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Exploring the roles of English: English as a lingua franca in master's programmes at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

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Abstract

Europe's largest business university, WU sees offering master's programmes in English as a means to stay competitive. This paper highlights the roles of English and other languages at a strategic level in the university as well as in intercultural student teams. The data is taken from a multi-modal research project investigating students' language and interaction in teamwork on English-medium programmes. The results show that students use English as the medium of communication in and out of class and for discussing task-related topics, while they use other languages for socialisation purposes and to develop a sense of community.

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1. Introduction

WU Vienna is Europe's largest business university and is constantly striving to be one of Europe's leading providers of business education. Offering master's programmes in English is seen as one of the most effective ways of achieving this goal. This paper analyses the roles of English at WU at both a strategic level and in intercultural

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teamwork according to the first dimension of Dafouz and Smit's ROAD-MAPPING framework for analysing English-Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings (EMEMUS) (Dafouz & Smit, 2014a, 2014b).

2. Roles of English

Dafouz and Smit's EMEMUS/ROAD-MAPPING framework has been developed as a response to the "pressing need for a conceptualization [of English in higher education institutions] that encompasses the diversity and complexity of the specific settings analysed" (Dafouz & Smit, 2014b, p. 2). The framework consists of six dimensions, the first of which, 'Roles Of English', is the subject of this paper. Within this dimension, Dafouz and Smit have further identified four factors, namely 'institutional', 'pedagogical', 'communicational' and 'societal' (Dafouz & Smit, 2014a). While a comprehensive explanation of the theoretical basis of these is beyond the scope of this paper (see Dafouz & Smit, 2014b), the example of the WU should serve to show their practical application, with a particular focus on the last two factors.

3. Roles of English at WU: institutional and pedagogical factors

The rise of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in European higher education, particularly since the implementation of the Bologna reforms in 2005 and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010, has been the subject of numerous studies (e.g. Räisänen & Fortanet Gómez, 2008; Smit & Dafouz, 2012; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2013; Unterberger, 2014). Smit and Dafouz (2014a) refer to these strategic developments as belonging to the 'institutional' factors, while their practical implementation comes under the 'pedagogical' factors. In Austria, WU pioneered EMI in business faculties at graduate level (Unterberger, 2012, 2014). While German is still the primary language of instruction in the bachelor programme, English is rapidly gaining strength in the second and third cycles, which has considerable pedagogical implications (cf. Smit, 2010, pp. 37-45; Unterberger, 2014, pp. 34-52).

Furthermore, the university management's latest development plan clearly perceives this as a positive, and ongoing, trend:

WU positions itself vis-à-vis benchmark business and economics universities [...] and additionally wants to attract students from abroad. Therefore, a significant share of the programmes will be exclusively offered in English. (WU Development Plan 2012, quoted in Komori-Glatz & Unterberger, 2014, Unterberger's translation)

The university thus sees the role of English as being a tool to "attract students from abroad". It already offers around 130 individual courses in English to accommodate its non-German-speaking exchange students. This correlation between teaching in English and attracting international students (and staff) is particularly pronounced in the master's programmes. English is further given a special role in the linguistic landscape of the university, where "all signage and important information [is] available in both German and English" (<http://www.wu.ac.at/strategy/en/international>). All this should facilitate access for international students and staff, making it easier for WU to join global corporate and academic networks, turn competitors into partners and benefit from their experience as well as their prestige. As a result, the university hopes to improve its position in rankings and obtain international accreditations, increasing its competitiveness on the world stage (Komori-Glatz & Unterberger, 2014).

Yet, while English clearly plays an important role in WU, very few of the students are English native speakers. At the same time, the number of students on the master's programmes who do not speak German as an L1 can be as high as two-thirds, resulting in an English as a lingua franca (ELF) context (Smit, 2010) both in and out of classroom, as well as the official medium of instruction, of course materials and of written assignments.

4. Student perspectives: communicational factors

Dafouz and Smit's 'communicational' factors examine language in practice. The data set analysed in the following sections consists of video recordings of student teams working, their Facebook conversations, and reflective interviews. Each team had 4-5 members who spoke German to varying degrees, from virtually none to native speakers.

The data showed that English was the main language of communication in the teamwork. Some students reported that German was occasionally used in other groups or when only the Austrian students were present. However, all the Austrian students indicated in the interview that they felt it was "unpolite [sic]" or "not friendly" to speak in German in front of other students who might not understand what was being said. English thus also played an important facilitative role outside the classroom.

Furthermore, English seemed to be clearly (albeit unconsciously) designated the language for discussing the topic and any work-related subjects, while other languages tended to make an appearance when the topic of conversations switched over to small talk. On the one hand, this meant that even when the Austrian students talked amongst themselves in German, they often used English terminology when discussing the case or the task. While in some cases the students may only have encountered the terms for the first time on the EMP and did not actually know the German equivalents, other words seem to have been used because English was the automatic language to turn to when discussing task-related issues in this context.

On the other hand, this did not mean that other languages were not present. Though German was the language observed most often, as might be expected, there were also instances of other languages. However, these typically appeared in the opening and closing phases of the group meetings and in the Facebook conversations, which seem to be an inherently informal context. The importance of socialisation and small talk as well as the role of local languages for these has already been the subject of research (e.g. Angouri, 2013; Lønsmann, 2014). However, in contrast to the exclusive nature of these practices found in much of the existing research, this data showed that they actually served an integrating role. While the Austrian students were reluctant to initiate conversations in German, the international students used German words quite frequently. Fig. 1 shows an excerpt from a Facebook conversation illustrating several of these points:

- the use of the English "sheet" (i.e. Excel sheet) to refer to a document discussed in the previous meeting
- the Austrians' sensitivity to the non-German speakers: subsequent message in English possibly functioning as an implicit reminder to return to English; apology ("oh shit") and explanation ("couch mode", presumably as opposed to 'desk' or working' mode); humour/social markers (☺, :), "Haha"); only using German once the non-Austrians have confirmed they understand
- the non-Austrians' willingness to try out their language skills and to play with the language ("Danke", "Nicht mehr bitte/ich bin ein bisschen [sic] krank")

Names and dates have been hidden/changed to protect the students' identities, and their nationalities are indicated by codes (AT=Austrian German, BR=Brazilian, RU=Russian). The text reads:

Fabian: *here today's sheet*
 Maria: Hi Miya, fyi we booked project room 0.022 in the D2 and will meet there at approx. 3 pm.
 Rafael: *Thanks ☺*
 Fabian: oh shit I wrote it in german^^you know, I'm in the couch mode :)
 Igor: My current level of German allowed me to understand it
 Maria: Haha. *Well then from now on we'll only speak german*
 Igor: *No more please I am a bit ill*
 (italics indicate translations by the author)



Fig. 1. Facebook script, MktgB.

Another example of other languages serving a social purpose was a nickname, “Mr/Dr Bretele”, given to Benone, one of the students in another group. This arose from a discussion about Austrian national costume and an attempt to find the English word for “*Hosenträger*” (‘braces’[UK]/‘suspenders’[US]). They discussed the word together to establish its meaning – which several apparently prefer over directly consulting a dictionary – and Benone told them the Romanian word, “*bretele*”. The other students liked the sound of this word, particularly the Austrians, as it is similar to an Austrian German word (“*Brettl*”, used to serve cheese and cold meats). From that point on Benone had an alter ego in the group called Mr and sometimes Dr Bretele. It therefore seems that the students do not try to erase or ignore their differences but rather celebrate them and make them part of the team’s collective identity. The interviews also showed that they generally regarded the group’s diversity very positively. Having a good group atmosphere and having fun was repeatedly mentioned as being key to successful teamwork. An environment that includes these social elements, where language and culture can be played with in a ‘safe’, non-judgemental and supportive setting, thus allows the group to strengthen both their linguistic and intercultural knowledge as well as the team’s bond.

5. Language use in context: societal factors

Dafouz and Smit’s ‘societal’ factors identify the roles of English resulting from the university’s integration into society as a whole. Firstly, the ELF setting resulting from the mixed team allows the students to develop and practise the intercultural skills they are extremely likely to need once they enter the corporate world. Indeed, Butler and Zander (2008, p. 213) argue that “multicultural teams are an excellent vehicle for internationalizing business

curricula and for preparing students for working in multinational organizations". The teachers, too, firmly believed that the task reflected situations the students could be expected to face in their future careers.

Furthermore, while the university management see internationalisation and the EMPs that enable it as a means to hone WU's competitiveness, the students interviewed see EMI as a means of developing themselves personally and professionally. One student said:

You not only get to know a lot of new friends or new people from other countries but you also get to know a lot of different point of views and yah **that's very important I think not just for a career but also for my person personality and for my personal career** (Carina, MktgA, Austria, author's emphasis)

Though they share the view of the university management that teaching in English facilitates access for international students, the Austrian students do not merely see this as a way to boost the university's international credentials. Many highlighted the fact that working in a diverse team allows them to develop skills and attitudes they otherwise would not learn, particularly if they do not have much experience abroad.

The liberalisation of trade and improvements in information and communications technology mean that teams comprising people from a variety of countries is fast becoming the norm (Butler & Zander, 2008, p. 193; Stahl et al., 2010, p. 439). Furthermore, given that diverse teams can perform considerably better, or considerably worse, than homogeneous teams (cf. Stahl et al., 2010), learning to work effectively in an intercultural team is essential, even for students who intend to remain in Austria.

6. Conclusion

As borders become more fluid, the ability to work in intercultural teams is becoming increasingly important, particularly among the larger companies that are seen as the holy grail for WU students. Both the university and its students fully expect to have to work in English if they wish to be competitive in the future. The data exploring the 'communicational' aspect shows that English is regarded as the working language, both in the sense of the medium of work-related discussion as well as the default language for work-related vocabulary. In contrast, other languages have a social role and are used for humour and socialisation.

Secondly, at a strategic or 'institutional' level, English has a role as a facilitating language in WU's infrastructure. Despite the often problematic 'pedagogical' implications, using ELF on its master's programmes eases access to the university for non-German speakers, enables WU to sharpen its international profile against foreign competition, and allows students to develop intercultural teamwork skills even if they have little experience or opportunity to go abroad. The roles of English and other languages in the university context, giving the students practice in a 'safe' environment, play an important part in preparing them for their future careers.

This integration of the multilingual university into society is considered the 'societal' aspect in Smit and Dafouz' framework. The experiences the students gain from working in their intercultural teams on the EMP is crucial practice for building strong, effective teams in the future. Giving the languages different roles and separating the languages used for 'serious' work from those brought up in play or more social contexts has a major role in the team's development. In their ELF context, the students have the opportunity and the obligation to collaborate more closely and more carefully with their team members in order to achieve the desired result. Cognitive knowledge and work-related discussion must be finely honed and meaning negotiated precisely, while still embracing their diversity and allowing this to make itself felt in more social contexts. Developing in-jokes and catchphrases, some of which drew on the students' multilingual repertoire, served to strengthen the group's sense of community, which in turn led to high levels of motivation for the task. In short, English plays a variety of roles in EMPs at WU – in the infrastructure, in the teams, and in the students' personal and professional development.

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