



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

TÍTOL: Reflecting upon challenges, opportunities and uncertainties of using English as a medium of Education as a stepping stone to improve internationalization

Subtítol: An experience at the University of Girona

AUTORIA:

Yeste, Marc

Universitat de Girona

Departament de Biologia / Facultat de Medicina

marc.yeste@udg.edu

Ferrer, Glòria

Universitat de Girona

Unitat d'anglès / Servei de Llengües Modernes

gloria.ferrer@udg.edu

Mateu, Glòria

Universitat de Girona

Departament d'Informàtica, Matemàtica Aplicada i Estadística / Escola Politècnica Superior

gloria.mateu@udg.edu

Puntí-Brun, Mònica

Universitat de Girona

Departament de Filologia i Comunicació / Facultat de Turisme

monica.punti@udg.edu

Waddington, Julie

Universitat de Girona

Departament de Didàctiques Específiques / Facultat d'Educació i Psicologia

julie.waddington@udg.edu

1. RESUM:

A Teaching Innovative Networks focused on using the English as a medium of education (EME) was created at the University of Girona in 2020. The main aim of this Network is to advocate for the use of English among teaching staff, as well as to provide them with supporting material and orientation to enhance their teaching. This Communication explains the first action undertaken by the Network. The findings referred herein will be subject to a more detailed analysis and will serve to publish an open-access Handbook in the months to come.



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

2. ABSTRACT:

A Teaching Innovative Networks focused on using the English as a medium of education (EME) was created at the University of Girona in 2020. The main aim of this Network is to advocate for the use of English among teaching staff, as well as to provide them with supporting material and orientation to enhance their teaching. This Communication explains the first action undertaken by the Network. The findings referred herein will be subject to a more detailed analysis and will serve to publish an open-access Handbook in the months to come.

3. PARAULES CLAU: 4-6

Anglès; Educació Superior; Innovació docent; competències lingüístiques

4. KEYWORDS: 4-6

English; Higher Education; Teaching innovation; language skills

5. DESENVOLUPAMENT:

1. Introduction

Among the different strategies undertaken by the University of Girona (UdG) to improve teaching (Teaching Innovative Networks), there is one created in 2020 that aims to increase and improve the usage of English as a medium of education (EME), which is also referred to as English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in the literature. The Network is composed of gender-balanced academic staff from different Faculties across the university, encompassing all fields from Engineering to Humanities, Life Sciences, Educational Sciences, Law and Social Sciences. From the very beginning, the working team has been trying to provide materials to help peers switch the language in which they deliver lectures and conduct other activities using English. The Academic Staff involved have benefited considerably from the support of the Modern Languages Service (UdG), with one of their members being also part of the team. This assistance is consistent with the definition of EME, which consists of teaching academic subjects through English where English is not the primary language of students and teachers (Galloway, 2020). Not only may this action be useful to students, but also to academics, as in both cases, particularly in the former, it is likely to contribute to increasing students' communications skills and aligns well with the expanding internationalization of Higher Education which, among other hallmarks, entails an increase in the number of classes delivered in English (Dafouz and Smit, 2020). By delivering subjects in English, higher education institutions promote the internationalisation of study programmes, contribute to developing students' international and intercultural competences, as well as attracting students from abroad through exchange programs.

2. Methods used to analyse individual perceptions of EME

While most of the academic staff involved in this Teaching Network are not English native speakers, all have previously been engaged in using EME in the subjects of their expertise.



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

As mentioned above, the main aim of the Teaching Network is to advocate for the use of English among other staff, as well as to provide them with supporting material and orientation to enhance their teaching. For this reason, the main activities conducted thus far among the Teaching Network members have involved reflecting upon their educational practices and experiences, as a prior step needed to implement further actions. The reflections made by Teaching Network members have been conducted in different stages. First, Network members reflected on their experiences as teachers using EME in discussions carried out in general meetings. Thereafter, members were asked to deliver a brief presentation and share their experiences with their Teaching Network peers; a total of ten separate presentations were delivered. This was followed by a systematic/thematic analysis, in which the experience of each of the members was analysed by two separate members of the Network. The content and reflections compiled in every presentation later served to identify different themes relevant to the use of EME. The themes that emerged were: the objectives of EME; teacher competences in English, as well as their role and teaching methodology; the perceptions of using EME of both teachers and students; the identity of students involved in teaching activities using EME; the learning objectives and outcomes of modules being taught in English, including the percentage of the module delivered in that language; the assessment strategy of the module, including whether or not English was considered in the final grade; the challenges and difficulties that both teachers and students encountered when using EME; and the satisfaction and perceived impact that using that language had on the professional opportunities of both students and teachers. The entire group later gathered to discuss together each theme, and members are now preparing a Handbook, where all this information will be pertinently collected, analysed and discussed. The main purpose of this Handbook is to assist other academic staff not participating in the teaching network to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of using EME, from an actively supportive view. Thus, the Handbook aims to support teachers who are already teaching in English, while also encouraging other academics who have not yet contemplated EME to ask themselves whether they think this could be an opportunity for them and their students, and to what extent they feel they could be involved in such an action. In the current paper, three of these themes are discussed: attracting students from abroad; uncertainty of objectives; and teacher competences in English.

3. Main outcomes

3.1. Attracting students from abroad

First of all, there was a consensus among participants and across disciplines on the strengths of using EME. This was perceived as an effective strategy, profiting from the online resources currently available to students, as well as a way to contribute to the development of students' international and intercultural competences, the positive impact on students' future prospects, enhancing employment opportunities, international mobility, and the development of global skills and disciplinary knowledge (Beelen & Wit, 2012). In addition, this could also attract incoming students from external programmes, such as Erasmus, thus benefitting the university, while also increasing opportunities for home students to have



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

access to intercultural experiences. This is certainly aligned with Higher Education policies, incentivising students' competences in foreign languages as well as the 'RECI' program, which aims to certify a graduate student's capacity to work in a global context. In order to obtain this accreditation, students need to conduct certain activities, which may include (but are not limited to) passing at least 12 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and accumulation System) in subjects delivered in a foreign language, or elaborating their final dissertation in a foreign language. This initiative, along with others, is expected to give added impetus to the trend of increasing use of English in higher education, to give students more chances to obtain the credits needed. Because of the advantages that this could represent for them, students may thus be keen to consider signing up for a subject delivered in English.

3.2. Uncertainty of objectives

A significant number of experiences of the Teaching Network members concurred in the uncertainty of objectives about using EME. It was even suggested that, in some cases, it may not be appropriate for a particular subject to use English as a medium of instruction; specifically, some subjects are exceptionally difficult, so that delivering them in English may not be helpful to the students. Related with this debate, it is worth mentioning that concerns around this uncertainty have also been raised by different organizations, such as the European Association for International Education (EAIE) (Hunter, 2015). In this context, one should note that some of the concerns raised with regard to the uncertainty of objectives are related to the actual meaning and impact of internationalisation of higher education. In effect, internationalisation is envisaged as an objective itself, focusing more on figures (i.e., number of agreements, rankings, number of students...) than on the quality of education and research. Also, emphasis is also paid to the economic impact that can potentially be generated by having more students able to communicate in English. Yet, there is no consensus on whether this should be one of the objectives of EME, as many see the internationalisation of EME as a strategy to increase the quality of education and research for all students and staff as well as a way to make a significant contribution to society (Hunter, 2015). That being said, it must be highlighted that the strategy to implement EME and its purpose differs between study programmes and faculties. This means that while all the teaching staff participating in the Innovation Network share some perspectives about the actual value of EME, they are also aware about the need to adapt the strategy to the particularities of each Faculty/study program. Furthermore, there are aspects that, despite being the theme related to teaching strategies, should also be considered when implementing EME. An example is inclusivity, as it comes back to the need to see internationalisation from a multidimensional perspective, not only from the economic angle. Also related to inclusivity, there may be students that cannot spend time at foreign institutions, through the Erasmus program, for example, because they do not have the economic support for mobility. Taking this into consideration, EME can be another way to provide the abroad component, thus complementing Erasmus programs. All the aforementioned supports that, while objectives are not always certain - even from an institutional point of view -, any action to implement EME should consider multiple angles.



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

While the Teaching Network members have reflected on this, there may be other points of view that have been missed, given how complex and interdisciplinary the approach to EME is.

3.3. Teacher competences in English

Regarding the other themes, one that attracted much interest from Network members was the competence of teachers in English. This was one of the biggest drawbacks that was suggested to prevent academics from delivering their classes in English. Remarkably, it emerged that no specific level requirements to deliver lectures in English is required at an institutional level, which has pros and cons. At present, no specific level of English from EME teachers is required for them to deliver subjects in English. In spite of this, academic staff can obtain a Certificate issued by the Modern Language Services (*Teaching in English: Qualification certificate for teaching and research staff*) that, without being compulsory, can help teachers gain confidence. In fact, self-confidence in English is regarded as a crucial aspect for the success of the EME initiative, and any potential strategy acting on this issue should receive further attention. Network members who were more confident, despite feeling, in many cases, that they were not proficient in English, also referred to the need to make an additional effort to teach their classes in English. This included, but was not limited to, reading a considerable amount of texts to prepare classes, watching audio-visual material to be able to develop different kinds of exercises, writing coherent and meaningful statements and instructions for students, reading and understanding all the material submitted by students. All these activities are sought to improve the skills of teaching staff in the use of language, including pronunciation and proper use of English terms. Moreover, EME teachers should also consider the possibility that the level of English of students may sometimes be higher than their own. While this should not be considered as an impediment to deliver classes in English, it is something that could affect the self-confidence of the teacher and should thus be taken into consideration in advance, taking that as a matter of fact and talking naturally about it. Because of all aforementioned, members agreed that they were constantly improving their English by teaching in the language. They also concurred in that the challenges raised by EME improved their own teaching practice in different ways and prompted them to reconsider their roles as teachers. One member suggested that 'teaching a subject in English develops different skills', such as: the capacity to present a topic succinctly; the capacity to interact and communicate with students; the ability to understand what students are asking you; and the ability to articulate appropriate responses. In short, while participants in the team demonstrated initial concerns about the challenges of EME, they consistently gained confidence using English in their classes. These teachers, however, were not completely convinced of the students' perceptions about the usefulness of this initiative, or of their confidence to use English. For this reason, the network aims to conduct further studies with students to explore this further.



MILLORA DE LES EXPERIÈNCIES D'APRENTATGE: TRANSFORMACIÓ I REPTES

4. Conclusions

Since 2020, a Teaching Innovation Network at UdG has been working with the aim of increasing and improving the usage of English in Higher Education. Among the different initiatives thus far conducted by the Network, one in particular has consisted of reflecting on the values, aims and perceptions of EME among teachers and students. The first approach involved the experiences of team members and a further analysis of their peers. The initiative provided enough data to write a Handbook for teachers (Waddington et al., 2023); this material is likely to help other lecturers to undertake the challenge of using English in their classes. Moreover, and based on the perception of Network members, while the collected evidence supports the beneficial impact of the EME initiative, institutional support and a major advocating effort are required for its success.

