree programmes was only 4% in 2010 when the OECD average was 6.9%.

This discrepancy is due to the fact that there is some hot air in the figures, in the number of programmes supposedly available and the actual number of foreign students studying in them. Yet it can be claimed that Finnish institutions of HE have been very keen to offer tuition in English for exchange students and for degree students alike. The situation reflects the strong role of English in Finnish society and that the Finns´ overall proficiency of English can be considered to be good, especially among the younger generations. This is the situation in the Nordic countries in general. Finns are also subjected to English in their daily lives in the media, e.g. through

television series and films because they are not dubbed and subtitles are used instead. Furthermore, Finns' attitudes to English are very positive, as indicated by a recent national survey on English in Finland. (Cf. Leppänen & al. 2008, 2009). However, the most compelling reasons for the high rate of tuition offered in English may be economic.

6. Why do universities offer international programmes?

Why are Finnish universities so keen on offering tuition in English? The standard reasons given are that the Ministry of Education and Culture encourages the universities to establish international programmes and also rewards universities for their internationalization efforts in the national funding formula. This has occasionally led to untargeted and non-specified international programmes that are not attractive to international students even though tuition is free (Cf. Saarinen 2012).

The belief behind the official policy is that Finland needs to recruit well-educated foreigners to the domestic work force and that international programmes also mean internationalization at home, which is very important for the Finnish students and staff alike. Most typically, international programmes are offered in economics, engineering, and in information technology. Programmes in social sciences and humanities are rarer. However, if we really want our foreign graduates to settle in Finland, they also need to learn Finnish to find employment and integrate in Finnish society. This aspect has unfortunately been largely ignored in the policy statements and planning of the programmes.

Speaking from a more general angle, we could divide the reasons into selfish and altruistic categories. In Western Europe at least, the selfish motives include the dreaded consequences of an aging population and thus the need to recruit highly-qualified immigrants to cater to labour-market needs and to guarantee the continued prosperity of the countries. It is expected that these immigrants would mainly come from the densely populated Asia. Internationalization of universities would also improve their competitive power in the global hunger for economic growth through innovations. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, the lucrative global education market adds a further incentive to universities to offer international programmes and to compete for foreign students. The altruistic motives include the will to help the emerging nations in their striving for prosperity without depleting their

educated work force, to promote the need to learn from each other and to recognize our mutual interdependence in the global setting.

7. What does international mean in terms of content?

In many cases, the international programmes offered are the same programmes for domestic and foreign students alike. The international students make the programme international. In the Finnish context, the international programmes are often standard programmes taught in English by the local staff. While there is nothing wrong with this, we can ask whether a change of language makes a programme international in content. The situation is probably the same in most English-speaking countries. But should not international education mean something different – at least in the softer sciences? Truly international programmes are the result of international cooperation between universities. The medium may be English, but both the teachers and students need to come from different environments and from different contextual frameworks for the programmes to be able to achieve 'brain circulation' and to increase our understanding of the world.

An additional aspect worth mentioning is that universities need support material in English for their international students and staff, and that is costly. They need information about the education available in English, about local regulations and customs, about financial support opportunities, services, etc. All this material needs to exist in an English that is comprehensible and that inspires confidence. Furthermore, this material obviously needs to be up-to-date and regularly modified.

8. Do we understand each other?

For students to be able to attend degree programmes taught in English, they usually have to demonstrate that their level of English is sufficient, either through proficiency tests, or certificates. In the case of teachers, their own assessment of their English skills is trusted and teaching in a foreign language is usually voluntary. In Finland, teachers are offered courses to improve their teaching skills in English and in the majority of cases, students seem to be satisfied with the linguistic standards of international programmes, but there is actually very little relevant data available to draw any long-reaching

conclusions about the matter. Airey (2011) has made a thorough analysis of the situation in Sweden. According to his study, Swedish teachers point out that they need more time for preparing their courses and feel that they are not able to express themselves as fluently as in their mother tongue. Their language use lacks in detail and in flexibility. There is no reason to believe that Finnish teachers teaching in English would not feel the same way. (Airey 2011 also includes a very good survey on the literature available on this topic).

It has sometimes been said that people seem to lose over 30% of their intelligence when they have to express themselves in a foreign language. Whether this is a valid claim or not, it is certainly a very common subjective feeling that most of us who need to develop complicated thoughts in a foreign language fully recognize.

9. Ethical aspects of English in international education

Even if the problems in oral communication were minor, they tend to multiply in written communication, in term papers, theses and other written assignments. Students in general encounter difficulties with their written assignments irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds. Problems multiply when they have to write them in a foreign language because there is rarely enough language support available to help them.

Even if the great majority of students in the world are honest, dishonesty is growing. Thanks to the internet and the vast amount of material available on-line, plagiarism has become rampant all over the world, among domestic and international students alike. Universities have introduced strict guidelines and sanctions against fraud and plagiarism checkers are in common use. Students using their own language are in a better position because it is easier for them to rephrase the text they copy and present the ideas as their own, but in the U.S. at least the market has also responded by selling deplagiarization services to students.

The 'linguistic paradox' is a phenomenon at post-graduate level that has become increasingly common. It is no longer unusual that in applications for post-graduate studies, the research plans the students submit are impeccably written, whereas the accompanying email correspondence tells a different story. In other words, it is often patently clear that the applicants' command

of English is not at the level that their written documentation implies.

High tuition fees in connection with international education add a new dimension to the ethical discussion. Many university teachers in Britain and the U.S. have publicly complained about the pressure they feel from the university officials to pass high-paying international students whose study performance, often due to poor command of English, is below the required standards. The cynical conclusion is that, in the international education market, teachers are no longer able to adhere to the quality criteria specified for the programme but that eligibility criteria are dependent on a student's ability to pay and that students are customers who are entitled to the degree they have bought, irrespective of their performance.

To summarize, what would an ideal international study programme look like? In my opinion, an ideal international programme at a university level anywhere in the world would be a flagship programme in a strength area of the institution. It would typically be run at an MA or doctoral level and it would be taught in English to ensure the widest possible audience. It would be taught by home university experts together with their international partners. It would be international in content and would benefit from the participants' different backgrounds and frames of reference and the students would be given hands-on linguistic support during their studies.

10. Ethical aspects of English in international research

The buzz words heard everywhere in the university world today are competition, rankings, performance indicators, impact factors and citation indexes. Universities have become too important for the economy to be left to their own devices and their traditional ways of working, and policy makers firmly believe that quality can only be measured through quantity, by means of mechanistically collected statistics that can be easily manipulated. English has in practice gained a monopolistic status as the means of communication and the national funding formulae that emphasize the importance of publishing in international refereed journals strengthen its position even further. As a result, the role of national and regional scientific publications is diminishing as their value as money earners for the university decreases. This means that the choice of language is not only a choice of the medium but is often also a strategic decision on potential themes that are likely to be

accepted for publication in high-impact journals. Local problems and issues are often not interesting enough for the top journals, which prefer a more global approach e.g. in the social sciences or humanities. For example, a complaint that I have heard Indian social scientists express several times is that their articles on local social issues in India are too marginal in the eyes of the international journals to be accepted for publication.

As mentioned above, there is often a clear difference in style between the so-called hard sciences and soft sciences. The structure of many articles in the natural sciences is fairly formulaic and this helps the non-native speakers of English to write about their research in international journals. However, it has also been observed that the formulaic nature of publications tempts those who do not feel confident about their language skills to lift structural components from existing publications and copy their argumentation style as a type of text base which they then fill with their own hypotheses, data and results.

Texts compiled in this manner tend to get caught by plagiarization detection tools, but are these texts plagiarized? The jury is still out but there is heated discussion going on about what amounts to plagiarization and about the need to redefine plagiarism in the digital age. It has been asked whether information copied from the net is plagiarism, if the origin of the information is not known and if it is non-permanent in nature and can change from day to day even in the same source. Has information or knowledge become shared knowledge that is nobody's intellectual property and that can be generated by anybody? Opinions vary, but it is clear that extensive copying still causes suspicions of unacceptable research practices.

Language revisers play an increasingly important role, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, to help authors produce linguistically acceptable texts. It is, however, not easy to find competent editors, as they need to be both experts in academic communication styles and linguistically skilled editors. In short, being a native English speaker is not sufficient. On the other hand, authors tend to become too complacent when they know that their texts will go through a revision process. They may occasionally expect the revisers even to correct problems in their argumentation style and content, and they are sloppy in their use of terminology or in checking their

facts. It is obvious that satisfactory results can only be achieved only if both partners recognize their responsibilities and cooperate. After all, muddy thinking cannot be remedied by language revisers.

11. Not everybody knows English

I do not believe that we can or should try to do very much about the growing influence of English as the lingua franca of HE and research. What we need to do, however, is to make sure that we are much better aware of the effects of the use of English in the world of learning. We need to think about what a monopolistic situation means in cultural and societal terms, what problems it causes and how those problems can be solved in differing contexts. We also need to make sure that decision makers fully appreciate the publication of research results in other languages as well to cater to national and regional needs and to promote the use of national languages in academic contexts. Most important of all is that we make language visible and do not try undermine or ignore the role that language policies play for education and research worldwide.

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