MA-students’ lecture comprehension of EMI courses at a Swedish university

Isabelle Neptune
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Abstract

The present quantitative study investigates MA-students’ comprehension of lectures in the first language (L1) and in English at a large university in Sweden. Forty-five students responded to a self-assessment questionnaire survey regarding their comprehension of lectures in the L1 and lectures in English. The scores from these were compared to each other to see if English lectures are more difficult to comprehend than lectures in the L1 and if so, to what extent. The findings show that, although not substantial, most students find almost all aspects regarding English lectures to be more difficult than L1 lectures. This is in line with what other studies investigating the effects of English Medium Instruction in higher education have found. The most prominent issues were with unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions as well as unclear pronunciation of content. The results suggest that there is a need to improve students’ and lecturers’ English proficiency as well as the effectiveness of lectures in higher education, regardless of the language of instruction.

Keywords

EMI, English Medium Instruction, higher education, lecture comprehension.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since the Bologna Process of 1999 there has been what some authors have termed an “Englishization of higher education in Europe” (Coleman, 2013, p. 10). This has resulted in most European countries offering English as the language of instruction in higher education, where Sweden is considered one of the leading EU countries in this area (Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, 2001, p. 15: cited in Airey, 2015, p. 158).

There is growing pressure on Sweden and the other Nordic countries to use English in many of its domains, such as science and business (Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015, p. 138). And while Swedish universities offer many of their courses and programmes in English (particularly at the advanced levels), which is of great benefit since this attracts students and researchers from all around the world, this does however also bring on some issues since the majority of the students and faculty at these universities do not have English as their first language (Björkman, 2010).

In Sweden, where English can no longer be considered a foreign language and where a substantial part of the population is considered to have high levels of English proficiency, it could be assumed that English Medium Instruction (henceforth EMI) in higher education would not pose any greater difficulties, especially since Swedish students are introduced to the English language around the ages of 7-9. However, according to studies investigating the effects of EMI in Sweden and other Nordic countries, both students as well as faculty have difficulties with EMI (Airey, 2015; Hellekjær, 2010).

In this study, MA-students’ lecture comprehension of EMI courses at a Swedish university is investigated, more specifically if they find English lectures to be more difficult to comprehend than lectures in their first language (henceforth L1) and to what extent. The study also takes into consideration the amount of English they have been exposed to previous to their graduate studies, contributing to the growing number of studies carried out in this area. The reason why it is important to compare the lecture comprehension of English to the L1, as Hellekjær (2010) points out in his study, is because otherwise it could be assumed that “lecture comprehension in the L1 is more or less perfect, (which) could give quite inaccurate conclusions” (p. 18).

1.2 Aim and scope

The aim of this study is to find out whether graduate students at a Swedish university find lectures in English to be more difficult to comprehend than lectures in their L1. The following research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent do the students find English lectures to be more difficult than in their L1?

2. Does the amount of exposure to English correlate with the level of the students’ lecture comprehension?
3. What are the similarities and differences compared to previous studies?

The scope of this study encompasses the scores from a questionnaire survey, taken by 50 graduate students from various institutions and disciplines, with a varying number of lectures in English, from a Swedish university in Stockholm, during the fall semester of 2015. The study is of a quantitative nature.

1.3 Teaching in English at university: current debates

English as a medium of instruction (EMI), has drawn the attention of scholars around Europe in the past few years due to the rapidly growing number of courses and programmes being offered in English in European higher education, both on graduate and undergraduate levels. The rate and the extent at which English has been implemented in higher education across Europe has varied from country to country, as they all have different historical, socio-cultural, political and economic backgrounds (Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, pp. 2-3).

Naturally, there are various opinions as to the presence of English in educational settings around Europe, although many countries have an overall positive attitude towards EMI, particularly in the north. Nonetheless, there are still issues and tensions regarding the increased use of English in higher education and many have expressed various concerns regarding this (Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, pp. 2-3).

Some topics that are currently being debated regarding the effects of EMI are: the quality of education (which is related to the levels of proficiency as well as “nativeness” among teachers and students), English as a threat to national languages, the role of language policies and practices and how these are implemented as well as parallel language use and multilingualism. All of these topics are intertwined and more or less linked to one another. The aspects regarding these issues are presented in greater detail below.

1.3.1 Quality of education

Regarding the quality of education, many are concerned that the implementation of EMI may have negative effects on teaching and learning. Since a majority of students and teachers do not have English as their native language (Björkman, 2010), there may be those who struggle with English being the academic lingua franca. As a result, students with limited competence in English may face difficulties in terms of performing at the best of their academic abilities (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Soler-Carbonell, 2015). In addition, a lot of time may be spent on making sense of the language, i.e. terminology rather than on the subject being learned (Airey, 2015; Soler-Carbonell, 2015, p. 230).

Teachers’ limited competence in English may have undesirable effects on their given instruction, which in turn may affect students’ learning. For instance, there may be teachers who fail to deliver all intended content due to “reduction and simplification of course material” or by spending “more time elaborating or explaining certain points”

On top of this, there are the attitudes regarding native-like proficiency or “nativeness” and non-standard forms of English where some believe that a high level of proficiency is closely related to “nativeness”. Some students find near-native-like proficiency in English among themselves as well as their teachers important and have expressed that they have difficulties with teachers’ and students’ non-standard forms of English (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012, p. 435). This may add to the already existing issues related to the quality of education, i.e. teaching and learning. However, there are many students that do not feel disadvantaged by not being near-native-like proficient in English (Soler-Carbonell, 2015).

1.3.2 Parallel language use

Furthermore, there is the issue of parallel language use. Teachers and students are expected to have equal parallel competence in English and the national language, which can be seen in university policies stating that there should be a high level of English proficiency along with the national language (Björkman, 2014; Kuteeva, 2014). These policies also promote parallel language use.

The reason for parallel language use being promoted is to protect the local language and to prevent domain loss due to the increase of English use in the academic domain, which is seen as a threat (Kuteeva, 2014). However, this is an almost impossible task in educational settings where “the vast majority of students and/or lecturers are not from the country where education is taking place” (Kuteeva, 2014, p. 333). Needless to say, there is a mismatch between policies and classroom/lecture practices, which can be seen on higher levels as well. On top of that, studies have indicated that students find using two languages simultaneously quite confusing and difficult as well as time consuming (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012, p. 435; Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015, p. 146; Kuteeva, 2014, p. 338; Soler-Carbonell, 2015). The result may be that students are unable to adequately express themselves in neither language. It is a question of whether or not “a good deal of their cognitive and memory capacity is spent on linguistic processing” (Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015, p. 147). Parallel language use also affects multilingualism and language diversity.

1.3.3 Multilingualism

Regarding multilingualism, some argue that the implementation of EMI in higher education is replacing any type of linguistic diversity within European educational settings (Meyer, 2011: cited in Phillipson, 2015, p. 20). With all of the issues and tensions regarding EMI, attention may be drawn from multilingualism and its growing absence in university settings (Lasagabaster, 2015). There is not much space left for foreign languages and according to Lasagabaster (2015) many European countries have been captivated by an “only one-foreign-language” trend (p. 128).

Policy makers on all levels (European, national, institutional) are promoting multilingualism alongside EMI. However, the issue with this may lay in the fact that
“…the relationship between multilingualism and Englishization is of mutually perpetuating dynamics, whereof increased multilingualism also leads to increased use of English” (de Swann, 2001: cited in Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, p. 5).

1.3.4 Policies and practices (planning and implementation)

Moreover, there are the issues regarding policies and practices as well as the planning and implementation of them. The language policies, both on a higher level (Bologna Declaration) as well as on the lower levels (institutions, departments, faculty) are considered by many as not being explicit enough regarding their practices, in terms of the use of English, parallel language use and multilingualism (Björkman, 2014; Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015; Phillipson, 2015). Phillipson (2015) argues that there are issues with the language policies and that these need to be more explicit, on all levels (p. abstract).

Regarding the Bologna Declaration, although it promotes multilingualism, the document does not mention any language-related issues that could arise from promoting Englishization within European higher education (Ljosand, 2005; Saarinen & Nikula, 2012: cited in Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, p. 7; Phillipson, 2006). Regarding language policies on an institutional level, Björkman (2014) states that there is little to no direction as to how to follow the policies and practices of parallel English and Swedish use. They mostly present concerns rather than how to make use of parallel language use.

Another issue regarding the language policies is the implementation of them. Since there are many levels that drive EMI, the decisions between these levels may vary and therefore these levels might implement them differently or not at all (Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, p. 6; Phillipson, 2015). It is safe to say that many believe that there are discrepancies between policies and actual practices. As Phillipson (2015) puts it: “There is unfortunately often a significant gap between a declaration of this kind, which formulates principles of language policy at the governmental level, and the realities, or often its absence, nationally and locally” (p. 29).

1.3.5 Threat

Lastly, there are divided opinions of whether or not the widespread use of English over several domains, in this case the educational domain, should be considered a threat or an opportunity. Some argue that English is increasingly strengthening its role as a lingua franca globally and is considered by many to have an increased hegemonic position in educational settings (Lasagabaster, 2015; Phillipson, 2015, p. 20), (although it needs to be stated that the use of EMI varies between disciplines and pedagogical contexts) (Kuteeva, 2014). Therefore, some have expressed a concern that EMI in higher education may be a threat to countries’ national languages. Some speculate that English might end up replacing national languages all together in European higher education (Coleman, 2006; Meyer, 2011: cited in Phillipson, 2015). However, Phillipson (2015) argues that this is not the case and that many universities use parallel language use (p. 26). At the same time there are others who are not concerned at all with this supposed
threat and see the use of English more as an opportunity (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012, p. 440; Lasagabaster, 2015; Soler-Carbonell, 2015).

Because a growing number of courses and programmes are offered in English and research and publication that are written and published in English are promoted more than those produced in the local language, many are concerned that there is a risk of domain loss within certain disciplines within the educational domain as well as the research domain (Gunnarsson & Öhman, 1997; Gunnarsson, 2001; Teleman, 1992; cited in Kuteeva, 2014).

All in all, as Phillipson (2015) states, “much of what is being done currently strengthens the position and the use of English and only English” (p. 37).

### 1.4 Previous research

A growing number of studies have investigated and continue to investigate, as is the case with this study, the evident implications of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education. Previous research that is closely related to this study, as these explore the issues of EMI in Sweden and the Nordic countries as well as other European countries, is that of Airey (2009), Hellekjær (2010), Ingvasdóttir and Arnbjörnsdóttir (2015), Kuteeva, (2014) and Soler-Carbonell (2015).

All studies have made similar findings regarding students’ perceived difficulties regarding EMI. First of all, it is not uncommon for students to overestimate their English proficiency, especially among students in the north (Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015; Kuteeva, 2014). This can be seen by the fact that students initially reported not experiencing any difficulties regarding EMI. Yet, during interviews actual challenges were revealed (Airey, 2009; Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015).

For instance, both Airey (2009) and Hellekjær (2010) found that students struggled with taking notes while simultaneously listening to the lecturer, where English was the language of instruction. Furthermore, students found words and expressions to be difficult and unfamiliar (Hellekjær, 2010).

Students also experienced difficulties regarding the English language along with the new terminology and stated that there was a great deal to read (Hellekjær, 2010; Ingvasdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2015; Soler-Carbonell, 2015). These students indicated that due to these language difficulties, they had to change their learning strategies and stated this increased their workload.

Hellekjær (2010) also found that the difficulties students experienced in EMI could be found during L1 lectures as well. However, Soler-Carbonell (2015) found that the students themselves believed that it was not a question of language but rather the subject at hand and that the same difficulties they experienced with EMI would be found in the L1 as well.
2. Material

2.1 The respondents

The respondents were all MA-students studying an EMI course. They were chosen for this study as EMI is used significantly more during graduate studies compared to undergraduate studies (Hultgren, Jensen & Dimova, 2015, p. 4). The students were either in their fourth or fifth year of studies, from various institutions and disciplines (e.g. economics, linguistics, literature & statistics), from a large university in Stockholm. A total of (N = 50) students participated in the study whereof five students were excluded from the study as they had English as their L1 and this is a study investigating lecture comprehension between the first language and English. So this left the sample at (N = 45). Of these students, 35 (78%) were female and 10 (22%) male. A vast majority had Swedish as their L1; a total of 37 (82%), and 8 (18%) had another L1 than Swedish and English. All students have previously studied in their L1 (undergraduate studies), i.e. having both experience of L1 lectures and English lectures.

2.2 The questionnaire

The only material used for this essay is the scores from the survey taken by the respondents. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was a slightly modified version of Hellekjær’s (2010) questionnaire used in his own study investigating the same topic. The original survey contained 60 items and is in English; the modified survey used in this study is also in English but only consisted of 50 questions, whereof 49 were multiple-choice items, mostly using a 4-point Likert Scale, leaving the last question open-ended. The reason for the modification was because the questionnaire was considered to be a little too long and would be considered by the students to be too long as well. The excluded items were additional questions regarding the students’ background, which could be left out as the most relevant and important questions for this study were kept in the questionnaire.

There were items regarding the students’ background such as education, previous exposure to EMI as well as current exposure to English in academic and non-academic settings, and also attitudes and possible motivation for studying in English, followed by self-assessment items regarding lecture comprehension in their L1 followed by items regarding lecture comprehension in English, where all of the questions regarding L1 and EMI were the same. It was expected to take 8-10 minutes to fill out at the end of the seminar.
3. Method

The study at hand was inspired by Hellekjaer’s (2010) study investigating comprehension of English lectures and L1 lectures in higher education among Norwegian and German students. It is replicated to a larger extent and uses the same method, i.e. the questionnaire made by Hellekjaer himself and used in his own study.

Due to time limitations, in depth interviews were not carried out as was initially intended. Neither was a listening comprehension test carried out nor any additional tests, such as a vocabulary test, which would have been complementary to the present study.

Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out during the first half of the semester. Due to some items being perceived as unclear, adjustments were made accordingly. Both questionnaires remained in English.

3.1 Research method

During the beginning of the term, courses given to MA-students during the fall semester were identified via the university’s website. Students from three different groups, from various institutions and disciplines, given the same “Academic Writing course” during the first and second half of the semester as a part of their MA-programme were selected. The teachers responsible for the MA-students’ seminars were contacted by e-mail to ask for permission to distribute the questionnaire in person at the end of class so they would be filled out on the spot. This was to ensure a high response rate, which there was, as around one hundred percent completed the survey. The researcher was present during the entire time the respondents filled out the questionnaire. It was made explicitly clear that the questionnaire is completely anonymous and voluntary, that it is part of a BA research project and that the responses would be used in the study.
4. Results and analysis

In this section, the results of the questionnaire will be presented, which is displayed in 8 different Tables. They are divided into what respondents find most difficult with their L1 and English lectures, how often they feel the need to ask questions about unfamiliar words/expressions and unclear content, if they get the chance to ask questions during and after L1 and English lectures. This is followed by how often they read in preparation for the lectures in both languages, how much work attending an EMI course is compared to a L1 course, how important transparencies/PowerPoint slides are for comprehension in the L1 and English lectures. Lastly, background variables such as exposure to English and their motivation for studying in English are presented.

4.1 Lecture comprehension

The first issue presented is which of the seven aspects the respondents find most difficult with their L1 lectures and English lectures respectively. Table 1 shows mean scores and standard deviation for these in separate columns. As can be seen, for every item except one, the English scores are lower than the L1 scores, which indicates that the participants find English lectures more difficult than the L1 lectures, although the difference between the scores is not substantial.

The aspect that was found to have the same mean scores in both the L1 and English lectures is to what extent the respondents find that they can follow the lecturers’ line of thought, which indicates that the language of instruction does not affect how well the respondents can follow the lecturers’ line of thought. It is however, worth pointing out that the score regarding this is one of the lowest in the L1 and among the highest in English.

The aspect that is most significantly different between the L1 and English lectures is to what extent the respondents find words and expressions unfamiliar. This scored lowest in both languages but is seen as more problematic during English lectures. Another aspect the respondents find problematic is words and expressions not being clearly pronounced and understandable. During L1 lectures, being able to take notes was found difficult as well.

The part of the lectures that was found less difficult and scored the highest in both languages was that regarding how fast the lecturer speaks. Additionally, understanding content and how fast it is presented was found least problematic in both languages.

To sum up, in both languages, it was revealed that the aspect the respondents find most problematic are words and expressions being unfamiliar. In English lectures, this aspect along with words and expressions not being clearly pronounced was also found difficult while in the L1 following the lecturers’ line of thought and taking notes were found difficult along with unfamiliar words and expressions.
Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviation for items regarding lecture comprehension in the L1 and English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item and item numbers</th>
<th>N=45</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you find words and expressions unfamiliar? (items 23, 36)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you find words and expressions clearly pronounced and understandable? (items 24, 37)</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the lecturer speak too fast? (items 25, 38)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent can you follow the lecturer's line of thought? (items 27, 40)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you understand the content of the lectures? (items 28, 41)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is the information in the lecturer's presentation so quickly that it hinders your understanding? (items 29, 42)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How difficult do you find taking notes during lectures? (items 32, 45)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second issue presented is how often the respondents experience the need to ask about unfamiliar words and expressions, as well as unclear content in L1 lectures and English lectures respectively. As can be seen in Table 2, during L1 lectures, 68% indicated that they never want to ask questions about unfamiliar words and expressions but during English lectures this number is 42%. In contrast, 24% indicated they seldom want to ask questions in L1 lectures and 53% in English lectures. These results are in line with the low scores presented in Table 1 regarding to what extent the respondents find words and expressions unfamiliar during lectures. Although this aspect scored lowest in both English and L1 lectures and is seen as most problematic, many of the respondents do not seem to find it necessary to ask about these, especially during L1 lectures. But because the respondents find words and expressions unfamiliar (more so in English than in the L1), they find themselves wanting to ask questions more often in English lectures than in L1 lectures.

Regarding the next question, as to how often the respondents want to ask questions about unclear content during lectures, 47% indicated that they never want to ask questions during L1 lectures and for English lectures this number is 36% as can be seen in Table 2. Furthermore, 47% indicated that they seldom want to ask questions during L1 lectures while this number is 58% for English lectures.

Overall, the respondents seldom or never want to ask questions regarding unfamiliar words and expressions or unclear content during lectures, regardless of the language of instruction. However, during English lectures students want to ask questions more often.
Table 2. The need to ask questions regarding vocabulary or content during lectures in the L1 and English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How often do you want to ask about unfamiliar words and expressions during lectures? (items 26, 39)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How often do you want to ask about unclear content during lectures? (items 30, 43)

|                | All the time  | 2  | 3  | I never want to ask |
| L1             | 0%            | 7% | 47%| 47% |
| English        | 0%            | 7% | 58%| 36% |

The third aspect that is presented in Table 3 is the respondents indicating if they get the chance to ask questions during and after the L1 lectures and English lectures. As can be seen, 76% indicated that it is easy to ask questions during or after L1 lectures while 58% indicated this for English lectures. So the respondents experience asking questions during and after lectures less easy regarding English lectures than L1 lectures.

Table 3. The chance to ask questions during and after lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indicate if you get the chance to ask questions during and after the lectures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 lectures</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English lectures</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourth aspect that is presented in Table 4 is how often the respondents read in preparation for their L1 lectures and English lectures. As illustrated, the same number of respondents read in preparation for every lecture (38%), regardless of the language of instruction. Furthermore, 42% indicated that they read for almost every English lecture while 29% indicated this for L1 lectures. Only 2% indicated never reading in preparation for English lectures while 11% reported this for L1 lectures.
Table 4. How often students read in preparation for lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N=45</th>
<th>How often do you read in preparation for lectures?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 lectures</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English lectures</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One aspect that may reveal language difficulties among students is how much they find work in L1 courses to be compared to English courses. This matter is displayed in Table 5, which indicates how much work the respondents find attending a course in English is compared to a course in the L1. As can be seen, a majority of the respondents (65%) believe that attending an EMI course is more laborious, some to a larger extent than others, while 33% indicated that it is the same amount of work.

Table 5. Is attending an EMI course the same amount of work or more than in the L1?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N=45</th>
<th>How much work do you find the EMI course compared to in the L1? (Item 47)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just like in the L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another aspect that may indicate language difficulties is how important respondents find transparencies/PowerPoint slides for comprehension. As can be seen in Table 6, most of the respondents believe that transparencies/PowerPoint slides are important for understanding, regardless of language of instruction, although to a larger extent in L1 lectures as 66% indicated that it is important or very important in L1 lectures and only 13% indicated that it is not at all important compared to 48% indicating that it is important or very important for English lectures and 24% indicating that it is not at all important. However, it is worth pointing out that this may be dependent on discipline as certain subjects may be more dependent on visual aids as a means to explain certain topics, e.g. graphs for statistics etc. (Hellekjær, 2010).
Table 6. How important visual aids are for understanding of lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not important for understanding</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Very important for understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1 lecture</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English lectures</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Background variables

The same number of students reporting having Swedish as their L1 indicated having attended high school in Sweden as well, 37 (82%). Of these, 30 (81%) indicated that they had studied the most advanced level of English (third year course) in high school. The rest, 7 (19%) reported that the most advanced level they had studied was the second year course. A total of 8 students (18%) reported not having Swedish or English as their L1 and the same number of students also reported not having attended high school in Sweden, i.e. international students. Furthermore, a vast majority, 35 (78%) indicated not having received any other forms of instruction in a non-language subject in English in high school. The same number also indicated that they had not studied in an English speaking country while at college or university. Of all the students, 24 (53%) indicated that they had attended an English medium course before this semester, while 21 (47%) reported that they had not. Lastly, 23 (51%) indicated that the reason for attending an English medium course is because the course is a mandatory part of their MA-programme. Furthermore, 10 (22%) indicated that they were interested in this specific course while only 2 (4%) reported that they choose the EMI course to improve their English or indicated that it was for other reasons. The rest did not indicate their reasons.

4.2.1 Exposure to English

The reason for including questions regarding exposure to English is to see if there is a relationship between this factor and the respondents’ level of lecture comprehension. As can be seen in Table 7, for each of the four items, a vast majority indicated that they are either exposed to English on a daily or a weekly basis through reading (72%), writing (73%), speaking (82%) or watching English movies, videos or TV-programs (91%). Only 4% indicated that they never read English periodicals, magazines or newspapers nor write in English.
### Table 7. Exposure to and use of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you read English periodicals, magazines or newspapers?</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you watch English language movies, videos, or TV-programs?</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you speak English?</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you write in English?</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.2.2 Motivation

The reason for including questions regarding future aspirations is to see what motivations the respondents might have for studying in English. As can be seen in Table 8, all respondents indicated that knowing English would be important or very important in their future careers. Regarding whether or not the respondents were interested in working outside of their own country, many indicated that they were indeed. Only 4% indicated that they were not at all interested in working outside of their country in their future careers. Almost the same number of respondents indicated that they were interested in working in a job where the working language would be English, whereas only 7% indicated that they were not interested at all. Regarding the question of whether or not the respondents thought knowing English would be important for new jobs, almost all responded that they believed so. Regarding the question if respondents thought having completed EMI courses would be an advantage when applying for new jobs, most did indeed believe so, some to a larger extent than others. Only 11% indicated that completing an EMI course would not be an advantage at all. Lastly, the question regarding whether the extra work involved in taking EMI course is worthwhile, a vast majority indicated that it is worth the extra effort while only 4% indicated that it is not.
Table 8. Motivation for studying in English in terms of future aspirations and possible advantages in future jobs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Category 1</th>
<th>Category 2</th>
<th>Category 3</th>
<th>N=45</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful do you believe knowing English will be in your future career?</td>
<td>Not useful at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How interested are you in working outside your own country in your future career?</td>
<td>Not interested at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you interested in working in a job where English is the working language?</td>
<td>Not interested at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think knowing English will be important for new jobs?</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think having completed English Medium courses will give you an advantage when applying for a new job?</td>
<td>No advantage at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A great advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the extra work involved in taking an EMI course worthwhile?</td>
<td>It is not worth the extra effort</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is worth the extra effort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Discussion

In the following section, the limitations and the validity of the present study will be presented. Further, a summary and a general discussion of the findings will be presented and discussed. Lastly, what similarities and differences this study has with other similar studies will be discussed.

5.1. Limitations of the study

The results of the present study confirm that students do indeed find EMI to be difficult. However, these results cannot be generalized for various reasons.

Firstly, there were only 45 students who responded to the questionnaire. They did however come from different institutions and disciplines, which provides a diverse sample. Still, this is a limitation to the study at hand as this is not representative of the total number of MA-students studying at the university or in Sweden. A larger sample would have been ideal.

Secondly, regarding the validity of the findings in this study, self-assessment is considered by many studies to be a reliable means of reporting on listening proficiency (Hellekjær, 2010, p. 23). However, the possible issue with self-reported data is that the respondents may under or over report regarding their comprehension of lectures (Airey, 2015; Kuteeva, 2014). Regardless, to have complemented the method used in this study with stimulated recall would have been ideal, as previously stated, since this would have given additional information to why respondents responded the way they did as well as giving more accurate information (Airey, 2015). A listening and/or vocabulary test would have been complementing as well, as this could have been compared to the self-assessment scores in terms of correlation.

So given the limitations of the study, the results need to be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the findings of the study are still complementary to studies that have investigated similar matters regarding EMI in higher education, especially those in Sweden.

5.2 General discussion

The main finding of the study is that many students find English lectures to be more difficult than L1 lectures. So despite the fact that most respondents indicated having studied the most advanced level of English in high school, being exposed to English on a daily or weekly basis in various ways and a vast majority being Swedish, who are considered to have high levels of English proficiency (Airey, 2015), most indicated experiencing some difficulties with EMI. As illustrated in Table 1, every aspect except one scored lower in English lectures compared to L1 lectures. Among these, students indicated having particular issues with unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions, as well as not finding these being pronounced clearly enough. These issues may be related to internal factors, such as students’ levels of proficiency and/or to external factors such as the lecturers’ pronunciation (Hellekjær, 2010, p. 23). Students also indicated that they
want to ask questions more often regarding unfamiliar words and expressions as well as unclear content during English lectures but that they find it less easy to do so during and after lectures in English compared to lectures in the L1. Many also indicated that visual aids are important for their understanding. Thus, it is possible that because words and expressions are found unfamiliar and also found to not be pronounced clearly enough by the lecturer, students become more dependent on visual aids and have an increased need to ask questions. However, students seem either less comfortable with asking questions during English lectures compared to L1 lectures, possibly because of their own English proficiency and/or lecturers during the English lectures make it more difficult to ask questions compared to lecturers in L1 lectures. The fact that a vast majority of the students also indicated that EMI courses are more work than L1 courses may indicate that additional work is needed to make sense of the language along with the subject which may increase the students’ workload.

However, some students experienced difficulties with L1 lectures as well, although to a lesser extent. For instance, the respondents reported having difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions in the L1 as well, which they indicated was the most difficult aspect regarding English lectures. However, it is not surprising that words and expressions are found unfamiliar in both L1 and English lectures, since university studies calls for students using particular vocabulary and expressions related to the discipline being studied, which may be the reason for students finding this particular aspect problematic (Hellekjær, 2010, p. 23). They also indicated that visual aids were very important for understanding, to an even larger extent than during English lectures. Contrary to English lectures, following the lecturers line of thought and taking notes were considered difficult in L1 lectures as well.

Indeed there are similarities but also differences regarding what aspects students find most problematic in both languages. But as already pointed out, these differences may vary because of discipline. Nonetheless, the results suggest that students find a few aspects regarding English lectures compared to L1 lectures more problematic and difficult than others.

### 5.3 Similarities and differences

The results of the present study have shown both differences and similarities to previous studies investigating the same topic. Indeed, having the language of instruction be in English is problematic and not without issues.

In fact, Hellekjær (2010) also found that among his respondents, most indicated that all aspects of the English lectures related to comprehension were more difficult than lectures in the L1 and among these the main difficulties, unfamiliar words and expressions were the main difficulties, the same as in this study. Furthermore, in Kuteeva’s (2014) study, students expressed issues with lectures’ English skills, which are similar to the findings in this study, where students indicated words not being pronounced clearly enough by the lecturer, which was also one of the other main issues among the students in Hellekjær’s (2010) study regarding the English lectures. Moreover, students in this study indicated that they want to ask questions more often during English lectures but that they do not get the chance to do so, during or after, to
the same extent as in L1 lectures which is similar to Airey’s (2015) study where the students reported that they answered and asked fewer questions during English lectures because they felt uncomfortable to do so during the lecture. They indicated that they would rather ask questions afterwards.

Contrary to Airey’s (2015) and Hellekjær’s (2010) findings, students in this study reported not having difficulties taking notes during English but rather during L1 lectures. Following the lecturers’ line of thought was not problematic either, regardless of the language of instruction, unlike Hellekjær’s (2010) findings.

Although what students find most difficult regarding EMI may vary between studies, especially when the respondents are of different nationalities, they all have in common that students do indeed find EMI difficult. These findings indicate that there may be a need to improve students’ as well as lecturers’ English proficiency but also that lectures need to be more effective to increase the comprehension among students. Most importantly, there seems to be a need to adjust lectures when the language of instruction is English, especially since most lecturers may not able to present as efficiently in English as in the L1 (Airey, 2015).
6. Conclusion

The present study is of MA-students’ comprehension of English lectures at a Swedish University. The aim of the study was to find out if students find lectures in English to be more difficult to comprehend than lectures in the L1 and if so, to what extent. Although not substantial, the findings of the study reveal that many students do indeed find English lectures to be more difficult to comprehend than lectures in the L1, which is in line with what previous studies investigating effects of EMI in higher education have found.

Despite the fact that a small number of respondents and self-assessment of comprehension was used, which limits to what extent the findings are generalizable, the present study is still complementary to other studies investigating the evident implications of English Medium Instruction.

Recommendations for any further research are to conduct a study of a larger-scale, including both undergraduate as well as graduate students from different L1 backgrounds and from various institutions and disciplines. Furthermore, using a questionnaire and stimulated recall is highly recommended.
References


Appendix A

[No._____] – do not fill in

Dear student!
This anonymous questionnaire is part of my BA research project investigating lecture comprehension in non-language courses taught in English in higher education at Stockholm University.

• Answer the questions as correctly as possible, and to the best of your ability even though you might not be quite certain that you remember correctly.
• If you are attending several courses in English, answer the questions on the basis of your general impression of these courses.
• If you do not have courses in Swedish/ your mother tongue this semester, use your experience from previous semesters to answer.

Thank you for your assistance!

English BA student Isabelle Neptune
Stockholm University

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND

1. Are you: ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. What is your first language: ☐ Swedish ☐ English ☐ Other

3. Do you use English regularly in social situations: ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you use English regularly in job related situations: ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Did you attend high school in Sweden? ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. If yes to (5): What was the most advanced English course you completed in Swedish high school.
☐ First year course ☐ Second year course ☐ Third year course

7. Have you received any other forms of English instruction in high school? You may give several answers.

☐ Instruction in a non-language subject, for example History or Religion, in English?
☐ High School in an English speaking country (6 months or more)
☐ Attended an English language high school, i.e. the International Baccalaureate.
☐ Other

8. How often do you read English periodicals, magazines or newspapers? (Give only one answer)
Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily ☐

9. How often do you watch English language movies, videos, or TV-programs? (Give only one answer)
Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily ☐

10. How often do you speak English? (Give only one answer)
Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily ☐
11. How often do you write in English? (Give only one answer)
Never ☐ Sometimes ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily ☐

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR UNIVERSITY LEVEL STUDIES

12. Have you studied in an English speaking country while at college or university?
No ☐ 1-6 Months ☐ 6-12 Months ☐ More than a year ☐

13. How long have you studied so far?
1 Year ☐ 2 Years ☐ 3 Years ☐ 4 Years ☐ 5 Years or more ☐

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR ATTENDING AN ENGLISH-MEDIUM COURSE OR PROGRAM

English Medium Instruction is the teaching of non-language subjects through English, such as Economics, Medicine or Political Science in English, to students whom English is a foreign language. In the questionnaire I call these EMI courses/programs.

14. Have you attended an English medium course before this semester? ☐ Yes ☐ No

15. Indicate your reasons for attending an English medium course:
☐ I am/was an exchange student.
☐ The course is part of an EMI program with several subjects that are taught in English?
☐ To improve my English
☐ I am/was interested in this specific course
☐ Other reasons____________________________________________________

16. How useful do you believe knowing English will be in your future career?
Not useful at all ☐ Very useful ☐
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

17. Are you interested in working outside Sweden/your own country in your future career?
Not interested at all ☐ Very interested ☐
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

18. Are you interested in working in a job where English is the working language?
Not interested at all ☐ Very interested ☐
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

19. Do you think knowing English is important when applying for new jobs?
Not at all ☐ Very important ☐
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

20. Do you think having completed English Medium courses will give you an advantage when applying for a new job?
No advantage ☐ A great advantage ☐
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4
21. What is your opinion of the extra work involved in taking an English Medium course?
It is not worth the extra effort ☐ □ □ □
It is worth the extra effort ☐ □ □ □
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF LECTURES IN YOUR FIRST LANGUAGE (SUCH AS SWEDISH). YOU MAY ANSWER ON THE BASIS OF COURSES YOU HAVE HAD EARLIER.

22. How often do you read in preparation for lectures in Swedish/your first language?
Never ☐ For every lecture ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

23. Indicate on the scale to what extent you find words and expressions in Swedish/mother tongue lectures to be unfamiliar.
All the words are unfamiliar ☐ All the words are familiar ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

24. Indicate to what extent words and expressions are clearly pronounced and understandable in Swedish/mother tongue lectures.
All words are indistinctly pronounced ☐ All words are clearly pronounced ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

25. Indicate on the scale to what extent you experience that the lecturer in Swedish/mother tongue lectures speaks too fast.
Too fast to understand ☐ I have no difficulties understanding ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

26. Indicate on the scale how often you want to ask about unfamiliar words and expressions during Swedish/mother tongue lectures.
All the time ☐ I never want to ask ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

27. Indicate on the scale to what extent you can follow the lecturer’s line of thought during Swedish/mother tongue lectures.
The lecturer’s line of thought is difficult to follow ☐ The lecturer’s line of thought is easy to follow ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

28. Indicate on the scale to what extent you understand the content of the Swedish/mother tongue lectures.
Impossible to understand ☐ Everything is understandable ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

29. Indicate on the scale to what extent the information in the Swedish/mother tongue lectures is presented so quickly that it hinders your understanding.
Too much information to understand ☐ I have no difficulties understanding the information presented ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐

30. Indicate on the scale how often you want to ask about unclear content during Swedish/mother tongue lectures.
All the time ☐ I never want to ask ☐
□ ☐ ☐ ☐
31. Indicate on the scale how important the lecturer’s transparencies/PowerPoint slide – or other visual aids are for your understanding of Swedish/mother tongue lectures.

- Very important for understanding
- Not important for my understanding

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

32. Indicate on the scale how difficult you find taking notes during Swedish/mother tongue lectures.

- Impossible to take notes
- It is easy to take notes

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

33. Indicate on the scale if you get the chance to ask questions during and after the Swedish/mother tongue lectures.

- Difficult to ask questions
- Easy to ask questions

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF LECTURES IN ENGLISH

34. Indicate in percent how much of the lectures are in English: ________%

35. Indicate how often do you read in preparation for lectures in English?

- Never
- For every lecture

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

36. Indicate on the scale to what extent you find words and expressions in the English language lectures unfamiliar.

- All the words are unfamiliar
- All the words are familiar

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

37. Indicate on the scale to what extent words and expressions are clearly pronounced and understandable in the English language lectures.

- All the words are indistinctly pronounced
- All the words are clearly pronounced

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

38. Indicate on the scale to what extent you experience that the lecturer in English language lectures speaks to fast.

- Too fast to understand
- I have no difficulties understanding

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

39. Indicate on the scale how often you want to ask about unfamiliar words and expressions during English languages lectures.

- All the time
- I never want to ask

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

40. Indicate on the scale to what extent you can follow the lecturer’s line of thought during English lectures.

- The lecture’s line of thought is difficult to follow
- The lecture’s line of thought is easy to follow

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

41. Indicate on the scale to what extent you understand the content of the English lectures.

- Impossible to understand
- Everything is understandable

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4

42. Indicate on the scale to what extent that the information in the English lectures is presented so quickly that it hinders your understanding.

- Too quickly too understand
- I have no difficulties understanding

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4
43. Indicate on the scale how often you want to ask the lecturer about unclear content during English lectures.

☐ All the time ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ I never want to ask

44. Indicate on the scale how important the lecturer's transparencies/PowerPoint slides – or other visual aids are for your understanding of English lectures.

☐ Very important for understanding ☐ Not important for understanding

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

45. Indicate how difficult you find taking notes during English lectures.

☐ Impossible to take notes ☐ Easy to take notes

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

46. Indicate if you get the chance to ask questions during and after the lectures in English.

☐ Difficult to ask questions ☐ Easy to ask questions

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

47. Indicate how much work do you find attending a course in English compared to one in Swedish/your first language (L1).

☐ Just like in Swedish/your L1 ☐ Much more work than in Swedish/your L1

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4

48. Which language will/did you use for oral examinations/presentations in your English language course(s).

☐ Swedish/first language ☐ English

49. Which language did you use for written examinations/papers in your English language course(s).

☐ Swedish/first language ☐ English

50. IF YOU HAVE TIME TO ANSWER

What do you like best about your lectures in English? Answer in your own words

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________