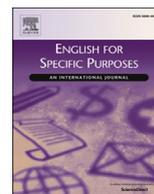




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Learning subject-specific L2 terminology: The effect of medium and order of exposure



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ABSTRACT

In the globalised university environment, many university students are expected to learn subject-specific terminology in both the local language and the L2 (English) by learning from two media in two different languages: lectures in the local language and reading in L2 English. These students' bilingual learning is greatly affected by the learning strategies they employ. An experiment was designed to investigate the effects of student choice of learning media and the order of media on their learning and perception of learning of terminology in English. The results confirm that added exposure to terminology in different media, even in different languages, contributes to learning and show that, in some circumstances, learning terminology from reading may be more effective than learning it from a lecture. The results also show that students do not correctly judge their knowledge of terms learnt from different media in different languages and that they underestimate knowledge gained from reading in L2. Implications for teaching are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the last 20 years, universities have adopted a rhetoric of internationalisation, as part of the general discourse of globalisation. Due to factors including market pressures, universities have felt the need to establish international profiles, to attract international students and researchers, and to give domestic students the skills to be able to compete in the global market (Ammon & McConnell, 2002; Wächter & Maiworm, 2008). In many cases this has meant an increasing use of English in tertiary education in non-English speaking countries, not always as a result of careful planning. A number of different practices are subsumed under this increased use. Many universities have courses and programmes which are given completely in English, and the number of these types of courses has been growing in recent years (e.g. Wächter & Maiworm, 2008). An even larger number of students now also attend what are called 'parallel-language' courses and programmes (Josephson, 2005) where they are required to learn from textbooks in English which have originally been designed for students in the UK or the US (Graddol, 2006). As the rest of the course is given in the local language, the students in parallel-language courses are often expected to learn from different media in different languages: they listen to lectures in their local language (L1) and read in English (L2).

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Several pedagogical reasons have been given for the use of English textbooks in higher education courses and programmes. In addition to increasing their proficiency in English (Chang, 2006; Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, & Malmström, 2011), students are also said to gain the ability to read research in English and to learn disciplinary discourse in English (Chia, Johnson, Chia, & Olive, 1999; Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine et al., 2011; Taillefer, 2007). This will benefit the students in their future careers, as they will have the skills to be able to access information in English and to participate in the global market. However, while some institutional language policy documents state that the aim is for students at the undergraduate level to gain this type of passive competence in the language (Mežek, 2013a), they rarely address how such a policy can be implemented (Björkman, 2014). In addition, a survey of Swedish lecturers' objectives and practices has shown that while they expect students to develop English competence and learn disciplinary discourse in English, in particular subject-specific terminology, they do not make these aims explicit to the students (Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine et al., 2011). Instead, these course aims remain implicit and, apart from the assigned English textbook, students are often not supported in other parts of the course. For example, it has been found that teachers draw students' attention to assigned reading only infrequently in their lectures (Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, & Pecorari, 2010). Furthermore, an investigation of teacher practices at a Swedish university with many parallel-language courses has shown that the learning of disciplinary discourse in English, in this case the learning of English terminology, is not supported in lectures in Swedish (Malmström, Mežek, Pecorari, Shaw, & Irvine, Submitted). Thus, learning subject-specific terminology in English, for example, is something that students in parallel-language courses achieve only through reading and usually without support in lectures.

These students' bilingual learning experience is, therefore, greatly affected by lecturers' management of medium and language issues. Pedagogical decisions in this parallel-language context are often based on the mere assumption that learning in this type of context is largely unproblematic and even beneficial; however, the efficacy of this type of teaching practice does not appear to have been tested by research. In fact, the effects of learning from media in different languages have largely been unexplored. For example, while it has been shown that one effect of learning from two media in different languages is that, in order to adapt to this situation, students have adopted different learning strategies (e.g. Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, & Mežek, 2012; Ward, 2001), the effectiveness of these strategies has not yet been established. Thus the aim of this article is to investigate the effectiveness of student learning strategies in educational parallel-language environments and make suggestions as to how teachers could effectively manage and balance learning from different media in different languages in order to improve student learning.

2. Background to the study

2.1. Student strategies

The strategies the students have adopted depend in particular on how they view assigned reading. Research has shown that students in general do not do all of their assigned reading (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Pecorari et al., 2012; Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002; Ward, 2001). They have problems understanding the purpose of different learning contexts, such as reading, lectures, and seminars (White et al., 1995), and they tend to underestimate the importance of reading (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, & Herschbach, 2010). Many students thus have negative attitudes towards reading textbooks in general. Moreover, in the parallel-language context, students have reported time management problems and reading difficulties when reading in English (Hellekjær, 2009; Pecorari, Shaw, Malmström, & Irvine, 2011; Mežek, 2013c; Ward, 2001), which results in them being even more negative towards textbooks when they are in English. This situation of students not doing their assigned reading is particularly problematic in parallel-language courses, as the students are usually exposed to disciplinary discourse and terminology in English in their textbooks only.

Because of time management issues, reading difficulties, and their negative attitudes towards reading, students have adapted to their learning situation by adopting particular strategies: depending on the lecture for content and minimising their reading load. Engineering students in Thailand, for example, focus only on certain parts of the English-language textbooks, such as examples, instead of doing all of their assigned reading (Ward, 2001). In a survey of study reading habits of Swedish university students (Pecorari et al., 2012), many students reported that they prefer lectures to reading, and that they believe that reading is an alternative to attending lectures. They also reported reading only certain parts of their textbooks and doing the reading after the lectures, even when their teachers expect them to do the reading beforehand. In short, these students restrict their learning to one medium (L1 lecture only instead of L2 English reading) and sequence their learning in a different way than instructed (reading after instead of before the lecture). These students' bilingual learning experience is thus affected significantly by lecturers' management of these medium and order issues. However, while surveys have revealed the types of strategies the students have adopted, and in part even their reasoning behind them, less is known about the measurable effects of the practices described. This article reports the results of an experimental study where we investigated what effects the medium and the order of exposure to media have on student learning and self-assessment of knowledge of subject-specific terminology in English when the media are in different languages.

2.2. The effect of order of exposure

Most investigations of the effect of the order of items on retention have been carried out within memory studies. In those studies researchers have investigated the effect of order by asking participants to recall a list of words or numbers. They found

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